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## More Than Digital Escapism? The Transformation of Russophone Queer Communities and Media Under Censorship and War (2019–2025)

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### ABSTRACT

Between 2019 and 2025, Russophone queer communities underwent a profound transformation from embodied party scenes to fragmented digital networks. While contemporary scholarship on Russian-speaking queer communities focuses predominantly on the damage inflicted after the 2013 propaganda law and the gradual erosion of human rights, this article examines how the queer media landscape has transformed during the turbulent period following the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine – a time marked by intensified anti-LGBT legislation and increasingly explicit conservative and authoritarian state rhetoric. Drawing on 35 interviews with queer activists and community members in emigration, alongside digital ethnography of platforms including VKontakte, Telegram, and Instagram, this article traces a radical reconfiguration of community-building strategies. In particular, it notes a shift from embodied presence and vibrant party scenes (by such online communities as LVBZ/Love Bazar, etc.) to dispersed media networks with educational and support purposes (Cheers Queers, Centre-T). The article argues that rather than marking a simple transition from vitality to survival, this transformation reflects a layered history in which spectacular and intimate forms of queer organising have always co-existed, and in which the period of relative cultural flourishing (2017-2021) was itself shaped by ongoing legal constraint. The article contributes to Russian queer studies, media studies, and diaspora studies by demonstrating how digital infrastructure built during pandemic lockdowns and mediated protest enabled communities to sustain support networks across emigration. These networks now function as vital spaces for those at the intersection of Russian-speaking and queer identity. This paradigm shift challenges linear oppression narratives, revealing how authoritarian constraint generates innovative forms of queer world-making across borders.

**Keywords:** queer diaspora, mediatisation, Russian LGBTQ+ activism, digital networks, queer joy, censorship

## Introduction

Between 2024 and 2025, I conducted a series of interviews about Russian-speaking queer media. Each time the conversation turned to the period before 2021, it was accompanied by a sense of sadness and nostalgia. From a global perspective, this moment might seem unusual: situated slightly before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the redoubled criminalization of queerness in Russia, yet also just after the global pandemic and lockdown. According to my respondents, it was a unique era marked by events and practices that have since disappeared and given way to something entirely different. Indeed, between 2017 and 2021, Russian (especially Moscow's) underground nightlife flourished, with queer parties drawing hundreds of participants and a substantial online following. By 2023, however, following a wave of emigration and increasing restrictions, queer sociality had largely moved into dispersed diaspora communities and moderated digital networks.<sup>1</sup>

This article traces the transformation of Russophone queer communities under escalating authoritarianism. It navigates the complex scene of mediatised parties that flourished in the period from 2017 to 2021 and traces the sporadic appearance of digital networks in reaction to the political climate. It asks what kind of digital infrastructure was built across overlapping periods of pandemic lockdown, protest, and legal escalation, and what this transformation reveals about the configurations of queer world-making under the extreme constraints of the post-2022 Russian context.

Rather than framing the trajectory as linear, this article aims to approach transformation as a complex process in which spectacular and intimate infrastructural modes of queer organization co-exist and mutually constitute one another. What I will henceforth refer to as the 'queer renaissance' of 2017-2021 was itself shaped by ongoing legal constraint and pre-existing underground scenes. What changed after 2022 was the scale, velocity, and geography of that shift. By studying transformation as a layered process, this article foregrounds issues that are often overlooked by accounts that focus exclusively on questions of legal restriction or state oppression.

Russia's legal landscape for LGBTQ people has deteriorated dramatically since the 2013 'gay propaganda' law, which prohibited representations of 'non-traditional sexual relationships' to minors.<sup>2</sup> The 2022 invasion of Ukraine intensified repression, culminating in November 2023's designation of the 'international LGBT movement' as extremist which effectively criminalised any organised queer activity.<sup>3</sup> These legal changes coincided with mass emigration: approximately 500,000 to 1 million Russians left the country between February 2022 and mid-2023. This disproportionately affected politically active populations, including LGBTQ communities.<sup>4</sup> Yet scholarship on Russian LGBTQ communities remains focused predominantly on legal restrictions, hate crime, and state-sponsored homophobia, with limited attention to how communities adapt, innovate, and sustain joy under such conditions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Freya Proudman, 'Exploring Research Gaps and Future Trajectories in Queer Diaspora Studies', *Sexualities* (2024), doi: [10.1177/13634607241301885](https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607241301885).

<sup>2</sup> Cai Wilkinson, 'Putting "Traditional Values" Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia', *Journal of Human Rights*, 13.3 (2014), pp. 363-79, doi: [10.1080/14754835.2014.919218](https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.919218)

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, 'Russian Court Bans "LGBT Movement"', Europe, *BBC News*, 30 November 2023 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67565509>> [accessed 26 May 2026].

<sup>4</sup> Félix Krawatzek, and Gwendolyn Sasse, *The Political Diversity of the New Migration From Russia Since February 2022* (Center for Eastern European and International Studies, 2024) <<https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-report/the-political-diversity-of-the-new-migration-from-russia-since-february-2022>> [accessed 26 May 2026]; Anna Prashizky, "'Living in Limbo": Digital Narratives of Migrants Fleeing Russia after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *First Monday*, published online 15 June 2023, doi: [10.5210/fm.v28i6.13174](https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i6.13174).

<sup>5</sup> Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014) <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucl/detail.action?docID=1879343>> [accessed 26 May 2026]; Alexander Kondakov, 'The Silenced

This article addresses this gap by examining two paradigmatic moments: first, the period of relative cultural flourishing from 2017 to 2021 that participants and commentators have termed the ‘Russian queer renaissance’, when a variety of new LGBTQ+ digital projects and NGOs appeared; and second, the post-2022 emergence of fragmented mediatised networks (such as Centre-T and Cheers Queers) which maintain community through non-hierarchical engagement, educational initiatives, moderation, and practices of mutual care. This periodization requires qualification: the ‘renaissance’ did not emerge in a vacuum. Scholars such as Maria Engström have traced a longer history of queer cultural expression in Russia, while Amico’s work on Moscow gay nightlife in the post-Soviet period demonstrates that party scenes and queer subcultural formation long predate the 2017–2021 moment.<sup>6</sup> Arrests in Chechnya beginning in 2017 unfolded simultaneously with the cultural flourishing described here, underscoring that ‘renaissance’ and repression were never mutually exclusive. Instead, they are often simultaneous processes and largely determined by geographical and social factors. Between these moments, both the Russian and global media sphere changed dramatically. Most notably, new digital infrastructures were built during the COVID-19 lockdowns (2020–2021)<sup>7</sup> and large-scale mediatised engagement was facilitated during the 2021 protests in Russia.<sup>8</sup>

This period of transformation was shaped by the increasing dominance of the media and the rapid rise of authoritarianism in Russia. This resulted in some of the most significant formations in the Russian-speaking queer and anti-war mediascape (primarily in emigration). This article draws on Jose Muñoz’s concept of queer world-making as a ‘concrete utopia’ — the projection of a utopian world that is ‘not yet here’ but performed as though already present.<sup>9</sup> In the Russian case, utopia had already been realised before 2021, but subsequently disappeared. The transformation of rhetoric, practices, and the mediascape itself imagines this pre-2021 period as a better time, combining Muñoz’s longing for a utopian future with what can be described as a ‘hauntology’ of the past: something which is lost before it reaches its full potential. This article will also draw on scholarship about the Russian queer diaspora, including Mole’s work on Russian-speaking queer migrants in Berlin, Polkov’s analysis of queer counter-hegemonic articulations in Scandinavi,<sup>10</sup> and Novitskaya’s examination of the politics and geopolitics of post-Soviet LGBTQ+ migration<sup>11</sup>, in order to situate the post-2022 networks within a longer history of Russian queer diasporic world-making.

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Citizens of Russia: Exclusion of Non-Heterosexual Subjects From Rights-Based Citizenship’, *Social & Legal Studies*, 23.2 (2014), pp. 151–74, doi: [10.1177/0964663913505315](https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663913505315).

<sup>6</sup> Maria Engström, ‘Transgressing the Mainstream: Camp, Queer and Populism in Russian Visual Culture’, in *Satire and Protest in Putin’s Russia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 97–119, doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-76279-7\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76279-7_6); Stephen Amico, *Roll Over, Tchaikovsky!: Russian Popular Music and Post-Soviet Homosexuality* (University of Illinois Press, 2014) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt6wr6z5>> [accessed 26 May 2026].

<sup>7</sup> N. A., Ganichev, and O. B. Koshovets, ‘Forcing the Digital Economy: How Will the Structure of Digital Markets Change as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Studies on Russian Economic Development*, 32.1 (2021), pp. 11–22, doi: [10.1134/S1075700721010056](https://doi.org/10.1134/S1075700721010056).

<sup>8</sup> Aytalina Kulichkina, Nicola Righetti, and Annie Waldherr, ‘Protest and Repression on Social Media: Pro-Navalny and pro-Government Mobilization Dynamics and Coordination Patterns on Russian Twitter’, *New Media & Society*, 27.9 (2025), pp. 5433–54, doi: [10.1177/14614448241254126](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241254126).

<sup>9</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 2nd edn (New York Press, 2019), pp. 16–18. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv335kvs2>> [accessed 26 May 2026].

<sup>10</sup> Kirill Polkov, ‘Queering Images of Russia in Sweden: Discursive Hegemony and Counter-Hegemonic Articulations 1991–2019’, *Tidskrift För Genusvetenskap*, 44.3 (2023), pp. 99–101, doi: [10.55870/tgv.v44i3.34372](https://doi.org/10.55870/tgv.v44i3.34372); Richard Mole, ‘Identity, Belonging and Solidarity among Russian-Speaking Queer Migrants in Berlin’, in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities* (Routledge, 2019), doi: [10.4324/9781315623078](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315623078).

<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Novitskaya, ‘New Queer Dissidents: Politics and Geopolitics of Post-Soviet LGBTQ Migration and Asylum’ (State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2022), <<https://www.proquest.com/openview/4d163ea8af28f0e24acc6bfe77df714d/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>> [accessed 26 May 2026].

This article is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, which hinges on the three key concepts of queer joy as a world-making practice, mediatization, and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's notion of 'intimate publics'. Section 3 details the research methods. Section 4 examines the 'Russian queer renaissance' (2017–2021), focusing on the role of mediated party scenes. Section 5 turns to the post-2022 period, analysing the shift toward networks of care and the evolution of digital practices. Section 6 provides a detailed account of digital moderation protocols. Section 7 considers broader paradigm shifts in queer world-making, and Section 8 provides a conclusion.

### Queer joy, mediatization, and intimate publics

This article organises its theoretical framework around three interconnected concepts: queer joy as a mode of world-making, mediatization as a constitutive force shaping community formation, and intimate publics as the affective infrastructure through which belonging is sustained under constraint. Rather than surveying the full range of queer and media theory, this article aims to develop these three concepts in relation to one another and to the empirical material at hand. 'Queer' is used here to denote both a specific identity category (non-normative sexuality and/or gender) and a mode of sociality and politics that refuses normative frameworks. This usage is consistent with the communities under study, where the Russian-language term *квир* (*kevīr*) was adopted precisely for its double valence as identity marker and political orientation.

Muñoz's work theorises queerness as inherently futural, arguing that 'queerness is not yet here' but glimpsed through aesthetic and affective practices that gesture toward alternative worlds. For Muñoz, queer cultural production functions as a 'concrete utopia' – Ernst Bloch's term for tangible manifestations of not-yet-realised possibilities.<sup>12</sup> In this framework, queer parties, performances, and digital spaces become sites where participants temporarily inhabit futures otherwise unavailable. This is particularly helpful for understanding Russian queer nightlife in the period 2017–2021: parties were not mere escapism but rehearsals of alternative sociality – 'laboratories', to use Jodie Taylor's term – where queer identity was actively produced through sound, aesthetics, and collective embodiment.<sup>13</sup> Amico's work on Russian gay party culture further demonstrates that such scenes have served as spaces of identity formation and affective community since the post-Soviet period. This research underpins this article's argument that the 'renaissance' was a qualitative intensification of longer-standing practices rather than a rupture *ex nihilo*.<sup>14</sup>

Clara and Nick Montgomery's notion of 'joyful militancy' reorients politics away from sacrifice and purity, foregrounding collective pleasure, care, and experimentation as forms of militant commitment.<sup>15</sup> Kristie Soares extends this with the concept of 'critical joy' – joy as a practice of survival 'among the dead, the near-dead, the dying' – positioning it as an infrastructure of survival under conditions designed to eliminate.<sup>16</sup> In contexts where LGBTQ+ people are designated as 'extremists' or threats to the nation, insisting on joy becomes, in Soares's terms, not a luxury but a necessity.<sup>17</sup> Research on the political role of

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<sup>12</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp. 20–22.

<sup>13</sup> Jodie Taylor, *Playing It Queer* (Peter Lang Group AG, 2012), pp. 45–47 doi: [10.3726/978-3-0351-0420-2](https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0351-0420-2).

<sup>14</sup> Amico, *Roll Over, Tchaikovsky!*.

<sup>15</sup> Carla Bergman, and Nick Montgomery, *Joyful Militancy* (AK Press, 2017), pp. 5–7.

<sup>16</sup> Kristie Soares, 'Critical Joy Studies: The Emergence of a Field and a Movement', *Journal of Festive Studies*, 7 (2025), p. 20, doi: [10.33823/jfs.2025.7.1.290](https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2025.7.1.290).

<sup>17</sup> Soares, 'Critical Joy Studies', p. 21.

party spaces –from post-Soviet rave culture and the transformations of youth identity<sup>18</sup> to the Love Parade as a form of political identification,<sup>19</sup> from Berlin’s Berghain as a space of affect and sexual disorientation,<sup>20</sup> to the *tusovka* as a form of subcultural sociality<sup>21</sup>—provides further grounding for understanding how pleasure, politics, and community intersect in club and party contexts. The aforementioned frameworks form part of a broader body of comparative work demonstrating that the mediated party scene is not merely a cultural or recreational phenomenon, but also a profoundly political one.

In the Russian authoritarian context, joy has operated through what can be termed ‘strategic spectacular visibility’ during the period from 2017 to 2021, and ‘strategic intimate opacity’ following 2022. Strategic spectacular visibility is evident in mediated parties that attracted substantial international attention while employing coded aesthetics for domestic audiences. Strategic intimate opacity emerged after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, alongside the growing practice of designating companies and individuals as extremist. It involves the use of encrypted networks that minimise public visibility while sustaining affective bonds. For example, closed Telegram and Signal channels, invite-only gatherings, and diaspora-based projects that protect participants inside Russia through layered access and anonymisers.<sup>22</sup> In both cases, joy functions not only as an emotional experience, but also a deliberate practice of world-making under constraint.

Mediatization theory helps account for how these practices are structured by contemporary media environments. Mediatization describes processes whereby media become constitutive of social reality itself, rather than simply a channel of communication. For queer communities under censorship, mediatization operates in a unique way. Pre-2022 parties were designed for circulation: the online life of an event was integral to its existence, not secondary to it. As Nick Couldry argues, media rituals ‘are the key mechanism through which that assumed legitimacy is reproduced’.<sup>23</sup> Russian queer parties thus existed simultaneously as embodied gatherings and as circulating images, memes, playlists, and event flyers — what can be termed mediated parties. Online circulation allowed those in regional cities or those unable to attend to participate vicariously, creating a shared aesthetic repertoire and a sense of belonging that exceeded the physical venue.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s concept of ‘intimate publics’ – spaces formed around shared affect and non-normative attachments rather than formal political discourse – helps to theorise how mediated queer scenes sustain community.<sup>24</sup> ‘Intimate publics’ are built through recurring affective and aesthetic practices: particular outfits, visual references, memes, tracks, or slogans that feel collectively legible. For

<sup>18</sup> Alexei Yurchak, ‘Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Nightlife’, in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. by Adele Marie Barker (Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 76–109, doi: [10.2307/j.ctv113164m.8](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv113164m.8).

<sup>19</sup> John Borneman, and Stefan Senders, ‘Politics without a Head: Is the “Love Parade” a New Form of Political Identification?’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 15.2 (2000), pp. 294–317, doi: [10.1525/can.2000.15.2.294](https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2000.15.2.294).

<sup>20</sup> Johan Andersson, ‘Berghain: Space, Affect, and Sexual Disorientation’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 40.3 (2022), pp. 451–68, doi: [10.1177/02637758221096463](https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758221096463).

<sup>21</sup> Elena Zdravomyslova, ‘The Café Saigon Tusovka: One Segment of the Informal-Public Sphere of Late-Soviet Society’, in *Biographical Research in Eastern Europe: Altered Lives and Broken Biographies*, 1st edn (Routledge, 2002), doi: [10.4324/9781315193748-17](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315193748-17); Hilary Pilkington, ‘Farewell to the Tusovka Masculinities and Femininities On the Moscow Youth Scene’, in *Gender, Generation and Identity in Contemporary Russia* (Routledge, 1996), pp. 236–63, <<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/reader/read-online/26457132-4d44-4391-803d-7d58c74512db/chapter/pdf?context=ubx>>; Florian Copenrath, ‘The Leybl as Tusovka: Approaching Hip-Hop Musical Collectives in Bishkek’, *LASPM Journal*, 14.2 (2024), pp. 163–81, doi: [10.5429/2079-3871\(2024\)v14i2.9en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2024)v14i2.9en).

<sup>22</sup> Emil Edenborg, ‘Queer on the Home Front: Russian LGBTIQ Activism and Queer Security in the Wake of Russia’s War in Ukraine’, *Security Dialogue*, 56 (2025), pp. 170–187 doi: [10.1177/09670106241306558](https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106241306558).

<sup>23</sup> Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (Routledge, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Lauren Berlant, and Michael Warner, ‘Sex in Public’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24.2 (1998), pp. 547–66, doi: [10.1086/448884](https://doi.org/10.1086/448884).

Russian queers outside Moscow and St Petersburg, encountering LVBZ or other party images on Instagram, following Telegram channels, or streaming DJ sets constituted meaningful participation and recognition, generating what might be called ‘affective continuity’ – an ongoing sense of co-presence maintained through media.<sup>25</sup>

After 2022, communities shifted from mediatised parties to mediatised networks: heavily moderated, security-conscious digital ecosystems that distribute authority and sustain community across borders without centralised physical gatherings. This transformation echoes Manuel Castells’ analysis of network societies, in which social organisation operates through decentralised digital flows rather than hierarchical institutions.<sup>26</sup> Yet Russophone queer networks diverge from Castells’ optimisation narrative, having developed under conditions of necessity rather than efficiency. They exhibit distinctive characteristics: the use of encrypted platforms, *samizdat*-style information circulation, and careful calibration of visibility in response to extremism and propaganda legislation.

Scholarship on the Russian queer diaspora further clarifies how language, solidarity, and the negotiation of imperial hierarchies shape these transnational networks.<sup>27</sup> Mole’s work on identity and belonging among Russian-speaking queer migrants in Berlin traces how diasporic organisations such as Quarteera sustain both sexual and ethno-cultural solidarities.<sup>28</sup> Novitskaya’s analysis of the politics and geopolitics of post-Soviet LGBTQ+ migration, and Polkov’s work on queer counter-hegemonic articulations in Scandinavia examine how Russian-speaking migrants navigate racialised, geopolitical, and (post-)imperial hierarchies in Western contexts.<sup>29</sup> The post-2022 diaspora is not the first Russian queer diaspora, and insights from earlier migratory waves — including the presence of innovation and joy in diasporic contexts — help complicate narratives of pure loss or rupture.

Russia’s legal trajectory forms a crucial backdrop to these developments. The 2013 ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’ law marked a turning point, rendering public queer visibility legally precarious.<sup>30</sup> Yet, as Engström notes, queer content expanded and diversified, as communities adapted via coded communication, adult-only framing, and platform migration.<sup>31</sup> Halberstam’s work on camp and failure is useful here: camp aesthetics allow communities to ‘reroute’ rather than directly confront power, staging alternative values through humour, excess, and stylistic dissonance.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Matilda Tudor, ‘A Queer Kind of Dwelling: Digital Thrownness and Existential Security among Sexual Minorities in Russia’, *New Media & Society*, 26.7 (2024), pp. 3895–911, doi: [10.1177/14614448221109801](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221109801).

<sup>26</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2009), doi: [10.1002/9781444319514.biblio](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444319514.biblio).

<sup>27</sup> Polkov, ‘Queering Images of Russia in Sweden’; Alexandra Novitskaya, ‘Russian-Speaking LGBTQ Communities in the West’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Mole, ‘Identity, Belonging and Solidarity’.

<sup>29</sup> Polkov, ‘Queering Images of Russia in Sweden’.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Kondakov, ‘The Influence of the “Gay-Propaganda” Law on Violence against LGBTIQ People in Russia: Evidence from Criminal Court Rulings’, *European Journal of Criminology*, 18.6 (2021), pp. 940–59, doi: [10.1177/1477370819887511](https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819887511); Radzhana Buyantueva, ‘Virtually (Non)Existent? The Role of Digital Media in Russian LGBTQ+ Activism’, *International Politics*, published online 3 July 2024, doi: [10.1057/s41311-024-00592-7](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00592-7).

<sup>31</sup> Engström, ‘Transgressing the Mainstream’.

<sup>32</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, A John Hope Franklin Center Book (Duke University Press, 2011), doi: [10.1515/9780822394358](https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394358).

The expansion of ‘propaganda’ provisions to all ages in 2022 and the 2023 Supreme Court extremism designation have criminalised even neutral or positive representations of LGBTQ+ lives.<sup>33</sup> As Edenborg argues, this has pushed activism toward what might be termed low-visibility or encrypted politics, oriented around opacity, evasion, and tactical withdrawal rather than public confrontation.<sup>34</sup> Existing scholarship on Russian LGBTQ+ activism has largely focused on NGOs, legal advocacy, and human rights documentation.<sup>35</sup> Building on ethnographic work that has begun to redress this, the present analysis foregrounds queer joy — as it is cultivated in nightlife, digital media, and encrypted networks — as a key modality of Russian and Russophone queer politics.

### Research method

This research combines semi-structured interviews with digital ethnography. Between January 2024 and January 2025, I conducted 35 interviews with Russian-speaking queer people currently living in emigration, including 15 activists and 20 community members. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 3.5 hours, conducted primarily via encrypted video calls (Zoom, Telegram) and occasionally in person (UK, Serbia, Turkey, Kazakhstan). All interviews were conducted in Russian and translated by the author. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling across active network members, regular participants, and social media followers, with attention to geographic diversity (Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Germany, Serbia, UK), emigration timing, age (19-42), and gender identity. To ensure confidentiality, interview excerpts use alphanumeric codes (e.g., Int. 3) bearing no relation to participants’ identities.

This study also employs Critical Discourse Analysis to trace the evolution of queer linguistic markers, including shifting code words, self-references, and naming conventions within the digital landscape. The primary dataset consists of 35 semi-structured interviews (see Table 1) and a longitudinal analysis of over 50 thematic Telegram channels. These channels were selected based on frequent mentions in interviews and their role in the community structure, including *Parni Plus*, *Just Got Lucky*, *Kilkota*, *Lesbian Lobby*, *Lesbulochnaya*, *Vslukh*, *Pomya Ruki*, etc.

The computational analysis utilises TGStat statistics to monitor mentions and views of the word ‘queer’ (*квир*, *квирный*) from December 2019 to the final data collection point in December 2025. This analysis includes both niche community channels and prominent left-leaning media outlets such as *Sota*, *DOXA*, and *Meduza* to capture the term’s migration from subcultural to mainstream political discourse.

Table 1. Interview participants’ profiles.

Category	Number	Details
<b>Total Participants</b>	35	15 activists, 20 community members
<b>Interview Duration</b>	—	Activists: 3.5+ hours; Community: 2+ hours
<b>Age Distribution</b>		
20–24	5	Early career/university

<sup>33</sup> Radzhana Buyantueva, ‘Virtually (Non)Existent? The Role of Digital Media in Russian LGBTQ+ Activism’, *International Politics*, published online 3 July 2024, doi: [10.1057/s41311-024-00592-7](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00592-7); Kondakov, ‘The Silenced Citizens of Russia’.

<sup>34</sup> Edenborg, ‘Queer on the Home Front’.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Chaney, ‘Civil Society, “Traditional Values” and LGBT Resistance to Heteronormative Rights Hegemony: Analysis of the UN Universal Periodic Review in the Russian Federation’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70.4 (2018), p. 638–65, doi: [10.1080/09668136.2018.1453924](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1453924).

25–29	10	Established professionals
30–34	9	
35–39	9	
40+	2	Long-term community figures
<b>Geographic Location (Current)</b>		
Armenia	4	Yerevan
Georgia	8	Tbilisi
Germany	6	Berlin, Munich
Kazakhstan	2	Almaty, Astana
Serbia	5	Belgrade, Novy Sad
Turkey	3	Istanbul
United Kingdom	7	London, Edinburgh, Oxford
<b>Emigration Timing</b>		
Pre-2022	8	Before full-scale invasion
Early 2022 (Feb–Jun)	12	Immediate post-invasion
Late 2022–2023	10	After extremism law
2024–2025	5	Recent emigrants
<b>Gender Identity (Overlapping)</b>		
Lesbian/Bi women	16	
Gay/Bi men	11	
Trans people	12	Including non-binary people: Lesbian/Bi women and gay/bi men

Digital ethnography involved systematic observation of VKontakte communities, Instagram accounts of LVBZ, Popoff Kitchen, and Dragzina, and Telegram channels associated with Centre-T and Cheers Queers from 2017 to the present. For post-2022 networks, I analysed approximately 13 thematic Telegram channels, 220 Instagram posts from Cheers Queers (2023–2025), and more than 50 posts from Centre-T (2022–2025), documenting communication patterns, moderation practices, and community norms. These channels were selected because they represent the primary formations that are the focus of this study. The TGStat data presented in Illustration 1 draws on a broader sample of channels using the word ‘queer’ (*квир*, *квирный*) in their metadata over the period December 2019 to December 2025, providing a panoramic view of lexical trends. Specific channels monitored are those indexed by TGStat for Russian-language content and, while the overall sample may not be fully representative, the directional trend is consistent with interview data and ethnographic observation. Observation was conducted with awareness of my participant

status. I have been embedded in these communities since 2022, initially in Russia and later in emigration. This positionality provided access to intimate community knowledge but requires reflexivity about how my embeddedness shapes interpretation. Extensive data triangulation – comparing interviews, observational data, and media coverage – helps mitigate potential biases.

Analytically, I employ thematic coding (using NVivo) combined with critical discourse analysis, attending to how participants frame experiences, what tensions emerge in accounts, and how language communicates political positioning. Thematic codes were developed inductively from the interview data and then refined in dialogue with the theoretical framework. Core themes included: visibility and concealment strategies; the affective dimensions of party scenes and digital networks; experiences of emigration and diaspora; and the role of moderation and infrastructure in sustaining community. I focus particularly on the 2019-2022 transformation, COVID-19's role in accelerating digital infrastructure, and the post-2022 emergence of fragmented networks. Ethical considerations were paramount given participants' vulnerability. All participants provided informed consent; many agreed to speak precisely because they knew me as a community member, creating conditions for frank conversation. All identifying details beyond public activists' names (e.g., Centre-T founder Yan Dvorkin, Cheers Queers co-founder Tatiana Kalinina) have been withheld.

### The 'Russian Queer Renaissance'

The period between 2017 and 2021 was marked by a 'renaissance' of queer digital and artistic production, including the proliferation of parties, media outlets such as Just Got Lucky, and decentralised art collectives. By 'renaissance' here, I refer to a time-limited resurgence and intensification of queer cultural production, visibility, and informal-public organizing that developed within, rather than after, ongoing legal and physical violence. This development continued the 'path to resistance' identified by Buyantueva, as activism shifted toward online-first and subcultural organizing after the 2013 'propaganda law'.<sup>36</sup>

Hate crime data supports this periodization: after a sharp rise following the 2013 law, violence peaked in 2015 and then stabilised at consistently high levels. This stabilization, though at a high level, created a hostile but navigable environment in which urban queer networks could consolidate.<sup>37</sup> This 'renaissance', however, was geographically uneven. While Moscow and St. Petersburg experienced cultural expansion, regions such as Chechnya saw extreme escalation of violence, most notably the 2017 anti-gay purge involving the detention, torture, and killing of over 100 men.<sup>38</sup>

Urban queer life during this period coalesced around the *tusovka* as both communal and political form: an 'informal-public sphere' of 'meaningful participation' where a 'politics without a head' was enacted through aesthetics.<sup>39</sup> Party spaces and mediated scenes enabled the 'performance of identity' and extended

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<sup>36</sup> Radzhana Buyantueva, and Maryna Shevtsova, 'Introduction: LGBTQ+ Activism and the Power of Locals', in *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova (Springer International Publishing, 2020), p. 9, doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-20401-3\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20401-3_1).

<sup>37</sup> Sergey Katsuba, 'The Decade of Violence: A Comprehensive Analysis of Hate Crimes Against LGBTQ in Russia in the Era of the "Gay Propaganda Law" (2010–2020)', *Victims & Offenders*, 19.3 (2024), pp. 395–418, doi: [10.1080/15564886.2023.2167142](https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2023.2167142).

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Kondakov, 'The Silenced Citizens of Russia: Exclusion of Non-Heterosexual Subjects From Rights-Based Citizenship', *Social & Legal Studies*, 23.2 (2014), pp. 151-74, (p. 161), doi: [10.1177/0964663913505315](https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663913505315).

<sup>39</sup> Yurchak, 'Gagarin and the Rave Kids'; Zdravomyslova, 'The Café Saigon Tusovka'.

participation beyond physical venues, as ‘digital witnesses’ engaged through presence alone,<sup>40</sup> generating forms of belonging, ‘homing desire’ and diaspora space<sup>41</sup>. As one respondent noted, ‘even just being a member creates some feeling of belonging’.

These formations constituted a collective refusal of invisibility within a hostile but partially navigable environment, distinct from Western models of visibility politics.<sup>42</sup> However, increasing state ‘regulation’ of non-heteronormativity eroded this informal-public sphere.<sup>43</sup> The term *tusovka* itself – once denoting localised, informal networks of ‘being in the know’ – has largely fallen out of use, reflecting a shift toward dispersed, transnational configurations focused on survival after the post-2022 legal and physical rupture.<sup>44</sup>

As one organiser described the logic of this moment, spaces were created in which being queer was not framed through suffering or struggle but through the celebration of beauty, music, and one another. This shift aligns with work on ‘joyful militancy’ that conceptualises resistance not primarily as sacrifice, but as the cultivation of collective pleasure as political commitment.<sup>45</sup> In the Russian context, this materialised through deliberate aesthetic and organisational choices: queer parties with distinct visual languages; coded promotion; transnational media circulation; and digital initiatives foregrounding beauty, creativity, and pride within a hostile legal environment.

The mediatised party scene’s peak occurred between 2017 and 2021 through three major Moscow-based formations: LVBZ (LoveBazar), Popoff Kitchen, and Dragzina. Each operated simultaneously in physical and digital space, with offline attendance reaching several hundred people per event, and online reach extending to thousands through Instagram, VKontakte, Telegram, and coverage in outlets such as Dazed, i-D, Afisha Daily, and Wonderzine.<sup>46</sup> These parties were designed with media representation in mind; documentation and circulation were integral to their existence as community events, not incidental to them.

LVBZ (LoveBazar), founded by Lisa Androshina and a queer women/femme collective, functioned as a woman-centred space within Moscow’s historically male-dominated nightlife. Each party carried a thematic narrative (‘Safari’, ‘San Junipero’, ‘Summer of Love’) sustained through visual design, music curation, and costume suggestions. This thematic coherence was strategic: it made parties aesthetically legible in digital circulation and easily recognisable in image feeds. LVBZ developed an expansive digital identity through teaser posters, playlists, GIFs, memes, and post-party photosets, employing glitch aesthetics, neon palettes, and hybrid Russian-English slang.<sup>47</sup> Announcements via Telegram and Instagram used queer-coded emojis and inside jokes; language blending Russian, English, slang, and emoji functioned as a filtering mechanism

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<sup>40</sup> Kirill Filimonov, *The Performance of Participation in Russian Alternative Media: Discourse, Materiality and Affect in Grassroots Media Production in Contemporary Russia*, Uppsala Studies in Media and Communication, 15 (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2021), p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> Mole, ‘Identity, Belonging and Solidarity’, p. 81.

<sup>42</sup> Borneman and Senders, ‘Politics without a Head’.

<sup>43</sup> Olga Andreevskikh, ‘Discourses on Non-Heteronormative Masculinities and Intimate Partner Violence: A Russian Media Case Study’, *Journal of Family Violence*, 39.7 (2024), pp. 1313–24, doi: [10.1007/s10896-023-00614-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00614-7).

<sup>44</sup> Buyantueva and Shevtsova, ‘Introduction: LGBTQ+ Activism and the Power of Locals’; Interviews, 2024–25.

<sup>45</sup> Bergman and Montgomery, *Joyful Militancy*.

<sup>46</sup> Anastasiia Fedorova, ‘Dragzina: Join the Queer Artists Claiming Russia’s Summer Houses as ‘Their Own’’, *The Calvert Journal / New East Archive*, 24 August 2020 <<https://www.new-east-archive.org/features/show/12154/dragzina-dacha-russia-z>> [accessed 20 January 2026].

<sup>47</sup> Author’s observations and interviews, 2024–25.

and marker of belonging. These mediated elements extended the emotional arcs of parties: anticipation was built through teasers; participation was reinforced through photos and videos; memory was sustained via playlists and archived visual materials.

Popoff Kitchen, founded in 2017 by Nikita Egorov-Kirillov, evolved from small gatherings of around sixty people to large-scale events hosting up to 800 participants, in Moscow and abroad. Its distinctive strategy was camp double-coding: framing raves as ‘cooking classes’, with DJs styled as ‘chefs’, nights as ‘master-classes’ or ‘brunches’, and line-ups as ‘menus’. This framing was innocuous at the level of event description yet legible to queer audiences as a coded reference to sex, fetish, and underground culture.<sup>48</sup> Promotional imagery frequently deployed fetish aesthetics, signalling content to culturally literate viewers while remaining technically compliant with platform moderation and propaganda restrictions. The kitchen theme allowed Popoff Kitchen to be simultaneously public and private: on the surface, it was an experimental ‘culinary’ event; in practice, an explicitly queer techno rave. This double strategy operated in Paul Chevigny’s grey areas, where law is nominally in force but selectively enforced, allowing limited latitude for semi-public gatherings.<sup>49</sup>

Dragzina emerged in 2019 as Russia’s first drag zine and cultural platform, founded by make-up artist Masha Vorslav.<sup>50</sup> It rapidly expanded into performances, fashion collaborations, and parties that fused drag, burlesque, and theatricality. A distinctive feature was its incorporation of Russian cultural codes into visual aesthetics: performers appeared in *kokoshniks* and other traditional motifs alongside references to local pop culture.<sup>51</sup> This represented an attempt to reclaim national symbols and resist narratives that cast queerness as purely foreign. During COVID-19 lockdowns, Dragzina experimented with augmented reality (AR) drag performances viewable via mobile apps, bringing digital drag into private domestic spaces and extending access beyond Moscow.<sup>52</sup> This adaptation prefigured post-2022 shifts in queer infrastructures towards dispersed, technologically mediated forms.

Participation in these party formations can be understood through a model of concentric circles, which also draws productively on scholarship about the *tusovka* – the Soviet and post-Soviet informal gathering as a site of subcultural belonging and identity formation.<sup>53</sup> At the core stood organisers and scene-makers: producers, DJs, drag performers, and visual artists responsible for constructing the party’s mythology, iconography, and affective orientation. Around them, a second circle comprised regular participants familiar with codes and willing to engage with dress themes and aesthetic expectations. Access required cultural and aesthetic literacy – knowledge of where announcements appeared, how to interpret coded language, and how to present oneself in accordance with the scene’s norms. A third circle consisted of followers and digital witnesses: users who primarily engaged through mediated representation (Instagram posts, VK communities, Telegram channels) without necessarily attending offline events. For many in regional cities,

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<sup>48</sup> Anastasiia Fedorova, ‘Queer in Russia: The LGBTQ+ Parties, DJs and Collectives Uniting Communities through Music’, *Ransom Note*, 15 November 2021 <<https://www.theransomnote.com/music/featured-music/queer-in-russia-the-lgbtq-parties-djs-and-collectives-uniting-communities-through-music/>> [accessed 20 January 2026].

<sup>49</sup> Paul Chevigny, ‘The Populism of Fear: Politics of Crime in the Americas’, *Punishment & Society*, 5.1 (2003), p.80, doi: 10.1177/1462474503005001293.

<sup>50</sup> Fedorova, ‘Dragzina’.

<sup>51</sup> Author’s observations and interviews, 2024-25.

<sup>52</sup> Nikita Shokhov, Dragzina (holographic drag performance), *Orientation Device project*, 2021–22 <https://www.nikitashokhov.art/works/dragzina>.

<sup>53</sup> Coppenrath, ‘The Leybl as Tusovka’.

this mediated contact was their primary or only connection to the Moscow scene. Party photos functioned as evidence that visible queer life existed in Russia, reducing feelings of isolation.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond these circles lay tertiary mediation: international media coverage, academic analysis, and retrospective documentation, through which the parties appeared as emblematic cases of Russian queer world-making.<sup>55</sup> This model illustrates how community differentiation according to proximity, access, and engagement operated in practice. The outer circles' witnessing and circulation sustained the parties' symbolic power, while the inner circles' embodied experience sustained meaning and motivation. The organisers' labour sustained both.

Orientation towards visibility and international media also raises questions about representation: which forms of queerness were deemed attractive or legible to global cultural industries, and how far these logics reproduced hierarchies familiar from Western contexts. The orientation toward international media – visible in coverage in outlets such as i-D and The Calvert Journal – served a dual function. Externally, it positioned Russian queer culture within global circuits of cultural legitimacy, countering narratives of backwardness or victimhood. Internally, it created a feedback loop in which international visibility conferred domestic cultural capital. However, this dynamic was not without exclusionary effects: it privileged forms of queerness that were legible to international audiences and tended to centre metropolitan, English-literate, fashion-aware participants. Strict door policies and an emphasis on stylised self-presentation also limited access along lines of age, class, geography, and disability.<sup>56</sup>

Legally and politically, what is striking in party discourse is the relative absence of explicit confrontation with the state. Promotional materials and public-facing narratives emphasised joy, aesthetics, music, and community rather than critique of state restrictions. This absence functioned as a safety strategy. Confrontation through overt denunciation would have rendered parties more vulnerable to police intervention, closure, and criminal prosecution. A documented example is Queer Studio's charity event 'Show Me Love' in April 2021, which aimed to raise funds for human rights organisations but was shut down by police during the programme.<sup>57</sup> This illustrates how even cautiously framed events can be read as political and repressed accordingly. Parties navigated this space through several tactics: enforcing 18+ age limits; registering as cultural events; using coded language and insider channels; and cultivating international visibility as a protective factor. This practice aligns with Jack Halberstam's notion of 'low theory', where politics does not depend on state recognition but on constructing liveable alternatives in spaces partially outside the state purview.<sup>58</sup>

COVID-19 lockdowns (from March 2020 into late 2021) functioned as a transitional moment, forcing communities to develop digital infrastructures that later underpinned post-2022 survival. With physical gatherings prohibited or heavily restricted, organisers shifted activities entirely online. LVBZ and Popoff

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<sup>54</sup> PinkNews, 'LGBT in Russia: Smashing Stereotypes and Creating a Queer Future', 3 August 2019 <https://www.thepinknews.com/2019/08/03/lgbt-russians-creating-queer-future/>.

<sup>55</sup> i-D, 'This Party Is Redefining Queer Nightlife in Russia', 15 October 2020 <<https://i-d.co/article/popoff-kitchen-is-the-techno-party-redefining-lgbtq-nightlife-in-russia/>> [accessed 20 January 2026].

<sup>56</sup> Int. 19, May 2025; Eleanor Formby, 'LGBT "Communities" and the (Self-)Regulation and Shaping of Intimacy', *Sociological Research Online*, 27.1 (2022), pp. 8–26, doi: 10.1177/1360780420974031.

<sup>57</sup> Fedorova, 'Queer in Russia'.

<sup>58</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 15–36 (p. 21).

Kitchen hosted livestreamed DJ sets; Dragzina produced online and AR-based performances.<sup>59</sup> More significantly, Telegram channels proliferated and consolidated their role as primary arenas for community maintenance. For many participants, the COVID period revealed that physical co-presence, while central, was not the only way to sustain community. Encrypted chats, playlists, shared digital archives, and recurring usernames in comment streams generated a sense of continuity and familiarity.<sup>60</sup> Digital ethnography on Russian queer ‘dwelling’ suggests that digital media ‘multiply space’, enabling individuals to inhabit online environments that affirm desire and identity when offline life cannot.<sup>61</sup>

### Post-2022 transformation

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted a massive exodus, with estimates indicating that between 800,000 and 1 million people fled Russia<sup>62</sup>. This migration wave – predominantly composed of young professionals in high-tech and media – fundamentally altered the digital landscape.<sup>63</sup> Computational analysis of Telegram metadata confirms this rupture: Topic 1 (relocation and asylum) skyrocketed in frequency, effectively displacing earlier ‘renaissance’ themes of cultural identity and nightlife. This quantitative shift mirrors the state’s aggressive legal ‘regulation’ of non-heteronormativity<sup>64</sup> and the ‘weaponization of sexuality’ used to consolidate national unity.<sup>65</sup> Participants now describe ‘living in limbo’, utilizing digital narratives to navigate the ‘forced migration’ and legal precarity of exile.<sup>66</sup> This period is defined by a ‘hauntological’ loss — a nostalgia for a potential future that was abruptly halted, leaving the community to navigate a ‘spectral inheritance’ of lost progress.<sup>67</sup>

Interviews consistently described this period through notions of rupture and loss. Int. 15, recalling pre-war optimism, reflected: ‘I used to think there would be real Pride in Moscow when I was 18-19. You hear about old Powerhouse, the LoveBazar, how it was all surreal and shiny. And what did we get? Sometimes I feel like we got cheated.’ This sense of generational betrayal permeated younger participants’ accounts – those who were slightly too young to participate in the renaissance now face diaspora without having experienced that flourishing. Yet it is worth noting that diasporic contexts also generate their own forms of solidarity, community, and innovation alongside loss – a dimension documented in research on Russian-speaking queer migrants in Berlin, where collective life and shared identity-making actively emerged in emigration.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Interviews, 2024-25.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews, 2024-25 (n.21 mentioned this familiarity).

<sup>61</sup> Tudor, ‘A Queer Kind of Dwelling’.

<sup>62</sup> Krawatzek and Sasse, *The Political Diversity of the New Migration from Russia since February 2022*.

<sup>63</sup> Prashizky, ‘Living in Limbo’.

<sup>64</sup> Andreevskikh, ‘Discourses on Non-Heteronormative Masculinities’.

<sup>65</sup> Ellery G. Cushman, and Kiril Avramov, ‘Eurosodom: Specifics of Weaponized Sexuality and Gender-Based Narratives in Contemporary Russian and Pro-Russian Disinformation’, *Revista ICONO 14*, 19.1 (2021), pp. 123-54, (p.134), doi: [10.7195/ri14.v19i1.1626](https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v19i1.1626).

<sup>66</sup> Prashizky, ‘Living in Limbo’.

<sup>67</sup> Ruben Hordijk, *Spectral Inheritance: Unlearning the Maturity-Trope*, Linköping Studies in Arts and Sciences (Linköping University Electronic Press, 2024), p. 274 doi: [10.3384/9789180754781](https://doi.org/10.3384/9789180754781).

<sup>68</sup> Richard Mole ‘Identity, Belonging and Solidarity among Russian-Speaking Queer Migrants in Berlin’, *Slavic Review*, 77.1 (2018), pp. 77-98, (p. 80), doi: [10.1017/slr.2018.11](https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2018.11).

Centre-T and Cheers Queers, both founded 2022-2023, exemplify what this article terms mediatised networks: heavily moderated digital ecosystems prioritising security, distributing authority, and sustaining community across borders without centralised gatherings. Unlike mediatised parties (where physical events were amplified through digital circulation), mediatised networks operate primarily digitally, with occasional, carefully managed offline meetings.

Centre-T, founded by activist Yan Dvorkin (who speaks publicly under his name), functions as an online resource platform and support network for trans people from Russia and neighbouring countries. Its architecture is deliberately fragmented: multiple Telegram channels serve different purposes (general discussion, regional-specific, mutual aid, healthcare navigation), with distinct moderation teams and access protocols. This atomisation serves security: if one channel is compromised, others remain intact. Int. 9, a volunteer moderator, explained: ‘We learned from what happened to activists in Russia. You can’t have everything in one place. You can’t have one leader everyone knows. You have to be everywhere and nowhere.’

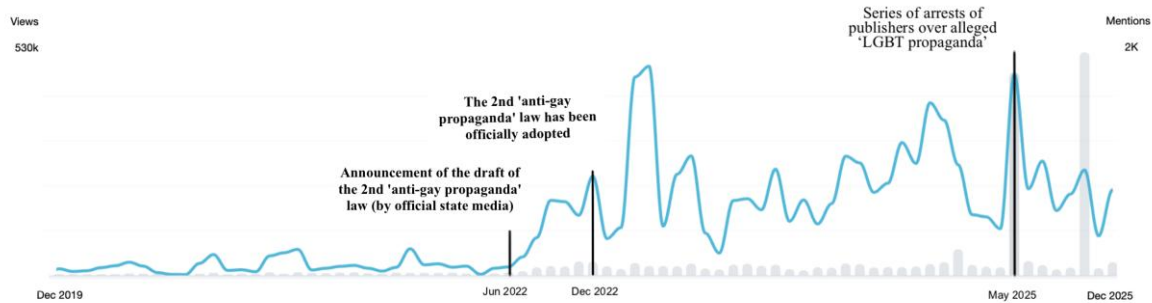
Centre-T provides crucial infrastructure: hormone replacement therapy (HRT) information navigating diaspora healthcare systems; legal resources for name and gender marker changes across different countries; housing networks; psychological support and peer counselling; and safety protocols for those still in Russia. Critically, Centre-T distributes knowledge production: information is compiled and verified by volunteers, information comes from collective expertise, and members share experiences navigating German clinics, Georgian bureaucracy, and Serbian administrative systems. Int. 11 described: ‘It’s not like an NGO where they tell you what to do. It’s people who’ve been through it telling you how they survived.’

Centre-T’s moderation protocols are extensive and explicit. Moderators are trained through internal documentation on conflict resolution, trauma-informed communication, and recognising infiltration attempts. Discussions around Ukrainian-Russian tensions receive particular attention: moderators actively intervene to prevent Russian nationalist rhetoric, centre Ukrainian voices, and acknowledge Russian imperial violence. This reflects the broader challenge in Russophone diaspora networks: Russian as a shared language enables communication across nationalities while simultaneously reproducing imperial hierarchies – the word ‘Russophone’ (*русскоязычный*) indexes a linguistic community that includes Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kazakhs, and others who may have complex relationships to Russian as a language of solidarity. Centre-T navigates this through the deliberate centring of non-Russian post-Soviet queers and the explicit naming of power dynamics. Yet Centre-T’s fragmentation comes with costs: access is challenging for those without digital literacy or secure devices and geographic dispersal means limited physical community. Int. 13 lamented: ‘I’m grateful for the information, but I miss bodies. I miss dancing with other trans people, not just texting them’.

Cheers Queers, co-founded in 2023 by journalist and activist Tatiana Kalinina (who writes publicly under her name) and others, foregrounds lesbian and queer women’s experiences through a hybrid model: encrypted Telegram chats combined with a public Instagram account and occasional in-person reading groups and cultural events. Unlike Centre-T’s emphasis on instrumental support, Cheers Queers prioritises cultural production and joy, though both networks overlap significantly in function and membership. Cheers Queers’ reading groups – held in Berlin, Tbilisi, and online – discuss Russian and Soviet literature, queer theory, and contemporary fiction, explicitly connecting literary content to lived experiences of repression and diaspora. Int. 18 described: ‘Reading together makes me feel like we’re still building something, not just surviving. Like we have culture, not just crisis.’ These groups function as intimate

publics, or ‘spaces formed around shared affect and non-normative attachments, sustained through recurring practices’.<sup>69</sup>

Illustration 1. TGStat statistics on mentions and views of the word queer (*‘квир’, ‘квирный’*) from December 2019 to December 2025.



At the level of language and naming, digital practices also shifted significantly after 2022. Analysis of Telegram data (Illustration 1) indicates that use of the word ‘queer’ (*квир, квирный*) in channel titles and descriptions grew steadily after the adoption of the second anti-gay propaganda law in 2022, reflecting the term’s increasing uptake within Russian-speaking queer communities.<sup>70</sup> However, as enforcement intensified – especially after the extremism ruling – channel owners progressively removed explicit references to queerness, homosexuality, or LGBTQ-related terms from public-facing metadata. Instead, they introduced neutral or humorous stand-ins: changing a channel name from ‘Everyday life of a lesbian’ (*бүднн лєббннкн*) to ‘Everyday life of a potato’ (*бүднн картшфєлє*), or replacing ‘lesbian lobby’ (*лєббннскє лоббн*) with simply ‘lobby’ (*лоббн*). Trans users often began naming chats according to neutral interests (‘academic chat’, ‘gamer chat’) or adopted collective nicknames such as ‘kittens’ (*кштєтє*).<sup>71</sup> These shifts significantly reduce discoverability from the outside while consolidating in-group codes; access increasingly depends on personal invitations, shared knowledge, and participation in existing networks.

This pattern mirrors historical queer semiotics but is shaped by platform-specific affordances. Whereas earlier eras relied on physical sites and embodied codes (jewellery, clothing, gestures), contemporary Russian queer networks utilise platform logics – channel hierarchies, forwarding practices, mutual contacts – to structure access. The removal of explicit labels is thus not simply defensive but part of a broader reconfiguration of how community is marked and maintained under conditions where any explicit association with LGBTQ+ identities may be prosecutable.

Both networks demonstrate how communities sustain belonging through fragmentation. They operate through what this article terms ‘concentric fragments’: overlapping yet asymmetrical spheres of access and belonging. Core organisers manage infrastructure; regular participants engage across multiple channels; peripheral members follow public accounts or occasionally attend events; distant witnesses encounter

<sup>69</sup> Berlant and Warner, ‘Sex in Public’.

<sup>70</sup> TGStat, TGStat Analytics and Field Observations, 2022–2025.

<sup>71</sup> Author’s observations and interviews, 2024–25.

networks through media coverage. Unlike the concentric circles of mediatised parties (organised around physical events), concentric fragments lack a physical centre. Community is experienced as a series of fragments – Telegram messages, Instagram Stories, occasional gatherings – rather than a stable whole. Yet the fragments are connected: the same individuals move across multiple channels and platforms; the same cultural references circulate; the same moderators maintain standards of safety and care.

Illustration 2. Timeline of transformations.



### Digital practices and moderation protocols

Moderation protocols are essential for protecting the ‘communal common ground’ required for survival<sup>72</sup>. Volunteers (e.g., Int. 7 and 22) navigate the ‘psychic labour’ of processing communal trauma, proving that ‘digital care’ is a material practice involving the physical and emotional health of community members.<sup>73</sup> These practices ensure that the ‘mediatised world’ remains a secure environment for adaptation despite the loss of physical co-presence. Furthermore, these protocols act as a defence against state ‘fantasies’ of infiltration.<sup>74</sup> As one moderator observed, state agents often fail to penetrate these spaces because ‘their characters don’t have stories’, highlighting the deep, narrative-based security of the queer network that protects its ontological integrity.

Moderators – volunteers, often with activist experience – enforce community guidelines that are explicitly stated and regularly updated: no Russian nationalist or imperialist rhetoric; no transphobia or homophobia; no outing or privacy violations; conflict resolution through direct communication or moderator mediation;

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Dhoest, Łukasz Szulc, and Bart Eeckhout, *LGBTQs, Media and Culture in Europe*, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies, 1 (Routledge, 2017), p. 11, doi: [10.4324/9781315625812](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315625812).

<sup>73</sup> Vasiliki Makrygianni, and Vasilis Galis, ‘Practices of Radical Digital Care: Towards Autonomous Queer Migration’, *Science as Culture*, 32.3 (2023), pp. 387-410, (p. 394), doi: [10.1080/09505431.2023.2221292](https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2023.2221292).

<sup>74</sup> Federica Prina, ‘Fantasies of Cultural Sovereignty and National Unity: Russia’s Ontological (in)Security and Its Assertion of Spiritual-Moral Values’, *International Politics*, 62.4 (2025), pp. 839–868, doi: [10.1057/s41311-024-00600-w](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00600-w).

explicit consent for sharing personal information. Moderators remove members violating guidelines and monitor for infiltration attempts by state agents or hostile actors. A Cheers Queers volunteer (Int. 22) explained: ‘Moderation is the only reason these spaces work. Without it, they’d fall apart in days – trolls, fights, people getting exposed. We learned from early VK publics where anything went. That doesn’t work anymore.’ This echoes broader scholarship on online community governance, sustainable online communities require active, transparent moderation that balances free expression with safety.<sup>75</sup>

Networks also employ security practices: encrypted platforms (Telegram); encouraged VPN usage for those in Russia; voice verification for new members joining closed chats; regular security audits. These practices reflect participants’ threat models: state surveillance, hate groups tracking activists, interpersonal violence from outed members’ families. Int. 22 noted: ‘Every precaution feels paranoid until something happens. And things have happened’. Yet security creates barriers. Int. 25, who emigrated only in 2024 and lacked digital security knowledge, struggled accessing networks: ‘Everyone uses VPNs and Telegram and knows the codes. I barely managed to join’.

This reproduces exclusions: those with technical skills, devices, and security knowledge access communities, while those without remain isolated. Networks attempt mitigation through guides and onboarding documentation, but gaps persist, and this asymmetry in digital literacy constitutes a structural inequality within diaspora networks.

Post-2022 networks prioritise care over spectacle. Where mediatised parties centred visible joy and aesthetic production, networks emphasise mutual aid, emotional support, and practical survival. Yet joy remains present: Telegram chats circulate memes, inside jokes, and celebrations of small victories (obtaining HRT, a visa, housing); reading groups foreground intellectual pleasure and collective cultural engagement. Int. 28 reflected: ‘It’s not the same as LVBZ parties. It can’t be. But there’s still joy. It’s just quieter, more private. It’s in the chat where someone shares good news and everyone celebrates. It’s in reading groups where we laugh at absurdist Soviet literature’.

This shift from spectacular to intimate joy reflects strategic adaptation: spectacular visibility became dangerous post-2022; intimate joy, shared in encrypted spaces, became survival practice.

Yet the absence of bodies persists as a source of mourning.<sup>76</sup> In their theorization of performative assembly, Judith Butler emphasises bodily presence: ‘When bodies gather [...] they are already making certain kinds of claims’.<sup>77</sup> Post-2022 networks lack sustained bodily gathering; claims are made through digital means. Int. 30 articulated this loss: ‘I miss parties. I miss dancing surrounded by other queers, feeling the bass in my chest, sweating together. Telegram doesn’t replace that’. Some participants in emigration hubs (Berlin, Tbilisi) access queer nightlife, but this differs from Russian-speaking community infrastructure. Language, shared cultural references, and specific understanding of post-Soviet queer experience create bonds that generic (but Berlin and Tbilisi are both post-Soviet spaces?) queer spaces cannot replicate. Networks attempt to bridge this gap through hybrid practices (occasional gatherings, reading groups, picnics, cultural

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<sup>75</sup> Danah Boyd, ‘It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens’, *Yale University Press*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm5gk>.

<sup>76</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015), doi: [10.4159/9780674495548](https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674495548).

<sup>77</sup> Butler, ‘Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly’, p. 26.

events) but these remain logistically complex, geographically limited, and security intensive. The tension between digital sustainability and bodily desire remains unresolved.

### Queer world-making under constraint

The movement from the ‘renaissance’ to the ‘relocation’ era represents a rupture in how queer participation is performed. The concentric circles of the *tusovka* have been stretched across borders.<sup>78</sup> The political role of the ‘party’ has transitioned into the political role of the ‘moderation protocol’, which now acts as a digital border-guard for a community in exile.<sup>79</sup> By tracing these changes through CDA, we see that the Russophone queer community has not vanished under censorship; it has evolved into a ‘transnational public sphere’ where the Russian language remains the primary site of solidarity and resistance.<sup>80</sup>

This article has traced the transformation of Russophone queer communities from 2019 to 2025: from mediated parties focused on visible, spectacular joy to dispersed online networks focused on security and care. This trajectory, however, is not best understood as a simple rupture from vitality to survival. The analysis reveals a series of continuities and layered processes that complicate such a reading.

First, the article has argued that rather than positing a false dichotomy between joyful party culture and survival-oriented network infrastructure, these two modes of organising co-existed throughout the period under study. Party spaces were always already engaged in infrastructure-building, while digital networks always sustained forms of joy and cultural production. The ‘renaissance’ did not simply give way to something else; rather, the skills, codes, and networks developed during 2017-2021 directly structured how communities responded to the ruptures of 2022 and after. In this sense, the article builds on scholarship that identifies long-running traditions of queer cultural formation in Russia and the post-Soviet space rather than treating the ‘renaissance’ as a starting point.

Second, this research confirms that queer joy operates not as a luxury but as a survival practice. Mediated parties were not forms of escapism but laboratories rehearsing alternative futures. Post-2022 networks, while emphasising care, maintain joy through intimate practices such as memes, celebrations of small victories, and cultural production. This positions joy not as available only in favourable conditions, but as essential under constraint – a finding consistent with Soares’ concept of ‘critical joy’ and ethnographic accounts of queer flourishing under authoritarian conditions.

Third, the analysis confirms mediatization's constitutive role. Parties existed simultaneously as physical gatherings and circulating aesthetics; documentation was not secondary but integral to their existence. Post-2022, communities operate primarily through mediated networks, demonstrating digital infrastructure's capacity to sustain belonging without sustained physical gathering. Yet this also reveals limits: participants mourn bodily absence, and exclusively digital forms of community reproduces exclusions along lines of technical literacy, device access, and geographic concentration in emigration hubs.

Fourth, the research illuminates dynamics that are unique to the post-2022 Russophone queer diaspora. Unlike many historical diaspora formations (gradual, with established communities in destination

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<sup>78</sup> Filimonov, *The Performance of Participation in Russian Alternative Media*.

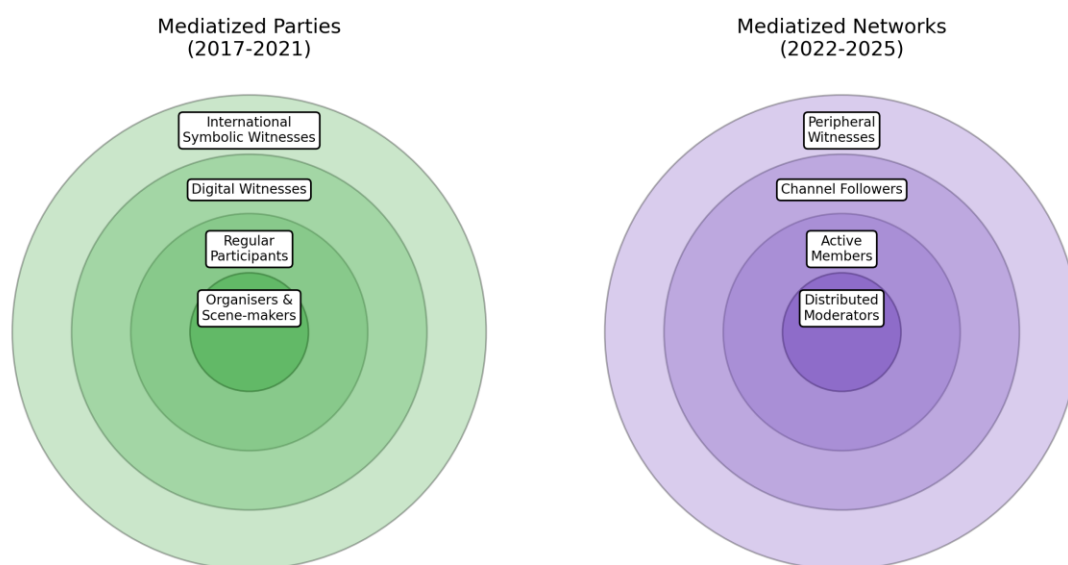
<sup>79</sup> Dhoest, Szulc and Eeckhout, *LGBTQs, Media and Culture in Europe*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>80</sup> Maria Yelenevskaya, and Ekaterina Protassova, ‘Virtual Post-Soviet Space: Russian Language and Transnational Communities’, *BAHASTR4*, 43.2 (2023), pp. 274-95, (pp. 277–278), doi: [10.26555/bs.v43i2.532](https://doi.org/10.26555/bs.v43i2.532); Koen Leurs, and Sandra Ponzanesi, ‘Mediated Crossroads: Youthful Digital Diasporas’, *M/C Journal*, 14.2 (2010), doi: [10.5204/mcj.324](https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.324).

countries), Russian emigration following 2022 was sudden and geographically dispersed. As such, communities lack physical infrastructure. Instead, they operate through digital networks spanning Georgia, Armenia, Serbia, Germany, and beyond. Russian as a shared language unifies yet also reproduces imperial hierarchies, an issue that networks navigate through explicit moderation protocols that foreground non-Russian, post-Soviet voices. This configuration – rapid dispersion, digital-primary infrastructure, linguistic unity with political fragmentation – may prove paradigmatic for understanding how queer diaspora forms under conditions of simultaneous mass emigration and digital suppression. It also connects to a longer history of Russian-speaking queer migration, in which diasporic contexts have generated forms of solidarity and innovation alongside loss.

Fifth, the article has demonstrated how communities sustain continuity across rupture. From parties to networks, from spectacular to intimate joy, from concentric circles to concentric fragments, communities adapted while maintaining core commitments: a refusal of victimhood, an insistence on joy, and a prioritisation of collective survival. At the same time, challenges persist: digital networks reproduce exclusions, moderation risks creating echo chambers, security imperatives limit visibility, and dependence on platforms vulnerable to state pressure creates precarity. These challenges raise urgent questions for future research: how can networks balance security with accessibility? What hybrid models might integrate digital infrastructure with sustained physical gathering? How do linguistic hierarchies within diaspora networks reproduce imperial violence, and what practices might disrupt this? What happens when current emigration destinations become hostile, forcing further dispersal?

Illustration 3. Comparison of the transformation of the concentric circles of queer mediated networks.



## Conclusion

Between 2019 and 2025, Russophone queer communities underwent a radical transformation: from mediated parties to fragmented networks, from spectacular joy to intimate care, from Moscow-centred nightlife to digital diaspora infrastructures. This paradigm shift resulted from intersecting forces - escalating legal repression, COVID-19 lockdowns, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, mass emigration, and the 2023 extremism designation - but it was also enabled by the skills, codes, and relationships built during the preceding period. From rupture emerged innovation: Centre-T and Cheers Queers exemplify how communities adapt, sustaining belonging through encryption, moderation, and distributed authority.

Theoretically, this research extends queer joy scholarship beyond Western contexts, demonstrating joy's operation as survival practice under authoritarianism. It advances mediatization theory by analysing how digital media constitute queer community under censorship. It contributes to queer diaspora studies by examining rapid, forced dispersal sustained through digital networks rather than territorial proximity, and by situating the post-2022 moment within a longer history of Russian-speaking queer migration and diasporic world-making. Moreover, it challenges scholarship fixated on state oppression by foregrounding community innovation, while acknowledging the real losses – of bodies, of physical community, of the specific joy that was the ‘renaissance’ – that accompanied that innovation.

Practically, this research offers insights for activists in other authoritarian contexts facing intensifying repression. The Russian case demonstrates: (1) the importance of building robust digital infrastructure before crisis; (2) the value of fragmentation and distributed authority for security; (3) the necessity of explicit moderation protocols; (4) the possibility of sustaining joy and culture alongside survival work; and (5) the ongoing need for hybrid models integrating digital infrastructure with physical gathering where possible.

The story remains unfinished. Russophone queer communities continue to navigate the diaspora, build infrastructure, mourn losses, and insist on futures otherwise. In doing so, they demonstrate that even when the state seeks queer erasure, queer people find ways to gather, celebrate, and create worlds. As Int. 33 reflected: ‘They wanted us to disappear. We didn’t. We just learned to exist differently’.

This existence constitutes a profound achievement: queer world-making under conditions designed to make it impossible. In this sense, post-2022 networks continue the work of 2017-2021 parties: they insist that queer life, queer joy, and queer futures remain possible, however transformed, however difficult. They prove that queer utopia, as Muñoz wrote, is ‘not yet here’ but can still be built through practices of collective survival and care.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp. 3-18.

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