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Condoms and Education: The Deterioration of Societal Acceptance of the LGBTQ+ Community  
and the HIV Epidemic in Russia

After the fall of the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, the newly independent Russia pushed for democratization and liberalization of many sectors of society and politics. One such area was the promotion of greater acceptance and rights for the LGBTQ+ community. This support resulted in the decriminalization of homosexuality and increased awareness and acceptance of the queer community by the Russian general public. At the same time, Russia was beginning to implement treatment and care plans for people who tested positive for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), although awareness and discussion of the relevance and nature of HIV did not extend far past the LGBTQ+ community, with many believing it was not an issue that would affect them. During the 1990s, despite the public's support, Yeltsin's government created a position of non-interference in the LGBTQ+ community which in turn influenced their actions regarding HIV. **Since the 1990s, society's acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community has deteriorated, as has the state of the HIV epidemic, because the avoidance of these issues in the 1990s turned to homophobic policies and sentiment that has allowed ignorance and discrimination to grow in the Russian government and society, as the state actively promotes "traditional family values".**

To assess the deterioration of these topics in Russia, it is important to understand what qualifies as deterioration in these cases. The deterioration of LGBTQ+ acceptance can be demonstrated by the rise in discrimination, hate crimes, and policies that have been implemented

since the 1990s, and under Vladimir Putin's reign. The continuous growth in positive cases indicates the deterioration of the HIV epidemic, but furthermore, the lack of movement on policies for aid and treatment, as well as the decrease in overall support for education on HIV is another indicator of the deterioration of the epidemic since the 1990s. The lack of discussion and minimal research about sexuality and identity, and HIV, especially in recent years, makes it difficult to directly analyze this deterioration but also highlights the deterioration in acceptance as it is not prioritized by society. Despite this lack of material, however, this deterioration can be assessed based on policies passed and information on related topics, such as sex education.

In the 1990s, societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community had begun to improve from the close-minded, discriminatory ideals of the late Soviet era. In 1993, Yeltsin's government decriminalized homosexuality, facing pressure domestically and internationally. It is important to note, however, that this law did not provide amnesty for those previously convicted of homosexuality and did not qualify them as political prisoners who could be exonerated under laws for victims of political repression, as government policy took the route of non-interference overall (Eremin & Petrovich-Belkin, 300- 301). By 1999, public polling showed that only 15 percent endorsed the liquidation of sexual minorities, an improvement of more than half the proportion who had endorsed that option when polled ten years earlier (Sundstrom, et al., 118-119). Throughout the 1990s, LGBTQ+ topics not only became legal but also openly discussed throughout media and pop culture, with society becoming more open on these topics, as celebrities publicly came out. In addition to legalization, infrastructure was built meant to support the community, including gay clubs, restaurants, activist groups, queer media publications, and the website gay.ru, which connected people from across Russia and provided a platform to publish about a variety of LGBTQ+ related issues (Eremin & Petrovich-Belkin, 301-302). Under Yeltsin, there was an improvement in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in

Russia as people were allowed to openly exist and discuss their identities in ways they had not been able to under Soviet rule.

Though in many ways society had come to accept the existence of the LGBTQ+ community, the government did nothing to remedy the extreme fear and homophobia that had been instilled during the Soviet era. Under the rule of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union had focused on the constant vilification of sexual minorities, associating them with spies and enemies, and encouraging public shaming. Russian society in the 1990s may have been primarily accepting, or at least indifferent to the queer community, but homophobia became more radical, with rhetoric taking more religious and moral arguments as opposed to legal, while hate crime numbers rose but were never addressed by the state (Eremin & Petrovich-Belkin, 301-302). Homosexuality may have been decriminalized and more socially accepted in 1990s Russia, but it never became a topic of interest or importance for the Russian government, which preferred to instead take a position of non-interference.

Due to their relative isolation from the rest of the world at the time, Russia did not see its first registered case of HIV until 1987. The late occurrence in Russia meant they spent much of the 1990s learning about HIV, AIDS, and its infectivity as the epidemic spread throughout the nation ("HIV in Russia"). The epidemic grew during the 1990s, as an estimated forty thousand positive individuals were diagnosed. There were several reasons for this growth, including sexual behavior changes, injection drug use, and economic instability, but all were underlined by the overall lack of knowledge and discussion on the topic throughout society (Kalichman, et al., 72-73). Many in the 1990s were unaware of the prevalence of HIV, believing it would only affect homosexuals, sex workers, and drug users, and there was a widespread refusal to acknowledge the protection condoms provide ("HIV in Russia"). By 1995, the federal Russian government passed a law to cover the costs of HIV treatments, testing, and providing welfare with the federal

budget, attempting to provide treatment despite economic instability (AESOP, 2). Also, in 1995, Yeltsin signed into law a requirement that all foreigners were tested for HIV, and if found positive, faced deportation (Stanley), a law that infers a belief that HIV is not a disease that Russians can have or be infected with without interaction with foreigners, and that it is a disease of foreigners. Many of the misconceptions, lack of awareness, and simple ignorance around HIV in the 1990s allowed it to grow to be a widespread epidemic.

Over the global history of HIV, it was often accused of being an issue that only affects gay, white men. This stigmatization was used as a reason for the issue to not be prioritized by many governments, allowing national epidemics to grow worse. In many of these countries, it was not until celebrities that did not fit that stereotype, such as Magic Johnson in the United States, publicly acknowledged their HIV-positive status for society to understand the universal impacts of HIV (Hollander, 192). In Russia, there were similar stigmatizations of HIV in the early years of the epidemic during the 1990s. The conflation of HIV with homosexuality, as well as sexual promiscuity and drug use, and the lack of prioritization of LGBTQ+ issues by the Russian government, meant the HIV epidemic went unchecked and undiscussed by the government and society overall.

The current state of Russian politics and society can often be described as a reversion back to Soviet-era ideals. This statement can be made on both the topics of the LGBTQ+ community and the acceptance of their identities by Russian society and HIV stigmatization. By the time Putin was officially elected for the first time in 2000, overall attitudes towards queer identities had become more hostile, as outwardly anti-gay sentiments were introduced within government positions, with homophobic policies being implemented at regional levels throughout the early 2000s. In 2013, the federal government put an end to the Yeltsin-era policy of non-interference with the ban on gay propaganda. The law made no specific statements about

what qualified as gay propaganda, and purposefully referred to all queer relationships as “non-traditional sexual relations,” and though it targets organizations (Eremin & Petrovich-Belkin, 305), the lack of specifications makes it applicable to individuals who do not hide their sexual identities. Since he took power, Putin and his government have used Soviet tactics of equating queer identities with ideological and political hostility, thus enabling them to vilify any progressive opposition. Not only is homophobia used to destroy his opposition, but Putin’s government often accuses the Western world and culture for the existence of sexual minorities in Russia, as the introduction of Western values is seen as an effort to pervert Russian society and undermine the state, especially with their demographic issues and attempts to grow the Russian population (Eremin & Petrovich-Belkin, 303 - 305). Putin’s vilification of queer identities and accusations about the West allows him to promote Russia as distinctly moral in comparison to the Western world, an idea that brings modern-day Russia closer to Cold War-era sentiments.

As homophobia has become institutionalized in Russian policies, the HIV epidemic has also deteriorated. As of early 2020, the estimated number of HIV-positive individuals was around one million, but once the estimation of individuals unaware of their status is factored in, the number increases to one and a half to two million individuals, meaning over one percent of Russia’s general population is HIV-positive. Despite the numbers, fear of labeling HIV as an epidemic has set in in the government, a fear that has also spread through the population due to ignorance (“HIV in Russia”). As homophobia has made its way into government policies, the conflation of HIV with homosexuality has continued, and stigmas against sex workers and drug users have also increased. Additionally, there has been a shift in the most at-risk groups, as young adults and teens have become the most vulnerable as younger people begin to have sex without any knowledge of the importance of protection against pregnancy and all STIs, including HIV (“HIV in Russia”). Unless prevention efforts are made by the state or society, the epidemic

will only continue to grow worse as it affects younger generations, reducing the state's chances of ending the HIV epidemic, and further hindering Russia's attempts to grow its population.

In addition to the vilification of queer identities, similar Soviet tactics are used now in discussions around HIV and the epidemic in Russia. The fear of the word epidemic by Russian politicians stems from the Yeltsin-era idea that HIV is not an issue for Russians and a rejection of expert advice that occurred towards the end of the Soviet era. Along with the idea that LGBTQ+ identities originate from Western culture as a plot to destroy the state, there is also an idea perpetuated that HIV originated in a CIA laboratory to destroy Russia. This idea has been carried on through Putin's leadership, as he leaves the policy decisions surrounding HIV, not to the Ministry of Health, but to other security agencies ("HIV in Russia"). While a law was passed in 1995 to cover HIV treatments with the federal budget, it is never sufficiently updated to cover the ever-increasing number of patients who require treatment. At the start of 2020, only half of the more than one million HIV-positive individuals received the medications they needed while the other half are forced to wait until they reach a sufficiently low enough cell count to receive treatment. In 2020, the budget was expanded to allow treatment of about six to seven hundred thousand people, but as the total number of positive cases grows, this will never be enough ("HIV in Russia"). Without providing treatment for every HIV-positive individual, a treatment that prevents the spread of HIV and allows HIV-positive individuals to continue living their lives as though they did not have HIV, it is impossible for Russia to begin to work on eliminating HIV from their society. If every individual were to receive the treatment, HIV would be unable to spread beyond those who have already been infected, in essence ending the epidemic, however, the lack of initiative to work on preventing the epidemic since Putin assumed office has only allowed it to deteriorate.

Since the 1990s, the direct connection that was drawn by the majority between HIV and homosexuality has improved, though there certainly are still some who assume HIV is exclusively a queer issue. Rather than direct connections now, however, the two are still connected through the stigmatization of individuals, resistance to acceptance, and prejudice against education programs. Since the 1990s, there has been a movement of support for providing sex education in schools, especially following the exponential growth of HIV and STI cases in the mid-1990s. Until 1997, general support ranged from sixty to ninety percent, however, a poorly executed project to test sex education programs in 1996 destroyed widespread support, as the failure was blamed as a Western plot to destabilize the state. As Russia has continuously modernized, the average age of sexual occurrences has lowered, highlighting the increased need for sexual education to decrease unwanted pregnancies, HIV, and STIs (Kon, 112-117). The introduction of sexual education would inform many young Russians, who have in recent years become the most high-risk group for HIV, of the effectiveness of condoms for preventing the spread of HIV, and normalize queer identities, reducing both stigmatization and the support for homophobic policies. In addition to sex education, teenagers must also be instructed about drug use, and addicts should be provided clean needles and safe drugs, while also supported through addiction treatment, as teenage experimentation with drugs and sex puts them at high risk of HIV. The resistance towards the sexual education movement demonstrates the attitudes about queer identities and HIV as the encouragement of conversations about sex, sexuality, and gender, as well as condom advocacy, are seen as Western propaganda, and Russian proponents are accused of being foreign agents and pedophiles (“HIV in Russia”). While the conservative majority of Russia may hope to not have to discuss these issues, preferring to believe young people are not having sex or using drugs, that is not the reality. The lack of education and discussion surrounding sex, sexuality, and drug use has only furthered the

deterioration of the HIV epidemic and encouraged stigmatization and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, allowing government implementation of homophobic policies.

The deterioration of LGBTQ+ acceptance and the HIV epidemic occurred because of homophobic policy changes, lack of policy awareness of the changing nature of the HIV epidemic, the increased influence of the Russian Orthodox Church under Putin, and Putin's focus on rhetoric about Western plots to undermine the state and the necessity of maintaining traditional values. In addition to accusations of Western influence on sex education programs, the Russian Orthodox Church has deemed sexual education unnecessary, as they claim to already devote up to eighty percent of time preparing for confession to the subject (Kon, 117), however, if that time is spent telling young individuals to not have sex, it does not teach them anything about safe sex and protection that would prevent the spread of HIV. Putin's time in office has been characterized by growing social conservatism. He has distanced Russia from Western ideals, preferring to instead embrace the traditional values that have also been espoused by the Church. Putin and other members of his government have repeatedly voiced their alliances with the Church and the policies the Church encourages, including gender norms, traditional family ideas, anti-reproductive rights, and homophobia, which has, in turn, influenced policies about the traditional family and relationships (Sundstrom, et al., 118). The increased public influence of the Church has also led to the public refusal of any topics of science that the Church does not approve of, including public health, social hygiene, and STI and HIV prevention. The anti-sex movement has portrayed the idea that sex education is more dangerous to Russian security than HIV, that it is a Western plot, introduced by pedophiles and gay men, to depopulate Russia, and that condoms do not prevent the spread of HIV and STIs, or unwanted pregnancies, ideas that damage chances of implementing sexual education programs as the government focuses on the demographic issues, making it impossible to prevent the further growth of the HIV epidemic



(Kon, 117-119). Educating the public is the best solution to reducing stigmatization and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, and solving the HIV epidemic, but until the Russian fear of sex education and conversations surrounding sexual identities is remedied, it does not seem possible for such education programs to be introduced or for these issues to improve.

With the later introduction of HIV to Russian society, Russia had the opportunity to learn from, and base their response on the experiences of the rest of the world, however, they did not. Russia's insistence on distancing themselves from the Western world and refusal to acknowledge queer identities or issues meant they instead systematically rejected all previously learned lessons. When it began in Russia, HIV was seen as a homosexual issue, and so it was ignored. When it became an issue for drug users, HIV was continuously ignored both because of the past perceptions, and the Russian government's disinterest in aiding drug users, as seen in their ban on methadone and stigmatization of drug addicts. Beyond the government, HIV-positive individuals continue to be stereotyped and shamed because of the connection to homosexuality and drug use but also a lack of knowledge. When HIV was introduced in the Western world, there were many misconceptions and fears surrounding the lack of knowledge on its spread, as people were afraid to share spaces or items with HIV-positive individuals. The years of global experience should have prepared Russia with the learned knowledge, but to this day, the lack of information spread amongst the general population means these fears and the mistreatment by friends, families, doctors, and the government still run rampant ("HIV in Russia"). This issue can only be solved if the taboos surrounding sexuality and sex are removed, allowing individuals to learn about sexual identities and safe sex, but this will only be possible if the government prioritizes LGBTQ+ issues and the HIV epidemic, rather than implementing homophobic,

discriminatory laws and policies, and not evolving HIV budget plans to account for the modern state of the epidemic.

Russian society in the 1990s, following their newfound independence, encouraged the democratization and liberalization of their new government. As the first president, Yeltsin and his government's attempts to satisfy the population included the decriminalization of homosexuality on their agenda, however, this only meant the government took a position of avoiding queer issues, rather than addressing issues that directly impacted Russian citizens, one such issue being HIV as it spread in the early days of the Russian epidemic. By not fostering a broad and government level acceptance and awareness of the LGBTQ+ community and their issues, and not focusing on the importance of addressing HIV before it had grown out of control, Yeltsin's policies led to the later deterioration of societal acceptance of the queer community and the HIV epidemic under Putin, whose primary focus has been on preserving traditional family values and protecting the state from Western plots to destroy Russia. HIV is an issue that can impact anyone, and as such, it should be a topic every individual is educated on so stigmatization of HIV-positive individuals can be eliminated, and individual and government level support can be offered. Furthermore, Putin's ban on queer propaganda does nothing to decrease the number of queer individuals, only causing harm by targeting organizations that help these individuals when they are discriminated against or targeted in homophobic attacks. If Putin's goal is to protect the Russian population and improve demographic counts, not providing treatment and support for HIV-positive individuals will only increase AIDS-related death counts, and homophobic hate crime-related incidents or discrimination that may lead to deaths or outward migration of queer individuals from Russia, and as such to truly accomplish his goal, changes must be made to protect queer individuals and support HIV-positive individuals.

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