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Redefining patriotism and belonging in illiberal Russia:  
Resilience and survival of othered groups

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### Abstract

This study advances the argument that contemporary Russian illiberalism can be characterised through immense societal polarisation, generating a language of ‘othering’ and equating groups with critical political attitudes as ‘agents of the West’ or ‘foreigners.’ In the name of eradicating ‘amoral Western influence’ and shielding Russia from ‘foreign penetration and propaganda’ that spreads immoral values, political control over ‘foreign’ groups and organisations has intensified. In a similar vein, patriotism is increasingly equated with loyalty to the Russian state. In this article, based on the example of LGBT organisations, I show how othered groups strive to (re-)define themselves as part of the Russian nation—as patriotic and socially useful members of society. Employing institutional, political and social strategies, groups such as pro-LGBT organisations try to resist being pushed outside of Russian society, and in the process prove their patriotism and rootedness.

**Keywords:** Russia, civil society, patriotism, LGBT, rootedness.

## 1 Introduction – narratives of belonging and discursive polarisation

A discussion of Russia’s place between East and West has been ongoing for centuries, making these opposite poles reference points in Russian identity, geopolitical position, and cultural orientation (e.g., Lukin, 2003). Throughout history, Russian political leadership has oscillated between promoting Western forms of progress or rejecting those; the latter either marked Russian civilisation as unique on its own right or placed it within Eastern civilisation. While many scholars have been concerned with the East-West dichotomy in Russian political discourse and the recently intensified anti-Westernism (e.g., Noviko, 2009; Umland, 2012; Papava, 2014), fewer have inquired into how the consequent social polarisation excludes entire groups in Russia, and how these groups develop strategies of resistance and survival. This research does not follow theoretical pursuits, but rather wishes to contribute to our empirical understanding of how excluded groups in the context of illiberal regimes develop survival strategies. Through analysis of ethnographic data, I also provide direction for further research.

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The East-West divide is not merely a political debate; it can be ‘appropriated by ordinary citizens in their everyday life,’ generating narratives of national identity and belonging (Pfoser, 2017, p. 26). This tendency has engendered a strong and growing social polarisation within Russia, differentiating ‘us’ (*nashi* or *svoi*) and ‘them’/‘others’ or (*chuzhie*). This discursive practice is neither new, nor unique to Russia; rather, distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them’ may be seen as a general nature of the intergroup relationships (e.g., Verkuyten et al., 2020). Yet in Russia, the ‘us versus them’ discourse has become so politicised that some argue it has been elevated to the country’s national or unifying idea (Fadeicheva, 2006; Solovyev, 2010; Snegovaya, 2014); it is mobilised to equate ‘ours’ with loyalty to the government, and labelling those critical of it as ‘not ours,’ but ‘them.’

In the recent years, among the ostracised groups cast as ‘others’ or ‘foreign’ are several rights groups and NGOs. The word ‘liberal’ became a ‘swearword in Russia,’ explained a former human rights activist in an interview; they are dismissed as ‘*liberasty*’ and ‘*tolerasty*,’ a portmanteau of liberal/tolerant and pederast (Interview No. 3). In recent years topics like the LGBT<sup>1</sup> have moved into public discourse, ‘forcing the population to choose sides: to support liberal organisations and be labelled as *liberast*, or to condemn them, and be seen as supporters of the state’ (Interview No. 3). The question then arises: when some groups within Russia are labelled as ‘others,’ on what coping mechanisms or survival strategies do they rely?

In answering this question, this article inquires about Russian ‘politics from below,’ rather than engaging in a state-centric analysis (see Cheskin & March, 2015, p. 262). Its contribution is to fill an analytical gap on how current political narratives exclude certain groups in Russian society, and how those groups cope. I argue that in contemporary Russia the West and its liberal principles are seen as a threat not only to preservation of traditional values, but also of Russian identity. In this political climate, partition of the society into ‘us versus them’ becomes a tool of social control, marginalising those groups who are critical towards the government or its conservative ideology. This weaponised polarisation, in turn, generated rhetoric of othering that labels groups or individuals within society as strangers, foreigners, or even traitors. By examining the examples of LGBT organisations, which must navigate several political and economic challenges in the illiberal context of contemporary Russia, the article identifies a set of institutional strategies employed by groups labelled as ‘outsiders.’

## 2 Methodology

This article builds on research conducted in 2015 and 2021 about LGBT organisations in Russia, and compares it to findings of an earlier study with a focus on non-Orthodox Christian groups.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article I provide a brief summary of our findings from

<sup>1</sup> Aware of other variants, in this study I use LGBT as an umbrella term to inclusively reference all members of non-heterosexual identities.

<sup>2</sup> In 2015 with Dr Karrie Koesel we conducted an extended study and fieldwork during July-August in three large Russian cities. Fieldwork included interviews with religious leaders and adherents, as well as with local government officials, lawyers, NGO representatives and scholars. This study was funded by the Templeton Foundation as part of the ‘Under the Caesar’s Sword’ project. Professor Koesel acted as the principal investigator of this study. IRB (Institutional Review Board) permissions were issued for field research. For this article, I summarise the findings based on the

earlier research, focusing on institutional survival strategies that these groups developed as a result of their marginalised position within an illiberal political climate. I then test these strategies in relation to LGBT organisations. The purpose of the study is to understand the contemporary challenges that LGBT organisations face in Russia, and analyse how they respond to various forms of oppression and marginalisation.

To that end, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with leaders or representatives of LGBT organisations, as well as scholars and activists, three in 2015<sup>3</sup> and seven in 2021. All interviews were conducted online. Respondents were informed about the secure storage of anonymised data and my aim of collecting data for academic studies. In order to guarantee interviewees' anonymity, I made no voice recording of conversations and instead took verbatim notes, complemented with interview scripts drafted directly after the interviews.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were conducted in Russian and translated by the author. The anonymised table below summarises the full list of interviews. Though not all interviews are quoted in this study, each informed the analysis and argument in this article and was imperative for grounded, in-depth understanding of institutional resilience in illiberal Russia.

In all cases respondents granted their informed consent to participate in the interviews. I took the anonymity of interviewees particularly seriously, considering their precarious situation and the sensitive nature of the topic. As one interviewed NGO leader and an activist aptly declared, 'even our interview can be called "political activity,"' referring to the 'foreign agents' designation applied to those who engage in political acts and receive foreign funding, 'because any communication critical to the government can be called political activity' (Interview No. 10). The organisations represented by interviewees are fairly broad in their regional coverage of Russia, including organisations in the Far East, and in north-western and central parts of Russia, but excluding the North Caucasus and Siberia. Among interviewees, the north-western region was somewhat overrepresented as it is known for its 'liberal electorate,' with Saint Petersburg as its administrative centre, a city with flourishing NGOs<sup>5</sup> (e.g., Petrov, 2002, p. 77; Von Neef, 2017). For interviews, I compiled a list of Russia-wide pro-LGBT organisations whose contact information was publicly available online. I then contacted by email a total of 15 organisations, of which six responded and were open for interviews; one suggested a renowned scholar in the field of LGBT rights in Russia, with previous experience working for civil society.

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publications already available (Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018; Dunajeva & Koesel, 2015; 2017), but do not focus on religious minorities in Russia. Crucially, the comparison of cases must not imply that LGBT groups need to be viewed in comparison to the non-Orthodox churches' strategies. Instead, I treat both groups as examples of marginal communities that need to develop survival strategies. In future, I intend to study further marginal groups and compare their coping strategies as well.

<sup>3</sup> Three interviews were conducted as part of a larger study by Political Capital Institute and published as Kreko et al. (2016).

<sup>4</sup> In fact, research demonstrates that 'data quality between audio-recorded transcripts and interview scripts written directly after the interview were comparable in the detail captured,' and ideas may even be better organised in the script rather than transcript (Rutakumwa et al., 2020, p. 565).

<sup>5</sup> According to the most recent BTI Transformation Index (2020), 'NGOs are unevenly distributed [in Russia], flourishing mainly in the two largest cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg.'

Table 1: List of interviewees

Year of interview	Interviewee	Type of organisation and its mission	Interview code
2015	Programme organizer	National NGO with a mission to end all forms of gender/sex-based discrimination, with the help of generating a positive dialogue especially in cultural spaces	Interview No. 1
2015	Director and programme organizer	Regional NGO, equality in human rights to sexual/gender minorities	Interview No. 2
2015	Activist and representative	Former chairperson of national board on LGBT rights and human rights activist in an NGO	Interview No. 3
2021	Director	Local NGO, Integration of stigmatised groups into society, ending forms of prejudice	Interview No. 4
2021	Activist and director	Regional NGO, provides support to LGBT-community	Interview No. 5
2021	Director	National NGO, research and support network for transgender communities	Interview No. 6
2021	Programme organizer	Regional feminist and LGBT group providing psychological, mental, educational support	Interview No. 7
2021	Representative	Umbrella organisation supporting LGBT groups and pro-LGBT NGOs	Interview No. 8
2021	Scholar	Researcher of LGBT-related issues in Russia and former Soviet Union	Interview No. 9
2021	Director	Human rights LGBT organisation	Interview No. 10

This paper is centrally concerned with institutional survival strategies, rather than individual activist actions (which some interviewed persons admittedly engaged in, in their personal capacity). It is also essential to note that during interviews, the line between initiatives, NGOs, or other formal or informal institutional forms was ambiguous. In some cases, NGOs may have decided to forgo their NGO status to avoid bureaucratic harassment and yet continued referring to themselves as an NGO during our conversation, even though they are not officially registered. For example, one interview participant commented that ‘we are not registered as such, but I call ourselves an NGO’ (Interview No. 4). In all cases, however, interviews reflect institutional experience, regardless of the official status and form of registration. All the represented organisations have faced some form of institutional discrimination due to their mission and were operating relatively independently; several interviewed subjects stated that they occasionally apply for state grants to fund their projects, but that they can only receive state support if they frame their operations in ‘acceptable terms,’ referring to publicly beneficial activities (Interview Nos. 4 and 5). In addition to the interviews, I also analysed websites of LGBT organisations, focusing on their projects, forms of cooperation and their representation in mass media.

### 3 Discursive othering: Russian illiberalism and social polarisation

Marlene Laruelle aptly pointed out that there is no coherent illiberal ideology that countries adhere to; instead, illiberalism comes in ‘country specific patterns’ and ‘stress different issues’ (Laruelle, 2020, p. 115). What is nevertheless common among illiberal regimes is a worldview that stands in opposition to liberal values, usually associated with the West. This worldview generates a rhetoric of othering, which labels groups or individuals within society as strangers, foreigners, or even traitors. What is particular about the Russian illiberal agenda and its othering rhetoric, is the claim to defend morality; the elevation and even official establishment of certain moral values is increasingly used to frame foreign and national politics in Russia. Laruelle characterises ‘us’ in terms of the conservative state posture, which is often echoed in the language of patriotism, morality and national culture, and anyone who challenges this posture is targeted and penalised (2016, p. 209).

Russia is portrayed as the foremost fighter for morality, a bulwark against Western decadence. This position ‘clearly distinguishes Russia from the West; it reinforces the idea that Russia is the only authentic alternative to Western ideology; and it positions Russia as pious and in contrast to an immoral West’ (Dunajeva & Koesel, 2015). Fernando Nuñez-Mietz pointed out the links between morality, anti-Westernism and exclusion of ‘othered’ groups, such as the LGBT, but also how this discourse constitutes patriotism and Russian identity today:

The construction of nontraditional SOGIs [sexual orientations or gender identities] as a moral disease is built into a conservative campaign for the preservation of ‘traditional values.’ It is also built into an anti-West campaign fuelled by Russian nationalism. In this context, ‘to be properly Russian is to be Orthodox Christian and against homosexuality’ (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 368, quoted by Nuñez-Mietz, 2019, p. 552)

Analogously, Western liberalism is also derided in mass media as ‘Gayropa,’ counterpoising ‘Holy Russia’ and ‘sodomitic America’ (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019), where the latter has lost its civilisational roots to ‘genderless’ family values and ludicrous political correctness. Consider the title of a newspaper article about returning Russian compatriots in RIA Novosti, a Russian state-owned news agency: “‘Their main holiday is gay parades.’ Why Russians are running away from the US and Europe.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, this sense of morality is not only framing political discourse, but also saturating public debate, generating profound social polarisation, dividing the society ‘into pro-regime patriots and foreign agents’ (Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018, p. 223). In other words, *nashism* in contemporary Russia redefines the meaning of patriotism, belonging and loyalty. It redefines who is rooted in Russian society—and who is not. It also serves as a tool to demobilise certain social groups, seen as critical of the regime or its conservative agenda. In such a climate, anything associated with the West and critical of Russia is denigrated and delegitimised. Subsequently, “‘human rights defender” (*pravozashchitnik*) became almost a term of abuse, laden with xenophobic connotations’ and the ‘human rights movement [became] an [...] innocuous vehicle for infiltrating foreign values into the national polity’ (Horvath, 2016, pp. 868–869). The us versus them dichotomy also divided Russia’s civic sphere into ‘ours’—those

<sup>6</sup> The article was published on 2018.02.10 and is available at: <https://ria.ru/20180210/1514337857.html>

who are neutral or loyal to the regime—and ‘others’—those who are critical of the regime and challenge its ideology—with the latter groups systematically marginalised (Gilbert, 2016, p. 1572).

In contemporary Russia, there is a legal basis for differentiating ‘them’ from ‘us’: the infamous ‘Foreign agent law’ (officially ‘On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent’), introduced in 2012 and expanded in 2020. At first, this law only referred to non-governmental organisations who engage in ‘political activity’<sup>7</sup> and receive assistance from abroad; now it applies to all citizens as well. This law was widely criticised for stigmatising and prosecuting government-critical groups.<sup>8</sup> An NGO with a focus on LGBT rights explained that they have gone through ‘a 16-month trial as a result of being labelled as a foreign agent,’ a stigma that discredited the organisation and cast them as ‘promoters of foreign values in the eyes of the population’ (Interview No. 10).

This political and legal uncertainty—a characteristic of illiberal regimes that can serve as a ‘tool of indirect repression’ (Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018, p. 201)—is a technique of co-optation, making the civil sector dependent on state (Skokova, Pape & Krasnopolskaya, 2018). For instance, an LGBT NGO leader complained of ‘pseudo-NGOs,’ those organisations that are ‘to the regime’s liking and are designed as window dressing, just to show the rest for the world that we have [NGOs]’ (Interview No. 4). Indeed, to improve state control of the civil sector and demobilise critical groups, the Russian state established so-called GONGOs (government organised non-governmental organisations) (Gilbert, 2016), and rewarded ‘useful’ NGOs that operate within the ‘prescribed boundaries’ with Kremlin-sponsored grants (Bindman, 2014). Alluding to these practices, some interview participants shared that there is a widely known phenomenon of ‘fake’ NGOs throughout the country that are created as part of a corruption scheme: they get government grants but in fact the NGO has no office, no base, no projects (Interview Nos. 6 and 9). In general, another LGBT NGO leader complained, it is hard to plan for the future in Russia, posing a rhetorical question: ‘How can NGOs or anyone plan for the next year if we don’t know what will happen tomorrow?’ (Interview No. 7). Furthermore, in an effort to demobilise and discredit some groups, ‘key officials publicly refer to specific organisations as either unpatriotic or as tools of foreign governments’ (Gilbert, 2016, p. 1556).

In this political climate, for many groups and organisations regarded as ‘foreign,’ ‘amoral,’ or even spies,<sup>9</sup> leaving the country became a safe means of escaping persecution. Russian media has widely documented NGOs liquidating their institutions or moving

<sup>7</sup> According to the Foreign Agent Act (‘On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent’) contains a rather broad, loose definition of ‘political activity’ as ‘any activity seeking to influence government policy or public opinion with regard to government policy’ (see Russia’s NGO Laws explained by Freedom House, available at [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet\\_0.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet_0.pdf); full law in Russian is available at <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/102766-6>).

<sup>8</sup> Such criticism was voiced by the Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle>), the European Parliament ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0258\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0258_EN.html)) or Amnesty International (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ACT3096472019ENGLISH.PDF>), among other critics.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the case of Memorial, a human rights organisation (Goncharenko, 2017).

abroad.<sup>10</sup> Some, nevertheless, decided to stay. I asked all interviewed NGO leaders why they kept their doors open. Each prominently expressed a sense of duty, a responsibility they felt towards their society and towards their nation. Most listed beneficiaries of their programmes, the individuals and families they have assisted with their work. With sorrow, one NGO director inquired: 'If we leave who will take over? We don't want to throw away what we have started. People need us' (Interview No. 4).

Non-state groups or institutions that continue to work in Russia must adapt to the political climate. Many LGBT organisations who decided to stay in Russia actively 'resist silence,' as Kondakov (2013) put it, but do not necessarily develop a resistant attitude towards authorities. Kondakov shows that in some cases LGBT organisations developed favourable attitudes towards authorities and strove for civil partnerships. Moser and Skripchenko's (2018, p. 592) study demonstrated that under current restrictions, 'foreign agent' labelled NGOs develop survival strategies that focus on creating 'supportive ecologies within their adverse political environment' and 'generating new sources of legitimacy.' In a study of non-Orthodox Christian churches and groups in Russia, which tend to be treated as 'foreign agents,' as well as seen as 'religious others' or faiths with foreign ties, we found marginalised religious communities developed a strategy of moving themselves to the mainstream by stressing their rootedness and patriotism (Dunajeva & Koesel, 2017, p. 57). We categorised strategies within three groups—social, political and institutional ones—summarised in Table 2 below. In the following section, I test whether these strategies are similar for LGBT organisations, who are perhaps the most targeted groups in contemporary Russia. Indeed, LGBT organisations became the archetype of 'foreign' organisations, considering that 'homosexuality is seen as a fashion, spreading due to Western influence, which is alien to Russian culture and threatens indigenous Russian values' (Gulevich, Osin, Isaenko & Brainis, 2016, p. 96).

Table 2: Survival Strategies of non-Orthodox Christian Churches

<b>Social Strategies (Rootedness)</b>	<b>Political Strategies (Patriotism)</b>	<b>Institutional Strategies (Networks)</b>
Display federal registration, which signals that churches are both legal and Russian entities	Religious leaders articulate a patriotic agenda, stressing love for their homeland and open support for Vladimir Putin	Joining umbrella organisations to represent their interests to those in power and provide protection
Robust online presence (as un-censored arena) that help identify churches as rooted in Russia and Russian-led	Patriotic projects (e.g., assistance for refugees from Donbass, participation in projects with United Russia)	Turn to state institutions to protect their rights and freedoms
Rooting churches in Russia through serving communities and social outreach programmes	Promotion of traditional values (e.g., marriage, religious education, large families)	Joining umbrella organisations that help with the transfer of information (e.g., interpretation of national and international regulations)

(Source: Dunajeva & Koesel, 2017; Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018)

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the case of the recently liquidated For Human Rights movement as a result of tightening Foreign Agent Act (Snegov, 2021).

#### 4 Resilience and survival: LGBT groups in Russia

Jennifer Suchland (2018) in her study cited the 2009 European Court of Human Rights case, when Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov banned the organising of marches by Nikolai Alekseyev, a gay rights activist and lawyer. To justify the ban, Luzhkov claimed ‘that’s the way morals work. If somebody deviates from the normal principles [in accordance with which] sexual and gender life is organised, this should not be demonstrated in public’ (Suchland, 2018, p. 1080). Suchland concluded that the Russian state evidently took on a responsibility to protect what the author calls the ‘moral majority.’ Given the state’s explicit anti-LGBT agenda and positioning Russia in opposition to ‘Gayropa,’ LGBT organisations became a political target.

LGBT organisations operate in a landscape of political and legal uncertainty, shaped by uneven and often arbitrary government penalties. Consider the example of ‘Side-by-side,’ a group known for organising international LGBT film festivals, whose November 2020 film screening event was blocked ‘10 minutes [...] before the opening ceremony’ in order to ‘check measures in relation to COVID-19’ (Side by side, n.d.). In the case of a LGBT organisation called ‘Parni Plus’ (Парни ПЛЮС), their website was recently blocked by *Roskomnadzor* (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media), the Russian federal-level executive body that oversees compliance with media and telecommunications law. Oddly, blocking the website came after a 2018 decision of the Barnaul court (Altai region) to rescind the previous blocking of the website by *Roskomnadzor* (MBK Media, 2021). Another example was shared during an interview, when the founder of an NGO explained the extent of legal arbitrariness throughout the country, especially when it comes to LGBT rights:

Once we had an open event where we decided to release rainbow-coloured balloons. After the event I received a complaint and I was asked to come to the prosecutor’s office. The complaint was from the MVD [Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs] about our alleged ‘political activity’ and the letter said: ‘Rainbow balloons in the air are propagating same-sex relationships [...] and these relationships do not lead to children because it is physically impossible, and so it contributes to a demographic crisis in the country, which is against the government’s doctrine on demographics.’ So the logic goes like this: rainbow balloons lead to a demographic catastrophe. Isn’t that absurd? (Interview No. 6)

The interviewee’s tone oscillated between amusement and dismay while sharing his recollections of this incident.

Many pro-LGBT organisations have been officially labelled as ‘foreign agents’; many of those that have not expect that dubious honorific soon. As the director of a LGBT organisation suggested with a smile, ‘We have not been marked as a foreign agent yet, but I think it will be our fate soon; I think next year we will become foreign agents and then there will be a lot more bureaucratic work for us’ (Interview No. 4). Another interviewee’s organisation has already received this designation, which devastated their professional network and debilitated their financial stability. Reflecting on the past, when the organisation was well-integrated with local government structures, the organisation’s leader lamented their current precarity and dislocation from society due to discriminatory policies towards NGOs:

In the [late 2000s], the government understood who we work with; yet despite this we were invited to meetings, supported or organised by the government, on various topics, such as human

rights and the like. We were members of a local youth network with direct ties to the regional Committee on Youth. We were well integrated into government structures. [...] Then with the wave of NGO repressions [in mid-2010s], we became 'foreign agents,' and after that [...] we no longer had any dialogue with government structures. [...] Now we don't have a high status or reputation to mobilise in order to fight for our cause and in the interest of improving the situation in our country. Our [earlier partner organisations] chose to stop cooperating with us because of the 'foreign agent' status; they said they were not allowed to work with us anymore. (Interview No. 5)

Once the stigma of 'foreign agent' was applied, a local NGO member explained, some decided to give up their status as NGO and find other, creative ways of generating income, whether through crowd funding, donations, cooperation with foreign consulates (if there were any nearby) or even receiving support from 'undesirable organisations' by 'using our own channels' (Interview No. 10). The 'undesirable organisations law' (officially Federal Law of 23.05.2015 N 129-FZ 'On amendments of some legislative acts of the Russian Federation') was enacted in 2015 and allows for closing down organisations deemed as 'undesirable' in the country.<sup>11</sup> Some organisations withdrew from Russia before being labelled as 'undesirable.' Commenting on that, one interview participant lamented that 'some foreign organisations don't see hope in Russia and have given up, leaving us on our own' (Interview No. 4).

I found that LGBT organisations at times engage in self-censorship in order to 'play by the rules.' One LGBT organisation director explained their process of registration: they learned from the experience of other institutions that including 'LGBT' in their name resulted in delays or outright rejection for registration, usually with 'made-up excuses,' such as 'unclear wording in the registration documents' or 'imprecise definitions of staff roles' (Interview No. 10). 'We need the registration more than any particular name,' the director explained, so the organisation chose a 'neutral name' and only referenced 'anti-discrimination work' in documents, which resulted in fewer complications in the bureaucratic process (Interview No. 10). Another organisation, which used to hold several public events, has turned to online spaces only; in part, this was due to Covid restrictions, but it also allowed them to screen and censor their own content more efficiently. Some forms of self-censorship were instrumental: one NGO explained that they have been vigilant about following the rules so they are not labelled a 'foreign agent,' as it is important for them to keep their good standing and apply for government grants. To do so, they frame their work as educational, without mentioning LGBT, hoping to receive some funding to continue their work (Interview No. 7). As organisations that are seen as critical of the government and its ideology have indeed been 'crowded out' of the civic sphere (Gilbert, 2016), neutral or even loyal appearances have become a survival strategy.

Similar to findings on marginalised Christian religious groups, I found that LGBT organisations developed particular coping mechanisms; namely, they engage in institutional, social, and political strategies that allow them to operate in the precarious political and legal landscape of contemporary Russia. They build institutional networks by joining umbrella organisations and form ties with other organisations, as well as turning to state judicial institutions for protection, even though state politics have been manifestly homophobic. One LGBT organisation has a community space, which they share with other organisations—

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<sup>11</sup> The Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation published a list of such organisations, available at: <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7756/>

many of which are also labelled as ‘foreign agents’—and with those that do not have their own spaces for public events. ‘We build strong alliances that way, we can develop cooperation and mutual understanding,’ shared an event organizer, offering examples of such fruitful cooperation with local feminist organisations, green movements or even the Red Cross (Interview No. 7). ‘Human rights organisations used to be our major partners,’ the organizer continued, ‘but they have all been liquidated [after the ‘Foreign Agent Act’] and the city was cleansed of human rights activists, too.’

Most of the interviewed organisations are members of the Russian LGBT-Network that, among other services, provides assistance to regional LGBT organisations countrywide. The network is a crucial resource, several interviewees suggested, to support local organisations and their work, especially in terms of sharing resources and generating visibility. Visibility is key, given that the mass media—largely controlled by the state—generally portrays these organisations negatively. Visibility of the actual work and true mission of LGBT organisations in online platforms and social media offers an opportunity to counter accusations and position their work as socially important and patriotic. The network also has a staff of lawyers, on which regional LGBT organisations regularly rely for legal assistance. Few lawyers take on LGBT cases, one interviewee claimed, and lawyers’ fees can be prohibitive for NGOs’ small budget, added another interviewee.

Curiously, even with hostile courts, LGBT organisations persistently appeal to the rule of law for protection of their rights and freedoms. A regional LGBT NGO leader, who otherwise has ‘great contacts’ due to their previous work for the regional administration, shared their experience with the courts:

We have a subjective court and often we hear about decisions that are sickening—these decisions are based on homophobia completely. Once a judge said that ‘we propagate amorality,’ and the [LGBT] community propagates these amoral values. [...] Many lawyers are afraid to take on cases [concerning LGBT]. [...] In district courts it is impossible to win. It seems like there is an internal agreement, an informal rule among the judges that we shouldn’t not win. Sometimes we appeal to the regional [krai] courts, but also unsuccessfully. [...] Some say that judges are afraid to go against ‘established principles’ [regarding morality] and no one wants to be seen as the ‘enemy’ if they challenge these principles. We were actually never able to reach the Supreme Court of Russia. That could be our next step. (Interview No. 6)

This response suggests two conclusions. First, the framework of morality is instrumental in delineating between ‘us and them,’ a division that operates as a pervasive informal standard throughout the judiciary. Second, despite legal and political uncertainties, LGBT groups and institutions continue turning to legal institutions for protection, although this is a costly strategy that not many can afford. This might be because they still hope for a positive outcome in court, or to make a statement with the very appeal to court (regardless of outcome) that they will fight human right violations with all means possible (Interview No. 9).

In all cases, LGBT groups stressed their patriotism. Though they are cast as ‘foreigners,’ several respondents nevertheless saw the very existence of their organisation and the work they do as a patriotic duty. During interviews, many shared their sense of pride and courage: ‘as our opponents say, “suitcase – train – Europe”, but why should I leave my own country? I think I am more of a patriot [given the work I do] than those who only wear national symbols for holidays,’ said one NGO leader and activist (Interview No. 3). Similarly, another NGO director pointed out that resilience is, in a sense, a ‘human factor’ and ‘those who are brave

to stay, they stay and keep their organisation afloat' (Interview No. 4). These sentiments were echoed in a 2018 op-ed in *The Moscow Times* by Zoya Svetova, a human rights activist, where she concluded that 'Russian civil society still counts many brave, talented, and charismatic people among its ranks. They are true patriots' (Svetova, 2018).

There was indeed an explicit attempt by all interviewees to position themselves as not only patriotic, but also useful organisations that serve their community in order to improve the society as a whole. Akin to non-Orthodox Christian groups, who made attempts at 'consciously rooting their churches locally [to] demonstrate that their communities are "authentically Russian"' (Dunajeva & Koesel, 2017, p. 60), leaders of LGBT organisations explained that their work often extends beyond LGBT communities, and in all cases serves the entire community. For instance, one NGO provides assistance to LGBT individuals as well as all women because they noticed a sharp increase in female victims of violence who sought their help (Interview No. 7). This organisation had an advantage compared to medical institutions: they did not require any medical documents or other 'papers,' hence they were able to react immediately and provide urgent support, without any preconditions.

Another NGO helps those infected with HIV, who often feel stigmatised in state institutions and search for tolerant, accepting institutions for support. The majority of studied NGOs—contingent on their funding and resources—assisted the LGBT community and their families during the pandemic with groceries and hygiene products. One NGO considered clinics and doctors their main beneficiaries, for whom they hold workshops and seminars on ethical topics. This NGO also described the tensions they experience in their work: doctors and medical staff are pleased to attend their lectures and find the content particularly useful for their practice, while their superiors and the administration is wary (Interview No. 6). The NGO director explained: 'we often hear that our work is valuable and beneficial, but there is nothing the administration [in clinics] can do formally include our lectures [...] they are afraid of being reprimanded "from the top".'

In all cases, NGOs stressed that they work *with* the local authorities or towards the same goals—not against them. This sense of mutual objectives was at the core of legitimating the purpose of LGBT organisations as well as positioning them as socially useful, patriotic groups. Two interviewees' NGOs hold educational seminars and workshops for professionals, such as doctors, psychologists, educators, and journalists. The ambition of one NGO director is to 'make the police and lawyers' interested in learning from them, especially in the field of domestic violence and homophobia. 'In fact, it is not us who need them, it is they [police and lawyers] who need us,' the director added, having shared petrifying stories of domestic violence, directed at women or LGBT members, when victims relied on the NGO as their only safety net (Interview No. 6). Another NGO representative commented that 'we don't want to be in a ghetto, we want to socialise, we want to be part of the society' (Interview No. 7).

Labelling LGBT groups as 'foreign agents' engaging in 'political acts,' one interviewee stressed, makes them into an 'oppositional force,' which they insist they are not. Seizing the occasion to communicate a message to the 'West,' the interviewee proceeded with a plea not to cast human rights and LGBT organisations as 'acting in their interest':

We don't want to be involved in or be associated with any anti-Russian statements or movements. We are Russian citizens; we love our country and act in her interests. We don't want LGBT issues to be used as points of contention between Russia and the US. [...] We keep stressing that we are criticising human rights violations and not Russia. (Interview No. 3).

## 5 Conclusion

This paper proposed that contemporary Russian illiberalism, associated with ant-Westernism, a traditionalist moral framework, and the rhetorical tool of ‘us versus them,’ polarises society and generates a language of ‘othering,’ equating non-desirable (or critical) groups as ‘agents of the West’ or ‘foreigners.’ In the name of eradicating ‘amoral Western influence’ and shielding Russia from ‘foreign penetration and propaganda’ that spreads immoral values, political control over ‘foreign’ groups and organisations has intensified. In a similar vein, patriotism is increasingly equated with loyalty to the Russian state. Alongside other research, this article showed how othered groups strive to (re-)define themselves as part of the Russian nation—as patriotic and socially useful members of society. Employing institutional, political, and social strategies, these groups try to resist being pushed outside of Russian society by reifying and proving their patriotism and rootedness.

The study revealed that pro-LGBT organisations strove to root themselves within their local communities through service and community support programmes. Many hoped to improve relations and develop cooperation with local authorities, stressing that they work towards the same goal. A central caveat to this study is that survival strategies were not always successful. For example, in some cases community outreach and support programmes, such as assistance during the pandemic, instead of challenging ‘otherness’ and the negative societal perceptions of LGBT, inadvertently reinforced them. During an interview, the founder of a small LGBT group explained that media accounts of their activities during the pandemic stressed that they helped ‘only “theirs,”’ referring to the LGBT community as ‘they’ (Interview No. 4). This instance not only shows the vulnerable position of ‘othered’ groups in Russia, but powerfully demonstrates the power of the ‘us versus them’ discursive division.

Finally, within its limited scope, this study did not focus on the *bytovoj uroven*, or ‘everyday level,’ the viewpoints among the general population towards LGBT groups. During several interviews with LGBT organisations, I heard about the tolerant youth that gave feelings of hope. One respondent, who is also enrolled in a graduate programme at a university in a major city and who holds ad hoc presentations about LGBT-related topics, averred that it is not only in big cities that young people are open to difference; most people are neutral or ‘listen in awe—they have never heard about anything related to LGBT’ (Interview No. 6). This might indicate that, beyond the hostile political climate, on the *bytovoj uroven* there may be more openness and tolerance for LGBT people.

So far, research and surveys of Russian youth have been inconclusive. On the one hand, a 2018 report of the Human Rights Watch, entitled ‘No Support Russia’s “Gay Propaganda” Law Imperils LGBT Youth’ shows that LGBT youth experience ‘intense fear,’ isolation, harassment, and bullying (Human Rights Watch, 2018). On the other hand, a 2019 study conducted by Mikhailov & Partners, a consultancy company involving 1057 respondents between the ages of 10 and 18 across 52 regions of Russia revealed that Russian youth is predominantly tolerant: 17 per cent reported negative attitudes towards members of LGBT community; 13 per cent claimed to trust them and 68 per cent had ‘normal views’ (in the Russian text described as ‘spokoynoe’, or calm, neutral) of LGBT (Kommersant, 2019; The Moscow Times, 2019). An article in *The Moscow Times* (2019) summarised the study: ‘Russian Kids Are Patriotic, Apolitical and Tolerant of LGBT People.’ This raises the intriguing question as to whether youth with such qualities are compatible with illiberalism. Future research may inquire into this topic.

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