Eastern others: homonationalism in the Flemish press

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Abstract

Jasbir Puar introduced the notion of 'homonationalism' to describe the increasing acceptance of sexual minorities in Western nations, leading to their incorporation in the national in-group which is increasingly opposed to homophobic 'others'. While Muslims constitute the main out-group, other groups and nations are also targeted, in particular Russia and related countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Such discourses create a binary opposition between two homogenized parties, the uniformly LGBTQ-friendly in-group versus the uniformly homophobic 'other'. While the literature on homonationalism mostly discusses politics in the U.S. and a number of other nation-states, this article explores homonationalism in a smaller sub-national region in Western Europe, Flanders, focusing on the press as a tool for spreading homonationalist discourse. Exploring three months of Flemish newspapers, this article identifies some instances of explicit homonationalism but more implicit homonationalism which does not explicitly mention the in-group but does paint a one-sided picture of Russia and related countries as homophobic.

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While sexual minorities were mostly marginalized in 20th-century nationhood, as they were seen as a threat to the national community (Mole, 2017), from the 1990s and particularly in the 21st century some – mostly Western – countries started to include certain sexual minorities in the national 'in-group'. This was the result of decades of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ)[1] activism, leading to increasing visibility from the 1960s and legal reform in the 1990s and 2000s, when same-sex marriage and adoption were increasingly legalized. This legal recognition built upon decades of increasing social acceptance, and explicitly granted LGBTQs sexual citizenship (Richardson, 2017). Although these evolutions are generally celebrated, a number of activists and academics are critical of the way LGBTQ rights and individuals are incorporated in nationalist discourses. Jasbir Puar (2007) most influentially qualified these politics as 'homonationalist', criticizing both the complicity of LGBTQs with nationalist agendas and the instrumentalization of LGBTQ rights by nationalists.

This article builds upon this legacy, shifting the focus and contributing to the literature on homonationalism in three, predominantly empirical, ways. First, while much of this literature has focused on the U.S. or other Western nation-states, this article considers a less self-evident national context, that of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium. As Flanders is not a nation-state but a region with strong national aspirations, this article explores how homonationalism works in this specific sub-national context. Second, while much of the literature focuses on Muslims as the main culprit in homonationalist discourses across Western countries, this article shifts the focus to the representation of Russia and Eastern Europe in homonationalist discourse. Third, while much of the literature on homonationalism draws on a wide range of (mostly political) sources, documents and statements, this article investigates the role of print journalism in creating and spreading homonationalist discourse.

Drawing on a qualitative analysis of Flemish newspaper articles connecting Russia and Eastern Europe with homosexuality, rather than aiming for a theoretical discussion of homonationalism, this article aims to expand our empirical understanding of its workings, and in particular the in-group/out-group dynamic it involves. The main question guiding this research is: how do Russia and Eastern Europe figure in Flemish newspaper reports on homosexuality? A first sub-question addresses the presence of homonationalist discourses: do Flemish newspapers contrast Russia and Eastern European countries as a homophobic out-group to an LGBTQ-friendly in-group? A second sub-question addresses the delineation of the in- and out-groups: which national 'us' is opposed to which foreign 'them'? However, before we can answer these questions it is necessary to unpack the concept of homonationalism.

Theoretical underpinnings

Puar's (2007) book *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times* is generally seen as the seminal text on homonationalism. Puar argues that LBTQs, who

were previously marginalized, started to be included in American discourses about the nation after 9/11. This was a dual movement 'in which certain homosexual constituencies have embraced U.S. nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas' (xxiv). Focusing on the latter, a key tenet of Puar's argument concerns the concomitant exclusion of others: 'National recognition and inclusion, here signalled as the annexation of homosexual jargon, is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary' (p. 2). She refers to a double process: the exclusion both of non-normative forms of homosexuality and of racial others. Only homonormative forms of sexuality are accepted, while Islam is presented as irreconcilable, leading to a form of 'homonormative Islamophobia'. Drawing on Duggan (2002), homonormativity can be defined as a 'politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (p. 179). Homonationalism, then, does not imply the unconditional inclusion of all forms of non-heterosexuality, but only of those expressions of same-sex desire that can be easily assimilated into neoliberal politics.

Having become part of U.S. national politics, LGBTQ rights also became instruments to assess other groups and nations. In her 2013 article 'Rethinking homonationalism', Puar explains how she aimed to understand 'the complexities of how "acceptance" and "tolerance" for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated' and 'why a nation's status as "gay-friendly" has become desirable in the first place' (p. 336) Indeed, not only did the U.S. at that time consider itself as LGBTQ-friendly, it also condemned those groups (particularly Muslims) and nations who did not accept LGBTQ rights. These were evaluated on the basis of Western concepts of sexual identity and found wanting.

Beside nations, gay and lesbian rights organization also contributed to this process:

> The gay and lesbian human rights industry continues to proliferate Euro-American constructs of identity (not to mention the notion of sexual identity itself) that privilege identity politics, 'coming out', public visibility, and legislative measures as the dominant barometers of social progress. (Puar, 2013: 338)

Here, Puar echoes Massad's (2002) vehement critique of the 'gay international', Western LGBTQ associations internationally campaigning for human rights and aiming to liberate Arabs but at the same time imposing Western categories and politics on them, in the process prompting a backlash and increased repression. Indeed, as demonstrated by Altman and Symons (2016), the global spread and visibility of homosexuality led to a conservative backlash, international polarization and critiques of cultural imperialism.

One central tenet of Puar's argumentation concerns the connection of sexuality politics to religious and racial others, a key element in the broader literature exploring homonationalism. Referring to the European context, Sabsay (2012) connects homonationalism to Orientalism, as migrant others are seen as having 'sexually conservative, intolerant and constitutively anti-democratic sexual values' (p. 607) which implies a renewed process of 'cultural othering'. Islam is the key identifier here, not only in the U.S. but also in other countries and regions such as Quebec (Bilge, 2012), the Netherlands (Bracke, 2012; Mepschen et al., 2010) and Europe more broadly: 'Cases of homophobia among Muslims are highlighted, epitomized as archetypal, cast within Orientalist narratives that underwrite the superiority of European secular modernity' (Mepschen and Duyvendak, 2012: 71). While Muslims are mostly discussed here as inhabitants of Western nations, other regions also figure prominently in homonationalist discourse, in particular Sub-Sahara Africa where homophobia in countries like Uganda is often criticized in discourses representing Western countries as the epitome of modernity, progress and democracy (Jungar and Peltonen, 2017).

Beside Uganda, Altman and Symons (2016) also refer to a 'new Cold War around homosexuality' (p. 8) which became most prominent during the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 and which opposed Obama to Putin: 'Both governments use queer rights as a weapon to mobilize international opinion, Obama using the language of human rights as against Putin's invocation of traditional cultural values' (p. 11). Indeed, as discussed by Wiedlack (2017), after the introduction of the so-called anti-homosexual propaganda law in 2013 and throughout the Sochi Winter Olympics, a media discourse was developed 'where Russia is positioned in-between the enlightened and civilised North/West and the backward and racialised Orient', representing Russia as backward, authoritarian and anti-modern.

Persson (2015) explains how the 2013 law was part of a longer Russian tradition of regulating sexual deviance in relation to Western modernity, adding: 'Importantly, the increased public visibility of homosexuality in the mid-2000s coincided with a strong anti-Western narrative, which would turn out to have sinister consequences for LGBT rights' (p. 257). To him, the banning of homosexual propaganda in 2013 was very much a 'media spectacle', a heavily mediatized response to Western LGBT politics. Analysing mainstream Russia media discourse of the period, he identifies three narrative tropes: homosexuals as a threat to the Russian nation, homosexuals as a small minority threatening the lifestyle of the majority, and refusal of Western modernity. In the end, he argues, the Russian gay propaganda initiative was part of a process of nation-building, presenting the nation as heterosexual and excluding non-heterosexuals. Edenborg (2017) further shows how Russian media constructed a narrative of the Russian nation around the Sochi games, presenting Russia as modern and diverse, contrary to the Western image of a medieval and repressive nation.

In this way, Western homonationalist discourses not only mirror but also prompt Eastern nationalist discourses which exclude homosexuality. Similar

processes are at work across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which in terms of LGBTQ rights is generally considered as a backward 'poor cousin' to the West, 'catching up with normality (...) after coming out of history's closet in 1989' (Mizielinska and Kulpa, 2012: 23). As Kulpa (2014) observes, CEE is seen as in need of Western pedagogy: 'This discourse frames CEE as permanently "post-communist," "in transition" (i.e. not liberal, yet, enough), and, last but not least, homophobic' (p. 432). Kulpa does not claim that homophobia is not a problem in CEE, but that the discourse opposing CEE to the West/Europe is out of balance as homophobia is only presented as a problem of Others while the West/Europe is presented as uniformly tolerant.

Besides reproducing unequal power relations between West and East, Kahlina (2015) adds, the externalization of homophobia may also contribute to the increased resistance to the struggle for sexual equality in CEE. Ammaturo (2015) agrees, noting how the labelling of Russia and Eastern Europe as homophobic strengthens the dichotomy between liberal (queer friendly) and illiberal (homo/transphobic) countries, which 'is also likely to re-entrench political resistance to values and norms seen as being imposed on Russia (or on other countries) directly by the "West"' (p. 1161). The problem, at heart, is the instrumentalization of LBGTQ identities, which are used to define Europe as tolerant, modern, open and respectful to LGBTQs, contrasting it with intolerant others, presenting both sides as homogeneous and failing to see complexities and stratifications within them (Edenborg, 2017).

Homonationalist discourses in the Flemish press

This article explores homonationalist discourses on Russia and CEE in the Flemish press, contributing to the literature discussed above in three, mostly empirical, ways. First, by considering the context of Flanders, which is a relatively small region (of about 6.5 million inhabitants) with strong national aspirations in the Belgian nation-state, at the heart of the EU. While Flanders shares the Dutch language with the Netherlands, and like the Netherlands is one of the forerunners in terms of LGBTQ rights (e.g. Belgium was the second country to accept same-sex marriage), it is part of a very different political context with a weaker national identity on the level of the nation-state (Belgium) as well as a strong sense of regional (Flemish) identity. No academic research to date has investigated homonationalism in Flanders, with the exception of Eeckhout (2014) who cautions against an all-too-easy application of this conceptual framework to the Flemish context, without exploring its national and political specificities. Focusing on Flanders allows to explore regional uses and variations of homonationalist discourses.

Second, while most of the writing on homonationalism in the European context focuses on discourses about Muslims (e.g. Bracke, 2012; Mepschen et al., 2010; Mepschen and Duyvendak, 2012), which are generally considered as an out-group living within the nation, this article shifts the focus outside of the

nation and towards Russia and the former USSR, drawing attention to the most important external out-group in relation to homonationalism in the EU, as discussed above. Focusing on an out-group living outside of the nation allows to explore the international (rather than intra-national) dynamics of homonationalism.

Third, to the mostly political focus in much of the writing on homonationalism, which tends to work on a deliberately selected sample of political texts, this article adds a media studies perspective by drawing on a systematic qualitative content analysis of a random sample of media texts, stressing the role of journalism in creating and spreading homonationalist discourse. While homonationalism may figure prominently in political discourse, such discourse is mostly spread through reporting in legacy media such as television and newspapers (as well as social media, to be explored in further research). As Edenborg (2017) argues in his study on Russian media narratives, media are not an intermediary but are where the world (including representations of the nation) becomes visible in people's everyday lives. Focusing on journalistic discourses allows to study the presence of homonationalist arguments in everyday (rather than more specialized, political) contexts.

More concretely, this article analyses three full months of newspaper reporting, from April to June 2018. The sample size was limited to three months to allow for the in-depth analysis of news reports, and a recent continuous period (immediately before the start of data collection in July 2018) was chosen to be able to follow the development of arguments and discourses. This is a compromise between analysing a longer period (which would allow to identify longer term patterns) and a smaller sample (which would allow more in-depth, linguistic analysis). While the period was randomly chosen, it did happen to contain two major events, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) and the soccer World Cup in Russia. While these events are exceptional in prompting a quantitative spike in reporting on Russia and CEE in relation to homosexuality, they are typical in evoking familiar discourses, as will be developed below.

Using the database GoPress, all Flemish newspapers[2] including their online versions were searched, using multiple search terms to look for combinations of 'homo' (the Dutch-language translation of 'gay' which is also part of any term referring to homosexuality) or 'holebi' (the Dutch-language acronym used to refer to lesbians, gays and bisexuals) and terms referring to Russia: Russia, Russian, Russians and Putin. After filtering out irrelevant results, this first search led to a sample of 22 articles connecting Russia and homosexuality. In those articles, a number of other countries and regions belonging to the former Eastern Bloc and the USSR were also mentioned (alphabetically: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Eastern Europe, Poland and Serbia). A second search for articles referring to these countries and regions led to another 14 articles, bringing the total sample to 36 articles. These were subjected to qualitative content

analysis using the NVivo software, coding 'in vivo', i.e. devising the codes inductively, as suits such explorative research in a field which has not been analysed before. By repeatedly re-reading and re-coding the material, discursive tropes and patterns were identified, which were subsequently analysed and connected to the literature on homonationalism. While homonationalism is a complex concept with many ramifications, I operationalize it here as any discourse opposing a supposedly LGBT-friendly 'national' in-group to a homophobic out-group, and using this opposition in an (implicit or explicit) self-presentation of the own nation as modern, tolerant and progressive. Using this working definition as a way to detect instances of homonationalism, in the analysis I aim to further disentangle the specificity of such discourses and the way they define and characterize in- and out-groups.

Explicit homonationalist (counter-)discourses

Analysing the way Flemish newspapers write about Russia and Eastern Europe in relation to homosexuality, a first observation to make is that explicit homonationalism opposing a national in-group to a Russian and Eastern European out-group is not strongly present in this sample. While Russia and related countries are regularly connected to legislation or violence against sexual minorities (i.e. 'them', one side of the equation), the 'us' is seldom mentioned, let alone explicitly named. In only a limited number of instances, a clear homonationalist reasoning is developed.

The most overt cases of homonationalism can be found in the discourse of politicians, particular of N-VA, the populist Flemish nationalist party. For instance, one article reports on the call of Sander Loones, a candidate in the local elections, for a rainbow pedestrian crossing in his city. He states:

> The battle for equal rights for LGBs is not fought yet. For years, N-VA has stood on the barricades for the acceptance, security and resilience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. On the international day against homophobia and transphobia, *we* want to make this clear for everyone, with a rainbow pedestrian crossing. (...) In 2013 such rainbow crossings were made near the Russian embassies in Helsinki and Stockholm, to protest *Russian anti-gay policies*. (*Krant van West-Vlaanderen*, 25 May 2018)[3]

'We', in this quote, most clearly refers to political party N-VA but also, implicitly, to Flanders, which is normalized and 'banal' (hence often implicit) in the discourse of this party (Maly, 2016). The 'other' is Russia, which is explicitly connected to anti-gay legislation. This politician does not develop an elaborate homonationalist argumentation but he does set up an explicit opposition between an LGBTQ-friendly in-group fighting for acceptance and an out-group developing anti-gay policies.

A similar opposition can be found in an interview with Flemish parliament member Piet De Bruyn, also of N-VA, on the occasion of Belgian Pride:

> It has to be a heart-warming day for LGBs in countries like *Armenia* or *Albania*, where there's a long way to go. *Our country*'s doing well. *We*'re on the second place in the Rainbow Index, the European ranking of LGB rights. Even then, the openness *here* is not as big everywhere, and LGBs do not always get the necessary opportunities or protection. (*De Standaard*, 19 May 2018: 18)

While pointing at deficiencies in Belgian LGB-friendliness, De Bruyn does explicitly compare the country positively to Armenia and Albania, two countries associated with Russia, although the latter isn't mentioned here. Despite being a Flemish parliament member and Flemish nationalist, De Bruyn refers to Belgium here as the national in-group, which may be surprising for a Flemish nationalist but which also makes sense as Belgium (not Flanders) is ranked on the Rainbow Index and most legislation of relevance to LGBTs is made on the Belgian level. Contrary to the Catalan case, where a region with national aspirations presents itself in contrast to a more conservative nation-state (Sadurní et al., 2019), in Flanders it is hard to maintain such an opposition as politicians across the country are equally accepting of LGBTQ rights, with the sole exception of extreme right party Vlaams Belang (Eeckhout, 2014). The contrast, in Flanders, is not with a conservative nation-state but with internal (Muslim) and external (Eastern) others.[4]

Similar but less explicit examples are presented by five short near-identical articles reporting on Chechen gay refugees getting a humanitarian visa in Belgium. Reference is made to (then) N-VA State Secretary for Asylum and Migration Theo Francken, who is usually mentioned in the press on the occasion of his polarizing statements and Tweets on migration, but in these articles is presented as the face of Belgian LGBTQ-friendliness, in line with the broader policies of his Flemish nationalist party. This is significant, as it shows the fault lines of national in-group belonging: LGBTQs are part of 'us', migrants are not (Dhoest, 2020). The articles highlight the precarious position of LGBTQs in Chechnya: 'LBGs are systematically arrested, abused and even killed in the *Russian republic Chechnya*' (*De Morgen*, 6 April 2018: 6). Further on, Belgium is mentioned as one of the first countries hosting such refugees: '*Belgium* is one of the first countries responding to the international call to take in *Chechen* LGBs, after among others Lithuania'. While nothing is said about LGBTQ rights in Belgium, the argument is clear: in Belgium, as opposed to Chechnya, LGBTQs are safe.

The comparison between Belgium and Chechnya is also invoked in an op-ed piece by gay politician Bruno De Lille and trans politician Petra De Sutter (both of the Flemish green party Groen), who complain that Belgium does not have an action plan against homophobia and transphobia yet: 'Yesterday, it was six years ago that Ihsane Jarfi, a young man from Liège, was killed because he was gay. Not in *Chechnya*, not in Uganda, but with *us, in Belgium*' (*De Standaard,* 23 April

2018: 32). They imply that one could expect homophobic killings in other countries but not in Belgium, which is both a critique of the Belgian situation and a reconfirmation that LGBTQ rights are not respected in countries like Chechnya. Of course, they are right in addressing attacks on LGBTQs in Belgium and abroad, but it is noticeable how Chechnya and Russia are systematically and only mentioned in relation to homophobia. Indeed, the sample comprised all articles discussing Russia and Eastern European countries in relation to homosexuality, but hardly any of those presented a counterdiscourse by going against the binary opposition between an LGBTQ-friendly national in-group and a homophobic out-group.

In an op-ed piece, author and columnist Tom Naegels further contributes to this way of talking about Russia and Eastern Europe, when he reflects on the values of the former labour migrants from Eastern Europe living in Belgium: 'As far as "values" are concerned, or at least those values Western Europeans deem important today, *they* take up a middle position: they are more religious and homophobic than *Belgians*, but less than Moroccans, Turks and Congolese' (*De Standaard,* 12 May 2018: 40). Interestingly, Naegels explicitly compares Eastern-Europeans with Western-Europeans and Belgians (unfavourably) as well as other non-European 'others' (favourably), setting up a homonationalist hierarchy with Belgium at the top. In line with the theoretical framework on homonationalism, LGBTQ-friendliness is explicitly used here as a 'barometer' to assess the modernity of nations.

Similar comparisons come up in articles reporting on the death threats Belgian student and activist Rémy Bonny received when he published a critical piece in LGBT magazine ZiZo about the treatment of LGBTQs in Armenia. A first wave of articles is rather factual, reporting on the fact that he got death threats and filed a complaint with the police, mentioning that he described Armenia as homo- and transphobic but not explicitly comparing it to Belgium (*De Standaard*, 12 April 2018; *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 12 April; *Het Nieuwsblad*, 12 April). In *De Morgen*, Bonny describes Armenia as follows: 'It dangles between the *European Union*, Turkey and *Russia*, but in terms of human rights it is strongly dependent on Russia. At this time there is a law proposal to legalize the discrimination of LGBs' (*De Morgen*, 13 April 2018: 11). In terms of LGBTQ rights, he links Armenia to Russia and opposes it to the EU, again setting up a clear hierarchy, which as such cannot be considered to be homonationalist but does fit in the wider pattern of reporting on these regions as homophobic.

The week after, a longer article in the same left-leaning newspaper *De Morgen* elaborates this argumentation on LGBTQ rights in Russia and related countries. Echoing one of the key tropes in homonationalist discourse, the journalist refers to Belgium's high ranking in the ILGA rainbow index, while 'the former Eastern Bloc' scores 'pitifully' (*De Morgen*, 19 April 2018: 17). The article goes on to give an extensive overview of the history of LGBTQ rights in Russia and the USSR. Then the focus shifts to the contemporary situation, referring to the infamous 2013 'propaganda law' and stating that it forbids the organization of gay

prides and 'promoting' gay rights. Here, again, a comparison with 'the West' comes up: 'To Putin, homosexuality is a way to show *Russia*'s superiority over *the West*. To him, its acceptance is a proof of our moral and social decay'. Citing Bonny, the article goes on:

> '*Russia* has let go of communism and is caught in an identity crisis', Bonny continues. '*They* have to look for a new internal enemy. During communism that was religion, but not now anymore: Putin is good friends with church. Gays are his new scapegoat'.

The article continues to discuss discrimination and violence against LGBTQs in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. Needless to say, the situations addressed in this article are serious, but the one-sided connection of Russia and related countries to homophobia does fit within the discursive patterns discussed in international literature, painting the picture of a homophobic 'Eastern bloc' versus Belgium as uniformly LGBTQ-friendly. Identifying homophobia elsewhere is not homonationalist as such, but it can become part of homonationalist discourses when it is instrumentalized (particularly by nationalist politicians) in self-congratulatory discourses presenting the own nation as 'modern' and uniformly tolerant.

A more ambiguous instance of homonationalism is found in an op-ed piece by Dutch philosopher Marli Huijer in *De Standaard* (14 April 2018: 32). On the one hand, Huijer is defensive about gay rights, setting up a textbook homonationalist argumentation about Western Europe and the Netherlands where 'sexual freedom' is part of 'our culture':

> In all of *Western Europe* sexual freedom has become one of the highest values, *the Netherlands* playing a guiding role. Parties like the liberal VVD and Geert Wilders' PVV even see sexual freedom of gays and women as one of the 'core values of *our culture*', which cannot be negotiated. Governments, political parties and civilians use every infringement on those to dismiss other cultures, religions and political systems as inferior.

On the other hand, however, Huijer is also critical about the Western model of sexuality which expects people to come out and identify unambiguously with sexual categories, questioning its normativity:

> However tolerant *we* are towards a diversity of sexual identities, *we* become normative from the moment someone has claimed a certain identity. However, many letters are conceived for new identities, every letter has its own prescriptions which sharply define what is allowed and what isn't.

Overall, her message is mixed: yes, we should be proud of and defend LGBTQ rights, but we should also be aware of the limitations and normativity of the

Western model of LGBTQ rights. While not offering an elaborate counterdiscourse, Huijer does point at the limitations of 'our' LGBTQ-friendliness.

In another op-ed piece, columnist Heleen Debruyne is more critical, noting how Belgium indeed does well in terms of gay rights, but adding:

> At the same time N-VA belongs to the same European Union fraction as the *Polish* government party PiS, which strongly opposes gay marriage. Other *Flemish* parties also belong to European fractions with questionable parties in this respect. Gay rights are important, but mostly for *our* gays. (*De Standaard*, 23 May 2018: 33)

More explicitly than Huijer, Debruyne offers a counterdiscourse, celebrating Belgian LGBTQ rights but also questioning their normativity and selectivity (only for 'our gays'), thus deconstructing the binary opposition between a uniformly LGBTQ-friendly in-group and homophobic out-groups. Without explicitly using the term, Debruyne is critical of homonationalism, and in particular its tendency to inflate the strong attachment to LGBTQ rights in Flanders, the in-group. Note that none of these counterdiscourses qualify the other side of the equation, the homophobic nature of the out-group.

Partial homonationalist discourses

Beside the eleven articles which could be classified as homonationalist and the two articles offering a partial counterdiscourse, there is a larger group of 23 articles focusing on one side of the equation: the lack of LGBTQ rights in Russia and related countries. In these reports, a variety of actors talk about homophobia in a range of countries, on different occasions, without drawing a clear comparison with Flanders, Belgium or the EU, thus only presenting one side of the homonationalist equation.

Thus, three articles report on the European Court of Justice ruling that all EU countries must recognize gay marriage, a case opened by a Romanian gay man whose marriage with an American man in Brussels was not recognized in his home country. In an op-ed, Dutch philosopher Bas Heijne reflects on this ruling, wondering whether it is a good plan to impose values, as this leads to a backlash:

> At the time when *Eastern European countries* were yearning for freedom and prosperity, *they* could be forced to good behaviour, a bit of pushing, a bit of blackmailing. A common market, generous subsidies, OK, but then capital punishment should be abolished, and while *we*'re at it, removing homosexuality from the penal code. It worked for a while, but meanwhile the backlash is in full swing. It is actually as a community of values that Europe is torn apart. Last month, *Hungarian* prime minister Viktor Orban announced the end of liberal democracy again. (*De Standaard*, 11 June 2018: 32)

While questioning the European ruling and raising the possibility of a backlash, which was also mentioned in the academic literature discussed above (Altman and Symons, 2016), this article does reconfirm the monolithic image of Eastern Europe as homophobic, the only frame in which Eastern Europe is discussed in relation to LGBTQ rights throughout the three months analysed.

In another set of near-identical articles, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban is described as 'the European Trump': 'At the beginning of his political career Orban was liberal and modern, now he's Christian-conservative. He's against abortion and gay marriage and pleads for the reintroduction of capital punishment' (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 7 April 2018: 20; also in *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 7 April: 42; *Het Belang van Limburg*, 7 April: 16). Again, Flanders or Belgium are not mentioned, but Hungary is included in the cluster of backward, anti-modern Eastern European 'others' where LGBTQ rights are not respected. LGBTQ rights are listed on the same level as abortion and the prohibition of capital punishment, the latter in particular a cornerstone of Western democracies, confirming how LGBTQ issues have indeed become a barometer to assess other countries, as Puar (2013) claims. While an explicit comparison with a national in-group is absent, implicitly it is present as a taken for granted LGBTQ-friendly reference point from which out-groups are assessed. Flanders nor Belgium are mentioned, as it is deemed to be commonly understood that 'we' respect LGBTQ rights.

Beside these more occasional reports, two main events in the period under analysis prompt a number of articles: three articles on the ESC and evelen on the soccer World Cup in Russia, which allow to follow the development of a discourse, and justify the inclusion of three continuous months in the sample. The ESC has been an occasion for reporting on LGBTQ rights for a number of years now. The show has had a great LGBTQ (mostly gay) following for a long time (Lemish, 2004), which Cassiday (2014) attributes to camp: 'flashy costumes, inane lyrics, cheesy choreography, and over-the-top staging' (p. 1). From the 1990s, ESC 'came out of the closet' (Cassiday, 2014: 2), in particular after Israeli transgender artist Dana International won the contest in 1998. Several subsequent acts knowingly alluded to or even made open reference to homosexuality, such as the 2003 Russian entry t.A.T.u, a supposedly (but not really) lesbian pop duo kissing on stage (Heller, 2007). Similarly, Cassiday (2014) points out how Dima Bilan's winning 2008 act strategically used ESC's gay identity politics in order to appeal to the broad (in particular gay) European audience by suggesting homosexuality through a camp style, although the sexuality of the performer remained ambiguous.

During the 2009 contest in Moscow homosexuality became an open topic of discussion as the Slavic Pride parade was forbidden, leading to international indignation. To Cassiday (2014), Bilan's flirtation with camp was mostly a ploy to win the contest, while the 2009 contest was a key example of Russian national identity branding. Miazhevich (2012) makes a similar point about Ukraine's 2007 entry, Verka Serduchka, a deliberately excessive and kitschy drag act which consciously created an ambiguous image of Ukraine identity, on the border between Russia

and the rest of Europe. Baker (2017) calls ESC the 'gay Olympics', considering it as a node in the geopolitics about LGBT rights opposing a LGBT-friendly 'rainbow' Europe and a homophobic Russia, much like the Sochi Olympics.

On the occasion of the 2018 edition, Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* interviews a gay fan, Christophe Van Berckelaer, to better understand the show's success among LGBTQs. He states that the Song Contest is a big support for gay men around the world, as it breaks through norms of masculinity and offers a sense of freedom, which is why Conchita Wurst and Dana International are his favourite winners:

> A drag queen and a transgender winner, that has an impact. With 180 million viewers the Song Contest is the most viewed TV program in the world, apart from the Super Bowl. The Song Contest is really heartening to gay or trans people in countries like *Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan*, where LGBTQI rights are violated on a daily basis. (*De Standaard*, 5 May 2018: 8)

Again, 'our' LGBTQ-friendliness is not spelled out but Russia and two related countries are singled out as examples of homophobia.

In 2018, the controversy over the show was limited, although there were a couple of men kissing on stage during the Irish act. This led to a short report in two newspapers:

> The Song Contest is tremendously popular among gays. The Irish singer Ryan O'Shaughnessy – straight himself – capitalizes on that. In his stage act, two boys dance intimately and hand in hand in the background. According to persistent rumours *Russia*, where homosexuality is taboo, will not broadcast the Irish act. (*Gazet van Antwerpen*, 8 May 2018: 33; same text in *Het Nieuwsblad*, 8 May 2018: 23)

Russian television did eventually broadcast the act, but these reports again testify to the ongoing narrative about Russia being homophobic in the Flemish press, echoing broader Western discourses as discussed among others by Baker (2017).

The 2018 soccer World Cup led to more extensive reporting along the same lines, connecting Russia and related countries to homophobia. Here, too, the precedents are clear, in particular the 2014 Sochi Olympics which led to a stream of international reporting in relation to LGBTQ rights, in view of the 2013 'propaganda law'. The Sochi games led to indignation and even calls for boycott by people like actor Stephen Fry, but academics question the homonationalism inherent in this discourse, arguing that the international (LGBTQ and more general) press unilaterally focused on LGBTQ rights without consideration for other human rights problems in Russia, while also remaining silent about limitations to LGBTQ rights in the West (Edenborg, 2017; Le Blanc, 2013; Travers and Shearman, 2017). Discussing the U.S. perspective, Duholke (2016) considers this as an example of exceptionalism, America seeing itself as the champion of LGBT rights and the Olympics as an example of inclusivity.As Hubbard

and Wilkinson (2015) show, this representation of the Olympics has strong ante-
cedents in the 2012 London Olympics, which were marketed around the slogan
'unity in diversity', presenting a narrative about Britain and the Olympics as
LGBTQ-friendly, distancing it 'from the "barbarism" of the state-sponsored
homophobia found in certain parts of the world' (p. 605). A similar narrative
developed around the Sochi games, which were situated at the heart of this 'intol-
erant' other, so Le Blanc (2013) concludes:

> The insistence of one's nation's 'gay-friendly, tolerant, and sexually liberated society'
> enacts pro-national, pro-Western, and anti-Othering scripts that continually (re)pro-
> duce the Other as intolerant, sexually repressed, and uncivilised. (p. 7)

This discursive background reverberates in Flemish reporting on the 2018 World
Cup in Russia. Attuned to the image of Russia as intolerant, homophobic and
uncivilized, before the start of the competition the Flemish press worries about the
possibility of anti-gay (and other) violence. For instance, a number of articles
discuss the feared Russian hooligans, connecting them to anti-gay violence (e.g.
De Standaard, 26 May 2018: 28). Other articles make the connection with the so-
called propaganda law. For instance, in *De Standaard* Aleksander Agapov, the
spokesperson for an LGBTQ association, says:

> We had to close down our international soccer tournament, during our volleyball
> tournament they regularly come to check if we're not influencing minors – pure
> intimidation. So, it's easy to guess how it will go: a month of being hospitable to
> foreigners because homosexuality exists there and not here in Russia. (*De Standaard*,
> 2 June 2018: 40)

This quote illustrates the parallel processes of self-identification at work in Russia,
as discussed by Persson (2015): homosexuality is seen as 'Western', and while it is
condoned for the duration of the World Cup, it 'really' doesn't exist in Russia.
    Interestingly, most of the reports on LGBTQ rights in Russia predate the start
of the World Cup on 14 June, clearly illustrating the pre-existing discursive frame-
work. For instance, *Het Belang van Limburg* reports on a warning by the ministry
of Foreign Affairs: 'Consider that *Russian society* is not tolerant towards LGBTs
and that open utterances of affection between people of the same gender may lead
to problems. (...) Moreover, openly propagating homosexuality is forbidden in
Russia' (5 June 2018: 4). On the eve of the competition, activist Rémy Bonny (who
got death threats in April, see above) writes an op-ed piece in *De Morgen* (13 June
2018: 2), calling on the Belgian team and coaches to defend LGBTQ rights in
Russia. He wishes them good luck, but adds:

> During the past years, the LGB and transgender community in *Russia* was strongly
> targeted. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation ended up in an
> identity crisis. In their search for a new internal enemy, the homosexual community

was quickly pointed at. To strive for more equality in the LGB and transgender community is not possible in *Russia*. The anti-propaganda law of 2013 has officially made that impossible.

Bonny continues to describe cases of homophobic violence, both in Russia and in post-Soviet countries, and calls upon the soccer players to give a signal: 'I call upon you to enter the soccer field with a rainbow attribute. In that way, you raise a fist to the homophobic part of *Russian* society'. The comparison with the situation in Belgium remains implicit in most of the article, but becomes explicit in the end: 'As *Belgium, we* were the second country in the world to introduce gay marriage. This makes us an example in terms of gay rights on the international level'. Like similar interventions discussed above, taken in isolation these statements may be unproblematic, but they become problematic in the context of a broader homonationalist discourse simplistically using Eastern 'others' in a congratulatory self-definition of the own nation as uniformly LGBTQ-friendly. While a valid activist intervention, Bonny's letter does replicate the pre-existing one-sided discourse on Russia as uniformly homophobic.

Because of this discourse, many reports before and around the start of the World Cup focus on the risk of homophobic violence. For instance, on 14 June *De Standaard* wonders whether everything is under control: 'In the next days, it has to become clear if there really is no space for hooliganism, racism, homophobia and doping at this World Cup, as promised' (p. 2). Despite close scrutiny, the World Cup seems to run without major incidents: 'It has to be said: everything runs smoothly. So far, no hooligans, no attacks on gay or black people and no political statements, at least not from the *Russian* side' (*De Morgen*, 27 June 2018: 16). However, on 21 June *Het Laatste Nieuws* (p. 10) reports that Flemish TV presenter Gilles De Coster witnessed how two men walking hand in hand were kicked out of a club in Sochi.

The incident was also referred to in *De Standaard* (21 June 2018: 33) and then picked up again in an op-ed piece by journalist and commenter Jo Van Damme who ironically comments on the 'surprise' experienced by De Coster:

Who would have thought about the fact that *Russia* is openly homophobic, that there's a law forbidding homosexuality among minors, that there are enormous fines for 'gay propaganda' (walking hand in hand, kissing each other in public, even talking about homosexuality), that demonstrations by gays and lesbians are regularly forbidden or torn apart, that wearing external signs referring to the LGBT community (such as a rainbow T-shirt) is punishable, even for foreigners? (*De Standaard*, 23 June 2018: 44)

In this comment, as in most reporting on the Soccer World cup, the view on Russia is clear: homophobia is rampant there, everybody should know this, and 'we' should cherish and protect our LGBTQ-friendly values. Belgium nor Flanders

are explicitly mentioned, but constitute the supposedly LGBTQ-friendly vantage point from which Russian homophobia is reported.

Conclusion

The main question guiding this research was: how do Russia and Eastern Europe figure in Flemish newspaper reports on homosexuality? A first sub-question addressed the presence of homonationalist discourses: do Flemish newspapers contrast Russia and Eastern European countries as a homophobic out-group to an LGBTQ-friendly national in-group? In the three months analysed here, relatively few articles are explicitly homonationalist in setting up a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Only 11 out of the 36 articles connecting Russia and Eastern Europe to LGBTQ issues do so, some politicians but also journalists and LGBTQ activists drawing a picture of Russia and related countries as homophobic, as opposed to an LGBTQ-friendly national in-group. At the same time, it is striking that no article presents a more nuanced picture of Russia and Eastern Europe, and only two present a partial counterdiscourse by qualifying the degree of Belgian LGBTQ-friendliness. When explicitly mentioned, then, the in-group and out-group constitute a binary opposition, a black and white contrast without much grey in between.

A second sub-question addresses the delineation of the in- and out-groups: which national 'us' is opposed to which foreign 'them'? To start with the latter, it is clear that Russia and Eastern Europe are represented as a single homogeneous homophobic entity. Even the articles not setting up an explicit us–them opposition do portray Russia and related countries as a uniformly homophobic 'Eastern Bloc'.

The in-group, to the contrary, is elusive. When it is explicitly referenced, the terms vary: sometimes Flanders, mostly Belgium, occasionally Western-Europe. Although Flemish nationalist politicians play a key role in spreading (homo-) nationalist discourses within the Belgian context, targeting both the French-speaking and Muslim communities as domestic 'others' to the Flemish in-group (Adam and Deschouwer, 2016), in relation to international others 'Belgium' seems to be the key in-group. LGBTQ policies and accomplishments are mostly situated at the Belgian level, so that even Flemish nationalists (have to) refer to Belgium when praising 'our' accomplishments.

Perhaps partly for this reason, the in-group often remains unnamed, but even then, the opposition is clear: the LGBTQ-friendly 'us' is implied and taken for granted, as a position from which homophobic Eastern others are judged. It seems unnecessary to spell out the domestic attitude to LGBTQ rights, as it is inconceivable that the reader would not share this tolerance, which as a consequence is firmly anchored in the in-group. For this reason, the partial homonationalist discourse identified in the majority of the articles (23 out of 36) is equally significant: while not setting up a clear us versus them opposition, these articles do repeat part of the equation (Russia is homophobic) while the rest (we are LGBTQ-friendly) is taken for granted, so the end result is similar: a black and white opposition. It may

not be explicit, but it is insidious as it is omnipresent and unquestioned. Blatant and overt homonationalism is not strongly present in this sample, but as a discursive undercurrent it is omnipresent.

Returning to the three levels on which this article aimed to contribute, first the focus on Flanders as a sub-national region has allowed to explore the workings of homonationalism in less self-evident national contexts. While in the U.S. (Puar, 2013) and others countries such as the Netherlands (Mepschen et al., 2010), homonationalism is clearly connected to the nation-state, and in other regions such as Quebec (Bilge, 2012) or Catalonia (Sadurní et al., 2019) it is connected to the subnation, in Flanders the picture is more mixed. Some politicians do clearly connect LGBTQ rights to Flanders, but others connect it to Belgium or even the EU. This reflects the more complicated political landscape, where most LGBTQ policies and accomplishments are situated on the federal Belgian level, but the underlying narrative remains the same: 'we' (however defined) are LGBTQ-friendly. All of this suggests that the 'nation' in homonationalism may take on different shapes and refer to regions, nation-states or broader territories such as the EU. In this sense, 'homo-ethnocentrism' may be a more accurate term.

Second, the shift in focus from Muslims to Russia and Eastern Europe has disclosed clear discursive parallels: both groups are strongly 'othered' as they are presented as unified, radically different entities. Muslims are mostly considered as a domestic out-group in the Flemish press (Dhoest, 2020) while Russians and Eastern Europeans are mostly situated outside of Belgium in the articles analysed here, but both groups are used in a process of self-definition, using contrast to draw a portrait of the own group as modern, enlightened and LGBTQ-friendly. While homonationalism is connected to different out-groups, the underlying discursive mechanism is similar: identifying and stigmatizing an anti-modern and backward homophobic out-group, while explicitly or implicitly creating a positive and homogeneous image of the in-group as modern, LGBTQ-friendly and tolerant.

Third, the focus on the press has shown how homonationalism is not limited to political discourse. Compared to the international literature, it is striking how few politicians partake in homonationalist discourse on Russia, apart from occasional interventions by nationalist Flemish N-VA politicians. The newspapers analysed here present occasional instances of self-praise (referring to the Rainbow Index or gay marriage), connected to a number of regions including both Flanders and Belgium, as part of a broader discourse about homophobia elsewhere. This discourse is mostly promoted by journalists themselves, building upon established news narratives such as the ones concerning the LGBTQ-friendly ESC and Olympics. Beside a political logic, then, homonationalism seems to also follow a media logic. Particularly after the introduction of the 'gay propaganda' law in 2013, Russian homophobia has become a journalistic trope, fitting in wider discourses on Russia as our 'Eastern other' and Putin as the 'European Trump'. Strikingly, as already mentioned, the three-month sample studied in this article did not contain any counterdiscourse presenting a more balanced account of the

situation in Russia and related countries. While the human rights indignation is, of course, justified, what gets lost in this one-sided narrative is all sense of nuance. Moreover, the instrumentalization of LGBTQ rights in both political and journalistic discourses may lead to mere 'lip service'; rather than a value to be defended, LGBTQ rights become a mere tool to target a variety of Eastern others.

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Notes

1. Throughout the text, I use 'LGBTQ' as an umbrella term to refer to sexual minorities, but when quoting literature or newspapers I adopt (the translation of) the terms they use.
2. *De Morgen, De Standaard, De Tijd, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*.
3. All quotes from newspapers are translations from Dutch by the author. When no page number is mentioned, the article was published online only. Italics are added to highlight references to in-groups and out-groups.
4. See Dhoest (2020) for an extensive analysis of homonationalist discourses on Islam.

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