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Russian cultural conservatism critiqued: translating the tropes of ‘Gayropa’ and ‘juvenile justice’ in everyday life.

Abstract

Framing the conservative ‘turn’ in Russia as a ‘culture war’ casts ordinary Russians as an amorphous reactionary mass, willingly following political entrepreneurs’ cues of intolerance. This article rejects that interpretation, to restore agency to ordinary Russians. Based on ethnographic encounters discussing homophobia and heteronormative gender and family attitudes, the article argues that vernacular social conservatism re-appropriates official discourses to express Russians’ feelings towards their own state. Intolerance is less fuelled by elite cues but rather reflects domestic resentment towards, and fear of, the punitive power of the state, along with nostalgia for an idealised version of moral socialisation under socialism.

Keywords: conservativism, hegemony, homophobia, juvenile justice, ‘structure of feeling’, ‘cultural intimacy’, vospitanie

Word count: 10949 (including footnotes and references)
“If the subaltern can speak, they definitely do not speak in a sweet voice.” Viatcheslav Morozov 2015 p. 168.

A culture war between ‘degenerate’ liberal Western values and a ‘(neo)conservative’ Russia is purportedly being waged (Anderson 2013, Riabov and Riabova 2014, Robinson 2014, Trudolyubov 2014). This perspective groups Russians as an amorphous reactionary mass; it makes them into a kind of political sponge – readily absorbing rapid shifts in cues by elites and their agents. In contrast, this article rejects the application of the notion of culture wars to Russia or the idea of a meaningful ‘conservative turn’ beyond elite discourse itself. It builds a counter argument from intimate ethnographic encounters to argue that vernacular social conservatism re-appropriates official discourses in ways that say more about Russians relationship to their own state (rather than attitudes towards ‘the West’). In doing so the article seeks to restore agency to ordinary Russians, whom are too often (implicitly) seen as passive recipients of the state’s official discourses. Everyday talk about homosexuality, family and gender norms are infused by Russians’ interpretation of the political context of their own society, particularly the capacities of the punitive state. Similarly, the social legacy of communism and the shared trauma of postcommunist transition are important and formative. Objections to ‘permissiveness’ anchor to a search for putatively lost moral values and normative socialisation – symbolised by the concept of moral vospitanie (upbringing).

It is widely argued that a so-called Russian ‘conservative turn’ masks a political expediency that seeks to distract from deteriorating living standards and corruption (e.g. Pomeranzev 2016). However, others link conservatism to a more enduring sense of ‘civilizational’ difference between Russia and ‘Europe’ (Tsygankov 2007, 2016) where Russian ‘paleoconservatives’ emphasise organic spirituality (Morozov 2015, pp. 113-4). While Eurasianism has gained attention for the continuity of its intellectual tradition in opposition to Western models of development, the ‘culture war’ trope transfers this dilemma to the level of identity politics, pointing to a decisive ‘cultural turn’ in Putin’s rule (Robinson 2014). In doing so, it presupposes more than just a cynical political elite, but posits a responsive polity capitalising on an actually-existing conservatism among ordinary Russians (Riabov and Riabova 2014, Robinson 2014, p. 27). Such a ‘cultural turn’ would see the ruling elite successfully aligning their rhetoric and domestic policy with ‘mass quotidian common sense’ (Hopf 2013) which is supposedly quite conservative.

For example, Riabov and Riabova conclude their analysis of the uses of the emblematic term ‘Gayropa’ by assuming that attitudes of most Russians towards heteronormative sexualities are mapped on to their evaluation of the West as friend or foe. (ibid, p. 8). While indicating diversity in the population as a whole, they subscribe to a hypodermic model of elite-shaped public opinion. Key policy figures and intellectual entrepreneurs, using a compliant media, broadcast the ‘conservative turn’, particularly through tropes of the West devaluing the traditional gender and sexual order, and the ‘people’ follow.

On the face of it, there is evidence that political actors are pushing at an open door when it comes to conservatism. Numerous polls indicate ‘conservative’, or ‘intolerant’ attitudes, particularly towards
what are framed as ‘non-traditional’ sexual and gender behaviours and lifestyles (Hobson 2015). Neil Robinson calls this a ‘cultural turn’ that aids the stabilization of the particular form of patrimonial political coalition in Russia. Using Albert Hirschman’s concept of a ‘rhetoric of reaction’, he argues that this rhetoric stresses civilizational difference as a resource, and European multiculturalism in particular as a threat (Robinson 2014, pp. 27-31). Here the role of charismatic leader is key in activating, maintaining and leading public opinion. Similarly, Samuel Greene uses the term ‘identitarian turn’ to describe a ‘values agenda’ used to drive a wedge between a liberal opposition and the bulk of Russian citizens (Greene 2017). The agenda ties together appeals to nationalist unity, political sovereignty, cultural normalcy, all of which have some purchase among ordinary citizens, but appear in particular to appeal to and reflect, a particular type of socio-cultural sense of indignation within conservative intellectual constituencies (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2014, p. 2, Laruelle 2012). Public intellectual discourses of a special national idea and identity find many expressions in popular or ‘lay’ culture, but perhaps more important are the rise of the power of entrepreneurial conservatives, whether having religious credentials, or links to political elites.

It was only in 2012-2013 that the rhetoric of conservatism found real traction (or elites fully understood the political expediency of giving such forces their head). These were respectively the years of the Dima Yakovlev law, denying Americans the right to adopt Russian children, and the well-known law protecting children from ‘Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values’. Both of these legal projects were facilitated by the prominent deputy Yelena Mizulina chairman of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs from 2008-2016, and member of the political party A Just Russia. For those proposing a coordinated and elite-sponsored conservative turn, Mizulina is an emblematic figure. She has been associated with proposals to restrict the right to abortion, right to divorce, and pro-natal policies more generally (Osborn 2011), as well as censorship of television and the internet, decriminalisation of some forms of domestic violence (Turbine 2017), and, perhaps most revealingly, has resorted to conspiracy theories about a ‘paedophile lobby’ within Russia opposing her policies (Healy 2017, p. 13).

Typically, scholarship on the conservative turn uses terms like a ‘hardening’ of attitudes (e.g. Patin 2016). Homophobia in particular can be seen as a core example of this, and a proxy for ‘traditional’ values more generally (Wilkinson 2013, p. 6). Human rights organisations point to increasingly widespread, if sporadic, violence towards openly gay men (a most visible symbol of the enemies of conservatism) (Hobson 2015 Kondakov 2017), including by representatives of the state (OSCE 2017; Amnesty International 2019), which support a thesis of an intolerant turn.

In contrast to a broad thesis of a ‘conservative turn’ based on elite-led my argument rests on the following idea: that Russian public opinion is highly diffuse, especially on matters of ‘cultural values’. The discursive field of cultural values is not ‘reactionary, but amorphous, multifaceted’ (Morozov 2017). While the rhetoric of political entrepreneurs in Russia clearly has effects (reflected in the short term in survey polls), ordinary people reflect and interpret them in complex, often historically meaningful ways, and the longitudinal expression of, say, everyday homophobia, is more significant than short-term discourse from above. I base my arguments on the ethnographic materials collected on two topics that inductively should have major traction among a purported conservative majority: sexual orientation and heteronormative family/gender roles. While there are deeply ingrained attitudes towards homosexuality and the normative meaning of gender roles within the traditional nuclear family, in talking about, for example, the meanings of ‘lay’ homophobia, or
negative attitudes towards children’s rights, other reasonings and meanings are operative and visible. I focus on homophobia, on the one hand, and the impact of the anti-Juvenile Justice movement on the other – a conservative umbrella objection to the erosion of parental authority and the rise of children’s rights (Sherstneva 2014, p. 203). Because of the use of in-depth interviewing, rather than other methods, focussed coverage of two related areas is preferred over superficial discussion of wider topics.

Sustained ethnographic engagement is useful in showing how attitudes in reality are contradictory and internally inconsistent. Moreover, while there is widespread exposure to the idea of ‘Western-led permissiveness’ and that this is a threat to the idea of the ‘traditional’, heteronormative, nuclear family, the operationalisation of this within already-existing ‘conservative’ attitudes is weak. Building on these, frankly anodyne conclusions, I propose, rather than looking at lay attitudes in terms of the ‘culture war’ trope, or even ‘conservatism’, scholars should better contextualise them in time, space and in the broad sense of a post-socialist political-economy in which attitudes are formed. To do this I try to test the words and ideas of my research participants against two useful prismatic conceptions of how the everyday meets and interacts with dominant cultural politics – a politics that attempts to become hegemonic.

‘Structures of Feeling’ and ‘Cultural Intimacy’

In analysing collected materials, two prisms emerge that aid in re-evaluating the so-called ‘conservative turn’. The first prism is Raymond Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’ (1977), whose main insight is that hegemony is cultural, an ‘interlocking’ of politics, the social and culture (ibid, p. 108). However, culture is also the ‘lived subordination’ of particular classes – not a system or structure, but a process; culture is not just passively dominated by elite opinion, it has to be continually renewed, recreated, defended and modified and is also changed from below (ibid:, p. 110-112). If the true condition of hegemony is effective self-identification (ibid, p. 118) then the way tropes like Gayropa are interpreted from below indicate dispersal or even a radical diffusion. Homophobia is then a ‘structure of feeling’ about gender and sexual identities that predates contemporary political operationalisation of anti-gay, anti-European sentiments. Scholars admit as much when they describe contemporary homophobia in Russia as ‘rooted in culturally-specific expectations’ (Stella 2015, p. 23), or, as among Russian speakers in Latvia, as ‘naturalized … to fix a desired conceptualisation’ (Mole 2011, p. 541). As such, while part of a dominant set of cultural dispositions that characterise homosexuality as deviant, morally reprehensible and socially dangerous, such intolerance also acts as one container of ordinary Russians’ acknowledgement of the arbitrarily punitive and fundamentally violent power of the state. In some senses, homophobia is not so different in this regard from anti-Semitism. It tells us more about what Russians fear about the capacities of their own society for victim selection, than it does about what they think about homosexuality. Each society has groups, or latent groups upon whom deviance and dirt are projected. Furthermore, Russia is comparatively not ‘even’ particularly homophobic if one considers the considerable efforts, yet feeble results, at the highest level to link paedophilia to homosexuality.

The second prism, which also finds its origins in questions about hegemony’s functioning, is Michael Herzfeld’s ‘cultural intimacy’ (2016 [1997]). Through ‘cultural intimacy’ – evidence of
unspoken morally shared spaces of the state and ordinary people – Herzfeld highlights how social actors find advantages in ‘using, reformulating, and recasting official idioms in the pursuit of often highly unofficial’ aims (2016, p. 6). If Williams draws attention to structure, then Herzfeld to agency. Locally expressed conservatism as a political vernacular includes engagement with elite discourses. This helps us understand how people in Russia respond to the putative ‘culture war’. Indeed ‘political vernaculars’ have recently attracted attention in Russian Studies to better answer questions about the legacies of the Soviet period and political consciousness and participation today (Aronoff and Kubik 2013; Greene 2019). Herzfeld is particularly interested in how the ambivalence between Europeanness versus ‘other’ cultural identity is consciously manipulated at all social levels as a form of input-feedback between the powerful and ‘powerless’.

In an orthodox reading, ‘intolerance’ of permissive western values, and a shared irritation with their claim to hegemony as ‘progressive’, would serve as the rallying point of Russian cultural intimacy between elites and ordinary people. Indeed, this is the main thrust of Alexander Kiossev’s development of Herzfeld term for the referent ‘the Balkans’. The identity of Balkan as regressively nationalist (and therefore intolerant) is a form of ‘dark intimacy’ constructed as a mirror-discourse to a European identity (2002, p. 182). In ‘the Balkans’, nationalism compensates for stigma and binds people together. Thus in the context of any purported return to traditional or conservative family values, the idea of ‘cultural intimacy’ is pertinent. If ‘structures of feeling’ emphasise how Russian conservative values find resonance among ordinary people, then cultural intimacy indicates the ‘agency’ part of the equation, where more autonomous meanings emerge at the everyday level. The example in this article is that objections to homosexuality and children’s rights often revolve around claims, not to conservatism or hierarchy, but to practical shared moral values, and the integrity of family as moral community, where the state is a fickle and potentially malign ‘guarantor’ of rights.

The rest of this article is structured as follows: first, there is a short section on ethnographic methods detailing the field and generation of research materials underpinning my argument. Then I present two ethnographic sections, one on everyday homophobia and how it relates to elite-led discourse. The second ethnographic sketch relates to ‘Juvenile Justice’ – a framing of children’s rights as Western impositions with conspiratorial intent to undermine patriarchal authority within the traditional, and crucially, heteronormative family. The anti-‘JJ’ movement is not just about the patriarchal family, but carries meanings about the state, gender-identity and sexuality. I discuss ethnographic findings with reference to structures of feeling and cultural intimacy. Then I offer conclusions: that homophobia and traditional attitudes to the family, if they reveal anything, tell us about the ambivalence in people’s evaluation of their own state (rather than the West), particularly in terms of its capacity to inculcate, nourish, favour or punish social behaviours – whether in the spheres of sexuality, or child rearing. In place of shadowing an elite-rhetoric of ‘culture war’ with the big other of the West, the examples of ‘social conservatism’ in this article are structured by an emotional politics ‘fuelled by insecurity, doubt, indignation and resentment’ (Skeggs 1997: 162).
Methods and Fieldsite

This article is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a rural-urban district in European Russia (Morris 2016, pp. 215-231). Since 2009 the principle author has cultivated and sustained relationships with a wide and diverse set of research participants. Many people from two industrial settlements own village properties where they interact with outsiders (mainly Muscovites and people from the regional capital Kaluga). While the socio-economic milieu of the field is decidedly blue-collar and ‘rust-belt’, we talk to people across the income, education and class spectrum. This is an important point to make when dealing with values that many mistakenly think of as inversely proportional to educational level, viz: intolerance.

The interview materials cited below were collected in mid-2018, but some materials pertaining to Juvenile Justice date to 2015-2016 and 2009-10. For the most recent period of collection, a field researcher assisted in the interviews and transcribed them. Many of the conversations took place in country cottages, a typically accessible setting during the summer. Here, the researchers also sought out higher earners and more ‘cosmopolitan’ interlocutors. For the purposes of this article, two composite family groups of research participants (Ilya’s working-class family and Galina’s technical lower-middle-class one) are presented as representative of wider trends in the materials collected. Thus, for example, interview materials with numerous participants are presented through the ‘composite’ portraits of Ilya and Galina below. While both are real participants, their words are supplemented by those of others in similar generational, gender and class positions. Composites are a useful technique and tool for compressing diverse yet sample-saturated materials. They also present a solution to ethical issues when representing sensitive materials that require the disguising of participants’ identity (Humphreys and Watson 2009, Morris 2016, p. 225).

To many social researchers, the previous two paragraphs might read as dryly disconnected from the real human concerns of ethnographic research. In reality, doing ethnographic research, particularly participant observation, requires emotional commitments of empathy and loyalty to the field and the people in it. The research for this article is no different. Therefore, the following ethnography is presented in the informal, personal and sometimes intimate form it was conducted in. The biographical facts of the author’s personal circumstances (being a father of boys, being non-Russian, living in Scandinavia) aided the probing of the topics of sexuality and child-rearing rather than negatively affecting the ‘objectivity’ of the research, as if objectivity were a meaningful or realisable aim in such qualitative methods.

1 Assistance consisted of conducting some interviews alone, or taking a lead in conducting joint interviews, following up in arranging interviews with new and existing participants, reviewing and coding interviews with the author. Approximately 70% of the interviews featured the RA taking a lead. The research participants were familiar with RA involved via previous research conducted by the author. As a Russian woman with children, who had lived abroad in the ‘West’ for extended periods, the RA was able to draw on her personal experience and biography was useful considering the topics covered. To allow for a natural progression in conversation towards quotidian questions of child rearing, gender roles, and other ‘biopolitical’ issues in a setting of already established mutual trust and cross-cultural inquiry. In fact, some of the conversations were initiated by the respondents themselves, very interested in what was happening in those areas in the ‘West’.
Translating ‘Gayropa’ into everyday homophobia

Gayropa as a term has little purchase with most people we talk to, although they willingly, sometimes enthusiastically, discuss issues of sexuality with us. They’ve heard it, but don’t use it. ‘Gayropa’? What does that mean?’ says Ilya. ‘I mean homosexuals’, I reply. ‘Oh pederasts? Pidory, you mean?’ replies Ilya with interest. Before proceeding, we should be unpacking the ‘lay’ term for ‘gay’ – ‘pidor’ – one which is both ordinary and offensive; uncouth and yet unremarkable, depending on one’s company, and socio-linguistic self-awareness.

This is not the first time I’ve mentioned I’m interested in topics of sexuality, and the ‘traditional family’, to my friend Ilya, a good natured if rather depressive, single man of thirty. We are sitting in his native village. Ilya has been unemployed for about a year now. He gets by using his car as an informal taxi. Often though, there are few daytime, weekday customers, and he comes to water his mother’s little plot here from the town where his main residence is. We start eating fish with beer and a wasp is bothering Ilya: ‘Fuck, pidory have flown in’, says Ilya. ‘So, about ‘pidory’, I say, ‘what do you understand about Gayropa?’ Ilya continues, at first rejecting from discussion what appears to him as a technical piece of jargon he has heard somewhere, but which remains obscure:

I recall last time we spoke we talked about how pidory are people with a non-traditional sexual orientation, but now what I want you to understand is that pidors are not ‘gays’, but it is a character trait [zachonchennyi]. To be a pidor is to be incorrigible. Your ‘gays’ is something else, fashion maybe.

*Ilya: And how do you feel about real homosexuals?*

Oh, immediately, ‘tratratra’ [imitates sound of machine gun firing]. But in the West it’s all normal, right? They go on parades, smile? […] They are everywhere. So many have appeared; there didn’t used to be them.

*Probably before you just couldn’t see them, they kept themselves to themselves. Does it bother you? It makes no difference to me. They’re not going to bother you.*

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2 An important impetus for people to discuss homosexuality with the researchers was because one of us was a ‘foreigner’ (the research assistant is a Russia national). This equally applies to the discussion about Juvenile Justice. Indeed, this interest among research participants partly prompted this project. However, rather than conclude that this increased interest is evidence of Gayropa’s salience among ordinary people, media and elite narratives merely serve as sensitising ordinary people to issues in the manner of a ‘Structure of Feeling’, as is discussed later.

3 *Pidor* literally translates as ‘pedo’. But in Russian it also preserves a deliberate mispronunciation of the original ‘pederast’, presumably because of the distance from ordinary speech of the foreign medical/historical term, and its taboo history as a subject of general discourse. It indicates the (un)easy association between forms of sexual deviance as well as a sense of unmasculine contempt – perhaps better approximating the use in English of the term ‘motherfucker’ or ‘bastard’. As with North American English uses of the word ‘faggot’, but perhaps even more readily, usage may easily slide between literal and figurative use (‘repellent male’, ‘useless person’). The degree to which this has developed in the last few decades in Russia can be illustrated by the extent to which, even in public discourse, those using the word can be observed to say ‘pidor, in a good sense’, meaning ‘gay’, and ‘pidor, in a bad sense’, meaning ‘motherfucker’. See for example https://polit.ru/news/2005/01/24/pidary/. Also similar to usage of the term ‘faggot’, the pejorative gendering implications of the term ‘pidor’ may be more important than the sexuality ones (Pascoe 2007).
I’ve heard that they come through and immediately they’re up for fucking, almost in passing, like. In Russia it’s different – immediately against the wall and ‘bang, bang’. Jeremy you are not right here. In Russia it’s a man and a woman, they live together. But if it’s man and man then it’s complete trash [polnyi shvakh]. Woman and woman exists, but it’s done in secret. Now though, homos get married (someone was telling me about it), even Russians […] It does exist, even in our town. I’ve heard about guys kissing in the entry-ways. But without a woman, beautiful kids, what is a man? […] It’s not that there aren’t homos here, it’s just that in the West they walk freely, raise flags – it’s fashionable. Here they are afraid. Just try to raise a flag to show you’re a pidor and they’ll stamp on you and crush you. And even the cops won’t say a word and they’ll be no consequences. Honestly, I do believe that this fucking mess came from the West, from English-language countries. […] Before that there were pidory only in prison, or they put them in the loony-bin. […] Well actually there was this [attempt to have public gay parades] before, in the 80s or something in Russia, and in those days, you know, they didn’t say anything, but now they understand that this fucking mess is growing. They tried it in Moscow but the police broke it up immediately and Volodya Putin said, ‘It’s a Russian country, we have boys marrying girls, giving birth to kiddies and we can’t have all this shit.’ Go and google it yourself, in our country we don’t support homos. While Ilya’s speech is somewhat performative, his narrative here is largely in earnest, not least because of his concern for what he sees as my dangerous ignorance and naivety, given that I’m the father of two small boys playing somewhere out of sight in the village. Ilya maps Putin onto his own normative conception of heterosexuality as wholesomely Russian. At the same time, while connecting homosexuality to the unwholesome influence of the West, he uncovers contradictions that only weakly resonate with Gayropa. They indicate everyday (non-politicised) homophobia, historicised knowledge of sexuality discourses in the USSR and modern Russia, but also, most surprisingly, exposure to versions of post-repressive hypotheses of sexuality. The first category – fear of the threatening (to masculinity, to personal safety, to order) homosexual is relatively representative of all our interviews. If anything Ilya is rather restrained in comparison to other male interlocutors: some middle-class men we talked to used more extreme violent language and imagery. The second category too, is straightforward: the idea of an ‘etymological’ link between deviant sexuality and systems of incarceration in the USSR. Collective punishment, penalty, and ‘homosexual rape’ have a long-standing semantic connected (See Kharkhordin 1999, pp. 307-312).4

The third category is a fuzzy and hedged articulation of sexuality as an ‘incorrigible’ fact of identity. This is interesting given that a core idea of the dangers of permissiveness is that homosexuality arises from environment – in the ‘culture war’ framing – due to the unwelcome influence of the West. Later there is a casual admission that in fact Ilya does know that gays are among him and perhaps are not quite the new imposition on Russia. Indeed, exploring further the idea of gays as a new form of pollution, Ilya and others map this idea onto that of a general breakdown in order, the loss of old certainties. What interests him more than the category of people being ‘disciplined’ is the exercise of arbitrary punishment and swift retribution of the state towards those who step out of line. The evocation of firing squads and clandestine meetings are also

4. The conflation of homosexual identity with prison sexual relations and army hazing are a major cause of negative attitude towards homosexuality and the accompanying view that of homosexuality as coercive or ‘imposed’ from without.
noteworthy Furthermore, the idea of state disciplining was never proposed enthusiastically, rather family upbringing (‘vospitanie’) with a strong normative role model was key. This links permissiveness, sexuality and child-rearing – the latter explored in the second ethnographic section. Finally, when pressed further, the majority of interviewees moderate their extreme positions, when questions about sexual behaviour are couched in terms of the right to private life – a point argued by Kon (2003).^5

‘Moral upbringing’ socially frames (non)permissiveness

The Russian term vospitanie is more than its literal translation of ‘upbringing’. The collocative significance of ‘cultural upbringing’ [kulturnoe vospitanie], is a legacy of Soviet concerns about the moral and social education of youth and their vulnerability to pernicious influences (Muckle 1988, Sirotin 2009, Krupets et al. 2017). The meaning of shared ‘culture’ and norms imbricate with moral education. Importantly, successful vospitanie involves a continual process of interventions, and externally-measured moral conduct (Kharkhordin 1999, p. 61). This produces a ‘morally educated’ person who, in the Soviet version, would always know how to act in the spirit of the aims of the state. The right training could produce not only a collectivised citizen, but also a collectivised body and personality (Oushakine 2004). While the ideological teleology of vospitanie are displaced after 1991, the ensuing social and ‘moral chaos’ of the post-Soviet era, only reinforces the demand for a meaningfully orientating process of socialisation of the young.

Those most acutely experiencing subordination – those of Ilya’s class – are thus predictably more likely to object to homosexuality as it is for them emblematic of failure of socialisation. That they themselves might secretly fear that despite correct socialisation they too are members of a ‘failed’ group in society – a lumpen working-class – may only intensify their homophobia. Thus homophobia, for many men is a ‘structure of feeling’ – with much deeper roots than the Gayropa trope – where cultural hegemony is tempered by the lived subordination of class and is processual and liable to change from below, as Williams predicts and even in Ilya’s talk is notable – that the

^5 Official, legal and ideological homophobia as a political tool has a long history in Russia (Healy 2017). While there is general fear and disgust of homosexuality, overall attitudes towards ‘non-normative’ identities and lifestyles are improving (Kabrykant and Magun 2014) and it is important to look through short-term fluctuations. More recently, scholars have pointed out that Russia is among on the ‘medium-high’ end of tradition-normative values in comparison to other European countries (Fabrykant and Magun 2018, p. 82). They base this evaluation on the work of Viktoria Sakevich (2014) who analysed Pew Research Center data on ‘moral’ values. When findings are broken down, Russia differs little from Western European countries on issues such as extra-marital and premarital sex, divorce, abortion, contraception. In some cases Russia is more ‘liberal’ than both Anglo-Saxon and some Southern or Eastern European countries. Homosexuality is the outlier, with Russia more similar to Asian and African countries. However, we should again exercise caution because so much depends on how questions are phrased. If we return to the important question of nature-nurture and homosexuality, Russians do not look so much like outliers. A recent UK poll, for example, records 34% of respondents as believing that gays are not born, but made, with much internal variation in the sample (YouGov 2017). As recently as 1998 a majority (62%) of British people thought homosexuality was ‘wrong’ (Clements and Field 2014). One could even argue that based on attitudes towards adoption of children by homosexuals, British and Russian people are pretty similar when it comes to the question of equal rights: British people are strongly against gay men adopting (ibid).
complete taboo subject of actually-existing gay people is not so taboo any longer, that there is ‘demand’ for ‘safe’ talk about sexuality and even that gays might well be ‘born’ and not ‘made’.

The nostalgia for correct vospitanie can be seen as part of a ‘retreat’ to a form of lay reasoning that makes use of ‘traditionalism’ as well as negatively referencing some aspects of ‘western permissiveness’ in elite discourse. The idea of a ‘retreat’ links to analyses more generally of the ‘turn’ to traditional values – such as that by Ukhova (2018) as an expression of social distress. This aspect is readily present in Ilya’s and others’ talk. They readily move from discussing violence and repression towards gays to other ‘blame’ groups, such as Central Asians. They also quickly link subjugation and the punitive state to their own positioning. As socio-economic ‘losers’ of postcommunist transition they do not disaggregate intolerance from ‘distress’.

Following Ukhova (ibid), it is worth breaking down ‘social distress’ into three subcategories as indicated by interview materials. These are 1. The socio-economic dislocation and sense of injustice, particularly for working-class men. 2. A Janus-faced political expression that has on one side a desire for punitively enforced order where there is perceived moral and social ‘disorder’. 3. On the other, a fear of arbitrary ‘justice’ dealt by the state and practical knowledge of its great capacity for indiscriminate collective punishment. Finally, there is an elective affinity between state-led conservative narratives of ‘protection’ from the West, and lay values around a loss of guiding moral vospitanie in social order more generally. Crucially however, this is an ‘affinity’, rather than a causal link. This affinity, together with symptoms of social stress make everyday homophobia into a structure of feeling only tangentially related to hegemonic discourses of western permissiveness. On the contrary, people are more likely to find their own state to be at the very least ‘lacking’ in capacity to provide morally socialisation or even the conditions to allow social reproduction to take place for the heteronormative family.

Regarding Gayropa, Ilya’s talk reflects official discourse on sexuality, but ‘expropriates’ it for local purposes, albeit to a limited degree according to a logic related to Michael Herzfeld’s notion of cultural intimacy in contrast to ‘European’ values. To be Russian is to be masculine and therefore

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6 By foregrounding a more class-based analysis, I do not wish to ignore the mountain of scholarship on sexuality and gender, particularly masculinity, in Russia. Gayropa/’JJ’ does in part refraction of long-standing domestic concerns about gender politics – e.g. the interplay between the threats of fragile masculinity, demographic crisis and the sexual emancipation of women which have been particularly noticeable since the late Soviet era (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002). Zdravomyslova and Temkina remind us that gender-inflected intervention (including discrimination) is nothing new. They remark that fears for the normative gender order were such that state strategies emerged to protect men (via state schemes – e.g. of addiction provision) as well as the ‘family-private’ solution of female enculturation and socialization (noting the discrete nature of each strand) of men away from degeneration (ibid, p. 438). In the light of this it is striking how easily the purported ‘culture war’ tropes map more readily on to a reading of a frustrated masculine revival rather than a conservative turn in relation to an external other cultural referent. A continuity between Soviet, transitional and contemporary (elite-led) conservatism is persuasive: ‘Transformational reforms in Russia began to be viewed as a chance of asserting some kind of real masculinity […] The liberal critics who created the ideology of perestroika assumed that the new order would provide an opportunity to develop hegemonic patriarchal masculinity.’ (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002, p. 450).

7 Stenning et al. (2010: 59) have been instrumental in highlighting how ‘household social reproduction’ in postsocialist spaces is more than just about how families and groups economically sustain themselves. Social, emotional values as well as networks are important. In other words the way a state enables or impedes thriving and flourishing are key categories of reflection for people.
intolerant of homosexuals and to avoid the folly of the West. But most of all, to be straight (and have a wife and kids) is a quality of Russianness, and perhaps something to cling on to in these difficult times. Alexander Kiossov (2002, p. 184) calls vernacular discourses a ‘redeployment’ of official narrative: a ‘mirror-discourse’ to a European identity (of tolerance), but locally salient. This maps onto the political vernacular of ‘common sense/direct knowledge’ (Aronoff and Kubik 2017, p. 244) – that for many working-class men, social reproduction is a hard fought, distressing struggle. The ‘impossibility of earning a living’ is something Ilya and others continuously return to, as if the link to intolerance were self-evidence. Ironically, in these meandering, repetitive litanies, gays are hardly the main target. Rather, metropolitan elites, Jews and foreigners (who caused the current economically unjust era) are targeted. Ilya, without showing admiration, recognised the punitive and arbitrarily violent nature of the state and was cognisant that therefore some forms of social life are ‘of course’ only possible clandestinely and that order is at risk, a ‘normal’ life precarious. Given such ‘distress’, again the importance of upbringing is emphasised – as if it is the only agency left for a person, hence the imperative to defend a heteronormative patriarchal nuclear family – one ironically, very difficult to achieve for many of our divorced, estranged and precariously employed male interlocutors.

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What of other responses towards the meaning of Gayropa? Ilya occupies a relative middle-ground between visceral intolerance and tolerance. Certainly there were people with more exposure to the print and online media, and with higher educational qualifications who were more ready to make the link between homosexuality and a Western-led cultural war on Russia. By the same token, there were a few people without higher education who expressed pronounced tolerant, even permissive views on sexuality. Zhenya, a male factory worker, 36 years old: ‘They can do what they want. I don’t want to see them kissing. I can’t look at that. But they should have the rights that others do. To get legally connected, not in a church, but why not?’

Contrast this with Denis, a 50-year-old sales representative of an international industrial firm, comfortably off, well-travelled with a post-graduate education: ‘these are not people, but scum who prey on the young and impressionable. They seduce youth – they are just opportunists. It’s a measure of the degradation of Europe that they are allowed to openly recruit through those parades.’ A middle-class retired woman echoes this: ‘It’s really dangerous, all these parades. These are spoiled people [isporechennye] who make use of vulnerable young people who want to experiment. But it’s not a real identity. And then it is too late for those youth – they can’t be normal again and have children.’ Denis elsewhere reflected on youth problems closer to home – his own child had both experienced substance abuse and mental illness. In more reflective talk he emphasised the lack of non-punitive state support for youth. His sense of injustice was not related to economic issues, but state capacity for pastoral care and providing opportunities for youth’s flourishing. Even for this successful executive, the idea of successful social reproduction was expressed with bitterness and cynicism. It is tempting to link his personal family life experience to his attitudes of intolerance.

Victor, a blue-collar worker, turned entrepreneur in his late 40s is less interested in sexual orientation, but finds it hard to reconcile a recent news story about a Western family that has a baby and decides not to reveal its gender to avoid gender bias. The story of a young boy who decided to dress as a girl is another cause for a heated debate: ‘Seriously? How could a small child even come up with the idea? Clearly, it’s the adults’ fault for suggesting to him that one could choose his
gender, rather than allowing him to grow up naturally – as a male.’ Similarly to Denis, Victor’s personal family situation should not be disaggregated from his commentary. Initially Victor had wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and set up a business. Now his own business was failing, he had sent his son off to retrain on the railways. Elsewhere his talk concerned his own mistaken assumptions about the merits of the son following the father. In the same interview session he later discussed the importance of youth ‘finding their own way, in this difficult and changing world’. He emphasised moral upbringing (his son was thanks to this resilient enough to adapt to change), but also recognised the structural constraints of society (particularly corruption and cronyism) that made social reproduction so vexed and was fearful for the future.

Perhaps the most successful reflection in ordinary talk of Gayropa is the idea of the semi-official imposition of artificial identity choices on youth. The idea of untoward influence by shady exploitative older people is repeatedly expressed. However, this is linked in talk to a more complex objection based on a psycho-social portrait of the individual: that non-normative sexuality emerges where there is a lack of moral fibre. Although beyond the frame of reference for this paper, we encounter analogous ideas in the construction of race: non-whites as lacking morals. Morality is mapped on to a more sociologised lack within the everyday idea of homosexuality: a lack of cultural upbringing.

The idea of the state and society as playing an active role in the correct inculcation of values (including sexual mores) is a longstanding and unsurprising artefact in Russia. This makes it easy for elite-promoted discourses of Gayropa to insert a wedge and widen purchase in the already significant space of normative upbringing. Ironically, vospitanie here can be seen as the more societally moulded idea of ‘maturation’ but squarely within a European enlightenment tradition. It is merely the more collectivist corollary of the more individualistic/personalistic self-cultivation expressed by ‘bildung’. Normalizing non-fixed sexuality draws children into making choices they would not otherwise make.

Finally, it is worth emphasising how intolerant views are quite strongly mapped on to lack of personal experience of ‘others’. Encouragingly, people’s beliefs often change when confronted with reality. A middleaged woman who worked for a foreign language school commented on how many years ago she shared her boyfriend’s views that gay men had something wrong with them, completely changed her views after working with several openly gay men and women (all foreign) at the school. This even made her realised how conservative her boyfriend was and led to the break up in their relationship. Similarly, her friend’s husband was really against black people and thought of them as inferior and dirty, until he was forced to offer lodgings to a young black teacher. This completely changed his view. Even if homophobic and other intolerant attitudes are deep ‘structures of feeling’, lived experiences moderate and change them, if only over the long term. Indeed this is one of the main sociological insights based on William’s idea of cultural hegemony – that cultural hegemony is tempered by the lived experience and is processual and liable to change from below.

**Traditional family roles and Juvenile Justice**

From the discussion of what homosexuals and homosexuality lack, it is clear that one of the main interpretations is a concern with heteronormative gender roles, most particularly within the ideal of
the nuclear family. This necessarily entails a look at relations between genders, normative expectations of ‘husband’, ‘mother’, etc., and the rights and relative subordination of ‘juveniles’ within the family and society. The latter (termed “Juvenile Justice” – further: ‘JJ’) is a ‘hot topic’ that easily meshes with Gayropa among some research participants. They criticise permissiveness of putatively ‘Western’ child-rearing norms and link them to social degeneration. However, in all of the gender and family talk, as much is expressed about their own state’s biopolitical power.

Often in the same conversations, research participants would cover sexuality and gender and family. As can be seen with Ilya, frequently this elision was unprompted. To return to Ilya, it was striking that he makes frequent reference to the potential loss and threat to what he sees as an idyllic traditional nuclear family that homosexuality represents. His talk of ‘beautiful’ children was revealing. The spectre of loss, but also corruption of innocence frequently arose. Victor’s discourse (the well-off salesman) is very similar: ‘Biological difference is set. You can’t choose to be a boy or a girl. If at ten he can define whether he’s a young lady [baryshnia] or a man; well, how can that be? And more importantly what for? I can’t understand that.’

The idea of the unpredictable dangers of giving minors ‘too much’ autonomy leading to ‘malign influence’ of bad adult actors is neatly expressed in the term ‘JJ’, a signifier that has more potential purchase than Gayropa. A retired nurse, Galina had encountered a number of websites devoted to the topic and talked to us about them at length. Internet resources and networks are important for anti-JJ mobilization (Sherstneva 2014, p. 199). A review of these reveals a common narrative – in Germany and Scandinavia ‘JJ’ policies have led to the legal empowerment of children and this is dangerous. Along with strict laws against reasonable parental corporal punishment, states are manipulating children into denouncing their own parents. The children are then institutionalised, destroying the authority of parents and familial bonds. ‘JJ’ is a rhetorical trope illustrative of a wider narrative of the defence of traditional family values. Tova Höjdestrand has written extensively on this topic, arguing that grassroots mobilization and popular resistance to children’s rights are an articulation of state distrust (Höjdestrand 2017).

Galina had digested the aims of the organised civic movement in Russia against children’s rights through internet fora devoted to the topic. In particular, she had assimilated the link between permissiveness and the collapse of traditional family authority, but had not linked this to a Western attempt to undermine Russian culture. Crucially, she saw it more as a domestic Russian appropriation of Western mores – imputing it to bad local actors. Nor had she (or any other interlocutors) absorbed the religious message of this rhetoric – i.e. that Orthodox morality was the guarantor of appropriate family hierarchies and relations. Similar to Ilya’s expression of homophobia, Galina’s expression of traditional family hierarchy will be explored in depth in contrast to semi-officialised articulations of ‘JJ’.

Galina is in her late 60s, married, has two children and three grandchildren. One of the grandchildren was mainly raised by her and her husband. Galina had worked as a nurse and her husband as a railway engineer. She has been housebound due to disability for the period I have known her. She is very eager to talk about the world beyond her four walls. She makes full use of the internet as a result of her social and physical isolation. She often invites me and my children over and makes a big fuss of them. Consequently, conversation often turns to the topic of child-rearing. Having often talked about ‘JJ’ before, in May 2018, the author and research assistant asked Galina to summarise her views:
It’s just that after 1998, there was an all-union [Galina confuses the structure of the UN with the former USSR] convention on human rights, including children’s rights. And JJ appeared in Russia. […] I was walking on Karpov Street and saw a sign ‘Juvenile Justice’ and asked what it meant, and they told me – it’s so that if something happens to a child they should go not to an adult organisation but deal with it here. Then I read in the internet that it turns out that Medvedev in 2014 or 2016 was in China. There was a programme called ‘Childhood 2030’ and it was all laid out by year. In St Petersburg the Social Institute wrote a huge article, I can show you it, all the references point to it. Perhaps I wouldn’t have paid much attention if not for the fact that videos started to appear of children taken away from their parents in Finland, in Denmark, Russian children in particular, in England, Norway, just for being smacked. In Russia they immediately started working on a law – if you smack a child once, you get two years in jail. They collected a million signatures and there were even protests against it. The upbringing of children is not only a matter of verbal chastising, but sometimes one can smack a child depending on circumstances. I can’t remember her name, but a woman protested saying “what are you doing – so if a blood relative smacks they get two years, but if it’s a stranger it’s only an administrative infraction?”

Galina continued giving very detailed, if sometimes confused, accounts that tallied with the various websites she visited. Her grandchild, Masha, aged 15 interjected: ‘But how does this get defined as either criminal or administrative? It depends surely on the circumstances. Like yesterday I saw a little girl step out into the road in front of me and of course her mother smacked her. What else could she do?’ One of Galina’s sons who was present during some conversations supported his mother, saying – ‘you just have to use the belt sometimes. My dad used it on me when I deserved it. He didn’t want to but in extremis…’ Occasionally Galina’s family would, referring to some behaviour of the researcher’s children, recommend similar corporal punishment. Others interviewed (in particular women working in care sectors) would single out what they perceived as overly ‘free’ behaviour [vol’nye] on the part of children as illustrating a European upbringing – specifically linking vospitanie to the non-Russian milieu of these children. Unlike Galina, they readily linked permissiveness to Europeanness. However, like her, they more keenly took up the topic of the sinister aims of their own state. We return to Galina as expressing this in representative fashion:

For a long time it’s been the case that in schools and kindergartens nurses and childrearers have to promptly react to any bruises on the children. If there are any, they immediately phone the social protection agency who come and deal with it. There was a case near Tula last year where a child had a bruise from playing with her brother and the mother had to go to court to reinstate her parental rights. It’s so terrible. I’ll give you the link to the case. Then after the lake tragedy they removed Pavel Astakhov from the role of Presidential defender of Children’s Human Rights and put in his place Kuznetsova, the wife of a priest and mother of five children, but that’s no good in a role that requires so much travel – who is bringing up her children now?8 And what does a religious person know of the complexities of today’s youth? […] You know everyone’s disappointed with decisions like that by Putin, like with the pension fund thing. I’m in favour of women in politics but not at the expense of family.

Children’s rights begin at home! It was all so much easier when the system was that the grandmother could live with you and look after the children while you worked. Yes, while on the one hand they say that this JJ comes from the West, as a condition of getting access to some currency fund. On the other hand Navalnyi is right that maybe Putin is just representing somebody’s interest—I mean Navalnyi has shown and now everyone can see how he’s protecting particular interests – oligarchs. In Soviet times there were no human rights but there were other values – peace and harmony, toleration. But after the USSR new organisations arose that were not subordinate to anyone.

At this point in the interview, the granddaughter precociously opines that to take away a child from its family should require a qualified transparent commission adhering to principles of legal process. This returns Galina to the topic of supervisory control:

JJ is not subordinate to anyone. It’s not a conspiracy, it’s that there are petty provocateurs. People in hospitals or education who will use the opportunity of JJ to improve their own situation.

Galina’s interpretation is worth cross-referencing with Höjde strand research on the anti-JJ movement, which focuses on the agenda of civic organisations. Höjdestrand traces the origins of organised conservative religious opposition to implementation in Russia of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child after 2000 (2017, p. 45). In particular, she highlights the articulation of a ‘civic’ opposition to the imposition of a Eurocentric models of child-parental relations and the privileged role of the state as arbiter of such relations. This is revealed in open reference to foreign NGO agendas, as well as the use of the term ‘sovereign’ which is used in a negative sense to illustrate cultural imperialism in opposition to a native “antiliberalism”, patriotism and a religious worldview’. (ibid, p. 33). Conspiracy theories, which link domestic state administrators to supranational agencies in exploiting children in the name of child protection, are increasingly common. Here there is a confusing collision between the ‘anti-state’ aspects of ‘JJ’ and the elite-led utilization of Western-led conspiracies and ‘fifth columns’. For example, the Duma deputy Mizulina flirts with the ultimate conspiracy reading: child rights as the Trojan horse of homosexuality and paedophilia (ibid, p. 47).

Drawing on the work of Vorozheikina (2008) Höjdestrand suggests the importance of the context of distrust in the state and formalised structures for the anti-JJ movement. The interpretation of an attack on the role of the parent in favour of the state provides fertile ground in particular for the antiliberal agenda of conservative morality organisations (Höjdestrand 2017, p. 42). While Galina and others certainly looked at ‘European’ child-rearing as inferior due to the loss of traditional family hierarchy and its attendant discipline, what these ‘lay’ or vernacular discourses on the vulnerability of the Russian child have in common with organised forms of conservative morality is distrust of the Russian state’s capacities and motivations. The West here is overshadowed and really an afterthought, or merely the origin of ideas. The right kind of morally framed vospitanie, once again, rears its head. Just as the organised opposition to ‘JJ’ rests on the interpretation of children as vulnerable (‘malleable and dependent’, Höjdestrand 2017, p. 48), so too does the lay version agonise over the loss of a guiding role for the parent, particularly the father. Natalia Sherstneva argues that anti-JJ activism is directed against the ‘authoritarian centralized system’ of institutional family policy and social services, as much as signalling conservative politics (Sherstneva 2014, p. 199).
Concurrent to the above conversations, people we spoke to repeatedly stressed the necessary dominance of a father figure as a solution to problems of vospitanie. As Galina’s son Zhenya succinctly put it, continuing his theme of “spare the rod and spoil the child”:

In the army the boy will get more than a smack round the face. It’s better if it comes first from the father, from within the family, for a good reason and only in extremis. This teaches that there has to be moral reason for punishment. You did something bad and accept the moral consequences – the belt. Otherwise the boy will remain infantile not able to feel the limits. If you leave it to the army or after, it will be too late and the consequences will be worse. You don’t want the army or the police in a country like this teaching your kid lessons in how to behave [uroki vospitania] – because that punishment will often be mindless [bessmyslenno], as so many things are in Russia [u nas’]

This narrative strongly suggests not only a lay conservatism and recourse to traditional masculine-enforced order as a reaction at the micro-level to wider societal disruption, as suggested by Daria Ukhova (2018), but encased within that ‘lay conservatism’ is a fear and mistrust of the punitive and vindictive, if not corrupt state. The state today is understood as an inadequate or even dangerous model of vospitanie, underlined by a projection on to the past of more ethically meaningful possibilities of education, real or imagined. Therefore reinforcing hierarchy in the name of moral growth at the level of the family is a ‘rational’ response.

**Conclusion**

The degree to which we can impute a conservatism to many Russians is not in the operation of a hegemonic discourse about the permissive decadence of West, but in a structure of feeling that has more complicated roots, causes and expressions. The idea of a need for moral vospitanie as structuring feelings of fear and intolerance is fruitful in historicizing Russia’s history of homophobia. Such anxieties are equally likely to result from feelings of inadequacy relating to one’s own class or gendered social positioning. These intimate reflections on one’s failure or potential failure can be acute in Russian society – characterised as it is by high levels of visible inequality, corruption and risk as well as very normatively gendered notions of success and failure. Moreover, given the ongoing sense of dislocation and socio-economic vulnerability of large groups of citizen, frustrations and fears relating to social reproduction loom large. The latter is increasingly delegated to the heteronormative family, symbolized by politicians’ repetition of phrases like ‘the state didn’t ask you to have children’. Despite rhetoric that purports to support social reproduction with piecemeal measures like subsidised mortgages for families and maternity capital, people are able to critically reflect on the increasing retreat of the social state since the communism, whether the loss benefits like universal childcare or the more recent pension age changes. If anything, the mobility of people’s thought – moving from homophobia to reflections on the paucity of opportunity or hazardous social environment for their own offspring illustrates how the conservative turn in elite discourse can have counterintuitive effects. At the same time, structures of feeling relate to practical consciousness, and should not be seen as epiphenomena of changing institutions (Williams 1977, p. 211) or elite discourse. As affects, are not a ‘world view’ or ideology, and are therefore only unpredictably inflected by the state. In place of shadowing an elite-rhetoric of ‘culture war’ with the big other of the West, the examples of ‘social conservatism’ in this article is structured by an emotional politics ‘fuelled by insecurity, doubt, indignation and resentment’ (Skeggs 1997: 162).
In turn, researchers interested in the relations between political rhetoric and lay ‘opinion’ should attune themselves to the difference between the political and the social as defined by Chantal Mouffe (2005). Homosexuality has long been a social taboo, but it only became a political issue, one contested in the public sphere, when it became of political utility. The acts of ‘hegemonic institutions’ should be carefully prised away from the realm of ‘sedimented practices’. Even though they are mutually constitutive, any articulation of one through the other requires contextual reference to unstable ‘frontier’ between them (ibid. pp. 17-18). This is fundamentally Herzfeld’s contribution to understanding cultural hegemony – that a simple model of elites ‘hailing’ ordinary people would ignore how even seemingly incontrovertibly-shared ‘cultural’ values give rise to articulations of counter-hegemonic meaning.

Viatcheslav Morozov views Russians as ‘colonised natives’ caught between liberal universalism represented by the West, and domestic authoritarianism (2015, p. 163). They are subalterns who cannot speak, lacking any salvageable ‘representational device’ from within hegemonic discourses. Thus, Morozov argues that Russian conservatism deliberately silences Russian people while pretending to give them a voice. While agreeing with this characterisation, I would underline the persistent narrative in the material of ‘moral upbringing’ that emerges as the ‘unforeseen’ cultural patina, or even affective structuring, of intolerance. While finding its origin in the legacies of collective socialisation of the Soviet period, as a ‘signifier’ it tries to break free of this (notably in the lack of what one would expect of conservatism – an appeal to a disciplining big other – the state). As we have seen, echoing Ukhova (2018), distrust of the state as a guarantor of order is important, but so too is the realisation of its inability to serve as a model for moral order in society or to meaningfully support social reproduction. Indeed, often conservative rhetoric rankles because it reveals empty words – a hypocritical emphasis on the value of the heteronormative nuclear family, while structurally doing nothing to sustain it.

After nearly three decades of the imposition of the notion of moral value as residing in the ability to develop neoliberal personhoods (Makovicky 2014), it is unsurprising that vernacular expressions of conservative political cues push back. Instead of valuing the person based on criteria such as flexibility to the needs of the market (‘governmentality’ – a social hygiene that stresses its anathema to dependence and solidarity), the ‘unforeseen’ vernacular might express the opposite. While subject to ‘restorative’ ‘structural nostalgia’ (Herzfeld 2016, p. 159), people’s ideas of a ‘recovered’ personhood: the socially re-embedded individual – in community, family and society (school, work) illustrate more than just social distress proposed by Ukhova. They are a plea for social reconstruction in the face of post-socialist trauma that has lasted a long time. While the state stresses the danger of the dissolute West and social degeneration, ordinary people look around themselves and answer, ‘yes, we see degeneration close to home. Do something about it.’ Conservatism becomes a ‘social strategy’ of the distressed (Herzfeld 2016, p. 165) and expresses a locally meaningful response to political messaging from above (Greene 2019, p. 198). This is not the same as a genuine ‘culture war’, nor is it a sign of general intolerance that is any greater than in other complex societies.
References


