

HOMOSEXUAL REPRESENTATIONS IN ESTONIAN PRINTED MEDIA DURING THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s the Soviet Union started to collapse leading to a major transition in Estonian society (cf. Alenius 2000; Lauristin 1997). Estonians struggled for their independence as the structures of the socialist system fell apart. At the same time the concepts of man and woman gained new meanings. Instead of the socialist equality rhetoric, the development towards more traditional gender roles—which had already begun during the last years of Soviet rule—strengthened (Lauristin and Vihalemm 2002, 17–24; Narusk 2000, 50–51). In this new gender structure, the ideal woman must be a mother of at least three children and a man should be the breadwinner of his family (cf. Hansson and Laidmäe 2000; Narusk 2000). However, besides these traditional values there was also some space for new kinds of thinking, as, for example, homosexuality started to get attention in the public discourse (cf. Veispak 1991; Nögel 1991).

Soviet troops had first occupied Estonia in 1940 and after the Second World War the country became part of the “Soviet family.” This meant that the socialist value system began to assert itself also in Estonia (Alenius 2000), which could also be seen in the way homosexuality was judged. In Estonia, both male and female homosexuality had been decriminalised between the two World Wars but male homosexuality was re-criminalised after the Soviet occupation. The Soviet penal code was ratified and an atmosphere of intolerance surrounded male homosexuality. Female homosexuality was not mentioned in the law, but it was not accepted in Estonian society (Kotter 2003). What is more, homosexuality, on the whole, was regarded as a phenomenon that was a decadent product of the capitalist West and of which Soviet society was free (Veispak 1991).

During the first half of the 1960s, there was a more liberal period in Soviet history in terms of politics as well as social existence. The sexual sphere opened for discussion and that also affected the lives of homosexuals. According to Teet Veispak (1991) many Estonian homosexuals later thought of the 60s as golden years compared to the other decades

of the Soviet period. However, after the period of thaw the atmosphere in Soviet society worsened once again and also the number of trials, both of political dissidents and homosexuals, was growing.¹

In the years of perestroika and glasnost repression towards homosexuality finally eased in Soviet society.² For example, in Russia the first gay and lesbian organisation was established in 1989 and the first gay newspaper began publishing in 1990 (Kon 2002; Miller 1995). The liberation of Soviet society was also seen in Estonia. The penal code—that prohibited homosexual relations between men—was still in force, but after 1989 homosexuality became a topic in the media (Veispak 1991; Nögel 1991). The slow liberalisation of Estonian society could also be seen in research focusing on Estonian students' attitudes towards homosexuality in 1990: half of the interviewed students thought that homosexuality was a disease or an abnormal form of sexuality but the other half had rather more positive views about homosexuality.³

In this article, I will analyse how homosexuality was discussed in the printed media right after the new openness policy had started to break the taboos in Soviet society. I will pay attention to a few specific events⁴ and analyse how printed media presented homosexuality around the time of these events. At the same time, I will try to give an overall picture about the discourses on homosexuality that were produced by journalists at the time. I am particularly interested in how a theme that had been hidden for so long was depicted and what kind of influence the transitional process had on the representations of homosexuality.

I will concentrate on five different magazines and newspapers: the *Edasi/Postimees* (Forward/Postman) and the *Noorte Hääl/Päevaleht* (Voice of the Youth/Daily),⁵ which were leading daily papers in Estonia by their

¹ In his article Veispak has quoted statistics about criminal cases convicted for pederasty. According to those statistics which can be found in the Archives of the Ministry of Justice of the Estonian Republic, there were no criminal cases during the years 1963–1966. In the year 1967 however, there were 17 cases and until the year 1989 there was at least one criminal case every year (see Veispak 1991, 112–113).

² Perestroika can be translated as reform. Glasnost is normally translated as openness.

³ The research material was based on the responses of 180 students at the two largest higher educational establishments in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia (see Nögel 1991, 117–121).

⁴ The events are a conference which dealt with sexual minorities and was held in Tallinn in May 1990, the establishment of Eesti Lesbiliit (Estonian Lesbian Union) on the 13th of October 1990, the dissolution of those paragraphs which denied male homosexual behaviour in the penal code on 1st of June 1992 and the establishment of Eesti Gayliit (Estonian Gay League) in 1992.

⁵ *Postimees* (Postman) was published under the name *Edasi* (Forward) until the end of 1990. A newspaper which is nowadays known as *Eesti Päevaleht* (Estonian Daily) was

circulation, the *Nõukogude Naine/Eesti Naine*⁶ (*Soviet Woman/Estonian Woman*), which was the only Estonian women's magazine until the early nineties, the only young people's magazine the *Noorus* (Youth), and the *Eesti Ekspress* (Estonian Express),⁷ which was one of the new weekly magazines which started to be published in Estonia during the early years of 1990s. In addition to these magazines and newspapers I will refer to articles the active members of *Eesti Lesbiliit* (Estonian Lesbian Union) had selectively collected between 1990 and 1995 and placed in a booklet to celebrate the union's fifth anniversary. The article collection consists of the most extensive articles written about lesbianism in Estonian printed media and therefore it can be seen as an important complement to the systematic trawl of the above mentioned magazines and newspapers.⁸

The article is based on a historical approach which, in this particular case, means qualitative analysis of the writings in the frame of their historical context as well as discourse analysis through which I try to identify different discourses on homosexuality.

The theoretical background of this paper is based on Michel Foucault's thesis as well as post-modern queer theory. According to Foucault, a historical core of homosexuality does not exist. In contrast, homosexuality as a concept and identity is produced by historical forces during all periods (Foucault 1980, 1999; Pulkkinen 1998). Like in Foucault's thinking, in queer theory, homosexuality is understood as a historically constructed and maintained discourse (Juvonen 2002).

HOMOSEXUALITY EMERGING AS A "TRENDY TOPIC"

According to Estonian historian Teet Veispak, the appearance of homosexuality in Estonian media during the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was, in most cases, restricted to presenting opinions *pro et contra* (Veispak 1991, 113–114). In other words, those writings did not produce a diverse picture of homosexuality, but rather projected accepting or rejecting slants. The present investigation supports Veispak's thesis in part. The articles, which were published in different magazines and newspapers, show a "black-and-white dualism." However, reading the articles where positive assertions towards homosexuality are prevailing one cannot miss the interpretation that it was somehow fashion-

published until 1990 under the name *Noorte Hääl* (Voice of the Youth) and through years 1990–1995 under the name *Päevaleht* (Daily).

⁶ *Eesti Naine* (Estonian Woman) was published as *Nõukogude Naine* (Soviet Woman) until the end of 1988.

⁷ *Eesti Ekspress* (Estonian Express) was first published in January 1989.

⁸ The information was obtained from Lilian Kotter on 3 August 2006.

able to write about homosexuality, while in the end journalists did not really know what to think about homosexuals.

Although there was some confusion concerning the acceptability of homosexuality, the articles which were published in the beginning of the 1990s indicate that homosexuality seemed to have become a trendy topic in some magazines. One of the weekly magazines in which homosexuality was discussed in many different ways was *Eesti Ekspress*. The first articles published during the years from 1990 to 1992 where enlightening as far as they dealt with, for instance, the first lesbian and gay organisations that were established in Estonia in 1990 and 1992⁹ and tried to picture what it meant to be homosexual.¹⁰ However, little by little the writings became more extreme in nature: presenting homosexuality in itself was no longer enough so there had to be something more, something that would fulfil the increasing thirst for sensationalism. As early as 1993 readers could find stories about an Estonian man who had been a homosexual prostitute in New York as well as an interview with one of the first Estonians who was undergoing sex reassignment surgery.¹¹ In addition to *Eesti Ekspress*, the trendy topic began to be mentioned also in other papers like *Liivimaa Kroonika*, *Õhtuleht* and *Nelli Teataja*.¹²

When asking how it is possible that homosexuality, which was still a taboo in the early years of the 1980s, received so much attention¹³ in the above mentioned magazines only a few years later we must search for the explanation model in the Estonian society in general.

⁹ See for example "Ma ei tea midagi rõvedamat kui mehe ejakulatsioon" (I Do Not Know Anything More Immodest Than the Ejaculation of a Man), *Eesti Ekspress*, 8 March 1991; Bohumil Visák, "Eesti Gayliit loodud" (Estonian Gay League Established), *Eesti Ekspress*, 6 March 1992.

¹⁰ See for example Teet Veispak, "Ma usun et varsti toimub coming out" (I Believe That it is Going to Happen a Coming Out Soon), *Eesti Ekspress*, 6 April 1990.

¹¹ Liis Pajupuu, "Tahan vahetada sugu" (I want to change sex), *Eesti Ekspress*, 7 May 1993; Kärt Karpa, "Homoprostituudi pihtimus. Eesti noormees, kes müüs New Yorgi millionäridele kalli raha eest oma keha, naasis koju tühjade kätega" (Confession of a Homosexual. Young Estonian man, Who Sold His Body for Money for New York's Millionaires, Came Back With Empty Hands), *Eesti Ekspress*, 20 August 1993.

¹² See for example Taavi Pöld, "Minu naine oli lesbi ..." (My Wife was a Lesbian ...), *Nelli Teataja*, 17 July 1992; Margit, "Lesbi? Lihtsalt naine, kes armastab naist" (Lesbian? Just a Woman who Loves a Woman), *Õhtuleht*, 5 March 1993.

¹³ During the 1980s, homosexuality was discussed mainly in the context of AIDS. The peak of such representations was reached in 1989 when 11 articles about AIDS and homosexuality were published. In the same year, there was only one article which didn't frame the discussion about homosexuality in the context of AIDS. In 1990, a clear change took place in the public atmosphere. In this year 7 articles dealing solely with homosexuality and 5 articles briefly mentioning homosexuality were published. All of these articles were supportive towards homosexuality. In 1992 the number of articles which dealt with or briefly mentioned homosexuality was 11 and it was 16 already in 1993.

Teet Veispak (1991, 108–109) stated that Estonians were quite liberal towards homosexuality in the period between the two World Wars. As many researchers have pointed out (cf. Järviste and Mälksoo 2001), the years of perestroika saw Estonians turning back to the values of the Interbellum. It can be argued that the liberal views towards homosexuality of the 1920s and 1930s affected the values and attitudes of post-soviet Estonians, too: namely, the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union was on the horizon, was also the time when the first Estonian republic became a nostalgic (and mobilizing) reference point in the minds of Estonians (Kivimaa 2000; Järviste and Mälksoo 2001; Kurvinen 2006). However, one must not forget that in Estonian society, where the connection between Church and people had weakened considerably during the Soviet period, rising spirituality gained a secular form¹⁴ laying fertile grounds for liberal attitudes. The situation, however, was different in other post-socialist countries such as Poland where the influence of the Catholic Church had remained strong.

Although homosexuality was a trendy topic in some magazines, one can not miss the fact that in many newspapers and magazines it was still a hidden theme during the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. It was something that could be written about only if some kind of special event was taking place but otherwise there was no sign of it. For example, *Postimees* and *Päevaleht* only briefly mentioned a conference on sexual minorities held in Tallinn in May 1990. In addition, the information given to the public was very formal.¹⁵ Apart from this, homosexuality was mentioned only on rare occasions if at all. The establishment of *Eesti Lesbiliit* (Estonian Lesbian Union) in 1990 and *Eesti Gayliit* (Estonian Gay League) in 1992 did not get any attention in the papers although journalists were invited to the organisational meeting of *Eesti Gayliit*.¹⁶ There was no coverage when the paragraph that prohibited male homosexual behaviour was repealed in 1992, decriminalising homosexuality, yet other facets of the legislative process received a lot of space in both newspapers.¹⁷

¹⁴ See for example the text “Usuelu” from *Estonica*, which is an Internet Encyclopaedia made by Eesti Instituut. <http://www.estonica.org/est/lugu.html?kateg=5&meny_id=115&alam=20&tekst_id=116> (5 December 2006).

¹⁵ Kalle Müller, “Varjatud vähemuse kaitse!” (Protecting a minority), *Edasi*, 29 May 1990; Annika Lusmägi, “Milleks meile see konverents? Suhtuminen homoseksualismi 20. sajandi Euroopas muutub” (Why Do We Have This Conference? Attitudes Towards Homosexuality Change in 20th century Europe), *Päevaleht*, 30 May 1990.

¹⁶ The information about the press conference is from the article: Bohumil Visák, “Eesti Gayliit loodud” (Estonian Gay League established), *Eesti Ekspress*, 6 March 1992.

¹⁷ See for example all the issues of *Postimees* and *Päevaleht* in May 1992.

While wondering why the most widely read newspapers did not pay any attention to homosexuality, we must understand that newspaper column space was at a premium at the time. Papers, at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, normally appeared in editions of between four and sixteen pages. The events of Estonia regaining independence put additional pressure on column space. However, if editorial boards of those papers had regarded sexual minorities and their status in society to be an important theme, they would have been able to include more writings about it.

REPRESENTATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY—FROM A MEDICAL DISCOURSE TO A SEXUAL DISCOURSE

When analysing the articles published in newspapers and magazines during the last years of the 1980s and first years of the 1990s, two discourses can be distinguished: a medicalised discourse, which was prevalent from 1987 to 1989 and then faded, and a sexualised discourse, which emerged from 1990 onward. I will now briefly analyse these discourses.

MEDICAL DISCOURSE

In Soviet-Estonia, homosexuality became a part of the public agenda first with the discussion concerning AIDS.¹⁸ Articles produced typically very conservative tones and AIDS was connected to "risk groups" such as homosexuals and prostitutes—instead of risk behaviour.¹⁹ Although medical candidate Jaan Märtin pointed out in 1987 that AIDS could also spread in heterosexual relationships, the presupposition, also in his article, was that prostitutes and homosexuals were clearly identified "risk groups."²⁰ For example, *Nõukogude Naine* published an article written by Elmar Rõigas in 1988 stating that "from the very beginning the disease has killed mostly perverse males, homosexuals."²¹ These articles were written by medical doctors who reproduced the prevalent discourse of Estonian medical circles. It was not an uncommon thing in Soviet societies: in Russian medical circles AIDS was presented as being connected to homosexuals (Kon 2002, 305). In the Western world where the fear of AIDS was at its peak during the 1980s this was also the case (Miller 1995, 450–451).

¹⁸ The first case of AIDS in Estonia was identified as late as in 1988. See Liiu Kotter, "AIDS dr E. Rõigase moodi" (About AIDS in dr. E. Rõigas' style), *Edasi*, 21 March 1989.

¹⁹ For example, the women's magazine *Nõukogude Naine/Eesti Naine* published articles where this kind of positioning can be seen.

²⁰ Jaan Märtin, "Haigus, mille nimi on AIDS" (Disease, Which Name is AIDS), *Nõukogude Naine*, 9, 1987.

²¹ Elmar Rõigas, "AIDS ja naised" (AIDS and Women), *Nõukogude Naine*, 3, 1988.

The medical discourse featured most prominently in the Estonian printed media when doctor Elmar Rõigas published the first book discussing AIDS in Estonia in 1988.²² After the launch of the book, a lively debate started around his points of view. In these discussions, in 1989, Rõigas strongly defended his views in *Noorte Hääl*.²³ He described homosexuals as “pyromaniacs” who had started the “fire of AIDS.”²⁴ Moreover he alleged that homosexuals were sex-maniacs and accused them of seducing innocent heterosexuals and spreading the disease among them.²⁵

Although Rõigas was allowed to present his views extensively in *Noorte Hääl*, the debate around his book was also a turning point for writings concerning AIDS. In this public debate, opinions which criticised Rõigas’ remarks also began to arise. The first person who started this critique was Liuu Kotter, who was later known as Lilian Kotter, one of the active members of *Eesti Lesbiliit*.²⁶ In her writings, which were published in the newspapers *Edasi* and *Noorte Hääl*,²⁷ she made it clear that the opinions of Rõigas were homophobic. Kotter, for example, wrote that Rõigas was making anti-homosexual “agit-prop” (i.e. propaganda designed to agitate) in his book²⁸ and that he was trying to make AIDS seem like a cane which would castigate homosexuality.²⁹

Even though one journalist agreed with Kotter’s criticism, there was also a response which rejected her ideas.³⁰ The opposing article was by a doctor named Jüri Teras who made the point that Liuu Kotter was just making propaganda on behalf of homosexuals and that Rõigas’ opinions about AIDS were trustworthy.

²² The information is from the newspaper *Edasi* in which there was a lively debate around the quality of the book. See for example: Jüri Teras, “AIDS’ist ka L. Kotteri moodi” (About AIDS also in L. Kotter’s style), *Edasi*, 9 June 1989.

²³ Elmar Rõigas, “Homoseksualismist, AIDS-ist ja iibest” (About Homosexuality, AIDS and Growth), *Noorte Hääl*, 6–8 July 1989.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Lilian Kotter was one of those few active women who started the Estonian Lesbian Union in 1990. Interview with Lilian Kotter on 3 August 2006, conducted by the author.

²⁷ Liuu Kotter, “AIDS dr E. Rõigase moodi” (About AIDS in dr. E. Rõigas’ style), *Edasi*, 21 March 1989; Liuu Kotter, “Meie kolm” (Us three), *Edasi*, 29 June 1989; Liuu Kotter, “Meie sedasi. Homoseksualismist ja antihomoseksualismist Eestis” (Our Way. About Homosexuality and Anti-homosexuality in Estonia), *Noorte Hääl*, 11 July 1989.

²⁸ Liuu Kotter, “AIDS dr E. Rõigase moodi” (About AIDS in dr. E. Rõigas’ style), *Edasi*, 21 March 1989.

²⁹ Liuu Kotter, “Meie sedasi. Homoseksualismist ja antihomoseksualismist Eestis” (Our Way. About Homosexuality and Anti-homosexuality in Estonia), *Noorte Hääl*, 11 July 1989.

³⁰ Teras Jüri, “AIDS’ist ka L. Kotteri moodi” (About AIDS also in L. Kotter’s Style), *Edasi*, 9 June 1989; Mart Ummelas, “Parast, et haigeks jäid!” (It is the Best That You Get Sick!), *Edasi*, 29 June 1989.

Although the medical discourse continued to be dismissive toward homosexuality, more acceptant voices spoke up in the public discussion. A *Noorte Hääl* editorial comment introducing an article about homosexuality by Elmar Rõigas made it clear that the paper tried to adopt a neutral stance in this debate.³¹ However, after three articles by Elmar Rõigas and one by Liiv Kotter were published, a piece by Kaur Hanson, journalist of *Noorte Hääl*³² summed up the discussion. This article presented tolerant views toward homosexuality and quoted three letters to the editor in the same vein. The message of the article was clear: the opinions of Rõigas should not be taken seriously because homosexuals are people just as much as heterosexuals are.

Apart from the AIDS context, medical positions can also be seen in the columns of letters to the editor. In the youth magazine, *Noorus*, for example, there was an active debate around homosexuality, especially in 1989. The magazine itself did not take a clear position but its willingness to publish articles about homosexuality³³ can be interpreted as a sign of openness towards sexual minorities. However, the magazine also published letters from its readers as well as responses to these from specialists, and some of these writings had a clearly negative tone towards homosexuals. By publishing these *Noorus* maintained the discourse which presented homosexuality as a deviant phenomenon. For example, psychiatrist Anti Liiv in his reply to two young girls who were frightened that they "will also become victims of same-sex love,"³⁴ wrote that lesbianism was a psychological problem that could be solved and he suggested that the girls should turn to a psychiatrist or a psychologist in order to get rid of homosexual behaviour. The medicalisation of lesbianism became even clearer when Liiv ended his comment by saying that "there are possibilities to get rid of it. You are just in the beginning of going astray." Three years later Liiv still used the same kind of arguments in an article published in *Eesti Ekspress* but he seemed to have had a more positive attitude towards lesbianism than before: "naturally, because of the future of our nation, we do not want to glorify or propagate lesbianism. But we are able to accept it."³⁵

³¹ Rein Spitz, "Prelude," *Noorte Hääl*, 6 July 1989.

³² Kaur Hanson, "Kas teie pooldate veel inkviitsiooni?" (Do You Still Speak up for the Inquisition), *Noorte Hääl*, 5 August 1989.

³³ See for example Udo Parikas, "Loomuvastane?" (Unnatural?), *Noorus*, 9, 1989.

³⁴ Anti Liiv, "Ma teile kirjutan. Maie ja Kati (15-a.)" (I Write to You. Maie and Kati (15-years)), *Noorus*, 8, 1989.

³⁵ Anti Liiv, "Lesbid?" (Lesbians?), *Eesti Ekspress*, 27 November 1992.

From the 1990s, the medical discourse gradually lost importance. For example, AIDS was no longer solely connected to homosexuals but was discussed more diversely in the printed media.³⁶ A distinct sign of this was an AIDS campaign which got a lot of coverage in *Eesti Naine* magazine. In this campaign, AIDS was presented as a threat to both homo- and heterosexuals: “Whether you are young or old, homosexual or not, HIV affects your way of thinking about life, love and sexuality. Risk of infection does not depend on who you are, but on what you do.”³⁷

SEXUALIZED DISCOURSE

Since the years of perestroika the gender regime based on “natural” gender roles, common in Baltic countries at that time, was prevalent in the Estonian media, too (Hansson and Laidmäe 2000; Novikova 2001, 1998). Media representations made it seem obvious that women and men have their own roles determined by their biological sex.³⁸

A clear indicator of this kind of “biological determinism” was the national demographic policy³⁹ of the last years of the 1980s used as a tool to disapprove both male and female homosexuality. These arguments could be read in Dr. Elmar Rõigas’ writings, in which he appealed to the future of the Estonian nation while emphasising that homosexuals posed a demographic threat to the country. Rõigas wrote, for instance, that “we must keep in mind that every ‘family’ consisting of a male couple robs two normal families of their heads of family and of the fathers of children never born.”⁴⁰ Psychiatrist Anti Liiv used similar rhetoric against lesbi-

³⁶ See for example: Eesti Assosiatsioon “Anti-AIDS,” “1. detsember – rahvusvaheline AIDS-i vastu võitlemise päev” (1st of December—An International Day Against AIDS), *Pühapäevaleht*, 28 November 1992; Peeter Linnap, “AIDS kuulsate haigus” (AIDS, the Disease of Celebrities), *Eesti Ekspress*, 26 February 1993; Sulev Teinema, “AIDS ilma pisarateta” (AIDS Without Tears), *Eesti Ekspress*, 15 October 1993.

³⁷ Advertisement for AIDS campaign, *Eesti Naine* 4, 1993.

³⁸ See for example Tõnu Ots, “Sündinud meheks või naiseks. Vestlusi soo erinevustest” (Born to be a Man or a Woman. Discussion About Gender Differences), *Nõukogude Naine*, 4, 1987; Mare Ots, “Mis on muutunud naise elus” (What Has Changed in a Woman’s Life), *Nõukogude Naine*, 6, 1988; Aimi Paalandi, “Naine jääb naiseks” (A Woman Remains a Woman), *Eesti Naine*, 2, 1990.

³⁹ During the 1980s, Estonians were worried that the number of native Estonians was not enough and they were becoming a minority in their own land. That is why there was an active demographic campaign which hoped that women would give birth to at least three children (see for example Narusk 2000, 53).

⁴⁰ Elmar Rõigas, “Homoseksualismist, AIDS-ist ja iibest” (About Homosexuality, AIDS and Growth), *Noorte Hääl*, 8 July 1989.

anism whilst he was of the opinion that every Estonian woman should give birth to at least two or three children.⁴¹

Heterosexuality remained the norm of sexual behaviour also in those magazines depicting homosexuality more tolerantly. In articles dealing with safe sex or sexual relationships⁴² sexuality was always about a man and a woman, and sex between same sex partners was hardly mentioned at all. The only exception was in *Noorus* which published a series of articles that dealt with sex. In one of them a journalist asked his interviewees if they had had homosexual experiences.⁴³ Surprisingly, both of the two young men had had sex with another man. However, in both cases it was said to be an experiment and they did not identify themselves as either homosexual or bisexual.

This "biological" discourse was also reinforced by references to the dichotomy of homosexuality and heterosexuality. This could be seen in articles of *Eesti Ekspress* published in the early 1990s, where homosexuals were presented as a new, trendy group of people trying to organise themselves in the middle of heteronormative society.⁴⁴ In other papers like *Liivimaa Kroonika*, *Õhtuleht* and *Nelli Teataja* the homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy was even clearer: Heterosexuality was constantly presented as a normal way of behaviour while homosexuality was seen as acceptable but somehow abnormal. Homosexuality was something that heterosexual journalists were looking at from the outside, referring to homosexuality as the "abnormal other":

It [a gay bar in Tallinn] is one of those many old town cellar bars, many rooms and dark recesses. Although it's the middle of the week, the bar is full of people. A person with a nasal voice asks if I can offer light. No-no! I follow my friend quickly to the other room. God knows, what a person with that kind of voice would look like!⁴⁵

Heteronormative attitudes were reproduced by stereotyping, for example, by emphasising that lesbians did not look like ordinary women. According to psychiatrist Anti Liiv "that kind of girls may be more mas-

⁴¹ Anti Liiv, "Ma teile kirjutan. Anti Liivi kommentaar kahe teismelise tüdruku kirja" (I Write to You. Anti Liiv's Comments on a Letter Written by Two Teenager Girls), *Noorus*, 8/1989.

⁴² See for example Seija Välimäki, "Turvaline sex" (Safe-sex), *Noorus*, 6-9, 1990.

⁴³ Alexander, "Tüdrukud pipardavad. Alexander vestleb noormeestega" (Girls Are Peppery. Alexander Discusses With Young Men), *Noorus*, 6, 1994.

⁴⁴ See for example Teet Veispak, "Ma usun et varsti toimub coming out" (I Believe That a Coming Out is Going to Happen Soon), *Eesti Ekspress*, 6 April 1990.

⁴⁵ Piret Saar, "Võimalus olla armastatud" (Opportunity to be Loved), *Õhtuleht*, 3 February 1994.

culine in their behaviour . . . and their way of dressing inevitably changes from a sporty style to a more masculine.”⁴⁶ Similarly constructed stereotypes could also be detected in articles portraying male homosexuals by highlighting their femininity.⁴⁷ Even though it can be argued that these stereotypes prevailed in the Western world for decades, in the Estonian context they served to emphasise the otherness of homosexuality in a society where “natural” gender roles were seen as the right models for being men and women.

The years of perestroika and glasnost brought a sexual liberation to the Soviet Union in the sense that sexually explicit material permeated society. However, these changes were driven mainly by male desire (Shreeves 1992, 130–131). In public heteronormative discourse female sexuality was subordinated to male lust, and homosexuality was still seen as unnatural (Liljeström 1995, 384). This development could also be seen in Soviet-Estonia in the form of increasing visibility of pornographic material and prostitution (Kaskla 2003, 307).

This over-sexualisation had effects on Estonian printed media as well. For example, almost all of the articles about lesbianism were illustrated by two naked or half-naked women kissing, hugging, lying in bed and so on.⁴⁸ This is odd because in most of these articles the main point was not lesbian sex or sexuality at all. The clearest example of this practise is an article published in the tabloid magazine *Liivimaa Kroonika* in February 1993⁴⁹ reporting on the daily life of a young lesbian couple in a very matter-of-fact way: while one interviewee criticised the media’s way of emphasising sexuality in their pictures when writing about homosexuality, the illustration of the article was clearly over-sexualised, even pornographic—despite the critical comment in the text.

The use of sexual images in Estonian printed media can be explained in terms of the prevailing gender regime in the Estonian society at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. As Milla Mägi, former

⁴⁶ Anti Liiv, “Ma teile kirjutan. Anti Liivi kommentaar kahe teismelise tüdruku kirja” (I Write to You. Anti Liiv’s Comments on a Letter Written by Two Teenager Girls), *Noorus*, 8, 1989.

⁴⁷ See for example Bohumil Visák, “Eesti Gayliit loodud” (Estonian Gay League Established), *Eesti Ekspress*, 6 March 1992; Bohumil Visák, “Suudlus city’s” (Kiss in the City), *Eesti Ekspress*, 10 April 1992; Piret Saar, “Võimalus olla armastatud” (Opportunity to be Loved), *Õhtuleht*, 3 February 1994.

⁴⁸ See for example Anti Liiv, “Lesbid?” (Lesbians?), *Eesti Ekspress*, 27 November 1992; Tiina Kuuler, “Lesbimiss loodab mehele minna” (Miss Lesbian Estonia Hopes to Marry a Man), *Liivimaa Kroonika*, 7 January 1993; Pressman, “Ma ei taha kunagi midagi reklaamida” (I Do Not Ever Want to Advertise Anything), *Eesti Aeg*, 13 January 1993.

⁴⁹ Jaanus Meinart, “Tiia on tavaline tüdruk” (Tiia Is An Ordinary Girl), *Liivimaa Kroonika*, 25 February 1993.

journalist of *Eesti Naine* magazine, emphasised: there was a strong chauvinistic atmosphere in Estonian media during those years.⁵⁰ There was also a strong commercialisation process going on witnessed by the appearance of advertisements and the competition that took place in the media (Paju 2004, 26–28). This has also affected the representations of homosexuality by encouraging the magazines and newspapers to use over-sexualised images. Though male homosexuality is generally given more media space than female homosexuality (Kuorikoski 2004, 13), in Estonia it was lesbianism that became a trendy item as it was another context where the female body could be used to sell papers to the straight male audience.

Therefore it is hardly surprising that there was only one picture of two kissing men,⁵¹ among the examined sources: as male homosexuality was punishable until June 1992, it can be assumed that that had an influence on how male homosexuality was illustrated in the media. However, for example, in the *Noorus* magazine there were some homoerotic pictures in the middle of the 1990s when models were photographed in a way that the reader could sense sexual tension between same sex figures.⁵²

CONCLUSION

The social transition that started in the last years of the 1980s has been widely studied in Estonia but sexual minorities and their status in society have not been dealt with widely. In this article, I have tried to show that it is also possible to study the transitional process from a specific angle and that the process—which is often described as a positive progress—can not be seen in a straightforward way.

The brief analysis of the homosexual discourses in Estonian media conducted here has shown that during the early years of transition homosexuality turned from a disease to a somewhat acceptable form of sexual identity. However, the development did not take place in all the media products simultaneously, but it was a theme that divided newspapers and magazines. Among the biggest newspapers homosexuality did not get much attention after medicalised views became less dominant in the late 1980s. In the tabloid papers, on the other hand, homosexuality—lesbianism, in particular—became a “trendy” topic that received quite a lot of attention since 1990.

⁵⁰ Interview of Milla Mägi in Tallinn, 10 January 2006, conducted by the author (see also Kurvinen 2006, 55).

⁵¹ Bohumil Visák, “Suudlus city’s” (Kiss in the City), *Eesti Ekspress*, 10 April 1992.

⁵² Kätlin Kaldma, “In show,” *Noorus*, 4–6, 1995.

However, the growing number of writings about homosexuality did not signify increasing social acceptance in attitudes towards sexual minorities. Although homosexuality received a lot of attention in the early 1990s, the writings included elements complying with heteronormativity. The right of self-expression of homosexual interviewees was clearly distorted by over-sexualised illustrations. In the case of lesbian representations, the female body was subordinated to a straight male gaze, which detracted from the right to love and feel closeness with same-sex partners.

In the years of perestroika, homosexuality was still affected by the socialist past and its way of seeing homosexuality as a taboo. In the early years of the 1990s, on the other hand, the representation of homosexuality was influenced by the commercialisation of society as well as the revival of a traditional “natural” gender regime which became prevalent again in post-soviet Estonia. In Estonian printed media, the representation of homosexuality moved from medicalisation to sexualisation, and was seen through the lens of the heterosexual norm.

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