

Queer Shame, Queer Love

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The launching of SQS feels like a party for which many of us have waited a very long time. When invited to join the journal's celebration of queer culture in Central and Eastern Europe as a member of its editorial board, I immediately RSVPed "yes!" I then found myself facing the question that all scholars of things queer must sooner or later answer: What do I mean when I use the word "queer" and how do I understand the queerness I study? Given that I have spent some thirty years studying Russian culture in various guises, I hoped I would quickly come up with an answer. However, I found imagining an outfit for the SQS party much easier than responding to the question of what queer is. All of the brave people who arrived at this particular party before me—from Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and José Muñoz to my esteemed colleagues on the SQS editorial board—agree that queerness resists not only heteronormativity, but also definition, so who am I to tread where even they feared to go?

I wondered whether the invitation I so eagerly accepted might have come to the wrong person, and I even considered simply stringing together all of the rich non-definitions of queerness that have inspired me over the years. Confronting a mild case of the imposter syndrome, I suddenly realized that my self-doubt in fact demonstrates the very queerness that I study and perform on a daily basis as a lesbian who earns her living by ventriloquizing for students the heteronormativity of Tolstoy et al., or inculcating in them the Russian language's relentlessly gendered grammar. In other words, I have spent many years of my queer life in a struggle to grasp and teach material, much of which ignores or denies essential aspects of myself. However, this queer relationship to both the culture I study and its language has not just left me in a morass of self-doubt. Rather, the small, repeated humiliations that come from my eccentricity in relation to what I study have taught me a great deal of humility, something, as Dostoevsky's finest protagonists illustrate, we only learn thanks to humiliation and shame—that most powerful affect.

My recognition of the shame that has shaped my own queer career brought me back to Butler and Sedgwick, both of whom argued that queerness happens whenever subjectivity forms around shame (Butler 2013, Sedgwick 2003). And given that shame, like subjectivity itself, comes into being in discrete individuals located in specific times and places, the experience of shame varies in response to the social and cultural context where it arises. The variability of shame suggests that it might function as a portable analytic for understanding queerness in situations far beyond the United States of the 1990s, where and when Butler and Sedgwick first wrote about shame as the *sine qua non* of queerness. Moreover, this not-quite-definition of queer proves particularly applicable

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in the case of Russia, a country that has repeatedly shamed its LGBTQ+ citizens throughout its modern history. We need only remember Peter the Great's 1716 ban on sex between men in the Russian military, the criminalization of sodomy by Nikolai I in the 1832, its recriminalization in 1934 by Stalin's fiat, Putin's initial "gay propaganda" law of 2013, its revision into the anti-LGBTQ+ law of 2022, and the Russian Supreme Court's declaration in 2023 of "the international LGBT organization" as "extremist" to realize that Russians who challenge heteronormativity have long been a dumping ground for their country's shame and abjection. As we now know, the last three of these events has led to a rise in homophobic violence within, as well as a wave of LGBTQ+ migration and asylum from, Russia (Kondakov 2017, Mole 2021). However, Putin's efforts to transform LGBTQ+ Russians into the country's internal enemy have eliminated neither Russian queerness nor Russian shame. On the contrary, the homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia sanctioned by the final three decrees in my list have created an ever-expanding web of queerness, which requires increasingly aggressive and violent efforts to detect and destroy it. The very timing of the two anti-LGBTQ+ laws betrays the link between Putin's political homophobia and the Ukrainophobia driving his imperial aggression: the "gay propaganda" law came into effect less than a year before the 2014 seizure of Crimea, while the anti-LGBTQ+ law was passed not even a year after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Put differently, shame represents a particularly relevant criterion for queerness when we consider Russia, where queerness has never been just a question of personal identity or private sexual practice, but rather a shameful offence that inevitably plays out on the public stage of politics. Moreover, the queer identity generated by shame represents a peculiar mash-up of both performative and ontological notions of identity. Even though we might accrue shame and cast it off through what we say and do, repeated shame stigmatizes us, marking our very core as queer. Russian queers live with this double burden of shame, which reproaches them for having been "born this way" at the same time that it blames them for infecting others with their queer contagion. In the case of Russia the tension between ontological and performative queerness has led to a series of striking paradoxes: queerness is simultaneously nowhere yet everywhere, and the word "queer" applies to no one yet everyone, depending on our point of view. If, for example, Putin's homophobia mobilizes a queerness that is invisible to the naked eye yet always in its sights, then those Russians who dare to represent queerness as more than contagion and stigma create works with the power to undermine his paranoid imperial ambition by transforming the humiliation on which this ambition depends into a humility with the power to protect and sustain queer lives.

To illustrate my point, I would like to turn to two recent works of fiction, originally published in Russian, which show what happens when queerness is reduced to contagion and stigma, as well as what it might take to transform queer humiliation into humility. Unsurprisingly, both works have fallen prey to censorship in the Russian Federation due to their vivid portrayals of queerness. However, neither qualifies as fine literature or high art. Rather, the works I have in mind come from pop culture, and both represent a

subgenre of popular romance called “boys love” or BL. Written primarily by women for women, BL imagines the romantic and sexual attraction of young men, and since its birth in shoujo manga of the 1970s, it has left Japan and swept across the globe, inspiring avid fandoms from South Korea, China, Thailand, and the Philippines to Europe, Latin America, North America, and Russia.¹ Whether those writing and consuming Russophone BL consider themselves LGBTQ+ or not, their love of a genre that reimagines male homosociality as homosexuality makes them queer in the Russian context, as do the venues where they write and read BL: popular manga portals (MintManga, Tapas, Webtoon, and Patreon) and Ficbook.ru, the largest Russophone fanfiction website. Judging by their fans’ enthusiastic reactions, both the webcomic *im | mortal* and the novel *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* offer compelling depictions of how the traumatized queer subjectivity created by homophobic shaming in Russia might open up to humility, compassion, and even love.

I begin with *im | mortal*, the creation of the artist koriandr, since, as a webcomic with only a few of several volumes completed and available online, its serialized story has yet to reach its climax.² Set in a magical past, *im | mortal* draws on the narrative and visual canon of Russian fairy tales. However, koriandr recasts the archetypal antagonist and protagonist of many *skazki*, Koshchei the Deathless and Ivan Tsarevich, by placing them in a landscape of relentless violence and cruelty. Rather than setting out on a quest for magical animals or a beautiful bride, *im | mortal*’s version of the tsar’s third son finds himself surrounded by wraiths and monsters and already imprisoned in Koshchei’s castle, where he submits to the deathless demon’s sexual abuse in exchange for his sister’s freedom. Like other examples of BL that focus on non-consensual sex, *im | mortal* vividly paints an erotic bond that transforms foes into lovers, at the same time showing how a relationship that begins with sadistic domination and humiliating submission might eventually heal deep traumas of the past through what looks like their repetition.

koriandr’s dynamic drawings hark back to Russian folk art generally and more specifically to early-twentieth-century fairy-tale illustrations, most notably by Ivan Bilibin. *im | mortal* uses the vivid patterns and colors of her predecessors to draw readers into early scenes of the captive Ivan’s growing terror before the all-powerful Koshchei. The Tsarevich’s unblemished white skin, tousled yellow curls, blue eyes agape, and slim, cringing frame stand in high contrast to Koshchei’s glowering grey visage, long black tresses, diabolical eyes whose pupils shift from light blue to white and then gold, and

¹ For overviews of the genre of BL, see McLelland and Welker 2015, Welker 2022. Although little has been published on Russophone BL, two articles by Yuliia Tarasiuk discuss Russophone BL manga and BL fandom in Russia (Tarasiuk 2020 and 2022).

² A censored version of *im | mortal* is available on both Webtoon at https://www.webtoons.com/en/canvas/immortal/list?title_no=410499 and Tapas at https://tapas.io/series/im_mortal/info. The Russian-language site MintManga also appears to host *im | mortal* at https://2.mintmanga.one/bes_smertnyi_A5327; however, I have never been able to access the full webtoon probably due to either to firewalls or its removal from the platform. The full uncensored version is available only on Patreon via subscription at https://www.patreon.com/c/koriandr_art/posts. Interestingly, the first volume of *im | mortal* was published as a hardcover book by Eksmo in 2023, which subsequently discontinued the series (koriandr 2023).

imposing, well-muscled form. When taken with the demon's pointed ears pierced by multiple spikes, vampirish fangs, claw-like fingernails, flowing black robes, and stiletto boots, Koshchei looks more like a sexy dominatrix in koriandr's rendering than the repulsive old man of earlier fairy-tale illustrators (figure 1). Drawing equally on the visual vocabularies of *skazki* and BDSM, koriandr prepares readers for Ivan's eventual submission to the cruel, yet seductive Koshchei, as well as the cracks that soon appear in the latter's ruthless façade as the two grow closer.

im | mortal deliberately shocks readers with Ivan and Koshchei's first sexual encounter by painting it as a ruthless and bloody rape (figure 2).³ Yet during Koshchei's approach to Ivan, which happens only after the tsarevich has agreed to become his sexual plaything, koriandr introduces a new color palate into *im | mortal*, transforming both what and how this sex between a mortal man and immortal monster means. Surprisingly, Koshchei hesitates to take advantage of the now compliant Ivan, who meekly begs for mercy, pleading, "Please, please. . ."⁴ At this point, the demon's memory carries him and the reader back to a similar moment in the distant past, when a young Koshchei uttered the very same words. Drawn in tones of sepia, brown, grey, and black, the immortal fiend's mortal backstory slowly emerges. Brought to Russian lands as a slave himself and knowing barely a word of Russian, the young Koshchei found protection in service to a seemingly benevolent nobleman, only to fall victim to this new master's sexual abuse. Recalling these traumatic memories transforms not only Koshchei's attitude towards the tsarevich cowering before him, but also the reader's understanding of a character we might mistake for the embodiment of pure evil. Koshchei's momentary identification with the young tsarevich he plans to rape triggers repeatedly his own memory of childhood abuse, which, we now understand, made a once



Figure 1. Two frames from koriandr's webcomic *im|mortal* representing the encounter between Ivan and Koshchei as both threatening and seductive.

³ The rape takes place in episodes 9 and 10.

⁴ Ivan speaks these words towards the end of episode 10.



Figure 2. Frame from koriandr's webcomic *im/mortal* depicting the violent rape of Ivan by Koshchei.

vulnerable and human boy into the fearsome Koshchei now towering over Ivan. Just as important, the fleeting moments of empathy for his victim suspend, if only temporarily, the humiliation to which Koshchei subjects the tsarevich. We now recognize that Koshchei's desire to humiliate Ivan is little more than an attempt to cast off his own childhood sexual shame, and the compassion we initially felt only for the trembling tsarevich begins to extend to his traumatized tormentor.

Although koriandr has yet to bring *im | mortal*'s story to its conclusion, the artist has clearly indicated that the momentary lapses in Koshchei's cruelty will ultimately lead to a "love that was born against all odds" (koriandr n.d.). Those within BL's fandom readily recognize in the episodes of *im | mortal* published to date many of the genre's tropes: as the slash in the webcomic's title suggests, Koshchei and Ivan represent vivid examples of BL's requisite "seme/uke" pairing ("attacker/receiver" or "top/bottom" in Japanese), as well as a "hair contrast duo" (brunette vs. blond). Moreover, readers who identify Ivan Tsarevich as a "battered uke" might anticipate multiple episodes of "kabedon" (being slammed against a wall before a caress or kiss) and "hurt-comfort," both of which contribute to the ending happy of any BL whose protagonists go from "enemies to lovers."⁵ In short, by introducing BL's formulaic characters and plot points into a Russian fairy tale, koriandr all but tells readers that the violently non-consensual sex they witness in the webcomic's opening volumes can and should turn into tender and abiding love. By reframing a Russian fairy tale as a work of BL, *im | mortal* shows us that the queer sex that initially caused humiliation, shame, and trauma ultimately holds the power to transform these toxic feelings into humility, acceptance, and love. Moreover, given the mythic Russian past in which *im | mortal* takes place, the webcomic points to Russia's long history of humiliating and shaming its queers at the same time that it depicts queerness as deeply embedded in Russian history. For its gay characters and explicit depictions of gay sex alone, *im | mortal* was deemed a worthy target for the 2022 anti-LGBTQ+ law, to which it fell prey in October 2023.⁶ Perhaps more importantly, *im | mortal*'s tale of

⁵ These standard BL tropes come from a list compiled by students in a course devoted to a survey of the genre of BL, which I taught during spring semester 2025 at Williams College.

⁶ Koriandr announced that *im | mortal* was "banned in my country" and "removed from bookstore websites by order of the state [as] propaganda of non-traditional relations" at the start of episode 16-11 on both Webtoon and Tapas.

converting the contagion and stigma of queerness into empathy, humility, and love is clearly a story that Putin's regime prefers not to hear, see, or tell.

If koriandr dives into the mythic past for her exploration of Russian queerness, then Katerina Sylvanova and Elena Malisova return to a more recent past, as well as an actual location, to tell a very different tale of queer shame becoming love in *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* (Sil'vanova and Malisova 2021).⁷ Initially written as fanfic before being published by Popcorn Books in 2021 (figure 3), the novel tells the tale of Yura and Volodya, camper and counselor at a late-Soviet summer camp for young Pioneers. Although a far cry from the sexually explicit *im | mortal*, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* also draws on classic BL tropes to tell its gay coming-of-age story set in 1986, which Yura recalls after returning, twenty years later, to the now abandoned Camp Barn Swallow. The novel's dual timeframe forces both Yura and the reader to shuttle between the late-Soviet and post-Soviet eras as he discovers the pleasures and pains of the past. Among the latter, we learn that the college-aged Volodya was well aware of his same-sex desire before he and Yura ever met and that Volodya, unsurprisingly, internalized the Soviet era's homophobic laws and attitudes, which deemed sodomy illegal and homosexuality a mental illness. Once the two boys discover their mutual attraction, a large swath of the plot set in 1986 involves the naïve and more openminded Yura trying to persuade Volodya that their love is neither a social sickness nor source of shame. Yura's efforts ultimately meet with success when the two boys have sex and bury a time capsule on the final night of summer camp. However, Volodya's deeply internalized homophobia lingers, shifting the site of queer trauma from the body, the source of Koshchei's pleasure and Ivan's pain in *im | mortal*, to the very core of Volodya's queer self.

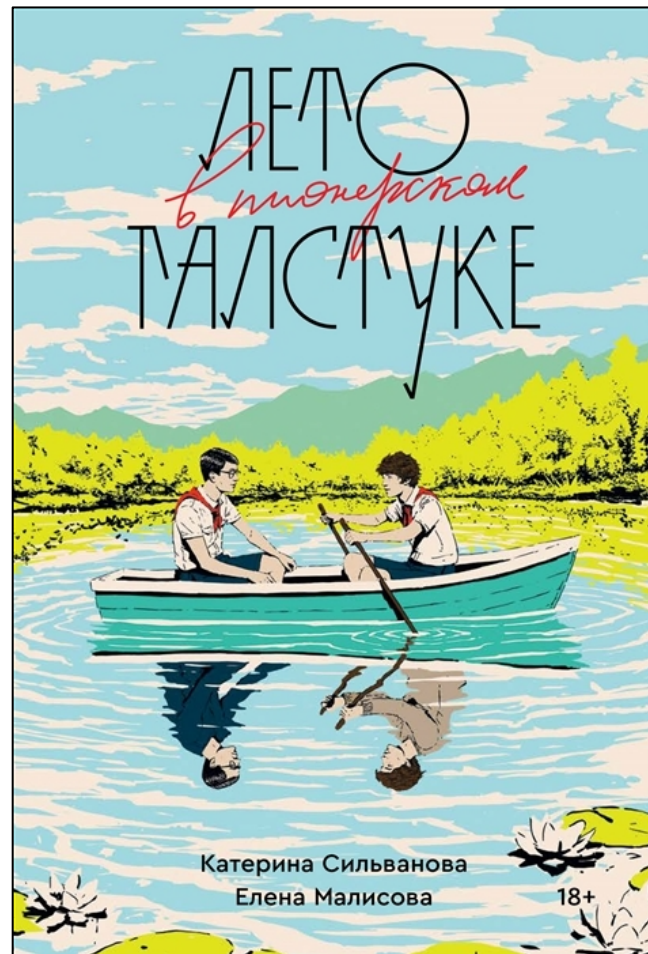


Figure 3. Cover of Katerina Sil'vanova's and Elena Malisova's 2021 *Leto v pionerskom galstuke* by Popcorn Books.

⁷ The English translation of the novel by Anne O. Fisher is scheduled for release in summer 2025 (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025). All passages quoted here come from Fisher's translation.

Summer in a Pioneer Tie gives this homophobia both a face and voice in the character of Masha, a clear example of the female villains typical to BL. At the same time as the two boys discover their mutual attraction, Yura's nosy fellow camper Masha takes a shine to his soon-to-be boyfriend. When she interrupts Yura and Volodya during "their second, grown-up kiss," her suspicion turns to disgust; she hysterically shrieks, "You're abnormal! You're sick!" and then forces the two boys to "Swear you'll never do that again" (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 281-282). However, when Masha follows through on her threat to snitch on Yura and Volodya, telling another counselor at the camp about their budding romance, her truthful accusation is mistaken for a lie. Apparently, the thought of an upstanding member of the Komsomol like Volodya kissing another boy is literally beyond belief.

Masha's malicious and self-interested homophobia may fail to do the damage she intends, yet it represents one of the myriad homophobic slurs that Volodya has heard, read, and internalized so that he now stigmatizes himself. As we might expect, the repeated shaming to which Volodya subjects himself at the mere thought of his homosexuality makes it impossible for him to talk about his feelings for Yura other than via circumlocution or in terms of self-disgust. His first attempt to tell Yura that he is gay ends with a reference to one of classical music's most eminent queers, which Volodya quickly backpedals: "I'm like Tchaikovsky! [. . .] I like music" (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 155). When the two boys finally discuss their attraction openly, Volodya immediately concedes, "I think Masha's probably right [. . .]. It's against nature, it's a psychological aberration [. . .]. It's not just bad, it's awful!" (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 199). He even quotes Maxim Gorky's infamous rehash of the "gay Nazi myth," which links the eradication of homosexuals to that of fascism. This repeated self-shaming overwhelms Volodya, who, we learn, has developed the habit of self-harming by scalding his hands in boiling water. We also discover that after his brief relationship with Yura, Volodya subjects himself to psychologically damaging conversion therapy for ten fruitless years (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 435). In short, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* uses its late-Soviet setting to show that the ultimate outcome of shaming Russian queers is a homophobia so deeply internalized that queers humiliate and punish themselves better than any statute in a criminal code or spiteful comment from a jealous interloper ever could.

Unlike koriandr, who continues to post episodes of *im | mortal* online, Sylvanova and Malisova have already brought their novel to its happy end and even published a sequel, *The Silence of the Swallows*, which traces Yura and Volodya's story beyond 2006.⁸ *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* concludes as the two lovers meet again, thanks to the time capsule they buried, so that they can continue to heal the wounds both have endured. While Yura rekindled his once extinguished passion for classical music thanks to their love at summer camp, Volodya has been stuck not just in an endless loop of self-disgust, but also

⁸ Malisova and Sylvanova have rewritten and expanded *Silence of the Swallows* and will publish this new material in revamped volumes two and three in their series. The second volume in English is slated to appear in 2026, while the third will come out in 2027.

on Camp Barn Swallow's land, which he bought as a real estate investment and now lives on. Although the novel gives ample justification for Volodya ending up next door to where he first confessed his homosexuality, his compulsion to return to the site where he also first experienced another man's love points to his hunger for the restorative compassion that Yura once gave him. True to BL form, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* ends with the two men embracing on the very spot where they once made love and buried their time capsule, "as time stood still around them" and as Volodya asks Yura to play Tchaikovsky's "Lullaby." This request for the very song that enabled Yura's return to music twenty years ago tells us that Volodya's own journey away from shame and towards self-acceptance and love has finally begun.

Sylvanova and Malisova's tale of queer love rising out of the ashes of queer shame had a sizable following even before its official publication, which only increased the number of Volodya and Yura's fans. In addition to countless Tweets and every conceivable style and genre of fanart on sites from VK to Tumblr, many of the book's fans posted videos on TikTok, which showed them shedding heartfelt tears as they read the story of Yura and Volodya's forbidden love. When the book became a bestseller, a significant number of anti-fans also emerged, including several highly incensed doyens of Russian culture. Zakhar Prilepin, for example, declared that Popcorn Books should be called "pornobooks" (Prilepin 2022), while Nikita Mikhalkov, in a bizarre reverse echo of Gorky, insinuated that Sylvanova and Malisova's novel not only promotes an LGBTQ+ agenda, but also somehow enables fascism and Nazism (Sector Video 2023). As a result of these slurs, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* became the immediate cause of the Russian Duma's decision to revamp 2013's "gay propaganda" law into the 2022 anti-LGBTQ+ law (Matsaeva 2022; Schimpfössl and Sandalov 2022).⁹ After both volumes of the book were promptly banned, Sylvanova and Malisova found themselves labeled "foreign agents" and forced to flee Russia. If such drastic measures seem excessive for a YA romance that depicts gay sex obliquely as something "sweet-smothering-hot," we should remember that Sylvanova and Malisova dared to trespass not only in the late-Soviet past, but also on Ukrainian soil, since they locate the fictional Camp Barn Swallow just outside the non-fictional city of Kharkiv, hometown of one of the book's authors (Malisova and Sylvanova 2025, 372). In other words, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* depicts a queer Soviet past that Putin has already deleted from Russia's history books and proposes Ukraine as the site where queer Russians' shame and humiliation can become empathy and love.

Despite the obvious differences that separate *im | mortal* from *Summer in a Pioneer Tie*, both tell the same basic story thanks to their shared reliance on BL's canonical tropes. While *im | mortal* lingers over the surface of queer bodies, portraying their shame and humiliation via sexual violence, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* explores the shame to which queers subject themselves once the stigma of queerness stains their souls. Moreover, both of these banned works use the past, be it distant myth or recent historical reality, to imagine a future in which queer humiliation might morph into humility and queer shame

⁹ For a thoughtful overview of the scandal that engulfed the novel and culminated in the 2022 anti-LGBTQ+ law, watch Shainian 2023.

might lead to love. To borrow from Muñoz's introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, both *im | mortal* and *Summer in a Pioneer Tie* represent queerness as "an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future," thereby rejecting the terrifying here and now of Putin's Russia and insisting on the possibility of a more caring world (Muñoz 2009, 1). These two works of Russophone BL do not merely imagine the queerness that has always been a part of Russia's history in direct defiance of Putin's efforts to erase it from the historical record. Ultimately, they envision a humbler and queerer future for Russia by fostering a queer epistemology that sees, feels, and desires far beyond the quagmire of Putin's cynical homophobia, xenophobia, and Ukrainophobia. The thousands of Russian speakers who have joined the fandoms of *im | mortal*, *Summer in a Pioneer Tie*, and BL more widely share the same shame-inflected queerness as LGBTQ+ Russians and their allies, since they all preserve a vision of Russia's past that admits queerness, and all hope for a future that will respect and sustain not just queer, but all lives through humility and love.

Admittedly, using shame as a hermeneutic that allows us to perceive and understand queerness means letting many more people into the queer party than those who have long been there because they identify as LGBTQ+. The horizontal networks of BL's largely female fandom not only in Russian, but in all languages is both innumerable and unknowable, since the online platforms where fans congregate let them mask everything from their names and addresses to their gender identities and sexual preferences. However, given that we live in an age of social media surveillance, enhanced security measures, and identity theft, inviting even anonymous guests to join this particular party seems fitting and even liberating. Even though the hermeneutic of queerness I propose here originates in the exclusion caused by shame, those of us who have felt this humiliation and taken the time to turn it into humility understand that our job is not to exclude anyone, but rather to include those whose experience of shame aligns with our own. After all, the more people we bring into the queer party of which SQS is now part, the more likely we are to topple the power verticals and burst the anti-woke bubbles that make not only queer, but all life precarious in the present day. Like koriandr, Malisova, Sylvanova, and their fans, we need to discover, attend to, and celebrate the full range of queer voices not just in the Russian Federation but in Russophone space more broadly, so that we help preserve the imperiled past, present, and future of Russian queers. Once we realize that what we wear to this party does not matter and that none of us is an imposter, we will be able to see more clearly the homosexuality in all homosociality and to show our students how queer Tolstoy and Dostoevsky often are, as well as how the "great, mighty, truthful, and free Russian language" is wielded not only by lying cowards to enslave and destroy so many lives, but also by humiliated and humble queers to liberate and preserve them.¹⁰ Perhaps we actually can become an "international LGBT organization," as Putin's regime has branded us, since our extreme times call for equally extreme measures.

¹⁰ I.S. Turgenev, "Russkii iazyk" (1882), available at <https://ilibrary.ru/text/1378/p.51/index.html>.

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