



# Discourses on Non-Heteronormative Masculinities and Intimate Partner Violence: a Russian Media Case Study

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## Abstract

**Purpose** The current paper is devoted to the analysis of the mediation of non-heteronormative masculinities within discourses on intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in contemporary Russian media.

**Methods** The article presents a discourse analysis of five samples of media texts devoted to IPV and/or DVA among LGBTQ people. The media texts were sampled through a keyword search completed on the websites of two openly pro-LGBTQ media outlets (news and entertainment portals *Meduza* and *Takie Dela*) and two media outlets catered for predominantly LGBTQ audiences (the news and entertainment portal *Parni PLUS* and the website of the NGO *SPID-Tsentr*).

**Results** The interpretative qualitative analysis of the sampled texts demonstrated that the IPV/DVA survivors' confessional narratives are framed within wider discourses on non-heteronormative masculinities, which are represented both as transgressing concepts of hegemonic masculinity and as challenging stereotypes about non-heteronormative masculinities.

**Conclusions** The outcome of the analysis presented in the paper is that there is evidence of the emergence of new media discourses on IPV and DVA among LGBTQ communities. Drawing on feminist discourses on IPV and DVA in heterosexual relationships and using media strategies of LGBTQ coming-out confessional narratives, the sampled media data reveals an ongoing search for a new language of discussing the relatively new societal problem. Further research into mediation of non-heteronormative male survivors of IPV and DVA promises insightful findings concerning the evolution of discourses on non-heteronormative masculinities in contemporary Russian media.

**Keywords** Non-heteronormativity · Russian masculinities · Intimate partner violence · Russian media

Over the last two decades, significant discursive shifts have taken place with regard to LGBTQ rights in Russia. In 2013, the notorious traditional sexuality legislation was introduced, with Article 6.21 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation (Kondakov, 2019; Johnson, 2015) which bans promotion of non-traditional sexual relations, in particular via mass media channels. In November 2022, the law was amended and reformulated as banning the promotion of non-traditional sexual relations, regardless of the age of the audience. This anti-LGBTQ law, which simultaneously aimed at curtailing LGBTQ-rights activism and at further controlling the work of media outlets and individual media professionals, placed discourses

on non-heteronormative sexuality in the focus of Russian media and public.

The anti-LGBTQ law defining what kind of sexualities are traditional or non-traditional (e.g., apart from representations of same-sex relationships or information on transgender transition the law bans information about childfree people and paedophilia) can be analysed and conceptualised within the framework of traditionalization (Muravyeva, 2014) that has been prevailing in Russian law over the last two decades. This framework is derived from the concept of traditional values which need protection, i.e., legal enforcement of heteronormative and reproductive behaviours (Muravyeva, 2014). Another framework crucial for understanding the nature and effects of the anti-LGBTQ legislation is that of “conservative jurisprudence,” which is “commonly viewed as having an agenda of limiting rights in cases concerning personal, familial and sexual liberty in order to remain as loyal to the past as possible” (Muravyeva, 2017: 1146–1147). Examples of conservative restrictive legislation

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in Russia include “both anti-LGBTQI laws and the criminalisation of libel as well as ‘protection of the feelings of believers’ and memorial laws (‘rehabilitation of Nazism’)” (Muravyeva, 2017: 1151). The 2017 partial decriminalisation of domestic violence can also be interpreted as an example of this conservative jurisprudence.

Overall, conservative discourses and restrictive legislative initiatives celebrating traditional values were met with resistance by various human rights movements, in particular feminists (Muravyeva, 2018: 7) and LGBTQ-rights activists. Thus, although the repressive anti-LGBTQ “has triggered anti-queer violence” (Kondakov, 2022: 8), it has also resulted in the mobilisation and solidarisation of LGBTQ activists in Russia, as well as in the introduction into the mainstream media landscape of diverse discourses related to LGBTQ themes (Andreevskikh, 2018; Buyantueva, 2018; Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2020). In this paper I attempt to bring together anti-conservative discourses of resistance related to debates around domestic violence and LGBTQ rights.

With my ongoing research work focusing primarily on representations of non-heteronormative masculinities in contemporary Russian media, in this article I aim to analyse how non-heteronormative masculinities are framed (Ribeiro & Hoyle, 2009) within the discourse on domestic violence and abuse (further referred to as DVA) and intimate partner violence (further referred to as IPV). The question I address is what discursive strategies are applied by the media outlets to construct representations of male LGBTQ survivors of DVA and/or IPV. I start with providing an outline of the developmental trends in Russian media discourses on LGBTQ rights in general, a background on the media outlets which served as the source of analysed media data, and a brief description of the research methodology. After that, I present a queer perspective on discourses on DVA and IPV in Russia and move on to the Critical Discourse Analysis of the media case studies. In the conclusion, I discuss the findings of the study and opportunities for further research into the topic.

## Russian Media and LGBTQ Discourses: an Outline

As has been discovered in previous research on Russian media and non-heteronormative masculinities (Andreevskikh, 2020), when it comes to Russian discourses around LGBTQ-related themes, media articles devoted to people with non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities do not always utilise the common western identity labels, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Moreover, in societies generally not supportive of LGBTQ rights, like the Russian Federation, the process of coming-out

and adopting this or that identity label invariably gets complicated by what scholars of visibility and diversity politics refer to as a double-edged sword of visibility (e.g., Brock & Edenberg, 2020), when the visibility of a non-heteronormative person in public discourses, on the one hand, provides them with a political and social agency; on the other – makes them a target of political backlash and, potentially, a victim of hate crime. As Alexander (Sasha) Kondakov underlines, “many queer theorists argue that when people identify with one of the letters of the LGBT+ acronym, they simultaneously expose themselves to the workings of disciplinary power” (Kondakov, 2022: 80). Indeed, although coming-out narratives and debates around identity labels are an important part of the work of Russian LGBTQ-rights activists and of the lives of some LGBTQ people (Glenn, 2021; Kislitsyna, 2021), among wider LGBTQ communities the concept of coming-out is not necessarily viewed as vital; moreover, there is a tendency among non-activist LGBTQ people in Russia to distance themselves from the activist circles (Weaver, 2020). Therefore, for the purpose of my analysis of Russian media discourses on LGBTQ-related themes, with regard to media representations of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender men, I consistently apply the terms non-heteronormative masculinities or non-heteronormative men rather than queer or gay in order to include the whole range of media portrayals which transgress heteronormative conservative stereotypes but do not necessarily sustain the LGBTQ identity discourses.

For the purpose of this study, ‘discourses’ are understood as linguistically and textually mediated social practices (Fairclough, 1992, 2003) analysed within the framework of power and politics (Wodak, 1997; Wodak et al., 2009). When investigating discourses on IPV and DVA in Russian media, I analyse both the verbally and visually manifested strategies applied by media outlets to create representations of non-heteronormative men, as well as the wider socio-political trends of regulating and constructing categories of non-traditional sexualities within the frameworks of law and power. The media data analysed further in the paper is sampled from four media outlets and consists of five articles featuring non-heteronormative male survivors of DVA and/or IPV. The four media outlets include two openly pro-LGBTQ media outlets (*Meduza* and *Takie Dela*) and two media outlets working for predominantly LGBTQ audiences (*SPID-Tsentr* and *Parni PLUS*).

The news and entertainment portal *Meduza* was selected due to the fact that this outlet has been consistently and strategically covering LGBTQ-related themes in a generally supportive and empathetic way over the last five years at least (Andreevskikh, 2020). This media outlet positions itself as an outlet with a liberal stance, and due to many of the *Meduza* materials being critical of the current political

regime in Russia this outlet was included in the list of foreign agents in 2021. At the time of this paper being written the outlet is blocked on the territory of the Russian Federation.

The crowdfunded media platform *Takie Dela* was identified as a pro-LGBTQ resource not only because of its focus on the coverage of topical social issues, including LGBTQ rights, but also because of its open support of LGBTQ communities in Russia. Thus, for example, the team of *Takie Dela* supported the online media strategies course organised by Russia's largest LGBTQ-rights NGO, the Russian LGBT Network, in November 2020 (which I attended in my capacity as a LGBTQ-rights activist and the chief editor of a LGBTQ media outlet). In one of the course sessions, the representative of the *Takie Dela* editorial team stressed the outlet's commitment to covering LGBTQ-related topics and problems in a positive and empathetic way.

One of the two LGBTQ-oriented outlets selected for media sampling is the news and entertainment portal *Parni PLUS*. This outlet, which was launched in 2008 and which was put on the foreign agent list in March 2023, originally catered for HIV-positive audiences and over the years evolved into Russia's largest LGBTQ media resource covering a wide audience within and outside of the Russian Federation (Pisemsky, 2020). The other LGBTQ media outlet selected for analysis is the media resource produced by the federal NGO SPID-Tsentr (AIDS Center) catering for HIV-positive people, including LGBTQ individuals. This outlet was selected due to its strong commitment to LGBTQ-related topics, research, and themes, as well as because of its being one of the most popular LGBTQ media outlets after *Parni PLUS* (Pisemsky, 2020).

The media texts were sampled on the four websites through keyword searches, and the keywords included *domashnee nasilie* (domestic violence) and *partnerskoe nasilie* (partner violence). The articles that were sampled through the keyword search featured not only female but also male survivors of DVA and IPV. Another criterion for selecting the media texts was structural: I chose the articles which relied largely or solely on confessional first-person narratives of male survivors of IPV and DVA. It has been demonstrated that confessional narratives are a productive framework of analysing Russian media discourses on non-heteronormative masculinities in the context of discourses on sexual harassment (Andreevskikh, 2022). I therefore expected this framework to be also productive when analysing media discourses on DVA and IPV in relation to non-heteronormative masculinities.

I approach a narrative as “a virtual sphere, emerging in communication, containing events that are temporally related to each other in a meaningful way” (Elleström, 2019: 37). In other words, I identify a narrative as a verbalised account of events connected with a plotline or a theme. I interpret confessional narratives as verbalised accounts of

the narrator's feelings, emotions, thoughts, or beliefs, in particular the kind of feelings or beliefs that can potentially lead to the stigmatisation of the narrator if they have been shared with an audience (Grobe, 2017: 38–40). The confessional narratives identified in the five articles selected in the way described above were then analysed through close reading with elements of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method (e.g., Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), with a special focus on the verbally manifested strategies of constructing non-heteronormative masculinities in the context of DVA and IPV.

Due to the media data being obtained solely from pro- and LGBTQ media outlets and due to media outlets with alternative views on non-heteronormative sexualities being excluded, the media analysis presented further in the paper should not be perceived as an exhaustive study with definitive results but rather as an outline of discursive trends which were emergent at the time of the media sampling in the spring of 2022.

## Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence in Russia: a Queer Perspective

The debate around domestic violence in contemporary Russia dates back to the late 1980-s – early 1990s (Davtyan, 2021: 45), when the Soviet legal frameworks aimed at coping with the issue of domestic violence and the Soviet policies of preventing cases of violence in so-called “problem families” (Muravyeva, 2014) came to an end. Those frameworks and policies were disrupted by the dramatic social changes in the early post-Soviet times, where, on the one hand, new liberalisation trends “gave officials more excuses to ignore domestic violence” (Jäppinen & Johnson, 2016: 146), and on the other hand, the reliance of the evolving women's rights movements on transnational funding and linkages contributed to the emergence of elitist tendencies among Russian feminist activists (Sundstrom, 2017). Since then, the problem of DVA and IPV and the issue of domestic violence legislation in Russia have been rigorously researched within various frameworks – e.g., through the prism of anti-gender reforms and backlash against gender equality initiatives in authoritarian regimes (Johnson, 2023). Although male-perpetrated violence against non-heteronormative men is by no means a recent phenomenon, with reports of such incidents dating back to the Soviet times (Healey, 2012) and earlier (Muravyeva, 2013), there is still a gap in scholarship on male IPV and DVA survivors within Russian LGBTQ communities.

In Russia, domestic violence tends to be understood as “the use of physical force, psychological, economic pressure, sexual coercion aimed at a family member in order to suppress their will and to gain power over them” (Salamova,

2018: 130). Based on this definition, four types of domestic violence are identified by Russian feminist and human rights activists: physical (e.g., assault and battery), psychological or emotional (e.g., emotional abuse, neglect, gaslighting), sexual (e.g., rape and sexual abuse), and economic (e.g., depriving the family member of financial means, threatening to revoke child support in case of separation). The latter, i.e., economic violence, is evaluated as a new take on domestic violence developed and incorporated into the notion of domestic violence specifically by feminist scholars and activists from Russia and other post-Communist European countries in their search for “innovative ways to critique not just domestic violence and gender inequality, but also the state’s failure to provide social services” (Johnson & Zaynullina, 2010: 80). The notion of family member as a domestic violence victim has a wide interpretation in Russia, and it includes seven categories: spouses; cohabitating intimate partners; children (including adopted children); parents (including adoptive parents); grandparents and grandchildren; uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces; any other relatives or dependents cohabitating or sharing the household with the perpetrator (Salamova, 2018: 131).

It is important to underline that in Russia sexual violence committed by a spouse against a spouse is not always perceived as a crime due to the popularity of conservative traditionalist views on women’s sexuality and on men’s right for marital intercourse (Salamova, 2018: 130) and due to the impact of the conservative traditionalist rhetoric, which “became more vocal in Russia after 2012” (Nelaeva et al., 2022: 256). In general, harmful conservative stereotypes of what constitutes the reasonable or unreasonable behaviour of a woman are one of the reasons many domestic violence cases are dismissed in court (Davtyan, 2021: 45) and one of the main reasons of discrimination of DVA and IPV victims (Pisklakova-Parker & Efanova, 2021: 32). Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of DVA and IPV survivors fail to report cases of violence to the police (Glebova et al., 2021; Atagimova, 2018: 51–52). Russian statistics still demonstrates that only as little as 3% of domestic violence cases ever reach the court and therefore get to be reflected in the official data (Salamova, 2018: 132). When it comes to DVA and IPV within Russian LGBTQ communities, DVA and IPV survivors face the double stigma of belonging to a marginalised social group and being potentially subjected to victim-blaming in case of publicly sharing their experiences of violence and abuse.

Although intimate partner and domestic violence remains a largely underreported issue (Mannell & Hawkes, 2017), “the topic of domestic violence has become a much-debated issue in Russia in the past few years” with 78% of Russians considering it “an important issue” and 90% viewing it as “unacceptable” (Davtyan, 2021: 42–43). Studies of online articles about highly mediated and publicly visible

cases such as the unprecedented case of Volodina vs Russia (Heri, 2019) demonstrate not only prolific media discourses on domestic violence in the Russian media, but also a high volume of criticism and negative views on the proposed draft of the domestic violence legislation (Nelaeva et al., 2022: 256–257). The mediation of such widely discussed cases demonstrate discursive shifts from “sympathy with the victims, criticism of ‘patriarchal thinking’ and police inaction” to the importance of “strengthening family ties” and “the priority of the family over civil rights and openly anti-gender narratives” (Nelaeva et al., 2022: 263–264). Although the media data analysis presented further in this paper does not cover widely discussed and highly visible cases but rather presents emerging trends in media discourses on IPV and DVA within Russian LGBTQ communities, the media analysis findings might provide helpful insights into discursive shifts around the issue of domestic violence in Russia.

Western scholarship on IPV and DVA among LGBTQ people underlines the higher percentage of reported IPV and DVA among LGBTQ individuals than that among non-LGBTQ populations (Savage et al., 2022: 5; Moskowitz et al., 2020: 329). The importance of rigorous research of the impact of IPV and DVA on male survivors, in particular – in the LGBTQ contexts, is being emphasized more and more (Bates & Taylor, 2019; Rollè et al., 2018; Gear, 2010). The focus on male survivors is particularly relevant for countries like the Russian Federation, where state-sustained discourses of compulsory heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2020) already have a negative impact on the lived experiences of those men who do not fit the traditional masculinity image (Yusupova, 2022) and where narratives about men having to be strong enough to “defend themselves and others against abuse” (Taylor et al., 2022: 18,419–18,420) are especially destructive. IPV and DVA against men has become a subject of growing interest and significance for masculinities scholars. Scholarship on these themes demonstrates how studies on the relationship between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities can be complicated or transformed if approached through the perspective of violence in gay relationships or against trans\*men (Gottzén et al., 2020).

One of the frameworks used in research investigating IPV and DVA against men within LGBTQ communities is chemsex practices which have become “a means by which to facilitate enjoyment of gay sexuality against the backdrop of a heteronormative and homophobic social environment” (Miltz et al., 2021: 230). Studies of chemsex practices in Russian LGBTQ communities are extremely scarce – the most exhaustive research so far has been the project initiated and funded by the UK-based organisation Terrence Higgins Trust (Rinne-Wolf et al., 2021). Although chemsex practices are recognised among LGBTQ-rights activists as contributing to risks of being subjected to violence and abuse, due to



Russia's laws banning any media coverage of events or topics related to drugs, media framing of IPV and DVA related to drug use is impossible to imagine at present.

## IPV/DVA Survivors' Confessional Narratives: a Construction of Non-Heteronormative Masculinities

In the following section I analyse five media texts containing confessional narratives of non-heteronormative male survivors of IPV and DVA. The media articles, all of which were published in 2019–2020, are presented in a chronological order. I start with the analysis of the 2019 publication by *SPID-Tsentr*, then proceed to dwell on the two media texts by *Takie Dela*, followed by the analysis of one article by *Meduza* and one by *Parni PLUS*.

### Understanding the Dynamic of IPV: the Case Study of SPID-Tsentr

On 22 February 2019, the editorial team of the *SPID-Tsentr* published an article titled “I didn't want to hit him, so I started stabbing my own arm with a knife”: Domestic violence and LGBT”.<sup>1</sup> The article opens with a critique of the ongoing debate around domestic violence due to it being focused solely on heterosexual patriarchal patterns of relationships. The author of the article goes on to explain that such a focus excludes from discussions of domestic violence all non-heteronormative individuals – i.e., “gays, lesbians, transgender men and women, non-binary people and everyone else whom we usually include into the modest abbreviation LGBT+” (Voitskaia, 2019). Then, quoting from a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the article states there is evidence of the high rate of IPV observed among LGBTQ people. With this example, the author of the article signals that the information that follows is of high importance, in particular for a LGBTQ reader.

After an educational informative preamble about the mechanism of violence in an intimate relationship, the text develops into a series of first-person confessional narratives of people representing different identities within LGBTQ communities. Two of the narrators identify as non-heteronormative men, and their narratives were therefore chosen for a CDA analysis, presented below.

The first confessional narrative belongs to the LGBTQ-rights activist K., who reveals he had both perpetrated and experienced intimate partner violence in his previous

relationship. As K. underlines, he is open about his experience of perpetrating IPV because he wishes to attract public attention to the high rates of IPV and DVA among LGBTQ communities in the context of what he calls the Russian rape culture. K.'s is the only narrative in the article which mentions the interviewee's real name: a queer artist and HIV-positive gay man, 31-year-old K. had been open about his homosexuality for six years by the time of the interview and had participated in numerous LGBTQ-rights projects and initiatives. For ethical reasons, however, in the current paper all the DVA/IPV survivors are anonymised, regardless of whether the media texts use their real names or not.

K. describes the first episode of violence in detail: intoxicated after a party at a friends' place, he slapped his partner on the face in response to the words he did not like. As K. explained, he was not aware at the time that he was committing an act of violence. Another episode of violence took place six months later, on St Valentine's Day, when K.'s partner returned home heavily drunk. The men continued drinking together and then K. got angry with his partner and started pushing him about, while his partner was verbally abusing him. In response to the verbal abuse, K. started stabbing his arm with a knife, which helped him cope with the urge to hit his partner.

K. mentioned other forms and incidents of violence he committed against his partner: i.e., he smashed dishes to exercise psychological pressure over his partner; he inflicted on his boyfriend multiple bruises, an open head wound, and a foot injury. According to K., his partner responded to those acts of psychological and physical violence with verbal abuse and insults. One episode of violence involved K.'s partner verbally abusing him and K. kicking him so hard that he broke his rib. According to K.'s words, the realisation that he had caused his partner actual bodily harm (ABH) made him finally recognise the seriousness of the problem.

From the perspective of a pro-feminist and LGBTQ-rights activist, in his interview K. attempts to analyse why he and his ex-partner got entangled in an abusive and violent dynamic. Speaking from his personal experience, K. acknowledges the impact of the outdated patriarchal concepts of masculinity which normalise physical violence as an innate attribute of all men:

In general, it is considered: these are two men, the men are fighting - this is normal. They share territory, power, fight for someone. They cleared the air, let off steam – and they go on. A kind of a patriarchal myth that translates to gay relationships. When we were fighting in front of people watching, everyone reacted condescendingly: “Well, so what, they had a fight, and not even like normal men, but like gays — they just slapped each other about.” It was not unusual for anyone that gays fight. They

<sup>1</sup> The translation from Russian into English here and further in the text is mine.

are men after all, it is just a passionate relationship! Moreover, gays are allegedly more emotional. (Voiutskaja, 2019)

As K.'s account demonstrates, societal acceptance of violence perpetrated by men as the norm can serve as a contributing factor to non-heteronormative men resorting to violence. Paradoxically, when non-heteronormative men's violent behaviour is conceptualised by their surroundings or onlookers as manifestations of non-normative, non-hegemonic masculinity (i.e., overly sensitive and excessively emotional), violence and fighting can be perceived as the norm due to the innate sensitivity and passion which tends to be attributed to homosexuals in Russian society (Baer, 2009). K.'s narrative serves as an illustrative example of the harmful impact of outdated attitudes to masculinity: even though K. was aware of feminist studies on IPV and DVA and even though as a pro-feminist he had already embraced the idea that IPV and DVA against women are unacceptable, it took him much longer to recognise unacceptability of IPV and DVA against men.

The second of the two accounts by male survivors of IPV presented in the *SPID-Tsentre* article is the first-person narrative of 37-year-old A. who identifies as a trans\*man. A.'s narrative starts with the time when he and his female partner were teenagers, long before his transgender transition. When he and his partner first met, A. still identified as a lesbian. The relationship between the two teenagers first ended due to A.'s partner's excessive aggression. Two years later A. and his partner resumed their relationship. A. explained he had expected his partner to grow out of what he thought to have been an aggressive teenage phase, but the partner's behaviour remained unchanged.

The violence A.'s partner perpetrated varied from excessive jealousy and controlling behaviour to verbal abuse and threats of physical violence (which she threatened could be committed by her friends against A.), as well as actual physical attacks. A.'s partner also threatened to destroy the vials with hormones which A. depended on for his transgender transition. According to A., the hormones and medical paperwork needed for the transition were his most valuable possessions at the time and fearing his partner would destroy them caused him the most suffering. A. highlights that his partner used his gender identity as a tool of abusive and manipulative behaviour: "It all started with insults: she told me that no one needed me, that it was hard to be dating a 'freak', reproached me for not having a penis: 'What sort of man are you if you have no penis?'" (Voiutskaja, 2019).

A.'s story reveals how the gender identity itself, namely the non-heteronormative transgender masculinity can be used as a pretext for verbal and physical abuse by a

perpetrator of IPV. The account of the IPV dynamic in A.'s narrative also demonstrates to what extent the outdated stereotypes about masculinities still prevailing in Russian society can be harmful and destructive.

The two accounts of IPV perpetrated against non-heteronormative men (a gay man and a trans\*man) presented in the *SPID-Tsentre* publication are consistent with the ambitious objective formulated in the opening paragraphs of this media text. The author of the *SPID-Tsentre* article aims not only to raise public awareness of the importance of this issue, but also to investigate the origins of IPV in non-heteronormative couples and to analyse how the power dynamic within the couple, as well as the pressure of societal stereotypes can serve as a trigger for violent behaviour. Non-heteronormative masculinities are portrayed as suffering first and foremost from common stereotypes of hegemonic and toxic masculinities, but also from homophobic stereotypes (e.g., "gays are more emotional and therefore there is always drama and fighting in a gay couple") and transphobic stereotypes (e.g., "transgender men are not real men").

### Vulnerability and Invisibility: the Case Study of Takie Dela

*Takie Dela* addressed the issue of IPV/DVA among Russian LGBTQ people by publishing the article titled "I have grown into you, breaking away is like peeling my skin off" (Dogadina, 2019). The article which was published on 13 June 2019 opens with the theme of extreme vulnerability of LGBTQ victims of IPV and DVA. The opening paragraph lists double invisibility, minority stress, and stigmatisation as additional difficulties faced by LGBTQ survivors of IPV and DVA as compared to heterosexual population. Centred around the report on the first study into IPV among LGBTQ people that was conducted by the Resource Centre for LGBT (*Resursnyi Tsentri dlia LGBT*) in Yekaterinburg, a large regional centre in the Urals, the *Takie Dela* article quotes the primary findings of the study: namely, that 41.4% of the 1539 respondents reported having been subjected to physical violence in their relationships, 55.9% of the total number of respondents reported having been exposed to psychological violence, and 49.1% of the respondents confessed they were in an abusive relationship at the time of the survey. After that, the article presents confessional narratives of IPV survivors, one of whom is as a non-heteronormative man.

The 45-year-old man, who is introduced under an alias – V., shares his experience of being in an abusive relationship. According to V., at the start of the relationship he had just found out about his HIV-positive status, and the gratitude to his partner for not leaving him after that discovery inadvertently caused V. to lower his guard and to allow his partner to cross multiple boundaries. As V. shared, the abuse began very early on in the relationship, progressing from

verbal insults and ungrounded jealousy to physical attacks, fuelled by drinking to excess. When V. made an attempt to walk out after he got beaten up for the first time, the partner destroyed his laptop and other possessions. Although V.'s friends unanimously advised him to leave, V. found ways to justify his partner's actions and to return to him. At some point, V. started fighting his abuser back, which resulted in their first separation. In total, according to V., the couple separated four times. V. underlines that the abusive dynamic impacted his well-being significantly, leading to anxiety and panic attacks. When his partner falsely accused V. of passing HIV to him and threatened to go to court with that accusation, V. made the decision to finally terminate the relationship.

Describing his experience, V. openly talks about his feelings and emotional reactions to the situations of violence:

I freaked out; I was really clinging to him; I got scared of not being able to stop [hitting him back]; I became a nervous wreck; my hands would start shaking and I would start panicking; he was strangling me, and here you are looking a man in the eye and not seeing the person you love there; I remember being dumbstruck by this thought: 'How is it possible, he is simply going to kill me now'. (Dogadina, 2019)

V. dwells upon his posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms following the break-up: as he explains in the interview, it took him three years to stop blaming himself for everything, and he still considers it a red flag whenever a new partner starts showing controlling tendencies.

The author of the *Takie Dela* article accompanies V.'s confessional narrative with explanations as to why IPV and DVA victims often find it easier to put the blame on themselves, as well as what kind of manipulations perpetrators of IPV and DVA can use to control their victims. The article also provides expert advice on how the issue of 'minority stress' affects Russian LGBTQ people. The closing paragraphs of the article explain how state-sustained homophobic discourses which normalise and legitimate anti-LGBTQ discrimination result in the fact that IPV and DVA survivors not only fail to receive help from the state but also face additional obstacles and stress, which makes it even more difficult for LGBTQ people to leave abusive partners than it is for heterosexual individuals.

On the one hand, this article by *Takie Dela* frames V.'s narrative as that of a strong masculine survivor who managed to break free from his abuser. On the other hand, the overall framework of minority stress, as well as the references to the state-sustained homophobic discourses and the default vulnerability of LGBTQ people depict non-heteronormative masculinities as victimised. The discursive trend to portray LGBTQ individuals as a victimised and vulnerable minority (and therefore, inadvertently, as a

priori inferior to the heteronormative majority) is characteristic of Russian media outlets which take a sympathetic stance towards LGBTQ communities: similar strategies can be found in LGBTQ-themed publications produced by other pro-LGBTQ outlets, such as the oppositional newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* or the oppositional internet TV channel *Dozhd'* (Andreevskikh, 2020).

On 24 July 2019, *Takie Dela* published one more article covering the issue of DVA and IPV perpetrated against LGBTQ people in Russia. The article titled "Coming-out before Allah" includes a confessional narrative of a Muslim man and centres around a complex relationship between him and his immediate family (Sakharova, 2019).

The man, who is referred to in the article as N., starts his narration by underlining that (at the time of the interview) he has fully accepted himself as both gay and Muslim. However, for his own safety, he had to hide the truth about his sexual orientation from his immediate family. As it often happens in coming-out stories, N.'s homosexuality was disclosed due to an unfortunate chain of circumstances. His family became suspicious because N. was spending nights out but never brought any girls home to introduce to his family, and his parents decided he might have got involved with drugs. N.'s mother spotted when her son forgot to lock his phone before going to bed, checked his phone, and saw that N. had been sexting other men.

The discovery resulted in attempts at subjecting N. to psychiatric treatment so as to cure his homosexuality. At first this plan made N. happy as, according to his own confession, at that time he was feeling bad and disgusted with himself when engaging in same-sex relations. When all the ten psychologists and psychiatrists N. and his mother visited declared unanimously that it is normal to be gay and homosexuality is not a disease, the mother still refused to accept it.

Later on, N.'s homosexuality became known to his father: someone sent the father a photograph featuring N. cuddling a man, thus outing N. At first the father threw N. out of the house but after some time allowed him to come back. N. was told that he had to marry a woman, otherwise a marriage would be arranged for him, and he would have to obey.

At the end of the interview, N. confesses that he would prefer to be in a same-sex marriage and to move to Europe with a man who shares his vision. The article closes with a passage revealing the importance of Islam and faith for the narrator. The article also quotes him questioning the attitudes to homosexuality in Muslim communities: according to N., homosexuality is not a curse or a disease, but rather a personal trial.

In this article, such instances of domestic abuse as psychological pressure exercised to force N. to get married, the parents' attempts at curing their son through conversion therapy, and N. being thrown out of the family home are

framed outside of discourses on LGBTQ-rights or state-sustained homophobia in Russia, but rather within discourses on homophobia in Muslim communities. The main focus of this representation is placed along the intersection of the categories of sexuality and religion. From this perspective, the article “Coming-out before Allah” portrays the non-heteronormative man as both strong enough to resist his homophobic parents, but also vulnerable and not protected against the abuse and violence he can face in the patriarchal family household. Most importantly, even though N. does accept his being gay and Muslim and does not see any contradictions there, the closing paragraphs of the media text emphasise N.’s wish to emigrate to Europe where being himself and finding a same-sex partner whom he could marry would be easier for him. In this way, non-heteronormative masculine sexuality is constructed as a European, western concept opposed to the patriarchal traditions of Islam.

### Searching for Protection: the Case Study of Meduza

The news and entertainment portal *Meduza* tackled the issue of DVA and IPV within Russian LGBTQ communities in its article of 27 January 2020 which was published as part of a series of materials devoted to LGBTQ-rights. The purpose of the article titled “People of ‘this sort’ don’t come to us” is stated clearly in the text as finding out “how domestic violence works in homosexual couples in Russia and beyond, and whether one can protect oneself from it in an anti-LGBT + environment” (Podlyzhniak, 2020). The article contains two confessional narratives by male survivors of IPV, which I analyse below.

The first narrative belongs to the openly gay stand-up comedian T., who uses his personal experience (an abusive relationship where he was subjected to IPV) in his comedy sketches. The section of the article devoted to T. focuses on his latest relationship which lasted three years. According to T., his ex-partner was addicted to drugs, suffered from internalised homophobia, could not accept himself as a gay man, and for that reason turned to violence. T. is quoted saying that he tried to convince his ex-partner to see a counsellor or psychologist, but it was in vain as his partner refused to talk about his feelings or about the issues the couple was facing. The comedian also describes the incidents of IPV he had to deal with: threats, damaged possessions, coercion for threesomes, sexual harassment. The turning point in the relationship, in T.’s own words, was when his ex-partner got very drunk, beat him up severely, and broke his nose – that marked the end of the abusive relationship and T. left his partner.

The other male IPV survivor featured in the article, E., describes in detail one particular episode of IPV when his boyfriend violently attacked him outside of a club. Being

hit on the face and kicked ruthlessly, E. sustained serious injuries but, as he underlined, he did not even consider the option of reporting the incident to the police, even though his friend advised him to do so. E. explained that he did not want to risk being outed by the boyfriend to his family, among whom only his mother was privy to the fact that he is gay. As E. put it, “I did not even see myself as a victim of domestic violence. Yes, I got beaten up, that’s the price I paid for being stupid” (Podlyzhniak, 2020).

Structurally, the body of the article consists of personal narratives alternating with comments by specialists – primarily, representatives of LGBTQ-rights initiatives who serve as immediate points of contact for LGBTQ survivors of violence. One of these commentary sections refers to evidence from other men who tried reporting IPV incidents to the police only to face ridicule and to be brushed off with offensive remarks. The only way they could see a change in police officers’ attitudes was when they returned with a second attempt to report the incident, but this time came accompanied by a lawyer.

Another commentary section focuses specifically on psychological and economic violence. The commentary explains that, based on the data provided by the Resource Centre for LGBT in Yekaterinburg, economic violence is the least common issue faced by Russian LGBTQ families due to the fact that economic independence tends to be viewed by LGBTQ partners as a means of coping with the imposed culture of traditional values, compulsory heteronormativity, and state-sustained homophobia. Economic independence makes it easier for LGBTQ couples to break up and terminate their relationship as partners tend not to depend on each other too much financially.

The *Meduza* article demonstrates the use of mixed strategies of mediating non-heteronormative masculinities of IPV survivors. On the one hand, the two male IPV survivors are portrayed as in need of extra, additional help on the part of designated LGBTQ-friendly services and professionals as for such men homophobic attitudes of police officers or crisis centre psychologists can serve as additional obstacles hindering their readiness and desire to seek help. On the other hand, there is an attempt here at avoiding victimisation of IPV survivors through placing a bigger focus on the description of the perpetrators’ behaviour and the possible reasons of their violent actions rather than on the vulnerability of the narrators. Internalised homophobia (of both the non-heteronormative perpetrators and survivors of IPV) and societal homophobia are framed as contributing factors causing IPV perpetrators to turn to violence (like in the case of T.’s ex-partner) or to get away with the crime they committed against their partners (like in the case of E.’s ex-partner, who was not reported to the police because E. was afraid of being outed).



## A Survivor's Coming-Out: the Case Study of Parni PLUS

Although the news and entertainment portal *Parni PLUS* covers a wide range of topics relevant and important to its non-heteronormative male audiences (from tips on planning a romantic date to information on safe sex practices to instructions on taking pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis), the issue of IPV and DVA perpetrated against non-heteronormative men is not extensively covered by the outlet. The only one original (not translated or republished from another source) text found on the outlet's website at the time of the media sampling was the 21 August 2020 article titled "A victim of violence: How to live through it and survive" and published in the website section *My Story* (Parni PLUS, 2020). The title of the text immediately frames the subsequent narrative as the intersection of discursive trends of victimisation and empowerment.

The media text consists completely of the narrator's (who is a fully anonymised openly gay man) direct speech, with the only commentary on the part of the editorial team added in the closing paragraphs of the article. In those paragraphs, the editors highlight the problem of the lack of media coverage of or research into domestic violence in LGBTQ couples and mention the double stigma faced by LGBTQ survivors of DVA and IPV. The commentary also states that for gay, bisexual, and transgender men it is particularly hard to cope with sexual harassment, sexual assault, intimate partner or domestic violence due to the prevailing outdated patriarchal stereotypes around masculinities.

The body of the article is divided into four sections. The first section is devoted to the experience of rape endured by the narrator at the age of 16. The second section renders his account of suffering from PTSD after the assault and facing a total absence of support. The third section dwells on the interviewee's experience of physical violence perpetrated against him by a much older partner. The last section of the article focuses on the narrator's experience of psychological abuse and manipulation in his most recent long-term same-sex cohabitation. The narrative contains a few common attributes of the genre of LGBTQ coming-out narratives: e.g., reminiscences about first experiences of same-sex desire at the age of 14; lack of information on homosexuality and no access to LGBTQ-rights organisations in the 1990s Saint Petersburg where the narrator grew up; failed attempts at heterosexual dating; the conservative family members pressuring the narrator into a heteronormative marriage.

The genre of confessional narrative allows for uncensored and unaltered evidencing of the gay man's feelings and thoughts following the sexual assault and episodes of IPV: i.e., suicidal thoughts and the feeling of shame which prevented him for sharing his experiences with anyone. There

are also detailed descriptions of the types of violence and abuse the narrator experienced in his intimate relationships: excessive jealousy; controlling behaviour; forced isolation from friends and family; verbal abuse; physical attacks and ABH (a concussion and a broken nose); infidelity; and psychological manipulation into providing the perpetrator with full financial support.

When giving an account of the episodes of violence and abuse he endured, the narrator particularly highlighted the fact that in the 1990s Saint Petersburg there were no services or support groups for men who had been subjected to sexual assault, there were only services and support groups for women. When talking about the time his partner inflicted ABH on him, the narrator explained he decided not to report the perpetrator to the police as he was convinced the police would not be willing to help him because of his homosexuality. Thus, one of the dominant discursive strategies employed in the *Parni PLUS* text for representing a non-heteronormative masculinity can be interpreted as victimisation: the interviewee is portrayed as left to his own devices when subjected to violence, with no help or support from his family, the police, or LGBTQ-catering organisations. Nevertheless, the article also channels an empowering message, demonstrating that, even when there is no help, survival is possible and there is a way out of an abusive and violent relationship. In other words, the non-heteronormative masculinity is constructed here simultaneously through vulnerability but also resilience.

## Conclusion

As the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates, a mix of discursive strategies is used by the selected media outlets when framing non-heteronormative masculinities of IPV/DVA survivors. Through various tools which the genre of confessional narrative affords (i.e., relying solely or significantly on the narrator's direct speech and personal perspective; uncensored evidence of behaviours and experiences which might potentially lead to shaming and stigmatisation; detailed descriptions of feelings, emotions, and thoughts experienced by the narrator during and after the act of violence and abuse; accounts of coping mechanisms employed by the narrator to overcome the consequences of IPV/DVA), non-heteronormative masculinities are framed in the analysed texts as simultaneously suffering from outdated patriarchal stereotypes about masculinity but also transgressing them.

The discursive strategies of victimisation are present to some extent in all the analysed media texts. In the case of *Takie Dela* and *Meduza*, this can be interpreted as a consequence of the outlets' desire to demonstrate their sympathetic and supportive attitude to LGBTQ people and to evoke

empathy in their audiences, which include both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ people. In the case of LGBTQ media outlets, the analysis of the media texts by *SPID-Tsentr* and *Parni PLUS* revealed a tendency to counterbalance narratives of victimhood with empowering messages about the narrators' experience of survival and ability to escape abusive situations. The two LGBTQ media outlets also attempt to analyse the dynamics of IPV in same-sex couples and thus to educate their audiences on the potential red flags and triggers which could result in abusive and violent behaviour.

The portrayals of non-heteronormative men as capable of fighting back, defending themselves, coping with and surviving acts of violence (as well as committing acts of violence and abuse) challenge stereotypes about homo-, bi-, and transgender men as default victims, a priori vulnerable, and invariably weak. The agency and empowerment used as discursive strategies of constructing non-heteronormative masculinities in the context of IPV and DVA allow for undermining, albeit partially, the ideas of hegemonic masculinity: although non-heteronormative men are portrayed as vulnerable, they are presented not as submissive, but as strong, resilient, capable of self-reflection and emotional openness.

It is noteworthy that the keyword search for IPV- and DVA-related materials on the selected outlets' websites returned results for 2019 and 2020 publications in the confessional narrative genre. Prior to 2019, there are no coherent narratives by LGBTQ people on this issue, which makes it possible to hypothesise that what prompted the change in the discourse towards first-person confessions and authentic stories of IPV and DVA survivors is the heated debates around family and gender-based violence legislation that started in Russian society after the partial decriminalisation of domestic violence in 2017 and an introduction of a new domestic law legislation initiative (Muryeva, 2021). Similar to how discourses on sexual harassment against non-heteronormative men, which were prompted by the appropriation of the global *#MeToo* trend by Russian media in 2017–2018, appeared to be shaped and influenced by the developments in the feminist movements (Andreevskikh, 2022), the discourses on IPV and DVA perpetrated against non-heteronormative men also seem to have been developing under the influence of feminist discourses on family and gender-based violence against women. However, to verify this hypothesis, further investigation of media representations of non-heteronormative male survivors of IPV and DVA is needed.

The findings of the article show a potential for further, more comprehensive research into the evolution of Russian media discourses on non-heteronormative male survivors of IPV and DVA. With the public and media discourses on family and gender-based violence in Russia still shaping up and evolving, it would be insightful to conduct a quantitative and qualitative research across time,

comparing how media discourses have been operating at different stages of public debates around the domestic violence legislation initiatives, and across media, comparing how various kinds of media outlets (e.g., pro-, anti-LGBTQ and neutral) frame masculinities in the context of discourses on IPV and DVA. A focus on non-heteronormative masculinities approached through the prism of violence, victimhood, empowerment, and survival should also offer important insights into the overall hierarchy of masculinities in contemporary Russia.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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