



Between Homophobia and Gay Lobby: The Russian Orthodox Church and its Relationship to Homosexuality in Online Discussions

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Abstract: In this article, I address the Church-critical discourse on the relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and homosexuality that pervaded social media discussions after the Church hierarchy was publicly accused of engaging in homosexual relations and promoting same-sex behavior in its innermost circles. One of the most prominent critics of the so-called gay lobby within the Church is theologian and Protodeacon Andrei Kuraev whose *LiveJournal* blog entries on homosexual scandals gained significant resonance and sparked heated online debates. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this article demonstrates how the discourse on the gay lobby controversy takes shape online, examines argumentation strategies and communication patterns and reveals high levels of intolerance and hostility among the internet users toward non-straight sexual desire. In broadcast media, as the subsequent analysis demonstrates, the discourse on homosexuality in relation to Orthodoxy has been significantly suppressed and remained largely invisible.

Keywords: Russian-Orthodox Church, Kuraev, homosexuality, gay lobby, internet, social media, digital media, Russia

After years of repression and persecution under the Communist Regime, Russian Orthodoxy experienced an unprecedented spiritual revival and became central to national identity in the early 1990s (Batalden 1993: 3f.). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the majority of the Russian population underwent a deep existential crisis and rapid social decline. Along with radical economic and political reforms, Russian society faced profound social upheaval and a breakdown of trusted public institutions, common values and norms. In

these times of traumatic and sudden changes, the Russian Orthodox Church, widely perceived as a victim of Marxist-Leninist ideology and state atheist politics, faced a tremendous religious demand among the people. In search for stability and legitimacy, Russian political leaders embraced Orthodoxy and promoted its role as a moral authority and as a symbol of Russia's national resurgence.

Strongly favoured by the state, the Russian Orthodox Church managed to overcome its marginal social status and substantially increased its influence and public presence over the course of the last two decades. With the consolidation of state power and increasing control over society under Vladimir Putin, the Church gained even more relevance as a carrier of national values and traditions and as a 'foundation' of Russian statehood. When, on Christmas Eve in 2014, the Gifts of the Magi were delivered from the Agiou Pavlou monastery on Mount Athos in Greece to Moscow, tens of thousands of Orthodox believers lined up in front of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior to worship the relics. Images of endless queues of the faithful, waiting for hours in the cold were broadcasted throughout the country and serve as evidence of Church's power and influence in people's everyday life. However, increasing criticism by public figures, scholars and activists undermines this positive perception of the Orthodox Church in post-Soviet Russia. Particularly in the era of new technologies and Web 2.0 with its unlimited networking, opinion-sharing and interacting possibilities, the Church became a constant object of intense discussions and swingeing attacks. Numerous Russian-language websites, chat forums, blogs, wikis and social media platforms address Orthodox Christianity and its role in a (post)secular society. In particular, current discussions in digital media show a contrasting picture to the state's acceptance and endorsement of the Church. Online portals abound with heated debates and severe criticism regarding the state's close co-operation with the Moscow Patriarchy, the Church's increased media presence, its visibility in public schools and the army, Church property restitution and controversial opinions expressed by Orthodox hierarchs.

The article seeks to represent and analyse this segment of the Russian internet that has become visible to large online audiences, but that has been insufficiently studied and accessed so far. The study seeks to gain insights into the Church-critical discourse in present-day Russia and to outline its dynamics, patterns of communication, argumentation strategies, confrontations or even 'web wars' (Rutten *et al.* 2013). The following essay focuses on the gay lobby controversy that was triggered by homosexual scandals at the Kazan' Theological Seminary and widely discussed in blogs and social networks in early 2014. My research approach combines quantitative and qualitative methods.¹ In order to define the online event and to narrow the dataset, I formulated a list of key words associated with the research topic, which will be introduced and discussed in greater depth in the subsequent chapters. The data was retrieved from two databases – from *Yandex Search for Blogs* for analysing social media and blogs, and *Integrum* for investigating print and online newspapers. The quantitative part of the research, visualized through various charts throughout the text, provides not only an overview of discourse dynamics and thus enables a comparison of various sources but also helps to focus the qualitative phase of the investigation and makes the dataset accessible to a close reading analysis. Further, the article explores how the Russian Orthodox Church is per-

¹As the following investigation is set in the Russian-Orthodox context, the article discusses first and foremost *male* homosexuality and homophobia.

ceived and interpreted online: it provides insights into a multi-layered, complex debate on homosexuality, and analyses how it is affected by state-imposed homophobia and the anti-gay campaign.

Homosexuality in Russia: position of state and Church

With the enhancement of gay rights, increasing liberal legislation and greater social acceptance of same-sex relations in West-European countries, the issue of gender and sexuality became an arena for political and moral discussion in Russia. While the discourse on homosexuality in the West is largely framed in terms of civil rights, equality and societal inclusion, it follows different patterns in the Russian context. In contrast to the heterosexuality that is portrayed as normal, natural and genuinely Russian, homosexuality is referred to as abnormal love, as non-traditional and immoral behavior and, what is more, as a product of Western cultural influence (Baer 2009: 6). As historian Dan Healey claims in his extensive study on homosexual desire and state regulation of same-sex practices in late-tsarist, revolutionary and Soviet Russia, by thinking and understanding homosexuality in geographic terms and by situating the Russian cultural realm between the perverted West and the pure East ‘permitted and permits Russians to imagine their nation as universally, naturally, and purely heterosexual’ (2001: 253). This is also true for post-Soviet Russia.

Although official policy toward homosexuality was different and inconsistent throughout history, ranging from tolerant and affirmative to openly homophobic and repressive, same-sex relations were documented for centuries and were part of sexual experience in Russia. First attempts to regulate and control sexuality were undertaken under Peter the Great, resulting in a legal ban on male homosexuality in the armed forces (Healy 2001: 22). In 1835, this regulation was extended to the civilian population and the Criminal Code that defined homosexual intercourse as illegal was introduced (Healy 2001: 22). Legal measures on sodomy and a number of medical documents as well as personal diaries demonstrate the visibility of same-sex relations in the public sphere in nineteenth-century Russia. These accounts show that same-sex relations were viewed as part of patriarchal society and masculine culture before transforming to a homosexual subculture in its modern sense (Healy 2001: 22). After a short period of liberal legislation on homosexuality in revolutionary Russia, sodomy law was re-introduced to the Soviet Criminal Code in 1934 and homosexual issues became socially taboo (Kondakov 2013: 158).

The silencing of homosexual discourse and its representation in arts, literature and science during the Soviet period (Baer 2009: 43) contributed to the absence of the gender language and to the denial that sexual and gender dissent ever existed in Russia:

Soviet information controls created [...] the impression that homosexuality was a vice of Western capitalism. In the press there was no reporting of closed prosecutions for male sodomy, while sexological literature about the ‘female homosexual’ was supposed to be issued to specialists alone. The biographies of literary and cultural figures were distorted, heterosexualized, or suppressed. (Healey 2001: 256)

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, sexual minority issues returned in the political and public domain. In 1993, homosexual intercourse between consenting adults was decriminalized. However, the repeal of the Article 121 of the Criminal Code was not a result of public discussion but rather a necessary condition for Russia to become a member of the Council of Europe (Kondakov 2013: 161), and a consequence of growing international pressure. In 1999, homosexuality was removed from the official list of clinical pathologies and mental diseases by the Russian Psychiatric Association (Sapper, Weichsel 2013: 3, Kondakov 2013: 161). Despite these legal measures, strikingly persistent views of homosexuality as a mental condition and as a foreign import continued to dominate the understanding of gender and sexual dissent in post-Soviet Russia. Decriminalization and depathologising of homosexuality in Russia were not preceded by any scientific research and public debates, as historian and sociologist Igor' Kon rightly emphasises in his study on the relationship between homophobia and democracy in post-Soviet Russia (2013: 51). Sudden and unprecedented visibility of same-sex issues in media and politics after the demise of communism only strengthened the impression that homosexuality was a product of Western influence.

Feared, condemned and demonized, homosexuality has been used for contesting power relations, articulating Russia's sovereignty and defining the *Self* and the *Other*. Since Vladimir Putin's accession to power, a rising tide of nationalist and traditionalist rhetoric put forward by public figures and politicians can be clearly observed in Russia. As Brian James Baer puts it persuasively, '[t]he idea of homosexuality as a symptom of the sorry state of Russian society in general and of Russian masculinity in particular is widely voiced' (2009: 10). While homosexual visibility during the Yeltsin era was conceived as a 'crisis of masculinity' (Baer 2009: 10), 'the return of the Russian male to social, economic, and political power under Putin was expressed in [...] the dispersal by the Moscow police of the gay pride parade in 2006' (Baer 2009: 10, see also Zogrdrader 2013: 221f.). This open suppression of gay rights activists created a symbolic rupture with the previous political agenda of perceived adaptation and mimicry of Western values, and marked an appearance of an allegedly strong, masculine state with its own ideological portfolio.

With the legal ban of homosexual propaganda among minors, introduced and enacted by the Ryazan' region in 2006 (Sapper, Weichsel 2013: 3), condemnation of homosexuality has left the symbolic realm and entered the realm of law. In the following years, similarly restrictive regulations were introduced by twelve Russian regional governments (Sapper, Weichsel 2013: 3). In response to a wave of gay marriage and same-sex relationship legislation in the West, a nationwide anti-gay campaign was initiated by the Russian government in 2012 before approving the new legislation at the federal level. The East-West-dichotomy provided important discursive parameters for this campaign. Arguing that Russian society was endangered by individualism, consumerism, secularism, and homosexuality, the Russian Orthodox Church made a significant contribution to the articulation of traditional family values and moral standards during the campaign (Mitrokhin 2013: 71, Michajlov 2013: 87). Patriarch Kirill described the legislation of homosexual relations in Western Europe as a 'dangerous apocalyptic symptom' and emphasized the necessity to 'ensure that sin is never sanctioned in Russia by state law because that would mean that the nation has embarked on a path of self-destruction' (Patriarch Kirill 2013).

Historically, the official position of the Church toward homosexuality has been unequivocal. Same-sex relation is condemned as sinful and inconsistent with the Christian teaching and the teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church. The current stand of the Moscow Patriarchy on homosexuality is described and articulated in the *Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, passed by the Bishops' Council in 2000. This major official document reflects the Church's position on its relation with the state and a number of social issues and secular matters. Apart from numerous references to the Holy Scriptures that reject homosexuality as a 'vicious distortion of the God-created human nature' (Social Concept 2000: XII. 9), the text is also embedded in contemporary discussions on sexuality. The document fundamentally opposes the perception of homosexuality as a gender identity and a sexual orientation among others that has 'the equal right to public manifestation and respect' (Social Concept 2000: XII. 9). Further, the Church strongly disagrees with the statement that homosexuality 'is caused by the individual inborn predisposition' (Social Concept 2000: XII. 9) and argues 'that the divinely established marital union of man and woman cannot be compared to the perverted manifestations of sexuality' (Social Concept 2000: XII. 9). Framed in terms of family, marriage and procreation, heterosexuality is perceived as the only possible and acceptable form of sexual activity, whereas homosexuality is regarded as a deviation from the norm.

The difference between the sexes is a special gift of the Creator to human beings He created. [...]. Man and woman are two different modes of existence in one humanity. They need communication and complementation. However, in the fallen world, relationships between the sexes can be perverted, ceasing to be an expression of God-given love and degenerating into the sinful passion of the fallen man for his ego. (Social Concept 2000: X. 1)

Homosexual desire, put in line with other passions and human temptations, is believed to be healed by 'the Sacraments, prayer, fasting, repentance, reading of Holy Scriptures and patristic writings, as well as Christian fellowship with believers who are ready to give spiritual support' (Social Concept 2000: XII. 9). Within the context of the *Social Concept*, homosexuality is considered as a result of a sinful social choice or societal influence. The document continues:

[...] the Church is resolutely against the attempts to present this sinful tendency as a 'norm' and even something to be proud of and emulate. This is why the Church denounces any propaganda of homosexuality. Without denying anybody the fundamental rights to life, respect for personal dignity and participation in public affairs, the Church, however, believes that those who propagate the homosexual way of life should not be admitted to educational and other work with children and youth, nor to occupy superior posts in the army and reformatories. (Social Concept 2000: XII. 9)

When the State Duma passed a law banning the dissemination of propaganda for homosexual relations to minors on 30 June 2013 and imposed heavy fines for violations thereof (Michajlov 2013: 87), the Russian Orthodox Church was supportive of the new legislation and actively promoted its view of homosexuality as a phenomenon alien to the Russian cultural tradition. Commenting on the anti-gay propaganda law, archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, then

Chairman of the Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society, stated that many see Russia ‘as a defender of Christian values and traditional ethics, as a country that provides a real alternative to the cult of the golden calf and to a self-destructing understanding of what freedom is’ (01.07.2013).

Arguing that the main objective of the law was to protect children from sexually explicit material and information, and to advocate national traditions and public moral norms, the notion of ‘propaganda’ of homosexuality to children and youth, first introduced in the *Social Concept* of the Russian Orthodox Church and discussed above, was officially employed in the wording of the new legislation. The only difference is that there is not a single mention of the term homosexuality in the text of the secular law that officially prohibits this:

Propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships to minors, expressed in the dissemination of information aimed at forming non-traditional sexual attitudes among minors, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relationships, distorted image of social equality of traditional and non-traditional sexual relationships, or the forced imposition of information of non-traditional sexual relationships, which can attract interest to such relationships [...]. (Federal Law No 135 2013)

Following this argumentation, homosexuality appears not only abnormal and dangerous but even worse: non-traditional. According to the law, any demonstration in favour of gay rights or visibility of homosexual relations in the public sphere might be declared illegal. Although the law does not criminalise or *explicitly* discriminate homosexuality, it further marginalises and stigmatises sexual minorities, as many critics and scholars have pointed out (Sapper & Weichsel 2013: 4, Mitrokhin 2013: 71f., Michajlov 2013: 87).

While the vaguely formulated anti-gay law made front-page headlines abroad and received forceful international condemnation, the overwhelming majority of Russian society approved this legal restriction against same-sex couples. According to the survey carried out by the state public opinion polling agency shortly before the anti-gay law was adopted, 88 percent of respondents indicated, they are in favour of the new law while only 7 percent did not support the legislation (VTsIOM 11.06.2013). An opinion poll conducted by the independent Levada Centre in April 2013 demonstrated that 67 percent of those who answered would support the ban on homosexual relations; 14 percent were against such legislation. Further, 35 percent of Russians characterised homosexuality as a disease and 43 percent linked same-sex desire to a lack of discipline or a bad habit (Levada Centre 2013: 114). Only 12 percent of respondents considered homosexuality normal (Levada Centre 2013: 114). When asked why the law prohibiting propaganda for homosexual relations was introduced, 60 percent of those polled answered ‘concern for the morality of the population, strengthening of public ethics’ (Levada Centre 2013: 114). In response to the question how homosexuals should be treated, 22 percent of respondents suggested to ‘heal’ them, 16 percent wanted to ‘isolate them from society’, 5 percent would ‘eliminate’ them, 27 percent answered ‘provide psychological and other help’ and 23 percent would ‘leave them alone’ (Levada Centre 2013: 114). Even though the responses might differ depending on questions, chosen survey strategies and methods, the numbers given above unequivocally demonstrate what negative attitudes toward homosexuality and massive rejection of gay people are dominant in Russia. In a climate of widespread conservative views and increasing anti-Western and anti-gay sentiments in con-

temporary Russian society, it appears hardly surprising that the Putin administration, allied with the Russian Orthodox Church, was perceived as a guardian of public good and succeeded in promoting itself as a supporter of the majority view.

Lifting the veil: gay scandals at the Kazan' Seminary

While supporting the anti-gay propaganda law, condemning sodomy as a grave sin and bearing down on all forms of non-traditional behavior (Papkova 2011: 49f.), the Russian Orthodox Church has itself been accused of covering and protecting homosexuality in its innermost circles. In December 2013, there were reports in the Kazan' local media on sexual harassment incidents involving hierarchs and priests of the Kazan' Theological Seminary. According to *kazanweek.ru*, the Education Committee of the Russian Orthodox Church urged a special commission headed by the Archpriest Maksim Kozlov to investigate sexual abuse and assault allegations by the seminarians ('Tatarstanskuii mitropoliiu' 2013). When asked by the delegation about cases of sexual harassment, most of the students confirmed being victims of homosexual actions, and complained about hegumen Kirill (Iliukhin) and other members of the administration of the seminary ('Tatarstanskuii mitropoliiu' 2013). Based on the testimony gathered during the inspection, Kirill Iliukhin was removed from both his vice chancellor and press secretary positions, and expelled from the Kazan' diocese ('Tatarstanskuii mitropoliiu' 2013).² The incident was neither followed by further investigation nor did the commission take administrative measures in order to reverse the policy of the seminary.

It seems clear that the Church tried to avoid publicity and to conceal the scandal, but the effect was quite the opposite. As with many other similar cases in the past, the Kazan' gay scandal was likely to remain of local relevance, if any relevance at all. However, soon after the incident it was reported that the notorious hegumen – despite serious accusations revealed by the Church inspection committee at the Kazan' Seminary – was appointed head of the department of Theology at the Tver' State University that belongs to the diocese of Tver' and Kashin ('Gomoseksualist-igumen' 2013). Andrei Kuraev (born 1963), Protodeacon, theologian, popular blogger and, until recently, prominent voice of the Russian Orthodox Church offering a Christian perspective on church-state relations and various contemporary issues, followed the gay scandals in Kazan' closely. He reposted media and social networks' reports on his *LiveJournal* blog (diak-kuraev.livejournal.com) that gained broad attention by the general public. Since its foundation in 2008, Kuraev's blog provides regular updates to a large and growing audience, including the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church. After Kuraev published a number of anonymous letters and confessions about further homosexual incidents within the Church, the scandal increasingly expanded beyond Kazan' Theological Seminary and its spiritual leadership to encompass the whole body of the Church, thereby gaining an entirely new dimension. In one of his blog posts, Kuraev himself refers to homosexuality as a common problem of the Church and claims that 'metastases of the 'gay' tumor in the church can be only removed by a miracle' (*diak-kuraev* 19.12.2013).

² This information was refuted by a Kazan' diocese representative who claimed that hegumen Kirill was not dismissed but voluntarily resigned from his office at the Kazan' Theological Seminary and moved to another diocese ('Igumen Kirill' 2013).

As a result of his blog posts and public statements, Kuraev was expelled from the lecturing corps of the Moscow Theological Academy – an unexpected and radical turn of events. At its regular session on 30 December 2013, the Academic Council resolved to dismiss Kuraev from the teaching staff and to exclude him as a Professor of Missiology of the Moscow Theological Academy: ‘The Academic Council noted that Protodeacon Andrei Kuraev regularly makes flamboyant statements in the media and blogosphere, and that his activity in this area remains scandalous and provocative in a number of cases’ (‘Moskovskaia Dukhovnaia Akademiia’ 2013). Kuraev commented on his dismissal from office in his blog, arguing that the decision by the Academic Council was a direct response to his publications revealing homosexual scandals within the Church, and claimed that he had become a victim of a Russian Orthodox ‘gay lobby’ (diak-kuraev 31.12.2013).

Obviously the clash between desired and existing reality, and a sharp conflict between harsh and openly anti-homosexual rhetoric by the Moscow Patriarchy officials, as well as the emerging visibility of homosexuality or even gay networks within the Church – made accessible through testimonial assertions by seminarians and priests published on Kuraev’s blog – contributed to the relevance and presence of the topic in public discourse. Yet, it was never Kuraev’s intention to justify and accept homosexuality as normal or to present same-sex relations in a positive light. On the contrary, Kuraev’s attitude toward homosexuality corresponds entirely to the official stance of the Russian Orthodox Church and its narratives, discussed above.

Quantifying online discourse

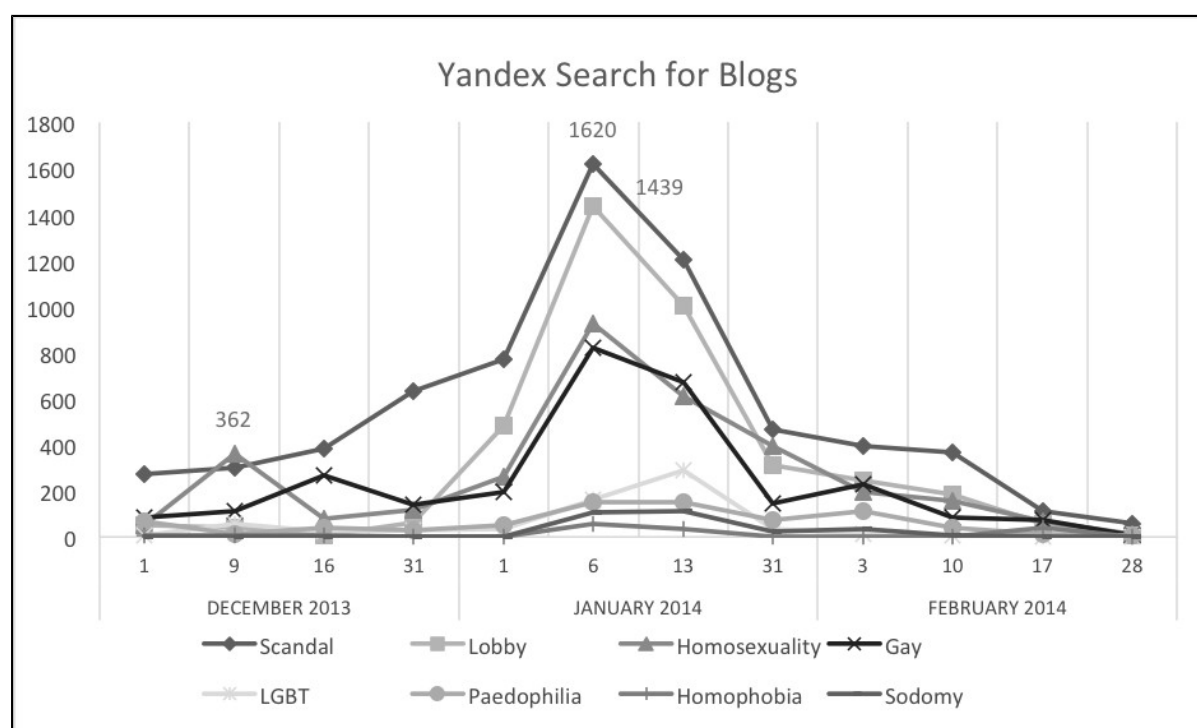
Kuraev’s *LiveJournal* blog entry ‘Torzhestvo golubogo lobbi’ [Triumph of the gay lobby] published on 31 December 2013 (diak-kuraev 31.12.2013) gained unprecedented resonance and triggered heated online debates on homosexuality and the role played by the Orthodox Church in today’s Russia. The number of comments to the blog entry alone demonstrates its significance. While the average number of comments that Kuraev received to each blog entry in December 2013 did not exceed 355, his post on the gay lobby in the Church generated in total 1.938 responses. Only the blog entries related to Mikhail Khodorkovskii and Pussy Riot received a comparable number of comments: 1.146 and 1.827 respectively. One might get the impression that the gay revelation scandal did not actually start with the unscheduled investigation at the Kazan’ Theological Academy but with this particular blog post by Kuraev. In this respect, it is not surprising that blog posts, comments on social networking sites as well as media reports – inside and outside Russia – referred to Kuraev as the primary source of information regarding the gay revelation wave.

In order to tackle the debates and to demonstrate how the discourse on homosexuality and Orthodoxy in Russian blogs and social media developed over time, I first conducted a quantitative analysis using *Yandex Search for Blogs*.³ The key purpose of the research was not to provide absolute numbers, but rather to trace changes and highlight differences over time within the scope of Russian social networking sites. The time frame chosen for the investigation was from 1 December 2013 until 28 February 2014. The data was collected manually, as

³ *Yandex Search for Blogs*, service founded in 2004, provides information and statistics not only for Russian-language blogs but also forums, social networks and microblogging services.

Yandex Pulse of the Blogosphere, an online service that helped visualise trends in Russian blogs and social media, had been terminated in February 2013 due to low attendance. Even though *Yandex* promises to provide necessary data for research purposes upon demand, according to the information on its official website ('Pul'sa net' 2014), the request sent in Russian to info@blogs.yandex.ru on 20 March 2014 remained unanswered.

Figure 1. 'Frequency of keywords mentioned in the Russian blogosphere and social media within the context of 'ROC' or 'church' or 'orthodox'. Data collected on 23 March 2014.



Source: Hanna Stähle

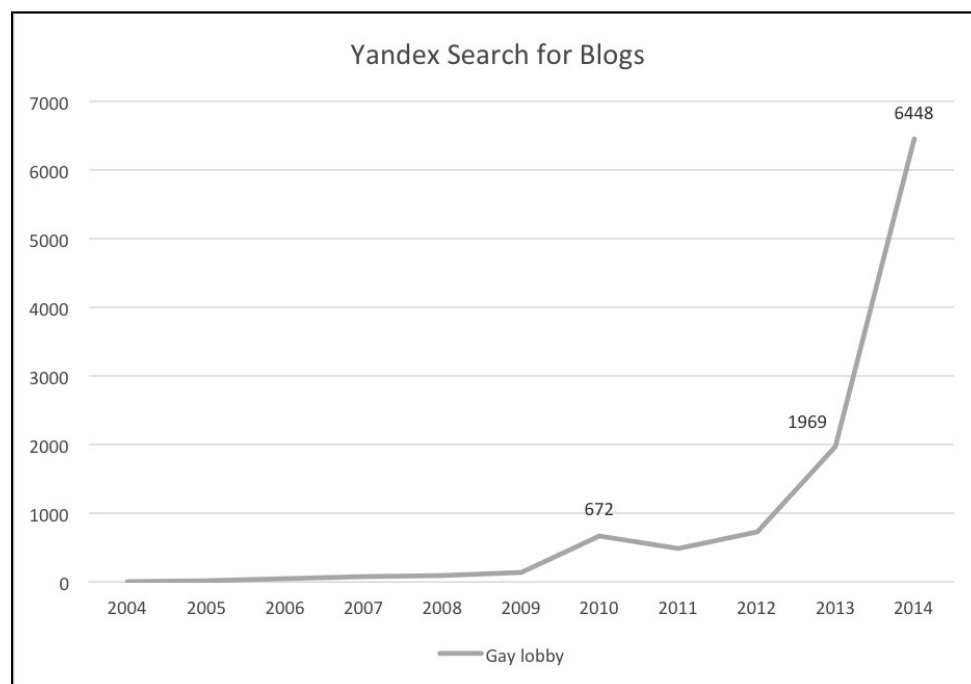
After creating a list of keywords associated with the research topic, I searched for these terms within the context of ROC⁴ or church or orthodox (see Figure 1) on a weekly basis. My exact query on *Yandex Search for Blogs* was ['search term' << (ПЦЦ && церковь && православный)]. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the debates in the blogosphere and social media started in December 2013 and were at their peak from 1 to 13 January 2014, gradually decreasing in the following weeks and disappearing entirely at the end of February 2014. The term 'scandal' was mentioned 1620 times, 'lobby' – 1439 times. The first intensification of the discussions can be observed in the week from 9 to 16 December 2013. Here, the term 'homosexuality' appeared 362 times. This slight rise can most probably be traced back to the investigations at the Kazan' Theological Seminary on 13 December 2013. Within the selected time frame, the keywords 'scandal' and 'lobby' were most frequently used, followed by 'ho

⁴ Russian Orthodox Church.

mosexuality' and 'gay' while the terms 'LGBT', 'paedophilia', 'homophobia' and 'sodomy' occurred less than 200 times.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the terms 'scandal' and 'lobby' dominated social media debates within the specified time frame and context. While the term 'scandal' appears rather broad and can be related to various issues, although this is less likely within the chosen research framework, the term 'lobby' seems to be more specific and is closely associated with the research topic. In the next phase, employing again *Yandex Search for Blogs* I searched the keyword combination 'голубое лобби' [gay lobby] in any possible context from 2004 to 2014. Broken down by year, research results in Figure 2 provide evidence that the use of the 'gay lobby' combination has risen considerably over the last three years, reaching a new level of intensity in 2014. In 2013, 'gay lobby' was mentioned 1969 times; at the beginning of 2014 the term appeared 6448 times in Russian blogs and social media. While these particular outcomes appear rather predictable, the mere fact that there were debates over 'gay lobby' provides interesting insights and is worth noting. While corresponding with the internet usage statistics, the graph curve demonstrates that the 'gay lobby' controversy was everything but new to the online audience. Even though the most intense debates started in 2013 and continued to increase significantly in 2014, the first peaks were in 2010 with 672 mentions and in 2012 with 730 mentions. A search query for 'lobby' on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchy returns several references dating from 2005 to 2013. None of them, even the latest one published on 14 December 2013, is related to the gay scandal within the inner circles of the Church ('Vy iskali' 2014), which is, of course, not surprising.

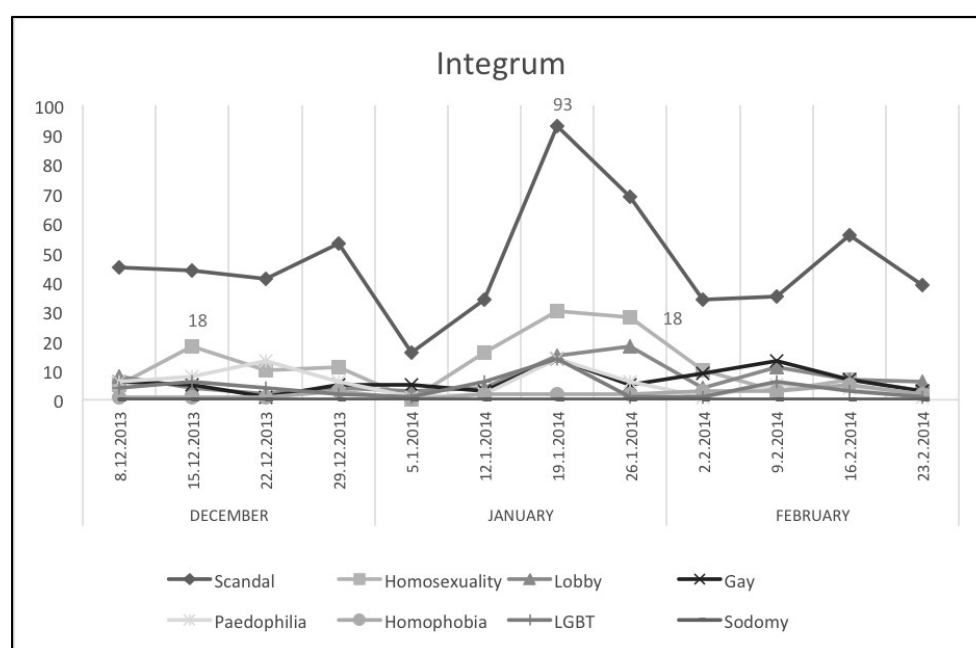
Figure 2. Frequency of the keyword 'gay lobby' mentioned in the Russian blogosphere and social media in any possible context from 2004 to 2014. Data collected on 23 March 2014.



Source: Hanna Stähle

To situate the research outcomes into a broader context and provide a comparative dimension, a keyword search similar to the analysis illustrated in Figure 1 was conducted in Russian print and online media. The data was retrieved from the database *Integrum* that archives and provides access to the largest collection of Russian print and online newspapers.⁵ The timeline examined was the period from 1 December 2013 to 28 February 2014. The exact query I used on *Integrum* was: ‘search term’ и (РПЦ или церковь или православный). As one can see in Figure 3, the way the discourse emerged in the mainstream media is different from the way debates took shape in blogs and social media. While social media responded immediately to Kuraev’s blog post published on 31 December 2013, the story built up slowly in the Russian print and online media. In the week from 31 December 2013 to 5 January 2014, the time of New Year celebrations and public holidays in Russia, there were almost no reports on the issue. Rediscovery of the ‘gay lobby’ topic occurred much later, after significant decrease of the discourse in social media. Within the selected time frame, the term ‘scandal’ was most frequently used, followed by ‘homosexuality’. ‘Homophobia’ and ‘Sodomy’ were mentioned less than 20 times.

Figure 3. Frequency with which keywords were mentioned in the Russian print and online media within the context of ‘ROC’, ‘church’ or ‘orthodox’. Data collected on 23 March 2014.



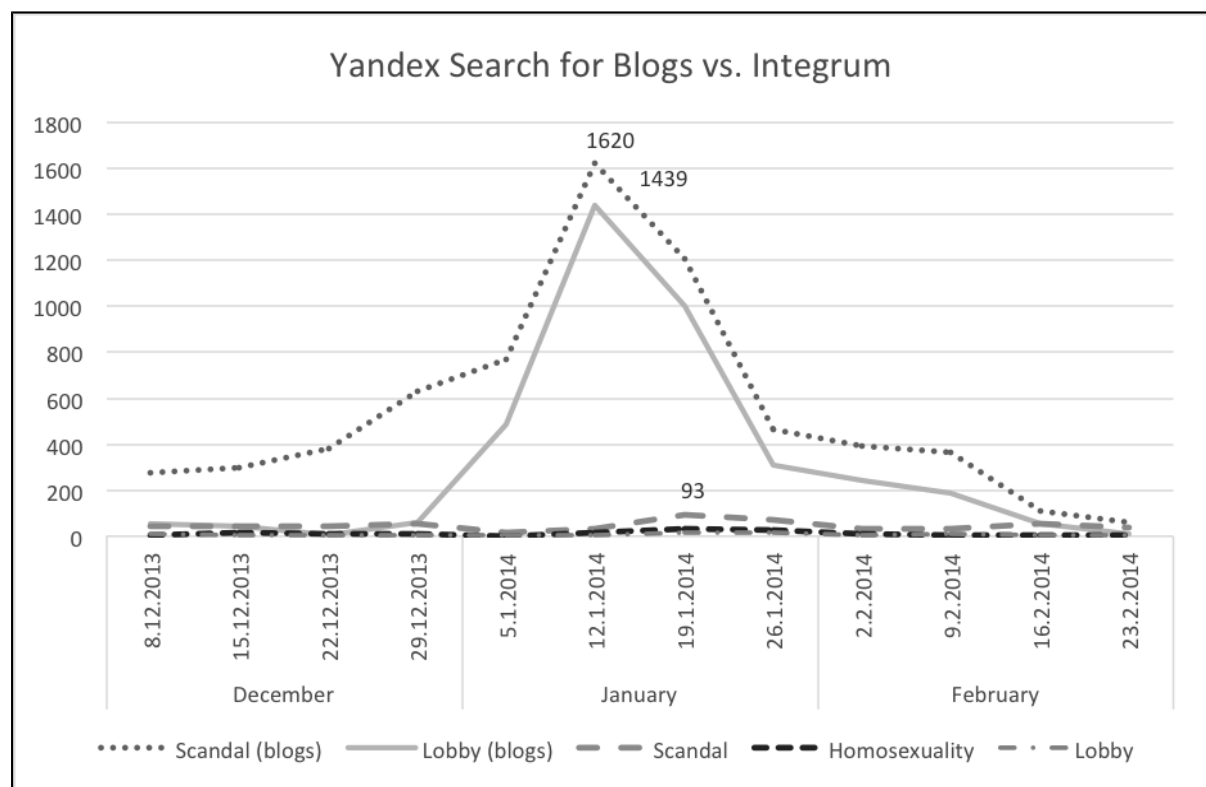
Source: Hanna Stähle

The data presented in Figure 1 and 3 and discussed above appear to demonstrate a similar discourse dynamics. In order to provide a basis for comparison, I put this data together in one single chart. For the purpose of clarity, only the two most frequent terms from Figure 1 and the three most frequent terms from Figure 3 were included. Based on this comparison, a com-

⁵ According to its website, *Integrum* provides an archive of 500 million documents collected from over 7000 databases. The archive covers, among other, all national and regional print and online media ('Integrum World Wide' 2014).

pletely different picture emerges. Against the background of intense discussions in social media and blogs, the discourse in the central press and online newspapers is of only marginal relevance. According to Figure 4, the “trends” discussed above are almost invisible and, thus, completely irrelevant. The online discourse on gay lobby scandals within the Church did not spill over to the mainstream media. It appears that the topic was too controversial to be covered and discussed in depth in central and regional newspapers, both print and online, and would contradict the positive image of the Russian Orthodox Church and its uncompromising stance toward homosexuality.

Figure 4. Comparison of data retrieved from *Yandex Search for Blogs* and *Integrum*, illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 3 respectively.



Source: Hanna Stähle

What conclusions can be drawn from the quantitative research results and how can they help when conducting a close reading study? Based on the data analysed, a clear-cut distinction between mainstream media coverage and social media debates has emerged. The difference is not only that print and online newspapers reacted almost two weeks later to the events but also the scale and intensity of discussions. Compared with the debates in blogs and social media, the discourse in the mainstream media was almost non-existent. As was illustrated in Figure 1, the interest of social networking sites was not generated by the offline events related to the sexual harassment cases at the Kazan’ Theological Seminary but by the blog post published by Kuraev after his dismissal from office. The most intense discussions on the gay

lobby scandals took place in the first weeks of January 2014 – this outcome is relevant for focusing the qualitative part of the research. According to Figure 2, the gay lobby issue was not a tabula rasa to the online audience but the scale and intensity of discussions over the topic was unique. Through a close reading study, the following chapter provides insights into the debates surrounding gay lobby scandals.

Online discussions: close reading study

‘I am not sure whether the way of publicity is for the good. But I am sure that it will at least provide an opportunity. The self-cleansing path in the Church is firmly clogged. Nothing will change without a strong external constraint to a cleansing’ (diak-kuraev 01.01.2014). With these words, Kuraev depicted the situation in the inner structures of the Russian Orthodox Church and legitimized his lonely fight against homosexual networks and intimate alliances within the Church. While remaining faithful to the official stance of the Moscow Patriarchy – at least in his own understanding and perception – Kuraev launched a campaign against the institutionalized protection of homosexuals in the Church. His blog posts about the incidence of homosexuality in the Russian Orthodox priesthood, further enhanced and dramatized through eyewitness reports and Kuraev’s sudden and poorly explained dismissal from his academic position, provoked a discursive explosion and controversial debates in the Russian blogosphere and social media, as illustrated in the previous chapter.

Hundreds of blog posts, comments, tweets, memes and videos appeared within days on the Web, some of them original – analysing, contradicting, complementing and contextualizing information on Kuraev’s *LiveJournal*, others were reposts, links and shares that were massively disseminated through blogs and social networks. A multitude of online platforms has been involved in discussing gay scandals and Kuraev’s role in revealing the issue: *LiveJournal* appeared as the most significant one, followed by *Vkontakte* and a number of forums. While *Vkontakte* focused on spreading the information, often retelling what exactly happened at the Kazan’ Theological Seminary and explaining offline and online events that followed the revelation wave, *LiveJournal* served as a facilitator of discussion and as the main discourse site. Focusing on the time frame from 31 December 2013 to 14 January 2014, I zoom in on the *LiveJournal* discussions that Kuraev’s blog posts generated in order to outline personal reflections as well as users’ main argumentation strategies and narratives, and to explore how Russian Orthodoxy and homosexuality are imagined and intertwined online.

A wide range of responses, positive, negative and, in many cases, aggressive ones, often referring to the same sources and names but articulating different views and perspectives, can be found in *LiveJournal* blog posts and comments. Among these many facets of responses, the recurrence to the Soviet heritage of the Russian Orthodox Church appears as a dominant discursive framework when reflecting on the culture of homosexuality in monastic circles. For the user ‘ponomarev_a_n’ the gay lobby revelation is unsurprising. By comparing the Russian Orthodox Church with the Soviet Writer’s Union, he deprives it of its spiritual function and religious meaning, and puts it in a secular environment. ‘ROC is an organization that calls itself religious but its genetic code makes it look like the Soviet Writer’s Union that was founded by the ‘genius’ Iosif Vissarionovich [Stalin] in order to manipulate the people’

(ponomarev_a_n 08.01.2014). It is further stated that both the Writer's Union and the Orthodox Church were founded by Stalin and had similar objectives (ponomarev_a_n 08.01.2014). Similar argumentation is employed by 'melancholy_gay' who is convinced of the existence of a powerful gay lobby within the Church and its roots in the Soviet anti-religious approach:

There is indeed a gay lobby in the ROC and it is rather powerful. However, it is far away from the LGBT activism, gay prides and from supporting same-sex marriages. Moreover, it publicly accuses the 'perverted West' and the gays. Modern ROC – this is an institution founded by Stalin who made the priests agree to his conditions. With the help of various techniques, the church was brought under the total control of the atheist state. (melancholy_gay 04.01.2014)

What seems remarkable is that it was not called into question that homosexual practices existed and were widespread among clerics during Soviet times, not even by Kuraev's strong opponents. However, unlike the Church-critics who see a continuation of Soviet religious narratives and practices in post-Soviet Russia as being adopted or simply tolerated by the Moscow Patriarchy, they emphasize an incisive rupture with the previous atheist politics due to the demise of communism. Here, a significant role is attributed to the Patriarch Kirill who 'initiated a politics of missionary work and total cleansing of the Church, cleansing from idler-missionaryphobes and the "gay lobby"' (kirillfrolov 2014). As a prominent Orthodox activist Kirill Frolov claims in his blog post 'Who, with what purpose and why prepares a new anti-Church campaign?' (kirillfrolov 08.01.2014). Directly responding to Kuraev's publications, he asks a rhetorical question at the end of the contribution: 'Who then cleanses the Church from traitors and perverts in priest's robes and who speculates on the topic of 'gay lobby' in the Church in order to discredit the Holy Patriarch Kirill?' (kirillfrolov 08.01.2014). A similar argumentation pattern emerges in the blog post by the user 'russkiy_malchik': 'Through Kuraev, perverts in priest's robes declared a war on the 'gay lobby' by trying to attribute their sins exactly to those who are extirpating it [the lobby] – what can be meaner?' (russkiy_malchik 12.01.2014).

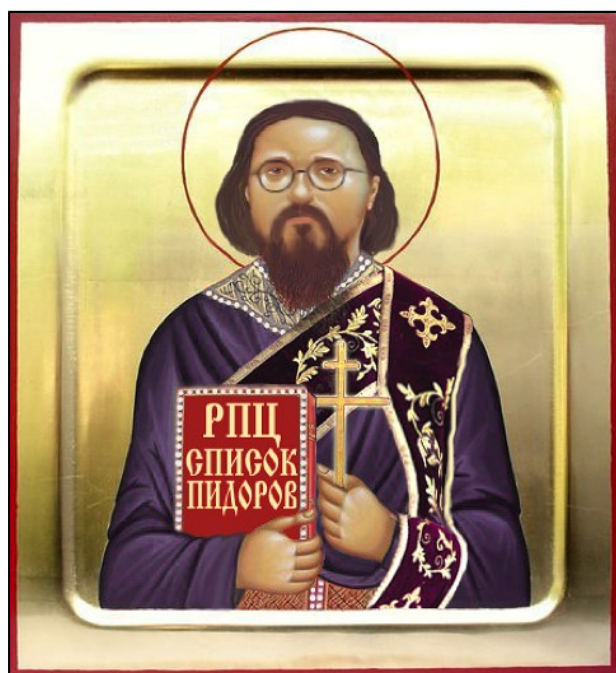
When analysing online reactions to Kuraev's blog posts, it becomes clear that many internet users as well as communities and groups have decisively taken sides, before the discourse even emerged and positions were articulated. The mere fact that Kuraev was the one who initiated the debates and caused a stir on the Russian internet was enough to decide how to engage with the issue. Many bloggers and commenters even focused on discussing Kuraev himself – as a person, missionary, theologian, blogger and, first and foremost, as a prominent public figure with non-conventional and rather controversial views –, rather than dwelling on the issue of homosexuality and gay networks within the Church. Widely discussed and reverberated in the social media was Kuraev's image as a reformer. When reflecting Kuraev's criticism on homosexual cover-ups by the Church and the possible changes this revelation might bring, many users drew historical parallels with the Protestant Reformation and compared Kuraev – not without ironic connotation and a hidden agenda – to Martin Luther, as in the following example:

ROC is pregnant with renewal and perestroika, will Kuraev become a new Luther or Yeltsin of the Orthodox faith? Kuraev has already nailed his theses to the door of his

home church in Wittenberg on the internet. However, he neither publicly burned the ‘Papal Bull Exsurge Domine’ in the backyard of his seminary in order to excommunicate him from the Church seminary, nor did he declare in his appeal ‘To the Orthodox believers of the ROC’ that the fight against ‘Papal’ pedophilic indulgences concerns all Orthodox believers and is the outset of the reformation of the ROC. (chudinovandrei, posted in ru-antireligion 04.01.2014)

Others question the sincerity and credibility of Kuraev’s intentions and mock his attempts to challenge homosexual networks in the Orthodox clergy and to contribute to the spiritual cleansing of the Church. Recalling numerous gay scandals that involved Orthodox priests and bishops that had gained publicity in the 1990s and at the outset of the 2000s, the users emphasize that Kuraev remained silent on the issue for many years, if not decades. In an ironical reversion, they “celebrate” Kuraev as a hero of gay scandals revelation and attribute to him the alleged authorship of the list of homosexual priests that currently circulates in the internet. Set in the context of a traditional Orthodox iconography, Kuraev is depicted as a saint and martyr (see image 1). Playing with the boundaries between the sacred and profane, users transfer a double meaning and, thus, ridicule Kuraev’s reformist desires.

Image 1. ‘Andrei Kuraev portrayed as a saint, holding the “Bible” – list of Orthodox gay priests.’



Source: <http://anticlericalism.livejournal.com/1678816.html> (accessed 12 August 2014)

The notion of reformation or, rather ‘schism’, finds its continuation in the blog posts by Kuraev’s opponents. Kuraev, who challenges traditional forms of Church authority and allegedly undermines its ability to produce sense and meaning, is often referred to as a sectarian, renovationalist or simply as a ‘spiritual terrorist’ whose aim is ‘to plant a bomb into the

base of the Russian Orthodox Church' (deltaplann 03.01.2014). In the comment by 'alekseysc' Kuraev is portrayed as a representative of a Khlyst movement: 'Kuraev himself has been long part of the Khlyst sect. And he decoys his admirers into the abyss. Kuraev discredits the Russian Orthodox Church and now openly harms it' (alekseysc 08.01.2014).

Another dominant and recurring motive in online discussions is reference to the punk band Pussy Riot and Kuraev's outspoken positive assertion of the anti-Putin punk prayer in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior. 'In the Russian Orthodox Church, the first voice on the action happened to be a positive one. A prominent figure of the ROC, Deacon Andrei Kuraev, posted his (now 'legendary') text three hours after the punk action in the Cathedral, assessing the action as 'NORMAL' [...]' (Ponomariov 2013: 190). In contrast to Kuraev, the official Church hierarchy condemned the action as blasphemy and sacrilege (Ponomariov 2013: 190). Even though the opinions on the Pussy Riot performance were rather controversial, the *majority* of the population raised criticism of the female band or openly opposed the action. It is no wonder that Kuraev is, until now, associated with this particular performance. In light of the homosexual scandals, this association gained a further relevance and meaning. For many bloggers and commenters, Kuraev's public campaign against homosexual practices in the Orthodox priesthood provides a direct comparison to the Pussy Riot protest. By publicly accusing the Church for tolerating and even promoting homosexual relations in the clergy, Kuraev himself performed a protest action, a discursive one that the internet users simply refer to as 'Kuraev Riot' (see image 2).

Image 2. 'Kuraev Riot'.



Source: http://vk.com/wall152784535_4461. Accessed 13 August 2014.

For many, speaking about Kuraev and his controversial statements is seen as a strategic opportunity to set a different agenda, to turn the issues he criticises against him and to avoid what is actually being discussed, such as in the *LiveJournal* community 'Kuraynik', a mimicry of Kuraev's blog. Community's main purpose is to provide regular responses to Ku-

raev's statements, to contradict, mock and deconstruct the information found on the Protopodeacon's platform. In the context of the gay scandals revelation, the terms attributed to Kuraev are 'homodeacon', 'professional atheist' or 'sectarian', Kuraev's publications are considered to be 'provocations' (Kuraynik 2014). However, while Kuraev reaches hundreds of online users on a daily basis who actively engage with his opinions and statements, leave comments and interact with each other, 'Kuraynik' suffers its lack of readership and is trying to combat its own insignificance.

When turning to Kuraev's blog that, without any doubt, provided the impetus for and served as the main platform for discussions, a more detailed picture emerges. Close reading of comments sent not only as direct responses to Kuraev's publications, but also to comments written by other users⁶, provides further insights into the discursive field with its variety of voices, perspectives and personal reflections. In the first two weeks of January 2014, the total number of comments Kuraev received to 50 blog posts was 46.758. The analysis of the comments revealed that while the internet users voice severe criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church, they almost entirely echo the anti-gay rhetoric and homophobic statements put forward by the Church officials. The stance toward homosexuality is a highly negative one. In line with the official position of the Church, homosexuality is regarded as sinful and abnormal. This can be highlighted by the words of the user 'Aleksandr Vinnik' who associates homosexuality with sodomy and perversion: 'How can they possibly stand at the Altar in the Church, celebrate the Eucharist, receive communion? [...]. It even sounds strange: 'gay bishop', how can he be a bishop if he is a sodomite and pervert?' (Vinnik 01.01.2014). A similar argumentation pattern can be found in the comment by the user 'nibudu' who considers homosexuality as a "normal" sin, comparing it to other human temptations, among them paedophilia: 'And it is not about a special sinfulness, sin is always a sin, whether envy, anger, gluttony, greed for money, power, pederasty...' (nibudu 31.12.2013). Conflation of homosexuality, paedophilia and child seduction underlies the discursive structure of a range of comments analysed in this article.

The following discussion between an openly gay person who appeals to the Church authorities to recognize homosexuality as a sexual orientation that cannot be healed or changed and two other commenters who deconstruct this notion – for them homosexuality is beyond all doubt a sin and deviation from the norm – appears illustrative and is quoted in full length:

I was raised in a religious family and, from childhood on, I believed in God. At the time I realized I was gay, I could not accept it because of my religious education. As a result – years of self-rejection, depression and struggles. Today I believe that the church destroys the lives of thousands of gays by trying to convince them that their orientation is a 'caprice', a 'sin' and that 'man can change with the help of God'. The church should honestly recognize that there is a homosexual orientation. In most cases, it is innate. Yes, the church has the right to consider homosexual relations sinful. However, it should be fairly admitted that [sexual] orientation cannot be changed. From the point of view of conservative Christianity, there is a way of full sexual abstinence. (melancholy_gay 05.01.2014)

⁶ Comments on Kuraev's blog were contributed not only by *LiveJournal* users but also by users of different platforms, such as Facebook, Vkontakte, Google+, Moi Mir, Twitter etc.

It is not a matter of whether the church has a right to or not... All this filth, bro, is in your head. You can get rid of it but you simply don't want to, you follow your temptation and are engaged in self-justification. Nothing more... No hard feelings, of course. God willing, you will return to the path of righteousness... I wish this day will come soon. Good luck! (caruss 05.01.2014)

+1 Apart from sodomy, there is a variety of abominations that are extremely hard to get rid of, depression and so on. The main thing is to not consider it as a norm and to not justify yourself, even though it is hard and 'life is not all sweet' because of such awareness. (aljiexsey1974 05.01.2014)

Despite this open confession by 'melancholy_gay' and a personal description of his suffering and depression when he, as a religious person, discovered his sexual desire and tried to suppress and overcome it, the reactions by other commenters are motivated by the extreme heteronormativity that does not allow any other forms of sexual identity.

Another concern voiced by many users is related to the repeal of the anti-sodomy law in post-Soviet Russia. Many discuss the necessity to introduce new legislation that would prohibit not only the propaganda for homosexual relations but homosexuality itself: 'The sodomy law was repealed for nothing. Under Soviet rule, life was better' (iskop 04.01.2014, see also business_mag777). Many comments are openly homophobic and aggressive, as in the following example: 'Vile sodomites! burn in hell! Here it the nest of these disgusting creatures! Father Andrei, burn even more' (sidorov785 04.01.2014). On the one hand, according to commenters, homosexuality demonstrates a wide range of meanings and negative connotations. On the other hand, it is simply reduced to sexual intercourse; understandings and interpretations of homosexual relations to be an expression of intimacy, mutual understanding, care and spiritual union are rarely, if ever, invoked. According to this perception, user 'infin56' stresses: 'Yeah damn, I do not understand people fucking asses and crying out loud for special rights... So you might understand it, but I don't' (infin56 04.01.2014). As demonstrated above, homosexuality is associated with abnormality and deviation; it is neither socially acceptable nor does it even have the right to exist.

In the context of the gay lobby controversy, a highly contested and negative picture of the Russian Orthodox Church emerges. While adopting official argumentation and explanation lines of the Church officials toward homosexuality, the users portray the modern Church as an institution struggling for political power and societal influence: 'For me, ROC is a public organization that massively evades taxes by the state and uses any instrument to increase its power' (newtricker 08.01.2014). The Church's unequivocal condemnation of homosexuality articulated in the public domain is perceived as hypocritical and distrustful and further reinforces the user's criticism:

Father Andrei, like it or not, you belong to the blessed ones, well to those who are 'expelled because of telling the truth', firstly, and secondly: who can give orders to the administration of the Moscow Theological Academy? Why not call things by their proper names – the so-called 'holy' Synod that people have long called the (Metro)polit(an)buro is headed by the so-called 'holy' Patriarch who, in fact, covers up (guards, protects, supports, consoles, cherishes) pederasts in priests' robes. [...]. In words, THEY speak about the rotten West but, in actual fact, they openly despise a man who denounced pederasts within the church. (alex_skayriver 31.12.2013)

Recalling numerous political scandals and financial affairs in which the Church authorities were involved, the users describe the current stand of the Church in terms of deep institutional and spiritual crisis and disease.

Conclusion

Why assess and analyse web data for cultural research? Why count term frequencies, visualise discourse trends and generate meaning based on data provided by users whose (nick)names appear to be quite the opposite: largely unknown and insignificant? What new insights can be gained from web-based analysis and how can these complement our research on religion in general and Russian Orthodoxy in particular? While analysing the Web, the research outcomes are not restricted to the online culture only, but are rather grounded in the offline (see Rogers 2013). A web data analysis can draw a more nuanced picture of the Russian Orthodoxy and challenges its unquestioned and hegemonic image conveyed through the state-controlled media. The quantitative part of the research provides evidence that the event evolved differently in the online media and mainstream media. While the discussions in social media and blogs were characterized by harsh criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church and its leadership, the discourse on homosexuality corresponded completely to the official narratives proclaimed by the Church hierarchs.

Not the fact itself that homosexual practices are widespread in the Orthodox priesthood, but its scandalisation and the attempts by the Church officials to silence the discourse, attracted the widespread public attention. By dismissing Kuraev from his position as a Professor for Missiology at the Moscow Theological Academy, the Church sought to deprive Kuraev of a strong voice in public religion. While this strategy proved successful for the mainstream media where only a few reports related to the homosexual scandals in the Church appeared, social media and blogs responded with a wave of controversial discussions. Contrary to the expectation that internet users critical of the Church and its authorities are more likely to express alternative or tolerant views regarding homosexuality, a high level of hostility and homophobia toward same-sex desire was identified through a close reading study. Despite harsh criticism of the Church as an institution, many users adopted its conservative views on homosexuality and its argumentation and explanation strategies. The vast majority of comments is framed by the common perception of homosexuality as a dangerous and abnormal phenomenon. Homosexuality frequently arouses feelings of aggression, fear, various tensions, disgust but rarely leaves commenters indifferent. Reinforced by homophobic political and religious public discourse, homosexuality is frequently associated with paedophilia and child seduction. Even more: homosexuality and paedophilia become interchangeable terms. Only marginal comments demonstrate tolerance toward sexual minorities, their demands and rights. In the Russian cultural realm, homosexuality demonstrates a wide range of meanings. Same-sex desire is, however, not restricted to sexual relations only but can be attributed to everything negative and disgusting. Notions of homosexual *love*, mutual understanding and spiritual union of same-sex partners are unimaginable for the commenters. While homosexuality is beyond acceptance and is considered abnormal, hostility toward homosexuality and explicit denial of same-sex desire as a form of sexuality appears to be an

accepted norm, both on the official level but more importantly in the social networks and blogs as well as in the mainstream media.

As homosexuality provides a wide range of connotations and associations, it is not surprising in this respect that online discussions were not restricted to the issues of sexuality and gender. They depicted a much broader discourse on a range of interconnected societal issues and problems. Many blog posts and comments that address the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in today's society express severe criticism of the Church authorities that is almost invisible in the mainstream media. The gay lobby scandal even intensified this emotionally charged discussion and negative perception of the Moscow Patriarchy. From the perspective of internet users, the Patriarchy portrays itself as a carrier of national traditions and norms, and defines what is socially acceptable and normal not only for the religious community, but for the whole Russian society. This article has illustrated that the picture of the Russian Orthodox Church is much more complex and that it is not merely an ally of the Putin administration. By giving voice to those who are underrepresented in the mainstream media and by focusing and analysing new forms of religious thinking, the web data research provides valuable insights into religious discourse in the post-Soviet Russian society and goes beyond analysing church-state relations and Church attendance statistics.

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