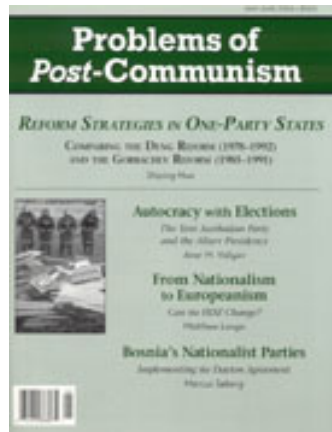


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Problems of Post-Communism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/mppc20>

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Published online: 17 Mar 2015.



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To cite this article: Andrey Makarychev & Sergei Medvedev (2015) Biopolitics and Power in Putin's Russia, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 62:1, 45-54, DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2015.1002340](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1002340)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1002340>

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Biopolitics and Power in Putin's Russia

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In Putin's third term, official rhetoric has become a normative, moralizing discourse promoting Russian traditional values as opposed to the "moral decay" of the West. This "biopolitical turn" in Russian politics—a redefining of the boundaries of the Russian political community and extension of state sovereignty into private lives—is part of the authoritarian drift of the Russian political regime.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three years, during the third presidential term of Vladimir Putin, the focus of political discourse in Russia has gradually moved into the field of sexuality, including issues of pedophilia, homosexuality, adoption, fertility, and family planning. This article takes stock of these debates, in order to understand the new laws and initiatives aimed at improving the demographic situation, upholding public morality, and proclaiming a sort of "sexual sovereignty" of Russia. These latter include the "Dima Yakovlev Law" (a ban on the adoption of Russian children by U.S. citizens), a ban on "homosexual propaganda," a number of laws on public hygiene (laws on smoking, use of obscene words, censorship and age limitations in the mass media, making noise in public, etc.), and a set of measures aimed at increasing the birth rate, supporting the family values, and regulating the sexual life of Russians.

Since the start of Putin's third term in office in May 2012, the rhetoric of the authorities has radically changed, turning toward a normative, moralizing discourse promoting Russian "traditional values" as opposed to the "moral decay" of the West, which is portrayed as a haven for homosexuality and pedophilia. Conservative family values are proclaimed to be the national idea and spiritual bond of the Russians, and grounds for opposing the West.

In search of explanations for this conservative agenda, our analysis turns to the notion of *biopolitics*, arguing that in

Putin's third term, a biopolitical turn has taken place in Russia, as exemplified by the application of a number of regulatory mechanisms for disciplining and constraining human bodies. Biopolitics is usually referred to as a relatively soft (but rather pervasive) technology of power and governance targeted at such areas as health, sanitation, birth-rate, and sexuality.¹ Within the biopolitical discourse, human life is the object of political calculations and of the mechanisms for executing power and providing security.²

The concept of biopower and biopolitics was developed in the later works of Michel Foucault.³ For him, this is a technology of power closely linked to the emergence of the modern nation state and capitalism. Beginning in the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species, and developed "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power."⁴ In short, this means the transition from public punishment of the individual body to the disciplining of the population.

According to Foucault, biopolitics entails the deployment by the authorities of local forms of biopower: managing health, hygiene, nutrition, birth, sexuality, and so on. Biopolitics develops technologies of sovereignty from disciplinary forms to so-called social medicine; life becomes a matter of government, no longer a private affair but an object of policy. From the right to take life, the state assumes the power to administer life.⁵

It has to be noted here that in modern society, the actors in biopolitics are diverse, including various social agents, activists, educators, scientists and medical personnel, religious groups, and so forth; here, however, we leave aside

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such issues as biotechnologies or bioethics to focus on the Foucauldian understanding of biopolitics as the production of the generalized disciplinary society, in terms of the government's concern with fostering the life of the population through various disciplinary institutions.⁶

The ideas of Foucault were further developed by Giorgio Agamben, who juxtaposed them with Carl Schmitt's notion of the "state of exception" (the ability of the sovereign to transcend the rule of law for the sake of public good),⁷ in order to argue that biopolitics is an exceptional form of sovereignty: ruling by exclusion, sovereign power captures and enhances its control over matters that were not previously within its competence, including the biological life of its citizens. For Agamben, biopolitics is not only a matter of modernity, as Foucault had suggested, but a perennial quality of politics as such; the ancient Greeks, for example, distinguished between *zoe*, or physical, animal life, and *bios*, the "correct" form of life for the individual and the society.⁸

Seen from this angle, one may argue that biopolitics has been implemented by various actors, from governments and local magistrates to doctors and teachers, and in different forms, from normative birth control to hygiene policy (as in Bruno Latour's study of the "pasteurization of France").⁹ Such aspects of biopolitics as juvenile justice, laws on smoking, censorship and age limitations in the mass media, measures aimed at increasing the birth rate, the cult of a healthy body, and even noise laws are extensively utilized by many governments in Western democracies. In Russia, some of these measures are positioned as means for bringing the country closer to international standards. Yet, as attested by the historical experience of totalitarian regimes such as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR, in the absence of political pluralism and viable civil society, biopolitics is likely to turn into a series of top-down repressive regulations that incorporate the ideas of racial or class hygiene as well as repression of "deviant" sexual practices.¹⁰ In this sense, the uses of biopolitics, pervasively throughout human history and society, are linked to the nature of the political regime.

In applying the concept of biopolitics to the study of the current Russian regime, we also draw on Judith Butler's critique of Michel Foucault's concept of *governmentality*—a set of practices aimed at disciplining, constraining, and monitoring the population and thus grounded in a biopolitical logic. Three points of her analysis seem particularly relevant for today's Russia. First, she is critical of Foucault's attempts to draw a line between the practices of sovereign power and disciplinary mechanisms regulating human bodies. As Butler argues, a relative loss of sovereignty in some policy spheres can be "compensated through the resurgence of sovereignty within the field of governmentality,"¹¹ with biopolitical rules at its core.

Second, Putin's regime not only rules by exceptions; in accordance with Butler's reasoning, it legalizes those exceptions and therefore instrumentally uses law as a tactic,

which is possible only as an effect of "the discretionary power of those who are asked to rely on their judgment to decide fundamental matters of justice, life and death."¹² This is exactly how Putin's regime puts in practice its biopolitical regulations: given the intentional ambiguity of the content of the definition of "gay propaganda," for example, court decisions are doomed to remain highly subjective and driven by a political logic rather than by the intentionally vague letter of the law.

Third, the biopolitical state is likely to further disarticulate "into a set of administrative powers that are, to some extent, outside the apparatus of the state itself."¹³ In other words, the price to be paid for the resurrected sovereignty is a growing number of policy functions outsourced to institutions that do not belong to the domain of sovereignty, including the Orthodox Church, Cossack regiments, or vigilance groups. All of them perform biopolitical cleansing functions on behalf of the state, but may use diffuse tactics for legitimizing their social roles.

This paper aims to study the roots of the new Russian biopolitics, its relation to the traditional forms of modern biopower and the forms of biopolitics, and its impact on the practices of domestic and foreign policies of Russia and the foreign policy discourse. We focus only on those forms of biopolitics that strongly resonate in Russian political discourses and shape daily political practices under Putin's rule, and leave outside our analysis such issues as biotechnology and surrogacy. Our main hypothesis is that the biopolitical turn marks an important departure in Russian domestic politics, namely the renegotiation of the borders of the Russian political community and the extension of state sovereignty into the private lives of citizens, and is part of the authoritarian drift of the Russian political regime that marks its definitive rupture with the international standards of human rights.

The analysis also seeks to discover the limits and limitations of biopolitics in a modernized, urban, and post-patriarchal society such as today's Russia, in order to measure the gap between the discourse of power and the daily practices of Russians. The research puzzle that this paper addresses is whether biopolitical regulatory practices strengthen the sovereign power or make it more vulnerable.

FORMS OF BIOPOLITICAL NORMALIZATION

The biopolitics of Putin's third term is an evolution of the earlier ideas of "sovereign democracy" (a concept promulgated by the authorities in the mid-2000s), an expansion of sovereignty into the private territory of citizens, and a tool of social discipline in the conditions of mass protests in 2011–13 and weakening regime legitimacy. The biopolitical shift did not happen suddenly. For instance, Russian demographic politics, connected with family consolidation and aimed at increasing the birth rate, gained the status of a

“national priority project” in 2006. However, a consolidated biopolitical strategy of the regime has taken shape only during Putin’s third term in office, starting in May 2012. As often happens, the move started from the bottom up. For example, in January 2013 the city legislature of St. Petersburg passed a bill prohibiting excessive night-time noise, which was ironically dubbed “the cat-stomping” bill. Oksana Timofeeva interpreted this novel zealotry as a biopolitical technique, which implies the proliferation of legal acts regulating human bodies. In her explanation, the total ban presupposes total corruption, since “everyone knows how to avoid the law, but sanctions can nonetheless be applied at any moment.”¹⁴

The other side of the biopolitical discourse is the growing securitization of routine social practices; in other words, what would otherwise be private or family values are treated as the highest security priorities. For at least a decade, Gennady Onischenko, Russia’s Chief Sanitary Inspector between 1996 and 2013, raised issues of sanitation and hygiene to the level of national security, regularly applying import bans on products from countries with which Moscow had unresolved problems, like Georgian mineral water, Moldovan wine, Lithuanian cheese, or American chicken legs. Likewise, the head of the Russian Security Council has included family values among the highest security priorities.¹⁵

The negative portrayal of “internal Others”—immigrants, for example—is one of the core elements of a securitized hygienic discourse. It would be an oversimplification, however, to assume that it is the state that always takes the lead in promoting biopolitical discourses. In 2005 it was the nationalist “Rodina” party led by Dmitry Rogozin (now a deputy prime minister) that issued a political ad with the slogan “Let’s clean up Moscow of the dirt,” clearly alluding to ethnically non-Russian immigrants. Soon after the ad appeared on the TVC channel, the Moscow City Court barred the party from taking part in the election to the Moscow Duma, for instigating ethnic hatred; nevertheless, the message of racial hygiene added to the emerging biopolitical discourse in Russia.¹⁶

Nationalist pogroms in many Russian cities (for example, Kondopoga, Pugachev, Moscow’s suburb of Biriuliovo) demonstrate how responsive large groups of the population can be to the ideas of biopolitical homogenization of society. The mass-scale antimigrant campaign of 2013 followed the logic of the biopolitical narrative, with camps for temporary detention of illegal migrants managed by the Federal Migration Service as examples of biopolitical purification. On November 4, 2013, or Unity Day, a new Russian national holiday, nationalist and fascist “Russian marches” were held under the slogan “For the future of white children,”¹⁷ reminiscent of Nazi racial hygiene.¹⁸

The state’s policies on secondary education also contain strong biopolitical components. President Putin personally has suggested that no pupil, not even one with disabilities, may be exempted from physical education classes and training, and

that the Soviet-era GTO (“Ready for Labor and Defense”) norms of physical fitness should be restored.¹⁹ This is certainly part of the Kremlin’s rhetoric of urging a healthy lifestyle for the younger generation of Russians. The Russian Health Ministry recently produced a survey for detecting not only drug consumption among adolescents but their sexual liaisons as well (“Have you had sexual intercourse that you regretted the next morning?” is one of the questions in a worksheet recommended for secondary schools).²⁰

Biopolitical regulation extends to school dress codes. The Chief Sanitary Inspector advocated for introducing a school uniform for pupils,²¹ which his critiques metaphorically dubbed an imperial idea, having in mind its potential for homogenization and top-down imposition of a set of rules.²² This practice may also be extended to a dress code for teachers, a measure that was directly explained by allegedly excessive displays of sexuality at workplace.²³ However, this initiative has not yet become law.

The Ban on Propaganda of Homosexuality

The attitude to homosexuality publicly displayed by the Kremlin has revealed the regime’s desire to socially and normatively homogenize the political community. Antigay legislation reflects the general trend in Putin’s Russia of suppressing minorities (sexual, ethnic, or political) and catering to the most patriarchal and archaic sentiments in the society.²⁴

Initially, the law on banning propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations adopted in June 2013 was formally aimed only at protecting minors from (homo)sexually explicit information. The problem with this law is twofold. First, its vague language and the imprecise definition of propaganda raised multiple concerns among those who predicted that its implementation could be arbitrary and selective. Second, the law spurred spillover effects, inasmuch as the silencing, and even more, the criminalization, of discussion on homosexuality has a negative influence on youth who are questioning their sexuality and losing hope that they are important and valued members of their communities. Besides, the wider interpretation of propaganda as any sort of public exposure of homosexuality-related issues might imply measures as extreme as banning books or movies with homosexual themes or contexts, even if expressed by artistic means.²⁵ The possibility of revoking parents’ rights on the grounds of homosexuality was seriously considered by a group of Russian lawmakers.²⁶ The antigay legislation has provoked a number of homophobic assaults and killings.²⁷ In one of the Russian regions a local lawmaker came up with a proposal to give Cossack paramilitary units the authority to identify and physically punish gay people.²⁸

It is not only the state, but vigilante groups within the society as well that fuel homophobia. Thus, the “Russian Mothers” movement (<http://vodmir.ru>) advocates a

complete ban on foreign adoption and on homosexuality.²⁹ Leonid Roshal, a pediatrician and the head of the National Medical Chamber, openly admitted that he hates homosexuals.³⁰ In 2012, a group of Orthodox believers sued Madonna for gay propaganda after she gave a concert in St. Petersburg. Russian social media have extensively covered the case of the school teacher Ilya Kolmanovsky, whose dismissal was requested by the parents' committee after he was spotted at a protest meeting against the anti-gay legislation.³¹ Dmitry Kiseliyov, the head of the "Rossiya Segodnya" TV Company and one of the key spokesmen of the regime, is known for his insulting remarks about gay people; he once suggested on a televised talk show that their hearts should "be burned after death, as unfit for continuing anyone's life."³²

It is unlikely, however, that the regime will ultimately be able to control the effects of the aggressive, biopolitically centered discourse it has unleashed. Research has shown that the antigay campaign prompted an upsurge of interest in this topic on the Internet.³³ Ironically, the state-controlled TV channels that are supposed to thwart the gay "propaganda" are full of entertainment shows featuring pop stars who are known to be gay.³⁴ Anton Krasovsky, a TV anchor, publicly acknowledged his gay identity and added, "I am a human being, just like Putin," which resulted in his ousting, but also subsequently gave him wide publicity and support, mainly in the new social media.³⁵ These examples show that, instead of being an asset for Putin, the effects triggered by the antigay campaign can turn into a problem for the regime.

The Anti-adoption Law

The law passed in 2013 prohibiting adoption of Russian orphans by American families was rhetorically substantiated by references to 20 cases of tragic deaths of Russian adoptees in the United States (statistically a tiny percentage against the backdrop of about 60,000 adopted children living in American families). The "Dima Yakovlev Bill," named after one of the victims, is another illustrative case of a biopolitical ban: it is based on the presumption that the bodies of "our" children should belong to the nation, even if this means that they should stay in a Russian orphanage rather than an American family.

The narrative of adopted children's abuse abroad disregards most rational arguments—for example, the miserable prospects for most of the one million orphans in Russia, the diminishing number of Russian families eager to adopt abandoned children,³⁶ and the incomparably higher (39-fold) risks of living in adoptive families in Russia in comparison to the United States.³⁷ Supporters of the law also neglected the fact that in most cases the American families chose to adopt sick orphans that needed expensive medical treatment unavailable in Russia.³⁸

Again, as in the cases already noted above, the anti-adoption law ended up publicly raising a number of

questions that were inconvenient and potentially troublesome for the Kremlin, from the state of orphanages in Russia to the reasons for the enormous numbers of abandoned children all across the country. This proves that biopolitical regulations come with a price and entail social responsibilities that the state is hardly capable of effectively assuming.

Family and Reproductive Behavior

The draft "Concept of Family Policy" published in summer 2013 is perhaps the best illustration of biopolitical totalization as applied to the whole set of family matters. The document, edited by MP Elena Mizulina, one of the ardent proponents of state interventionism in private spheres, contains explicitly religious connotations, characterizing the family as a "small church" that sustains the idea of immortality understood as "the continuation of the nation." It proposes to give the Russian Orthodox Church the right to interfere in matters of the state's family policies, including priests' participating in local commissions on juvenile delinquency and sharing their expertise in acts of legislation.³⁹ The draft attempts to introduce a model of "the normal family" as one with at least three children and two generations living in a common household. Apart from this, Mizulina and her associates proposed to revise the legal norm of equality of divorced spouses in favor of mothers staying with children and a drastic increase of fathers' alimony.

This bill is only part of a wider array of other initiatives aimed at regulating the subtleties of family relations.⁴⁰ A local legislator in a provincial city proposed to limit the number of possible marriages to three.⁴¹ Another member of a regional legislature aired the idea of conscripting young women who remain childless after age 20.⁴² Olga Kryshchanovskaya, a sociologist and Kremlin loyalist, at a convention of the All-Russian People's Front, proposed mandatory DNA tests for the possible fathers of children born outside of official marriage, upon mothers' requests.⁴³ There were voices in the State Duma lobbying for banning abortions as well.⁴⁴ Finally, the upper chamber of the Parliament, the Federation Council, suggested in September 2013 an increase in the "tax on divorce" (a fee for registration of divorce) from the current 400 rubles to 30,000 rubles (approximately \$ 1,000), in order to discourage divorces.⁴⁵

The Ideal Husband

An interesting visual component of today's Russian biopolitics is the representation of Vladimir Putin's body.⁴⁶ Over the past decade, his public image has been that of a macho—photographed while fishing or horse-riding in Tuva, riding a motorcycle in Crimea, or drinking beer with football fans (indeed, groups of nationalist bikers and football fans have become close to the Kremlin during the Putin years). In

many of these carefully staged appearances, he is shirtless, displaying a fit body for a 60-year old; in photographs of him swimming, he is using the butterfly stroke, which better shows the full torso. A black belt in judo, Putin is often photographed on the tatami, defeating his ostensibly younger opponents.⁴⁷

Such public display of the body of the ruler is a venerable political tradition. As Agamben observed, the body of the sovereign transgresses its physical qualities and becomes the political body of the nation.⁴⁸ Regular display of the ruler's body becomes a political ritual; in absolutist France, for example, such appearances were strictly codified and the health and sexual prowess of the king were a matter of the political well-being of the nation. By the same token, Putin's health, masculinity, and sports activities make him a model biopolitical object, a leader of a healthy nation, and a dream husband for millions of single Russian women. No wonder that the pop song "I Want a Man Like Putin" by the all-girl band "Singing Together," released in 2002, became quite popular:

*I want a man like Putin, full of strength
I want a man like Putin, a non-drinker
I want a man like Putin that will not abuse me
I want a man like Putin that will not run away.*

Paradoxically, Putin's divorce from his wife Lyudmila, which was made public in June 2013, did not greatly damage his image as the father of the nation; 65 percent of Russians considered it his private affair.⁴⁹ On the contrary, Putin's rumored relationship with a former Russian Olympic gymnast and Duma deputy, Alina Kabayeva, 30 years his junior, including his possible fathering of two children, are perceived in Russia as yet more proof of Putin's biological health. Meanwhile, some political analysts have suggested that Putin is now "married to the whole nation."⁵⁰

DOMESTIC IMPLICATIONS OF BIOPOLITICS

The biopolitical turn in Russia is a significant political instrument for the ruling regime. It should be seen in several domestic contexts. First, it creates a new disciplinary framework for the population and for the elite in the conditions of the weakening legitimacy of the regime and ahead of painful social reforms. Putin has been the leader of the nation for over 14 years, and there's a certain fatigue among the population. His rating had been steadily declining between 2008 and 2013,⁵¹ before an increase in popularity up to 67 percent related to the Sochi Olympics.⁵² The majority of the population still sees him as a key figure, not because of his political program or personal qualities but rather for the lack of a viable alternative, Putin being a "lesser evil." Having been a president of hope in the early 2000s, Putin ten years later is the "president of disillusionment."

The rise and fall of the protest movement in Russia in 2011–12 revealed the continuing latent dissent among the population in major urban centers (as proven by the strong performance of the key opposition figure Alexey Navalny in the Moscow mayoral election in September 2013). So far, this dissent has been successfully marginalized, but biopolitical regulations can be used to quell individual opposition figures (for example, the laws on homosexual propaganda can be used against those who have objected to the discriminatory nature of this law).

Russia is facing rather difficult socioeconomic conditions. After slowing down for more than a year, the economy has entered a period of stagnation.⁵³ Meanwhile, the government is pursuing a set of painful social cuts aimed at the final dismantling of the Soviet social security system, including health care, education, housing, and the pension system. In all of these fields, a transfer to the market principle is underway, and the bulk of the Russian population will feel the brunt of reform in the course of next two or three years.

In these circumstances, the normalizing biopolitical discourse could instill in the population a sense of emergency and the need for stricter governmental controls. Biopolitics could prove a useful tool for diverting political and social unrest over election fraud, corruption, and painful social reforms into fighting against imaginary moral threats. This would also be a good disciplinary tool and a test of loyalty for the increasingly volatile elite. For example, in December 2012, many Duma and Federation Council deputies were reluctant to vote for the "Dima Yakovlev Bill," which was widely perceived as inhumane and cynical and was even dubbed the "scoundrels' law" since it effectively denied adoption to thousands of sick orphans. However, the presidential administration engaged in arm-twisting tactics so that none of the deputies could escape the vote, and they all became complicit in the law's passage, "chained by blood."⁵⁴

Second, in addition to giving the authorities another set of power tools, what is more important is that biopolitics is an intrinsic element of the debates over the essence and borders of Russian political community. More specifically, Russian biopolitics is overwhelmingly about the issues of inclusion and exclusion that are indispensable elements of national identity narratives. Henceforth, biopolitical regulation, implemented through bans and restrictions, becomes one of the main tools for articulating the rules of belonging in the political community named Russia and drawing its political boundaries.

Third, biopolitical normalization is an expansion of the concept of sovereignty that has been the ideological core of the regime. Initially, Putin toyed with the idea of "sovereign democracy" in the mid-2000s. Since that time, the word democracy has all but disappeared from the official discourse, leaving Russia with a greater awareness of sovereignty. In recent times, Russia has been particularly

obsessed with domestic sovereignty, imagining threats of foreign intrusion, as in the case of the 30 Greenpeace activists who protested oil drilling in the Arctic by attempting to board the Gazprom-owned Prirazlomnaya oil platform in the Pechora Sea; they were arrested on charges of piracy and detained for two months. Several opposition figures and regional activists from Karelia, Tatarstan, and the Urals have been accused of plans to “dismember Russia.”⁵⁵ In late 2013, a law adopted by the State Duma and signed by Putin criminalized “the propaganda of separatism” with prison terms up to five years.⁵⁶ Even the torch relay for the Sochi Olympics—unprecedented in its duration (from October 2013 to February 2014), territorial expanse (all 83 subjects of the Russian Federation, the North Pole, and the International Space Station), and technical complexity—can be seen as an ultimate ritual of state sovereignty, a markup of Russian sovereign territory.⁵⁷

Biopolitics, too, is an act of state sovereignty, extending the state’s domain into the private sphere, into a person’s kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom, eliminating the very concept of privacy. By incorporating citizens’ bodies into the broader political community, it closes off the perimeter of sovereignty and completes Russia’s drift from the ideas of global interdependence in the 1990s to the Realist concepts of state sovereignty.

INTERNATIONAL REPERCUSSIONS: THE “SEXUAL SOVEREIGNTY” OF RUSSIA

The construction of a political community necessitates external othering, that is, the portraying of certain outsiders as threatening to the normative coherence of the in-group. As the anti-adoption and antigay laws reveal, the function of external biopolitical others is often ascribed to the collective West as representing the liberal emancipatory agenda, with feminism, moral relativism, sexual freedom, and the alleged erosion of the institution of marriage as its key elements. Hence, biopolitical discourses—different interpretations of the whole set of relationships between the state and human beings—are at the core of the Russian identity-making narrative contrasting a positively “conservative Russia” with a supposedly malign “liberal West.”

The current conservative wave in Russia, largely grounded in biopolitical regulation of corporeal practices, reveals a deep value gap between Russia and the West, where a “liberal revolution” is underway. In particular, Russian antigay legislation can be viewed as a response to the normalization of homosexuality in the West.⁵⁸ The normative gap is underpinned by the Orthodox Church, which lambastes feminism as a dangerous ideology with no connection to women’s emancipation.⁵⁹ By claiming that there are “traditional roles” for women to play, the Orthodox Church uses biopolitical argument to define what the Russian political community has to look like. As a Russian commentator avers, “sexual

sovereignty”⁶⁰ becomes a strategy of Russia’s normalization, which implies a normative split with the West.

The debates on the anti-adoption legislation unveiled a biopolitical reading of Russia’s understanding of great power ambitions. As the Russian ombudsman for children’s rights, Pavel Astakhov, declared: “Why should Russia be a donor of orphans? We are a great country, self-respecting and self-sufficient. In the midst of the crisis of the 1990s, we allowed foreign adoption. But it is time to put an end to it.”⁶¹ Since gay families are forbidden to adopt Russian children by Putin’s decree,⁶² Russia is likely to extend the adoption ban to many European countries, which only confirms the growing normative cleavage between Russia and Europe.

Conspiracy theory is also part of the Russian biopolitical discourse. As the Russian ambassador to the United States remarked concerning the adoption issue, “We have a sense that maybe some of the parents might think: if it’s a Russian kid, you can afford to dispense with it the moment you do not like it.”⁶³ The America-unfriendly narratives spurred by the Kremlin often take strange forms—for example, media-spread allegations that “American milk causes mustache growth on women’s faces.”⁶⁴ Yet the consequences of this hysterical narrative of voluntary isolationism are far from funny: after having introduced the adoption ban, Russia dropped out of a bilateral agreement that provided help from the United States for fighting drugs and human trafficking.⁶⁵

The Kremlin-inspired biopolitical bans have already started further deteriorating the Kremlin’s reputation in the West, thus demonstrating the growing normative distance between Russia and Europe. As a gesture of protest against gay discrimination, the municipal authorities of Venice and Milan have considered canceling their twinning programs with St. Petersburg, which was one of the first cities in Russia to pass local antigay legislation.⁶⁶ In April 2013, during his visit to the Netherlands, President Putin faced demonstrations by the local LGBT community indignant over the repression of homosexuals in Russia.

By engaging in harsh polemics with its international partners, Russia only demonstrates glaring deficiencies in its policy mechanisms. Thus, the anti-adoption law clearly illustrated Russia’s inability to use multilateral and institutional mechanisms for protecting its young former citizens. Russia still has not ratified the Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.⁶⁷ In addition, the broad interest in the issue made public the degree of corruption within the Russian system of foreign adoption, where kickbacks per one adopted child could amount to more than 10,000 U.S. dollars.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, there are some groups in the West that are attentive to Putin’s biopolitics, from paleoconservatives in the United States to the far right in Europe. In their view, “As the West becomes increasingly multicultural, less patriarchal and traditional, and more open to gay rights, Russia

will be a lodestone for the multitudes who oppose this trajectory.”⁶⁹ In Pat Buchanan’s words, Putin is not “without an argument when we reflect on America’s embrace of abortion on demand, pornography, promiscuity and the whole panoply of Hollywood values.... He is seeking to redefine the ‘Us vs. Them’ world conflict of the future as one in which conservatives, traditionalists and nationalists of all continents and countries stand up against the cultural and ideological imperialism of what he sees as a decadent West.”⁷⁰ The Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik called Putin “a fair, decisive, and respectable ruler” and wished to create a youth conservative movement modeled after “Nashi.”⁷¹

Summing up, biopolitical arguments and regulations are instrumental in shaping and deepening the normative gap between Russia and the mainstream liberal Western discourse. They are employed by both sides; however, on the Russian side we see a conscious and consolidated effort to build a sort of “sexual sovereignty” of the nation and an othering of the West on biopolitical grounds. This became extremely topical in the context of the sharp aggravation of Russia’s relations with the West over Ukraine in February–March 2014. Facing the possibility of a new cold war, Russia will be looking for an ideological legitimization of the confrontation. Since the capitalism/socialism opposition is long gone, a neoconservative discourse built around biopolitical normalization could prove to be the appropriate ideological platform for a new edition of the cold war.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This analysis has led to several conclusions. First, the regime in power actively utilizes biopolitical discourses and practices for consolidating its rule on the basis of conservative norms. Many of them are retrograde and can hardly be in harmony with the Western normative order. The Kremlin has ceased to feign eagerness to be included in this order and since the fall of 2011 has started building its domestic political capital on more clearly dissociating Russia from the West. In fact, what is at stake in the Kremlin’s biopolitical project is the very gist of Putin’s attempts to recreate a conservative majority as the political basis of his reign, and to formulate a conservative agenda for a still unfinished process of community building in the country.

Second, the biopolitical turn in Russian politics signifies that community building is achieved not on the basis of civil society and citizen participation, but by evoking deeply rooted complexes and phobias, patriarchal instincts, communal belonging, and mob mentality. The biological power eats away at the foundations of civil liberties and infringes on the last remaining territory of individual freedom, the private sphere. It completes Putin’s decade-long authoritarian drift and reconstitutes the limits of state sovereignty,

from reclaiming parts of the Soviet empire, most recently in Ukraine, to reestablishing the state’s control over the individual. Biopolitics is part of what the political analyst Alexander Morozov has called the “proto-fascist contour” in today’s Russia,⁷² based on neo-imperialist “Weimar resentment,” an authoritarian corporatist state, moral majority, biological power, and aggressive othering of the West and domestic outcasts.

Third, the new normative order is a political tool for disciplining the disillusioned society and the increasingly volatile elite, which is necessary in the conditions of the declining legitimacy of the regime, the shrinking electoral base, falling oil revenues, and in anticipation of painful social reforms that will complete the deconstruction of the Soviet social-security state. Biopolitical rhetoric could divert people’s attention away from pressing social problems and channel potential discontent away from the authorities to the designated Others: homosexuals, liberals, “foreign agents,” environmental activists, and so forth.

Fourth, biopolitical regulations are the basis for pursuing the so-called “sexual sovereignty” of Russia and an ideological platform for opposing the West in the conditions of the possible new cold war triggered by events in Ukraine.

Finally, the question remains as to the effectiveness and implementation of biopolitics in contemporary Russia, a modernized, secularized, urban society with a considerable extent of permissiveness in social norms, especially as regards sex, reproduction, and the family. In the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s, and especially in the early post-Soviet years, the population enjoyed a certain liberalism in the bodily aspects of politics. An explicitly permissive attitude to these issues was an essential part of an informal social contract between state and society, and a precondition for a relative balance between the two during the first two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union. This balance has been disturbed by the biopolitical turn in the Kremlin’s policy, the effectiveness of which is indeed quite questionable in a country with a tradition of two working parents, a low fertility rate, and very high abortion and divorce rates. In this situation, biopolitics may in fact become another simulated, rhetorical exercise, like so many policy acts in Putin’s Russia.

In this sense, seeking to answer the key research question asked at the beginning of the article, whether biopolitics strengthens the sovereign power or makes it more vulnerable, one can conclude that Russia’s domestic sovereignty and political community has been reinforced. The biopolitical discourse is a constitutive element of the Kremlin’s technology of consolidating the country’s conservative majority, solidified by the massively propagated antiliberal and anti-emancipatory public attitudes. But the basis on which this has been achieved is indeed untenable in a post-patriarchal, disillusioned, and atomized society like Russia’s, and the sustainability of

the newly achieved normalization and sovereignty remains an open question.

FUNDING

This study (research grant No 14-01-0175) was supported by The National Research University–Higher School of Economics' Academic Fund Program in 2014/2015.

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