“Gays as a Weapon of the Antichrist”: Religious Nationalism, Homosexuality and the Antichrist on the Russian Internet

_Magda Dolinska Rydzek and Mariecke van den Berg_

“Gays as a weapon of the Antichrist”: these words, here in translation, are from Maxim Schevchenko (2013), one of the most prominent Russian journalists and an expert in ethno-cultural and religious policies. These words are just one of many examples of how sexual minorities in Russia are being associated with the notion of the “Antichrist” on RuNet—the term by which in this chapter we refer to the Russian segment of the Internet.

The Antichrist did not (as some apocryphal writings suggest) come falling out of the blue. Rather, this apocalyptic figure invokes a long tradition of Russian cultural imagery, where over the centuries he has undergone numerous historical and semantic transformations (Ewertowski 2010). He was understood as God’s enemy, the false Messiah, the usurper of the tsar’s power (_lzhe-tzar_), the embodiment of evil forces, and an individual who falsely interprets Christian values.

In particular the 17th century and the _Raskol_1 contributed to the vivid presence of the concept of the Antichrist in Russian cultural cognition. In this period those who came to be known as “Old Believers” interpreted the reformist Patriarch Nikon’s actions, which were supported by tsarist authorities, as the beginning of the Antichrist’s rule (Crummey 1970). Moreover, the Antichrist and his presence in the world were an important subject of Russian philosophy of the late 19th century, which was then under the strong influence of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity. In their numerous works, authors and philosophers such as Dostoyevsky, Berdyaev, Solovyov, Rozanov, Merezhkovsky, and Leontiev appealed to the concept of the Antichrist as an allegory of imminent evil, present both in the human and the surrounding world (Korolev 2004, Ewertowski 2010). Since the introduction of Christianity in Russia, the concept of the Antichrist has been used to designate “the other” in many differ-

---

1 The split in Orthodox Church, triggered in 1653 by the reforms of Patriarch Nikon, who tried to establish uniformity between Greek and Russian practice.
ent contexts—e.g. theological, philosophical, literary, and historical. Russian historiosophy has seen the Antichrist in individual figures such as Napoleon, Rasputin and Peter the Great, in political and social systems such as Russian autocracy (*samoderzhavie*), socialism, communism or liberal democracy, and in social groups such as Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims and (other) immigrants. Each epoch of Russian history created its own vision of Antichrist, visions which often have little in common with the Beast from the book of Revelation (Korolev 2004). Now, finally, the Antichrist is gay.

The different interpretations of the figure of the Antichrist in Russian history suggest that the social meaning of this rhetorical figure, as well as the normative and emotional responses he is supposed to evoke, are subject to change. While presented as quite a massive theological and social concept, the historical fluidity gives reason to suspect that in present-day discourses the rhetorical effects of the Antichrist may not be quite as unequivocal as intended. Indeed, his rhetorical function might at times even fail, opening up the heteronormative discourse he is supposed to support to “cracks” where, according to Michel Foucault (1998), the possibility for resistance resides. In this chapter we will therefore scrutinize present-day discursive formations of the Antichrist in Russia, not only focusing on how the notion of the Antichrist is employed by Russian religious nationalists, but also assessing its religious provenance in a secular context. We will first explain our use of the method of Critical Discourse Analysis. We will proceed by discussing the specificity of the space of Russian Internet, followed by a discussion of religious nationalism in general, and Orthodox nationalist approaches to homosexuality in particular. We will then present our materials, in which homosexuality is equated with the Antichrist in RuNet, and our analysis of how these equations may be understood. In the final paragraph we offer some concluding suggestions on how Antichrist-based heteronormative discourse may be understood and valued.

**Critical Discourse Analysis as a Set of “Conceptual Tools”**

The theoretical approach in this chapter, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), forms a suitable point of departure for our research intentions, but is hard to pin down in a simple definition. According to Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak (2003: 6), “there is no such thing as a uniform, common theory formation determining CDA.” Other scholars dealing with CDA have similarly argued that this framework should be approached as a set of “conceptual tools” rather than a consistent theory (Van Dijk 1985, Mottier 2002). The main aim of these tools is to de-mystify ideologies implicitly embedded in a discourse, constructed