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Putin’s Dirty Little Secret: HIV/AIDS in the Russian Federation

1. Introduction

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Russia’s HIV/AIDS epidemic is a cause of serious concern. Representatives of the CDC wrote in 2013 that “The HIV epidemic in Eastern Europe has increased more than any regional epidemic since 2001, and Russia’s epidemic is the largest in the region with more than 900,000 persons estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS.” To put this in a global context, according to information gathered from the CDC, the Russian Federal AIDS Center, and UNAIDS (The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS), the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia grew by 41% between 2002 and 2012 (the years Putin solidified his power), while the HIV/AIDS epidemics in the United States, India, and South Africa all fell considerably: the U.S.’s fell by 10%, South Africa’s by 36% and India’s by 43%. Russia’s epidemic is one of the world’s only HIV/AIDS epidemics that is still growing.

Examining what the Russian government has (or has not) done to resolve the AIDS crisis makes the situation look more concerning. Despite the fact that the Russian government announced it would increase the amount of federal funding allocated to fighting HIV/AIDS in 2007, only 3.6% of those funds ($15.4 million) was spent on HIV/AIDS prevention, a crucial element in controlling the spread of an epidemic. Based on this information, experts concluded in 2007 that, “the [Russian] government needs to spend significantly more on prevention, as still a minority of governmental funds is currently spent on such efforts.” 2007 could have been a turning point in Russia’s HIV/AIDS crisis due to the increase in federal funds dedicated to HIV

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1 Centers for Disease Control, “CDC in Russia.”
2 Watanabe.
3 Pavri and Rotnem, 53.
4 Ibid.
prevention, as there were “no large-scale HIV-prevention programs in existence” in the country at that point. However, in drawing a comparison to the funds allocated by other countries, it becomes clear that the Russian government’s prevention efforts were sub-par. In 2008, for example, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) allocated 21% of its HIV/AIDS funds to prevention (over $18 million). That same year, Rwanda dedicated 26% of its HIV/AIDS funds to prevention (over $29 million). It is important to note that in 2007, these two countries had some of the lowest HIV prevalence rates in Sub-Saharan Africa (1-5%) and fewer people living with HIV than in the Russian Federation, yet their governments still decided to allocate at least 20% of their HIV/AIDS funds to prevention. Considering that HIV is highly infectious and that in 2007, Russia’s HIV-positive population was six times Rwanda’s, it is clear that the Russian funds allocated to prevention were a fraction of what they should have been.

Even countries that are not in Sub-Saharan Africa and therefore have lower rates of HIV prevalence dedicated a substantial amount of money to HIV prevention in 2008. For example, Bangladesh, which had an HIV prevalence rate of less than 1% in 2007 (less than Russia’s prevalence rate in 2007), allocated 69% of its HIV/AIDS funds in 2008 to prevention (over $25 million). In order to match the amount Bangladesh dedicated to HIV prevention in 2008, Russia would have had to almost double the amount that was allocated in 2007.

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5 Ibid., 53.
6 Amico, et al.
7 Ibid.
8 Joint United Nations Programme, 39.
9 Ibid., 224.
10 Ibid., 214, 224.
11 Ibid., 220.
12 Ibid., 52.
13 Amico et al.
Instead of increasing the funds dedicated to HIV/AIDS prevention in 2007, the Russian government decided to cut back. In 2009, Russia allocated only $12.8 million to HIV prevention. By 2010, that number had dropped to $0.\footnote{Pape, 83.} According to one expert, there is now “wide spread criticism that HIV/AIDS prevention in Russia does not receive sufficient funding,”\footnote{Ibid.} despite the fact that the number of new infections continues to grow. Although an increase in federal spending on HIV/AIDS may look like a step forward, the fact that the Russian government repeatedly cut the paltry funds dedicated specifically to HIV prevention suggests that the administration was perhaps less serious about curbing the epidemic than they wanted the outside world to believe.

Although the Russian government’s response to HIV/AIDS has been problematic in terms of prevention, it has also been problematic in terms of treatment. According to the World Health Organization, while over 80% of those in Rwanda who were eligible to receive antiretroviral therapy in 2009 were receiving it, only 20% of those eligible to receive antiretroviral therapy were receiving it in Russia.\footnote{\textit{Economist.}} Furthermore, according to UNAIDS’s 2013 Global Report, of the 820,000 people in Russia eligible to receive antiretroviral treatment, 10% were denied the health services necessary to manage the disease. The authors of the report also state that Russia is on a list of thirty countries, including Uganda, South Sudan, and South Africa, in which HIV/AIDS sufferers are routinely denied access to antiretroviral treatments by their governments.\footnote{Milonopoulos.} Not much has been written about why there is such a large gap between those who need treatment in Russia and those who are receiving it. One study suggests that it might be a result of expensive antiretroviral therapy and the fact that Russia does not produce its
own generic antiretroviral drugs.\textsuperscript{18} Overall, however, with a program lacking in both prevention and treatment, it seems that the Russian government could do more to solve the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic.

More recent information on the situation is far from reassuring. According to Vadim Pokrovsky, head of Russia’s State AIDS Center, “[t]he last five years [2010-2015] of the conservative approach have led to the doubling of the number of HIV-infected people.”\textsuperscript{19} Pokrovsky estimates that in 2014, the year Putin annexed Crimea, around 90,000 Russians had contracted HIV. Pokrovsky also notes that in May, 2015 there was not a single person in charge of HIV prevention in the Russian health ministry and that in four to five years he expected there to be about two million Russians infected with HIV.\textsuperscript{20} In January 2016, experts noted that “Russia has withdrawn significantly from international efforts to combat HIV and AIDS and has pressured international HIV- and AIDS-oriented organizations, particularly those that are Western, to leave Russia.”\textsuperscript{21} Despite the fact that more Russians contract HIV every year, experts estimate that only 3% of Russia’s HIV-positive population currently has access to antiretroviral drugs.\textsuperscript{22} Given that governmental efforts have been and still are severely lacking, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia is in a more critical state now than ever.

These statistics also raise the question of why Putin and his administration have not done more for Russia’s HIV/AIDS sufferers (it is important to note that, although the Russian government is not simply Putin, the Russian constitution gives the president significant and

\textsuperscript{18} AVERT, “HIV & AIDS in Russia, Eastern Europe & Central Asia.”
\textsuperscript{19} The Guardian.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Stratfor Global Intelligence.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
centralized power, and he is therefore widely responsible for the actions of the government). There have been numerous studies, articles, and books published on the state of HIV/AIDS in Russia, such as the World Bank’s *The TB and HIV/AIDS Epidemics in the Russian Federation*, the CDC’s webpage on public health in Russia, Joanne Csete’s *HIV/AIDS in Russia and Eurasia*, and Tinaz Pavri and Thomas Rotnem’s *Understanding Emerging Epidemics: Social and Political Approaches*. There are also many works that deal specifically with the topic of homosexuality in Russia, such as Narcisz Fejes and Andrea Balogh’s *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett’s *Queer in Europe*, Davis Tuller’s *Cracks in the Iron Closet* and Masha Gessen and Joseph Huff-Hannon’s *Gay Propaganda*. Although some of these sources contain material on the association between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality, very little has been written specifically about those associations and what makes them so politically significant. Even less has been written about why Putin and his administration have been so reluctant to mitigate Russia’s HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS in Russia, particularly the stigma that links the disease with homosexuality, seems to be the key to this puzzle. Because of the associations between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, many Russians still consider HIV/AIDS to be an inherently “gay” disease and homosexuals to be inherently sick. Although many scholars consider such forms of stigma to be unfortunate but unavoidable byproducts of culture, some believe stigma exists for a reason: “From a sociological perspective, economic, psychological, and social benefits of stigma sustain it. Stigmas will disappear when we no longer need to legitimize social exclusion and segregation.” Stigma, in other words, does not exist in a vacuum. On the contrary, on a macro scale, the categorizing effect of stigma often serves a

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23 Partlett.
social, political, or economic purpose. This paper argues that the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS in Russia, particularly the stigma that associates HIV/AIDS with homosexuality, serves a political purpose for Putin. First of all, it allows him to garner domestic popularity by protecting Russia from the diseased, dangerous, and foreign (i.e. “Western”) homosexual community. Second, it serves as a convenient distraction from the real social, economic, and political turmoil that Putin is either unable or unwilling to solve. Furthermore, although his inaction has serious consequences for Russia’s HIV/AIDS sufferers, Putin’s refusal to solve the HIV/AIDS epidemic also contributes to Russia’s looming tuberculosis epidemic.

2. The Need to Create an Enemy

In 2011, after Putin’s announcement that he would be running for president for a third term and a few days after what many consider to have been a rigged parliamentary election on behalf of his party, “[t]ens of thousands of Russians took to the streets in Moscow … shouting ‘Putin is a thief’ and ‘Russia without Putin,’ forcing the Kremlin to confront a level of public discontent that has not been seen [there] since Vladimir V. Putin first became president 12 years ago.”25 The protests had an immediate effect: in 2011, Putin’s approval ratings, for the first time since 2005, dropped below 70%.26 The seemingly undefeatable leader of Russian politics had finally experienced a blow to his popularity.

The same year, six Russian regions passed gay propaganda laws that criminalized the distribution of “gay material” to minors.27 In early 2012, St. Petersburg passed a similar law.28 In June 2012, a Moscow court’s stamp of approval was placed on a hundred year ban on gay pride

25 Barry.
26 Adomanis.
27 Schaaf.
28 Ibid.
parades in Moscow.\textsuperscript{29} The synchronicity of Putin’s falling approval ratings and Russia’s evaporating LGBT equality may not have been coincidental. On the contrary, it is perfectly plausible that the resurgence of attention to Russia’s “gay problem” served to distract from Russia’s more pressing political issues, like rigged elections. This is an example of what some scholars consider to be a common political tactic used in authoritarian regimes:

Another shared characteristic of authoritarian regimes is how they respond to that lack of a positive agenda by creating enemies against which they can bravely protect the citizenry. These enemies, internal and external, are also inevitably to blame for many of the nation’s ills, but scapegoating is not an essential element. Fear mongering and hatred are good enough to start, and when backed by a massive propaganda campaign, they can be effective in distracting people from the real problems of the economy, security, and lack of a voice in the face of oppression.\textsuperscript{30}

In 2011, “lack of a voice in the face of oppression” may have been exactly what Putin wanted to distract his citizens from. Galina Bogunets, one of the protestors in 2011, said that she felt her “political freedom had evaporated.”\textsuperscript{31}

Although the Kremlin is no longer facing heavy criticism for allegedly rigging elections, Putin may still have incentive to distract his citizens with Russia’s “gay problem.” Considering all that is currently going on in Russia, Putin might have even more incentive than he did in 2011. The economic decline in Russia is not only becoming increasingly serious, but more apparent to the outside world. There is a war raging in Eastern Ukraine, economic sanctions have

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{31} Barry.
been placed on Russia by the Western powers, oil prices are falling, and the value of the ruble is plummeting. Political analysts, understanding the gravity of the situation, are starting to wonder if it might have an effect on Putin’s popularity and Russia’s subsequent political stability: “So far, the majority of the Russian population has been loyal and grateful to the Kremlin because Russians have been able to enjoy two key social amenities offered by the Russian government—comparably high living standards and high consumption opportunities. But it may not be the case in the future, after the Ukrainian crisis, the sanctions wars and the headlong drop in oil prices.”

Indeed, analysts argue that “if the [economic] crisis is perennial, it will erode living standards of people and threaten prosperity. In that case, people might take to the streets.” Considering Russia’s revolutionary history and the current economic situation in Russia, which was brought on in part by the catastrophe in Ukraine, Putin and his administration could soon be facing serious consequences.

There is little doubt that Putin’s annexation of Crimea was premeditated. In 2008, for example, at the Bucharest NATO meeting, Putin said to U.S. President George W. Bush, “You understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a legitimate state! What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, and part of it was a gift from us!” In 2013, Ukraine was also facing pressure from Putin to join the Customs Union, Russia’s post-Soviet attempt to reunite former Soviet countries in an economic union that could face the West. Putin, in other words, had been thinking strategically about Ukraine long before the actual annexation of Crimea. If Putin had a good amount of time to think over his future actions in Crimea, he also had a good amount of

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32 Koshkin.
33 Ibid.
34 Мы же понимаем, Джордж, что Украина—это даже не государство! Что такое Украина? Часть её территории—это Восточная Европа, а часть, и значительная, подарена нам! Kommersant. Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
35 RT.com.
time to predict the public response to its illegal annexation. This also means that Putin may have had time to proactively manage the potential consequences. In June 2013, just months before unidentified (but unmistakably Russian) soldiers marched into Crimea, Putin signed Russia’s Gay Propaganda Law, which criminalized the distribution of “gay material” to minors.36 This law, which “effectively legalize[d] discrimination based on sexual orientation,”37 made it abundantly clear that homosexuals were Russia’s enemy. In this way, a “real” enemy for Russia’s citizens was created, right before the international world would denounce Putin as the enemy.

What may have been a strategy of Putin’s turned out to be remarkably effective: instead of turning against the man who broke international law and brought economic chaos to their country, Russian citizens, with the enactment of the Gay Propaganda Law, directed their now legally-legitimate hate and fear toward Russia’s homosexual community. According to a report written by Human Rights Watch in 2015 about the consequences of the law for Russia’s LGBT community, “All over Russia there has been an increase in attacks by vigilante groups and individuals against LGBT people in the past two years…anti-gay groups have used the 2013 law to justify mounting campaigns of harassment and intimidation of LGBT teachers…to get them fired from their jobs.”38 Furthermore, “[a]lthough Russian law enforcement agencies have the tools to prosecute homophobic violence, there appears to be no will to do so and no policy or instructions from the leadership to take homophobic violence seriously.”39 This newly invigorated wave of homophobic violence, in other words, may have been a direct and carefully planned result of Putin’s new law. Indeed, not only are members of his administration refusing to

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36 Elder.
37 Wright.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
take such violence seriously, but it also seems that they are encouraging it: “Instead of publicly
denouncing anti-LGBT violence and rhetoric, Russia’s leadership has remained silent. In some
cases public officials have engaged in explicit anti-LGBT hate speech.”

It seems that as long as Russia continues to suffer the consequences of Putin’s actions in Ukraine, he and his
administration may continue to use the homosexual community as both a threat and a distraction.

3. The Homosexual Community as Russia’s Enemy

The Russian word for straight, i.e., not gay, is натурал which is a cognate of the English
word “natural.” Homosexuals, in other words, are engrained in the Russian language, and
therefore the collective Russian mentality, as inherently unnatural. Although Russian
homophobia is not predominantly a linguistic problem, Russian linguistic structure can shed
some light on what it means to be homosexual in Russia.

In the early years of the USSR, homosexuality, a phenomenon that was rendered too
queer to exist in a proper proletariat society, was neither talked nor written about: “Many
scholars and observers have noted the near total invisibility of homosexuality in Soviet-era
popular and academic discourse. In the early 1930s…homosexuals were not simply prosecuted;
they were rendered invisible.” Homosexuals, in other words, were so stigmatized that their
existence in the Soviet Union could not be imagined. A socialist society, after all, was supposed
to be equivalent to a utopian society, and people with deviant sexual practices could not exist in a
utopian society without rendering that society imperfect.

Paradoxically, homosexual invisibility during the Soviet era was also accompanied by the
intentionally visible criminalization of homosexuality. It was officially criminalized in 1934.

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40 Ibid.
41 Fejes and Balogh, 37.
42 Ibid.
According to a scholar on homosexuality, “the contradiction can be resolved only if we assume that the act of outing members of a minority is designed not only to stigmatize some but also to deter others, encouraging them to repress or closet their desire, to remain invisible.”

If one was outed as a homosexual, that person was forever visible in society as an outcast and criminal, but if one’s homosexuality was unknown to the rest of society, if it was invisible, that person would have a lot of incentive to keep it that way.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many expected to see a gay rights movement develop in Russia. And although homosexuality was decriminalized under Yeltsin in 1993 and a minor gay rights movement began to develop, according to journalist Elizabeth Wolfe, in 1997 it was not legitimate enough to even be called a movement: “no movement exists and opinions are divided over whether it should, or could.” The lack of any concrete LGBT activism after the fall of the Soviet Union illustrates that Russia was a particularly hostile place for members of the LGBT community and that fear of homosexual visibility was an integral part of Russian identity and culture.

Today, homophobia in Russia is still alive and well. According to the Russian LGBT Network, for example, in 2010 LGBT individuals were only tolerated if they did not “make themselves known.” If homosexuals do not make themselves known, however, the public can succumb to paranoia and attempt to out any homosexuals that they can. Therefore, even with the decriminalization of homosexuality, the anxiety surrounding homosexual visibility in Russia is still present: “it is...important to situate homosexuality within a uniquely post-Soviet ‘politics of

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43 Baer, 68.
44 Moss.
45 Fejes and Balogh, 38.
46 Ibid., 39.
vision,’ in which homosexuality is construed as a threat to established values and identities both because it is too visible and because it is potentially invisible.”

Although anti-homosexual sentiment was present in Russia for a long time, Putin’s rise to power, particularly during his campaign for reelection, was accompanied by a newly invigorated wave of homophobia. According to Masha Gessen, a gay rights activist:

To mobilize his shrinking constituency, Putin needed a war, so he declared one. But to fight a war, you need not only to identify an enemy, you must also paint that enemy as both dangerous and less than human. Patriarch Cyrill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, has proclaimed that the international trend toward legalizing same-sex marriage is a sign of the coming apocalypse; that sort of rhetoric establishes imminent danger. In an April 2012 video that has recently gone viral, the deputy head of the Kremlin's propaganda machine screams that when gay men die in car accidents, their hearts should be burned or buried deep underground, lest they be transplanted into a human being. This establishes that we are less than human.

In other words, the LGBT community has long been considered an enemy in Russia. However, in 2011, when Putin’s approval ratings started to fall, he was in an especially vulnerable position. Perhaps because he understood this position, Putin amped up his administration’s anti-LGBT rhetoric, projecting attention onto an enemy other than himself.

As discussed earlier, Russia’s homosexual population has continued to suffer long after the political turmoil of 2011–2012. Indeed, in addition to the increase in violence and harassment reported by the Human Rights Watch after the enactment of Putin’s Gay Propaganda Law, the number of Russians seeking asylum in the United States (which analysts attribute to rising anti-LGBT sentiment in Russia) increased by 15% between 2013 and 2014. What happened after the enactment of Putin’s new law, in other words, may have been part of a larger plan.

4. Homosexuality and HIV/AIDS

47 Ibid.
48 Gessen, ”When Putin Declared War.”
49 Schreck.
Although homosexuality is not accepted in Russia for cultural reasons, it is also associated with the fear of HIV/AIDS. Because “the first official case of HIV [in the Soviet Union] was allegedly the result of bisexual practices on the part of a military translator working in Africa,” HIV/AIDS in Russia was associated with untraditional sexual practices from its first appearance in the country. The Putin administration’s rhetoric only strengthens pre-existing notions that HIV/AIDS is an inherently “gay disease.” Moreover, based on the magnitude of the anti-gay rhetoric that is currently sweeping through Russia, it makes complete sense for Russians to continue to associate homosexuality with disease. According to Patriarch Cyril, head of the Orthodox Church and a very powerful voice in Russia, the homosexual community represents a very real, apocalyptic-type threat, much like an epidemic. Furthermore, if, according to Kremlin representatives, gay men’s hearts should not be used for the purposes of transplantation, there must be something physiologically impaired and infectious about them. When taking the rhetorical climate into consideration, it is not too difficult to imagine how Russian citizens could come to the conclusion that homosexuals are inherently diseased and that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is simply proof of this. As long as homosexuals are considered diseased and HIV/AIDS is considered a fundamentally gay disease, Putin’s enemy remains a threat and there remains a political incentive for Putin to fuel the epidemic that keeps that threat alive.

Although Putin himself never directly says in a speech or interview that all homosexuals have HIV/AIDS, he discusses homosexuality in a way that makes it exceptionally clear that they are dangerous and diseased, leaving his citizens to make the obvious link between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. In an interview, for example, the transcript of which is available on the

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50 Pavri and Rotnem, 49.
Kremlin’s website, Putin is asked a question about Russia’s Gay Propaganda Law. When asked to describe what the law is really about, Putin answers:

You can carefully read and look over the law yourself. But the law is about the ban of pedophilic and gay propaganda. Again, a law about the ban of pedophilic, pedophilic and gay propaganda. In a few countries, including those in Europe, the possibility of legalizing pedophilia is being publicly discussed…. They can do what they want, but in the Russian Federation we have our own cultural code, our own traditions.⁵¹

Putin, in other words, does not say that all homosexuals have HIV/AIDS or that HIV/AIDS is a disease that only affects homosexuals. He does, however, put them in the same category as pedophiles, leading to the obvious conclusion that like pedophiles, homosexuals are inherently dangerous, sick, and threatening to Russia’s children.

Putin then goes on to discuss homosexuality in the context of Russia’s demographic problem:

My personal opinion is that society must take care of its children, at least to ensure the possibility of reproduction… [W]e have achieved what we never thought we would…. [W]e thought we would never overcome the absolutely terrifying situation that we were in regarding the demographic crisis.⁵²

Again, Putin does not directly discuss disease in the context of homosexuality. He does, however, relate his concern about “taking care of [Russia’s] children” and Russia’s demographic problem to his ban on gay propaganda. Homosexuals, in other words, are a threat to Russia both because they “cannot” reproduce (and are therefore biologically defective) and because even if

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⁵¹Вы внимательно прочитайте закон и посмотрите как он называется. А закон называется: «О запрете пропаганды педофилии и гомосексуализма». Закон о запрете педофилии, пропаганды педофилии и гомосексуализма. В некоторых странах, в том числе в Европе, публично обсуждается… возможность легализации педофилии…. Пускай они делают, что хотят, но у народов Российской Федерации, у русского народа есть свой культурный код, своя традиция. Ofitsial’nye setevye resursy.

⁵²Моя личная позиция заключается в том, что общество должно поберечь своих детей хотя бы для того, чтобы иметь возможность размножаться…мы добились того, чего у нас давно не было…казалось, что нам никогда не преодолеть ту абсолютную страшную ситуацию, в которой мы оказались, с демографическим кризисом. Ibid.
they don’t reproduce, they are still a threat to Russia’s existent population of healthy children. Putin will not directly say that all homosexuals have HIV/AIDS, but by associating them with pedophiles and the decay of Russia’s population, he makes it easy for Russian citizens to make the mental connection between homosexuality, danger, and disease. And as long as these connections between homosexuality and disease exist, there remains proof for Russia’s citizens that homosexuals are dangerous.

The consequences of Putin’s demonization of HIV/AIDS sufferers in Russia seem to be far-reaching. The ideas he expressed, although not based in science, have nevertheless found a way into Russia’s medical community. As discussed earlier, there is an enormous gap between those who are eligible to receive antiretroviral therapy in Russia and those who are actually receiving it. The attitudes of Russia’s nurses and doctors may provide a clue as to why that gap exists. The association of homosexuality with HIV/AIDS, for example, is prevalent in the minds of Russia’s medical professionals, especially Russia’s nurses. Russian nurses are taught over a period of three years, and part of their curriculum addresses infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS. A study conducted in 2014, however, illustrates that the education nurses get about HIV/AIDS does not prevent them from believing that all homosexuals are diseased. The authors of the study found, for example, that 11% of the nursing students surveyed thought that all homosexuals had HIV, while 17% did not know. Almost 30% of the surveyed nurses, in other words, had unscientific and bigoted ideas about the relationship between homosexuality and disease. Furthermore, according to the study, “Previous research has shown that in nursing schools students know of intravenous drug use as being a main route for acquiring HIV but often believe that all homosexuals have HIV because it is a risk-laden way for potential HIV

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53 Suominem, et al.  
54 Ibid.
In other words, even though nurses are taught scientifically factual information, their cultural values still play a major role in their perception of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS.

Furthermore, the authors of the study found that “only 22% of the students felt comfortable being in contact with a homosexual person, as they would with a heterosexual” and that “almost 30% felt that their attitude toward homosexuals had become more negative since the beginning of the HIV and AIDS crisis.” These statistics do not reflect poor medical practice, but they do reflect the biases held by Russian nurses that may affect the willingness of HIV/AIDS patients to seek treatment.

It is also important to note that in Eastern Europe, “nurses and nursing students increasingly care for people infected with HIV, people with AIDS and people who are at risk of contracting HIV. Nurses should therefore be knowledgeable about HIV infection and AIDS in order to provide proper care for people living with HIV/AIDS.” According to the report, however, 34% of the respondents were unsure about whether HIV could be transmitted through “casual contact.” As the authors of the study explain, “we need to emphasize this point, because if nursing students think that a person can contract HIV by casual contact, for example in nursing care, then students could fear contracting HIV/AIDS whilst carrying out their daily nursing activities.” It does not seem to be the case, that Putin or members of his administration are fueling the AIDS epidemic by directly telling medical professionals to deny HIV/AIDS sufferers treatment. It does seem, however, that Putin and his administration’s rhetoric, in the form of stigma, has made its way into the minds of the people who are largely responsible for

\[55\] Ibid.  
\[56\] Ibid.  
\[57\] Ibid.  
\[58\] Ibid.  
\[59\] Ibid.
treating HIV/AIDS patients. Not only could this deter patients from seeking treatment, but it could also have disastrous consequences for HIV/AIDS patients who do seek treatment and who will therefore come into “casual contact” with nurses.

5. Homosexuality and the West

Putin has presented himself as a national savior, protecting his citizens from the diseased and dangerous homosexual population, in an effort to garner domestic support. It can also be argued that his rhetoric has linked homosexuality and HIV/AIDS with the West. In his introduction to Gay Propaganda, Garry Kasparov notes: “The best enemies are those against whom historical conflicts can be resuscitated. For a KGB man like Putin and his clique, it’s been most natural to drum up anti-Americanism, preying on Cold War memories.”

According to Natcisz Fejes and Andrea Balogh, “the mythical opposition between Russia and the West has acquired new currency, and now it predominates over economic, social, or historical differentiations.”


61 Arutunyan.

62 Fejes and Balogh, 48.
sentiments is thus not only an easy task for Putin but also an extremely effective one in terms of garnering domestic support.

The resurrection of Cold War sentiments is made even easier for Putin by the fact that associations between homosexuality and the West existed long before he was elected into office. Due to the fact that, “late Soviet Russia was a place without homosexuality” (at least according the propaganda of the time), the new visibility of the LGBT community after the fall of the Soviet Union was seen as a result of increased contact with the West. As Russian émigré writer and activist Yaroslav Mugotin says, “According to Soviet propaganda, which is still very real, there weren’t any homosexuals in Russian and Soviet history: homosexuality is a ‘foreign disease.’”

The idea that homosexuality was a foreign disease imported by the West into Russia was not a new one. All Putin had to do was resurrect and strengthen pre-existing associations. Masha Gessen, in her blog, explains just how Putin accomplished this task:

Here’s how it all came about: When more than 100,000 Russians came out to protest rigged elections in December 2011, Vladimir Putin looked at them and saw the enemy. In Putin’s mind, anyone who opposes his rule opposes Russia itself. So the protesters must have been foreigners, or, if not, they had to be The Other. Early on, he accused then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of having personally inspired the protests. A few months later, this idea of The Other turned into the laws on foreign agents and espionage and into the ban on American adoptions—and eventually into the law on ‘homosexual propaganda,’ for no one represents Western influence and otherness better than gays and lesbians.

By identifying external threats to Russia, by creating a series of laws to protect his citizens against these threats, including homosexuality, and by drumming up old anti-American

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63 Ibid., 37.
64 Ibid., 38.
65 Gessen, "When Putin Declared War."
sentiments, Putin solidified and strengthened pre-existing associations between homosexuality, fear, and the West.

The Gay Propaganda Law itself also establishes the connection between homosexuality and the West. According to the law, the dissemination of “homosexual propaganda” is now a crime that comes with a fine of up to 5,000 rubles. If the person distributing the gay propaganda to minors is a foreigner, however, the punishment is much higher: “fines of up to 100,000 rubles, 15 days in detention and deportation.” Considering the rhetoric surrounding homosexuality and the West, this makes sense:

Judging by comments made by the law’s most-fervent supporters, Duma deputies believe that Russia’s LGBT ‘phenomenon’ is a morally noxious virus that the West has infected Russia with—together with prostitution, pornography, drug abuse and unhealthy fast-food chains. Thus...the law must impose harsher penalties on foreigners from the West because they are the chief provocateurs behind the gay propaganda campaign. They are the ones who are plotting to weaken Russia by corrupting its traditional values, exacerbating its demographic problem and increasing its number of AIDS cases.

6. HIV/AIDS and the West

The Russian idea that homosexuals are foreign agents is also strengthened by the fact that HIV/AIDS was historically considered a Western disease. When HIV/AIDS first appeared in the Soviet Union in 1987, for example, Soviet officials refused to address the issue because they “denied the existence of ‘Western’ social problems.” When reports of HIV/AIDS infections finally showed up in the press, “such reports highlighted that these infections were either the result of contact with Westerners or the ‘depraved’ practices of prostitutes and IDUs

66 Bohm.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Feshbach, 13.
In 1987, according to an article published in the U.S. Department of State’s *Foreign Affairs Note*, representatives of the Soviet government went so far as to claim that the AIDS virus had been “manufactured” by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Pentagon. In other words, for Putin and his administration to suggest a link between homosexuality and the West was not an innovation, since official discussion and attitudes had long ago created the link between HIV/AIDS, the notorious gay disease, and the West.

Russia’s visa regulations further strengthen the misconception that HIV/AIDS is a foreign or Western disease. According to the Global Database on HIV specific travel and residence restrictions, “a negative HIV test result is required for long terms stays (more than three months).” Additionally, according to the site, “foreign nationals found to be HIV positive are expelled.” Russia’s visa restrictions have clear implications to both Russian citizens and foreigners: HIV/AIDS is a disease that originated outside of Russia and it continues to pose an outside threat. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that Russia’s HIV/AIDS epidemic is one of the only HIV/AIDS epidemics in the world that is still growing.

7. The Consequences of Russia’s HIV/AIDS Epidemic: MDR Tuberculosis

Although the Russian government’s failure to curb Russia’s current HIV/AIDS crisis is catastrophic for Russia’s HIV/AIDS sufferers, it also has wider epidemiological implications. According to the authors of a 2001 report on Russia’s battle with tuberculosis, “the incidence of MDR TB [MultiDrug-Resistant Tuberculosis] has continued to increase, as has infection with

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70 Pavri and Rotnem, 49.
71 Feshbach, 14.
72 Global Database on HIV-specific Travel.
73 Ibid.
HIV and coinfection with HIV and TB.”\textsuperscript{74} Russia’s HIV/AIDS crisis is accompanied by a tuberculosis crisis, specifically a drug-resistant and thus more dangerous form of tuberculosis. While rising levels of MDR TB infection pose a public health threat on their own, that threat is exacerbated by Russia’s HIV/AIDS crisis. According to the CDC, there are two forms of tuberculosis: an active form and a latent form. Those with the latent form do not feel sick and cannot spread the disease to others. Those with the active form, however, exhibit symptoms and can spread the disease by simply coughing or sneezing in the vicinity of a healthy person.\textsuperscript{75} Furthermore, “because HIV weakens the immune system, people with latent TB infection and HIV infection are at very high risk of developing active TB disease.”\textsuperscript{76} Russia’s HIV/AIDS crisis, in other words, is contributing to Russia’s tuberculosis crisis by increasing the number of people who have the active form of the disease and thus increasing the number of possible infections. Putin’s refusal to solve one epidemic is also a refusal to solve a completely unrelated but nevertheless extremely dangerous other epidemic.

Russia’s tuberculosis epidemic is no trivial matter, especially because of the existence of drug-resistant strains. In 2011, experts estimated that there were 50,000 cases of MDR TB in Russia and that the majority of the new TB cases were occurring in populations of low socioeconomic status,\textsuperscript{77} meaning populations that are less likely to receive proper medical treatment and more likely to spread the disease. Experts in 2011 estimated that each day, there were 320 new cases of tuberculosis and 64 tuberculosis-related deaths.\textsuperscript{78} Today, Russia has the

\textsuperscript{74} Institute of Medicine.
\textsuperscript{75} Centers for Disease Control, “TB and HIV Coinfection.”
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Institute of Medicine.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
third-largest burden of MDR TB in the world.\textsuperscript{79} Even if MDR TB is treated with drugs (which are often unaffordable) for a period of two years, it has a 60\% fatality rate,\textsuperscript{80} which is higher than the fatality rate associated with Ebola.\textsuperscript{81} The tuberculosis epidemic that Putin is indirectly fueling by refusing to address the HIV/AIDS crisis poses a serious threat to Russia’s public health.

The most effective solution to both TB and HIV/AIDS in Russia would most likely lie within HIV/AIDS treatment itself, since HIV is the disease responsible for the rising number of cases of the active form of tuberculosis. Considering the rising number of HIV cases in Russia and Putin’s refusal to address the problem in a serious way, improvement in either Russia’s HIV/AIDS epidemic or Russia’s tuberculosis epidemic does not seem likely. A new study, however, might offer a glimpse of hope. Conducted in February 2014, this study tested the combined treatment of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis and showed that patients who are infected with both HIV and TB had a better chance of survival if they were treated for both diseases simultaneously than if they were treated for each disease separately.\textsuperscript{82} If Russia’s government officials and health care workers are serious about curbing the tuberculosis crisis in Russia, which is rampant in Russia’s HIV positive population, combining HIV and TB treatment may be what is most effective in the fight against tuberculosis. It is doubtful that Putin will do anything in the near future for Russia’s LGBT community or directly for those suffering from HIV/AIDS due to the political benefits he receives from their alienation and neglect. If he sincerely wants to mitigate the tuberculosis epidemic in his country, however, and he goes about it in the most scientifically effective manner, it may indirectly help combat Russia’s HIV/AIDS crisis.

\textsuperscript{79} Razvodovsky.
\textsuperscript{80} PBS.
\textsuperscript{81} World Health Organization.
\textsuperscript{82} Padayatchi, et al.
8. Looking Forward

When HIV/AIDS (or, as it was called then, GRID, standing for gay-related immune deficiency\textsuperscript{83}) first appeared in America, it was devastating, but was actively ignored by the United States government. When asked about the AIDS virus at a White House press briefing in 1982, one of Reagan’s spokespersons responded by asking, “What’s AIDS?”\textsuperscript{84} In 1983, two years before Reagan ever actually said the word “AIDS” publicly, 3,064 people had been diagnosed with the virus and 1,292 had died from it.\textsuperscript{85} The government remained essentially silent on the topic until public figures either died of the virus or publicly announced that they were infected with the so-called “gay cancer.”\textsuperscript{86} After actors, famous athletes, and even children began to publicly announce their HIV positivity, HIV/AIDS finally received its long-overdue place on the government’s agenda: in 1987, the Food and Drug Administration approved the use of the world’s first antiretroviral drug, and in 1994, the CDC and the Health and Human Services Department launched America’s first televised, government-initiated safe sex advertising campaign.\textsuperscript{87} In order for HIV/AIDS to be considered a legitimate and serious disease by the U.S. government or, in other words, a disease worth spending time and money on, it had to infect enough people and get enough publicity that it was no longer possible to ignore.

The current HIV/AIDS situation in Russia looks much like it did in America in the 1980s: skyrocketing infection rates, denial, stigma, and the spread of information not grounded in science. Because of the additional political incentives behind fueling the HIV/AIDS crisis for Putin and the particularly sensitive political and economic situation in Russia, it is doubtful that

\textsuperscript{83} AVERT, “History of HIV & AIDS in the U.S.A.”

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
he will do anything substantial to curb the epidemic in the near future. Unfortunately, similar to what happened in the United States, HIV/AIDS may need to infect heterosexual, non-drug using or perhaps politically active or otherwise well-known Russian citizens. Or perhaps MDR TB has to become a pandemic that kills millions of people before Putin’s administration realizes that the HIV/AIDS epidemic that is fueling the tuberculosis epidemic is a critical, relevant, and dangerous problem.

However long it takes, these two epidemics cannot be eradicated in isolation. Because of the way they interact with each other in the human body, it seems that HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis will either continue to exist together in Russia, creating an increasingly catastrophic public health disaster, or will be eradicated together. The question that remains, of course, is how many more people, gay or straight, imprisoned or free, poor or rich, have to die before Putin begins to take care of his citizens.

Works Cited


