

Gender Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Reassessing EU Policymaking in Light of Russian Sharp Power and the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract:

Politicians in Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Russia have long used anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and policies to distance themselves from the West and posit themselves as defenders of 'traditional family values'

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against western 'degeneracy.' In 2022, amid Ukraine-EU rapprochement, Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced the potential legalization of same-sex partnerships in Ukraine, where homophobia remains commonplace. The EU, however, has yet to recognize that institutionalizing minority rights at the structural and legislative levels alone is insufficient to prevent discrimination against national minorities. This study concerns the way in which Putin and Patriarch Kirill have in the recent past invoked gender politics to justify Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This research addresses the impact of Russian shows of solidarity with European critics of such 'moral decay,' namely that the Kremlin has used moral opposition to the West to polarize, confuse, and destabilize countries where state, national church, and national identity are intertwined. Finally, this study suggests that Ukraine is an opportunity for the EU to recognize the insufficiency of legal change on its own to resolve discrimination against sexual minorities. Rather, the EU must commit to adapting its conditionality to the individual circumstances of prospective member states.

Keywords: LGBT, Ukraine, Russia, EU, Gender Politics

Résumé:

Les politiciens hongrois, polonais, roumains et russes utilisent depuis longtemps une rhétorique et des politiques anti-LGBTQ+ pour se distancer de l'Occident et se poser en défenseurs des "valeurs familiales traditionnelles" contre la "dégénérescence" occidentale. En 2022, dans le cadre du rapprochement Ukraine-UE, Volodymyr Zelenskyy a annoncé la légalisation potentielle des partenariats entre personnes de même sexe en Ukraine, où l'homophobie reste monnaie courante. L'UE doit toutefois encore reconnaître que l'institutionnalisation des droits des minorités aux niveaux structurel et législatif ne suffit pas à prévenir la discrimination à l'encontre des minorités nationales. Cette étude porte sur la manière dont Poutine et le patriarche Kirill ont récemment invoqué la politique du genre pour justifier l'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie en 2022. Cette recherche aborde l'impact des manifestations de solidarité de la Russie avec les critiques européens de cette "décadence morale", à

savoir que le Kremlin a utilisé l'opposition morale à l'Occident pour polariser, confondre et déstabiliser les pays où l'État, l'église nationale et l'identité nationale sont entrelacés. Enfin, cette étude suggère que l'Ukraine est l'occasion pour l'UE de reconnaître l'insuffisance des changements juridiques pour résoudre la discrimination à l'encontre des minorités sexuelles. L'UE doit plutôt s'engager à adapter sa conditionnalité aux circonstances individuelles des futurs États membres.

Mots-clés: LGBT, Ukraine, Russie, UE, politique de genre

On September 30, 2022, at the signing of treaties on the accession of the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” and Zaporizhzhya and Kherson regions to Russia, Putin made sure to include in his speech marking this annexation:

Now I would [...] want to address also all citizens of the country [...]: do we want to have here, in our country, in Russia, “parent number one, parent number two and parent number three” (they have completely lost it!) instead of mother and father? Do we want our schools to impose on our children, from their earliest days in school, perversions that lead to degradation and extinction? Do we want to drum into their heads the ideas that certain other genders exist along with women and men and to offer them gender reassignment surgery? Is that what we want for our country and our children? This is all unacceptable to us. We have a different future of our own. (The Kremlin, 2022)

Why would Putin, in a speech celebrating the illegal annexation of Ukrainian regions, make note of non-heteronormative sexuality and include anti-gender mobilization? Similar comments were made on February 24, 2022, when the Kremlin announced Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, during President Putin’s New Year address, and in the Victory Parade address on May 9, 2023 (The Kremlin, 2022a). There is an unwavering consistency in the rhetoric used to justify the war in Ukraine as protecting Russian traditional values and ensuring the survival of the Russian nation (Mole, 2016). Deeply rooted historical theories and understandings of Russia’s place in the world have been utilized by Putin and his close associates to legitimize imperialist and expansionist aspirations.

With time, politicians in Hungary, Poland, and Romania employed similar anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and policies to distance themselves from liberal values and to present themselves as defenders of traditional family values against the West’s ‘degeneracy’. The respect of LGBTQ+ rights has become a litmus test for a country’s broader human rights record and been subject to direct political contestation as Russia champions its ‘sexual sovereignty’ over the West and presents a political and cultural model against the European Union’s

(hereafter, EU) universal liberal value system (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016).

Moral opposition to the West has created a dangerous cleavage. Eastern Europe wants economic advantages and freedom of movement, but simultaneously rejects the EU's presumed moral superiority, which leaves space for Russia to indirectly exploit and fuel far-right influences and discourse. The rise of stigmatizing and discriminatory attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter, CEE) against LGBTQ+ is welcomed by a Russian leadership that provides the appropriate language to spread polarizing messages. This study will analyze how gender politics in the EU have moulded into a source of instability not only for each country's internal affairs but for the EU itself, since its values system—upon which it was built and rests to this day—is continuously undermined from within by Russian sharp power.

Russia's portrayal of itself as the vanguard of traditional values takes root in Orthodox religious thought and draws from intellectual traditions such as Slavophilism, Russian Messianism, and Eurasianism (Edenborg, 2023). This discourse is intertwined with state patriotism drawing on concepts of sovereignty, security, and stability to legitimize both Putin's regime and his aggressive, encroaching foreign policy. Russia's use of this rhetoric has become especially dangerous since it has been used to justify aggression against Ukraine since 2014 (Young, 2022).

Understanding how Russian sharp power operates in the EU and in Candidate states, and addressing this urgency contributes to the preexisting literature in two ways. First, this study examines the origins of the Kremlin's ideological roots in relation to the Kremlin's and the Russian Orthodox Church's (hereafter, ROC) speeches to analyze mentions of nonconforming sexual orientation for foreign policy purposes. The Russian strategy proves efficient to fuel discriminatory rhetoric against queer people, polarize public opinion within the EU and Candidate states, and promote legislation similar to Russia's on "anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda."

Relatedly, the article responds to the paucity of attention on the challenges posed by Ukrainian admission to the EU and abundance by EU conditionality politics. The case studies of Hungary

and Romania expose how backlash to EU liberal values can emerge in instances where the EU unilaterally pushed for its own values system, disregarding local historical and cultural specificities. Rising grievances in CEE exemplify the EU's lack of consideration for reinforced traditional values system and consequent reversal of EU policies of inclusivity. Noting the viability of the Kremlin's divisive rhetoric on gender politics in Europe, Ukraine's membership candidacy is an opportunity for Brussels to learn from past mistakes and to consider historical precedents of reversals back to traditional gender norms and the impact of the current war on LGBTQ+ issues.

I further argue against the absolutist notion that the political and ideological cartography that divided Europe between East and West during the Cold War truly collapsed after the end of communism. When pushing for the respect of minority rights in countries of the former Eastern bloc, the EU's policies uphold a certain teleological character whereby western Europe is more advanced and meant to 'help' its 'backward' neighbour reach similar levels of cultural and political agency, 'proper' European culture (Blagojević et al., 2011; Butterfield, 2013; Dumančić, 2013; Todorova, 1997). LGBTQ+ communities are still in the process of emerging and taking form, and so EU policymaking should therefore begin reflecting the plurality and complexity of queer experiences in CEE (Kulpa, 2011). Brussels' disregard for the non-linear nature of emancipation when pushing for the respect of minority rights has provided the opportunity for backlash to EU norm diffusion.

The remainder of the study is structured as follows. The next section outlines the Kremlin's use of the mocking term "Gayropa", its historical roots, and its greater significance for EU politics and Russian sharp power. It is followed by an analysis of public opinion on homosexuality in countries where the state, national churches and national identity are deeply intertwined. It demonstrates the region's vulnerability to Russian divisive rhetoric and the urgent need for the EU to take greater note of it. The last section expands on the challenges posed by historical precedent and the ongoing war in Ukraine for LGBTQ+ rights in Ukrainian society in light of its Candidate status, granted June 23, 2022 (*Ukraine*, 2023). The case study of Ukraine exposes factors which make changes at the legal and institutional level insufficient for a true, socially widespread

respect of sexual minority rights in countries with high rates of homophobia.

“Gayropa” or the threat of western degenerate values

Public narratives expressed through speeches may not always indicate policy changes, but they do shed light on leaders’ perception of their own actorness and legitimacy, especially in relation to other states and international players (Bacon, 2012). Language and narratives provide significant transfer points to negotiate one’s place on the global playing field and indicate critical discursive reference points around which internal and foreign policy choices are made (Foucault, 1976; Light, 2015). It is therefore vital to undertake an analysis of “Gayropa,” one of the Kremlin’s main rhetorical tools to discredit nonconforming identities.

Introduced in Russian media in the second half of the 2010s, “Gayropa” has been employed by political, religious, and public supporters of the regime to further the claim that Russia is a unique Eurasian civilization that is distinct from the West and, therefore, has the legitimacy to protect its values in its supposed sphere of influence (Riabov & Riabova, 2014a; Riabova & Riabov, 2019). “Gayropa” reflects a rhetorical tool in Russian nationalist discourse that associates western Europe with demasculinization, portraying it as a degenerate civilization due to the acceptance of homosexuality, same-sex marriages, and the breakdown of traditional gender norms, contrasting this with Russia’s adherence to moral principles and the preservation of societal ‘normalcy’. The EU is undermined through the “Gayropa” propaganda, championed in Russian media channels broadcasted in the Russian Federation and in para-states that emerged out of the collapsed of the Soviet Union (O’Loughlin et al., 2016).

In the post-Cold War era, Russia was in search of its place and significance in the new geopolitical landscape. Riabov and Riabova explain that the roots of “Gayropa” are found in the political, economic, and psychological chaos that followed the collapse of the Eastern Bloc (Riabov & Riabova, 2014b). The dependence on the West during the 1990s, especially in terms of foreign aid and foreign advisers, came to be perceived as Russian “collective de-

masculinization". The weakening of its international standing as an economic, military, and ideological superpower pushed the former Soviet empire to feel as though it had to restore its moral sovereignty. Male and national pride was deeply intertwined with the idea that Russia would once again gain self-determination to decide its own fate. Thus began the revival of a society with a conservative values system that embraced patriarchy.

"Gayropa" inherently implies a power hierarchy, at the top of which Russia reigns high and mighty (Riabov & Riabova, 2014b). By portraying itself as the embodiment of masculine features of strength, independence, and rationality, Russia has legitimized its imperial aspirations by defending its morally superior nation that protects traditional values and the integrity of the heterosexual family (Riabov & Riabova, 2014a). Putin has utilized this rhetorical tool to posit gender politics in existential terms, implying the necessity of "re-masculinization" and the consequent delegitimization of western liberal values. Naydenova explains how Russia, as a successor of the Soviet empire, has never acted as a traditional "nation-state." It holds its own political, social and cultural traditions, which it seeks to extrapolate beyond its internationally recognized borders, turning it into a 'country-civilization' (Naydenova, 2016).

Russianness was rehabilitated and a post-Soviet version of the messianic idea established. In Putin's use of "Gayropa" to demonstrate the West's incompatibility with the *Russkiy mir* (Russian World) and/or Orthodox civilization or "Holy Rus," LGBTQ+ issues have been instrumentalized to rally support from voters in the EU or Candidate countries. Traditional Orthodox values are, therefore, mobilized to oppose the West's influence in Russia's former sphere of influence. In the Kremlin's eyes, non-heterosexuality is then not only a moral but, more importantly, an identity threat. Eidenbord identifies the 2010s in Russia as a period of discourse institutionalization when discrimination against sexual minorities, permitting domestic violence, and promoting traditional values became entrenched in Russian legislation (Edenberg, 2023). Able to promote an alternative to the universal liberal system of human rights by upholding itself as the stronghold of Orthodoxy and the bastion of traditional values, Russia has championed the rhetoric of anti-liberalism: dismissing the liberal values of political correctness and

permitting, if not actively encouraging, sexism and homophobia. The risk then becomes that the struggle for the respect of sexual minority rights is simplified and framed within a neo-ideological rivalry that pins one system of values against another, making them mutually exclusive and rendering the rights of sexual minorities only permissible within the liberal one.

With homosexuality perceived as contravening Orthodoxy, anti-LGBTQ+ mobilization serves as a defense of collective national identity rooted in ethno-religious nationalism (Edenborg, 2023). Katherine Verdery explains how nationalists have constructed 'family values' as the natural cornerstone of solidarity and social justice within the nation (Verdery, 1996). Political sovereignty and cultural autonomy of the nation based on religious and traditional values are standing ground to 'foreign' liberalism. Pride and the respect of the rights of sexual minorities are largely linked with European integration and its human rights conditionality, ideas not considered part of the wider culture and identity of countries like Hungary, Romania, and Russia.

Public Opinion, Religion, and Views on Homosexuality: Our God, No 'Western Degeneracy', Russia as a "Protector"?

To tackle the viability of "Gayropa" in CEE, we must consider the effects of the collapse of socialism on ethnonationalism, the rising role that religion plays in the region since 1989 and its correlation to views on homosexuality. Following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, Eastern Europe experienced a rise of nationalism rooted on each country's founding myths and on the resurgence of their respective religious institutions after many decades of Communist suppression (Tarta, 2015).

The 1990s in CEE were characterized by chaotic liberalization policies after the collapse of the socialist regimes. Simultaneously, the EU perceived the implementation of LGBTQ+ rights as a litmus test for a country's human rights record and alignment with EU politics (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016). Locally, sexual minorities' rights have also been understood as a yardstick to evaluate progress for the western model of modernity (Woodcock, 2011). While these rights have gained great symbolic value, they have also perpetuated

a demarcation between the 'traditional East' and 'progressive West' (Butterfield, 2013; Dumančić, 2013). The EU expects countries seeking membership to abide by western liberal norms, which the former socialist states have grasped very well and were willing to fulfill anti-discrimination and equal rights requirements should they be granted EU Member State status (Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2020). The adoption of inclusion policies is rendered ineffective by the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the national historical and cultural dynamics at play in the decriminalization of homosexuality (Tarta, 2015). Scholars such as Mizielińska describe the disjunction that ensued whereby CEE countries were 'catching up' with the West, only for western countries to perceive CEE as 'lagging behind' or 'dragging progress down' (Mizielińska, 2011). Analyzing Poland's politics on gender and sexuality, she explains how there was no clear grasp on the EU's side that the meaning of queerness is relative to the time and space analyzed, and that translating western experiences of queer liberation to other contexts risked disregarding local specificities. The backlash to the perceived "external invasive pressure" was noted in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine (Blagojević et al., 2011; Bonacker & Zimmer, 2020; Dima, 2020; Kent & Tapfumaneyi, 2018; Mizielińska, 2011; Woodcock, 2011).

While scholarship has problematized the EU's approach, for example regarding the emphasis put on visibility, there is yet to be change within EU structure. Non-heteronormative sexualities were largely invisible during the communist period and appeared in the public sphere in TV shows, the music industry, magazine stands, and festivals only after the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc (Fejes & Balogh, 2013). It led to a direct correlation of homosexuality with the evils of the West that came with economic liberalization policies. The sociohistorical specificities that made for an intolerance of queerness in the public space are not considered in EU policy toward post-socialist countries (Balogh, 2011; Fejes & Balogh, 2013). EU-promoted LGBTQ+ initiatives rooted in the increased visibility of the community are set within a context of strengthening religious and anti-EU sentiments that blame LGBTQ+ activists, EU policymakers, and liberal politicians for forming a "corrupt" alliance against the traditional family. Beyond the aforementioned countries, this phenomenon was noted in Bulgaria and Slovakia, thus pointing to a

widespread regional phenomenon overlooked at the EU level (Lorencová, 2013; Panayotov, 2013). To understand what social and cultural configurations are available to the queer communities of Eastern Europe, one must understand the national contexts in which they are formulated and operate.

The experiences of western queer liberation cannot be extrapolated to an environment that does not share the same sociohistorical experiences as value conflicts are highly probably, hindering positive development for the groups in receipt of international aid. This discussion on the complicated nature of the EU's approach to the respect of minority rights within the Union and for Candidate countries provides the background for a more in-depth analysis of the impact this has had on gender politics in CEE. The following section tackles the current conflict of values and the way in which the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church can exploit it to spread their anti-LGBTQ+ and pro-traditionalist rhetoric abroad.

Due to the lack of social cohesion and established political and legal institutions after the collapse of Communism, newly established local authorities had little on which to build solidarity (Mole, 2016). Appealing to ethnicity, historical rights, and religious authorities, state authorities created a cohesive social body and legitimized their hold on power. The establishment of such a discourse was also possible in the absence of a strong civil society that could resist a nationalist formulation of identity rooted in the rejection of perceived "others." Understanding the nation as an extended kin group that shares features of biology, culture, language, religion is tied to patriarchal conceptions of the family that naturalize the traditional public and private roles of women and men (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Religion and tradition came to be seen as a constancy in rapidly changing and unstable political and economic environment (Lorencová, 2013). Rooting national narratives in traditional values and the patriarchal family, threatened by sexual and ethnic minorities, results from the transition to western liberalism in the 1990s, enduring legacies of socialism, and the nature of the post-socialist political system that utilizes preexisting social phobias for political gain (Kuzio, 2015; Mole, 2016).

Poll results from the Pew Research Centre expose the fact that in Orthodox-majority countries a median of 68% of the population believe their culture is superior, whilst in Catholic-majority ones, this number stands at 45% (Sahgal & Cooperman, 2017).¹ Furthermore, in the former, the relation between religion and national identity is stronger in the latter: a median of 70% of the population believes being Orthodox is “very or somewhat important to truly share national identity” (Sahgal & Cooperman, 2017). The feeling of superiority and tying religion to national identity makes people more inclined to defend their culture and their values, especially if they are led to believe threats from a foreign values system exist. Centuries-old national churches in the predominantly Orthodox countries surveyed is a contributing factor to high popular support for religious institutions to play a role in public life. The Kremlin can more easily exploit anxieties in these countries by leveraging their desire to protect national identity, leading to a positive response to Russia’s rhetorical use of traditional values against the West.

In his speeches, Patriarch Kirill appeals directly to skeptics of Putin’s political stance. Religion is utilized as a cross-class cleavage to trigger the sense of national pride and identity that will thereafter mutate into a more favourable view of Russia and Putin. The Kremlin has employed religion to reinforce the idea of Russia as the stronghold of Christianity and the bastion of traditional culture.

What exists in the Donbas is a rejection, a principled rejection of the so-called values that are now being offered by those who lay claim to global domination. Today, there is a certain test for loyalty to that power, a certain pass into that “happy” world, the world of excessive consumption, the world of illusory freedom. [...] It’s a gay parade. The demand to hold a gay parade is in fact a test for loyalty to that powerful world, and we know that if people or countries resist this demand, they are excluded from that world and treated as alien. (Young, 2022)

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

Where the intertwining of the state and the church is more prevalent, the higher the likelihood of widespread negative attitudes towards homosexuality. The Pew Research Centre exemplifies how, in Orthodox traditional countries, the stronger the traditional and conservative mindset is, the less probable people will be to accept homosexuality (Sahgal & Cooperman, 2017). Studies have confirmed the direct correlation between the strength of religious belief and intolerance to non-heteronormative sexualities (Rowatt et al., 2009; Takács & Szalma, 2019; Whitley, 2009). The politicization of sexuality leads to a division of society between the “sick” and the “healthy,” between those who have betrayed tradition and the nation, and those who have remained loyal. As described by Sremac S. and Ganzevoort, R. R., ethno-nationalism and religious institutions rely on the principle of exclusion to create a ‘sacred-social order’ that intertwines notions of national threats, national preservation, the biological survival of a population, and moral defense, effectively furthering their own conception of national identity (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015). In this process of nation-building, we see an idealization of masculinity that puts the family on a pedestal as the bedrock of a ‘healthy’ nation.

In CEE, many countries view Russia as a necessary force to balance western influence while simultaneously accepting a form of cooperation with the U.S. and its allies: Romania stands at 52% and 82%, respectively; Hungary, 44% and 63%; and Ukraine, 22% and 62% (Sahgal & Cooperman, 2017).² In turn, the percentage of people who agree there is a value conflict with western countries (Romania: 68%; Hungary: 58%; Ukraine: 38%) demonstrates a significant level of discordance between EU liberal values and national traditional ones, creating another cleavage easily exploitable by Putin and the ROC. The universalization of the liberal value system is negatively responded to by CEE countries, perceiving it as an imposition from outsiders, delegitimizing their culture and targeting their religious values as backward, traditional, inferior, and incompatible with the ‘developed’ European ones.

A change in people’s mindset and values system is a long process that requires a heartfelt commitment on the EU’s part to

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

understand the culture and history of each Member State, acknowledging the reasons why there might be ongoing backlash to EU policies and membership requirements. In collaboration with local activists and organizations, a greater grasp of how it informs current politics and public opinion is vital. Greater dialogue and involvement with local parties will discredit the image that values of inclusivity are solely imposed from abroad and enable western hegemonic methodologies to adapt into effective initiatives that take root in each respective local circumstances rather than in western experience.

Case Studies (Russia, Hungary and Romania): What lessons can be learned to avoid the same from happening in Ukraine?

In 2013, Russia established the most discriminatory law against LGBTQ+ people since 1993, when homosexuality was decriminalized under former President Boris Yeltsin. The 2013 Anti-Gay Propaganda Law was passed unanimously by the Russian Parliament and consists of amendments to the Law on the Protection of Children. The law appeals to the conservative base that Putin has long drawn domestic support from, and champions 'traditional' values as it is "aimed at protecting children from information promoting the denial of traditional family values" (Stella et al., 2016). This law limited the promotion of "nontraditional" sexual relations to minors; anyone under the age of 18 could not have access to any information concerning non-heteronormative sexualities.

On November 24, 2022, exactly nine months after initiating the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin took a step closer to criminalizing homosexuality by extending the aforementioned law: no matter the age, it has become illegal to publicly promote homosexuality (Ebel, 2022). On November 30, 2023, the Russian Supreme Court enabled the Justice Ministry to effectively ban the "international LGBT movement" now considered an "extremist organization" (Meduza, 2023). These laws are utilized to harm sexual minorities for political gain and employed as a sharp power tool in foreign policy. One of the November 24th bill's architects, Alexander Khinshtein, commented: "LGBT [rights] today are an element of hybrid warfare, and in this hybrid warfare we must protect our values, our society and our children" (Davis, 2022). The discourse spread today takes root in the late 1990s and early 2000s when two

interlinked storylines defined the way in which the Kremlin would approach non-heteronormative sexualities: the challenge to traditional values represented a threat to security and national sovereignty, and Russia's children needed protection from 'imported' and harmful ideas from the West (Edenborg, 2023).

Anti-Gay Propaganda laws in Hungary and Romania

Inspired by Russia's 2013 Anti-Gay Propaganda law, Hungary and Romania followed suit in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Russia's "Gayropa" rhetoric is notable through the implementation of similar legislation in both countries committed to limiting, through legal and institutional means, information on sexual minorities to "protect" children from harmful values.

In Hungary, on June 17, 2021, the Parliament passed legislation known as the Child Protection Act that limits access to any content dealing with homosexuality or gender change to people under 18 (Szakacs, 2021). Fidesz, the ruling party headed by Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, promotes a Christian-conservative agenda, explaining why the act was appended to a separate, widely backed bill that strictly penalizes paedophilia. Doing so makes it much harder for opponents to vote against since the protection of children is a class-cutting cleavage. Orbán has championed himself, in a scarily similar way to his counterpart Putin, as the protector of traditional values and of children threatened by 'homosexual propaganda' coming from the 'decaying West' (Rédai, 2022).

Romania, in February 2022, took steps to mimic its neighbour after an amendment to the Romanian Child Protection Law was proposed—a similar method to the Russian and Hungarian method. Seven parliamentarians from the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) proposed a bill to prevent "child abuse" (Verseck, 2021). In May 2022, the amendment was adopted without a vote by the Romanian Senate. This law has not yet been ratified and awaits a vote in the Chamber of Deputies. Two former Members of Parliament from Alliance for the Union of Romanians (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, AUR), a right-wing populist political party in Romania, proposed another discriminatory bill as an amendment to the law to combat pornography that would prohibit films, music,

cartoons, photographs with gay content from reaching people under 18 years old (Păcurar, 2023). LGBTQ+ issues are thus utilized as a political tool to exploit already existing negative attitudes toward non-conforming sexual identities.

The tropes of sovereignty, security, and gender ideology (and their intertwinement) are irrefutably present in these three countries' anti-LGBTQ propaganda laws. These political and rhetorical tools serve efficiently to appeal to ideological nationalists while also alerting a broader audience concerned with family values and religious conservatism that their way of life is directly undermined and threatened (Edenborg, 2023). Focusing on family, gender, and sexuality permits restrictive regulations of sexual orientation and creates strict morals norms on social reproduction and socialization. Russia, Hungary, and Romania are mobilizing legally and institutionally against a perceived to be "decaying" West. Engaging in this type of narrative opens the door to Russian propaganda and the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, which have been following a coherent, homogenous rhetoric. Russia has been able to utilize the lack of a concerted effort to reconcile EU universalist liberal values with local values conflicts to its advantage. A broader lesson needs to be learned by the EU regarding Russia's manipulation of gender politics and use of it as sharp power to fuel dissatisfaction with values of inclusivity, and by extension values of the EU. While there is no international agreement on what 'traditional values' in fact consist of, the Kremlin has nevertheless been successful in employing and promoting this shared storyline to enable common action between a numerous and diverse number of groups worldwide against LGBTQ+ issues.

Ukraine: The Risks and How to prevent Russia's Manipulations

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and LGBTQ+ soldiers' sacrifices to fight invading Russian troops, there have been greater calls to grant same-sex couples equal rights to marry and start a family, since same-sex marriage and civil unions are not legally recognized. In August 2022, due to certain privileges that only relatives or a spousal partner can have (the right to visit a hospitalized partner, share property ownership, claim their partner's body if killed, etc.), a petition that garnered 25,000 signatures from all

over Ukraine urged President Zelenskyy to support same-sex marriage (Levenson, 2022). The Ukrainian constitution, which defines marriage as “based on the free consent of a woman and a man,” cannot legally be modified during wartime (Pietsch, 2022).

The state’s response to the petition was positive as Zelenskyy affirmed that “in the modern world, the level of democracy in a society is measured, among other things, by the state policy aimed at ensuring equal rights for all citizens” (ibid.) EU-Ukraine rapprochement since February 24, 2022 has given Zelenskyy greater incentive to legalize same-sex partnerships as a show of Ukraine’s readiness to join the European community (Ukraine, 2023). Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian President has framed Ukraine’s ability to defend itself as a fight for democracy and western values against Russia.

Inna Sovsun, an opposition lawmaker in the liberal party Holos and an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, wrote on Facebook that “The response is more positive than it could have been. [...] But at the same time — not clear enough. [...] Why are they not presented for discussion and not submitted to Parliament?” (Sovsun, 2022). She recommended civil partnerships as an “acceptable interim alternative.” There have been, however, conservative members within Servant of the People, Zelenskyy’s party, who had previously called for a law fining “homosexual propaganda.” In 2021, LGBTQ+ rights activists held the first UkrainePride Rave in front of the office of the Ukrainian President to protest a bill proposed by members of Servant of the People that they equated to the 2013 Russian Anti-Gay Propaganda Law (Benigni, 2023). LGBTQ+ rights are polarizing within the region, especially in post-socialist countries, and implementing changes only at the legal level, disregarding local sensibilities, could potentially fuel future problems and grievances.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has galvanized the national sense of pride and Ukrainian identity first ignited by Euromaidan in 2014. The wave of demonstrations and protests to affirm Ukraine’s place in the European community and the ensuing conflict in the Donbas since 2014 contributed to this new sense of civic identity as it changed people’s attitudes toward political participation. Everyday people became activists and actors of change, which made Ukrainian

identity mean more than ethnic or linguistic characterization, and evolve into a more pronounced sense of a civic duty to protect and preserve the independence of their country (Kulyk, 2016; Onuch, 2015).

Despite gaining greater visibility during the Euromaidan, LGBTQ+ people have experienced more violence by far-right groups, which have emboldened since armed conflict began in 2014. A popular opinion among LGBTQ+ activists in Ukraine is that the issue of sexual minority rights was put on the backburner as the war in the Donbas took precedence (Martsenyuk, 2016). Military escalations have in some ways reinforced the patriarchal system, again rendering LGBTQ+ people as a threat to the stereotypical male role of the defender of the nation (Phillips, 2014). Civil society has denounced the inaction of the police and of the overall justice system to investigate and punish hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people. The police classify instances of harassment as cases of hooliganism, largely because anti-LGBTQ discrimination has not been formally written into law (Benigni, 2023). Activists in the candidates states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia have also put forth similar complaints with regard to the lack of cooperation on the part of the police and the limited capacity of the judicial system to hold accountable perpetrators of hate crimes (Slootmaeckers & Touquet, 2016).

Russia's war against Ukraine has also compromised the networks that had previously existed, as these cities have been devastated by Russian bombings, are under Russian occupation, or have been evacuated. Organizations such as Other (Inna) in Kherson had to relocate and to reorient its activities to humanitarian aid for the community. Additionally, volunteers have left, buildings have been taken over by pro-Russian forces, and friendly law-enforcement bodies have vacated or been dismantled (Benigni, 2023). In the non-government-controlled areas of the so-called Donetsk "People's Republic" and Luhansk "People's Republic", homophobia has risen since 2014 because of Russian influence, leading to the increased use of derogatory terms such as "Gayropa" on the news and instances of "corrective rape", notably at the hands of the anti-LGBTQ+ movement *Occupy Pedophilia* (Ibid). In Crimea, on the other hand, the anti-gay propaganda law is in vigour as the territory

falls under Russian legislation. Local safe spaces have also disappeared as they have been destroyed or networks disrupted by people fleeing, further hindering the possibility to ensure the protection of the LGBTQ+ community within broader Ukrainian society.

It is important to note Crimea's place as the second most accepting region of homosexuality, after Kyiv, in 2007 (Martsenyuk, 2017). Cities like Kherson, Zaporizhziya, Luhansk, and Kharkiv in Eastern Ukraine, currently devastated by the war, were part of a wider hub for the emerging LGBTQ+ community in the East, which was more active and had more organisations than in western Ukraine. The temporary occupation of the eastern Ukrainian territories starting in 2014 is critical to consider for EU policy on human rights in Ukraine as Russian disinformation and the "Gayropa" propaganda have had detrimental effects on queer networks established since Ukraine's independence.

Ukraine was one of the most intolerant countries regarding homosexuality and same-sex marriage of the CEE countries polled by the Pew Research Centre: in 2018, 85% of the population were strongly opposed to same-sex marriage and in 2020, less than 10% of the population agreed that homosexuality should be accepted by society (Pew Research Center, 2018; Poushter & Kent, 2020).³ In the appendix to the report done in 2020, a table representing the acceptance of homosexuality over time exemplifies that in Ukraine the percentage decreased from 17% in 2002 to 14% in 2019 (Poushter & Kent, 2020). It is simply not feasible to overlook this widespread hostility to meet EU standards without expecting a future backlash as seen in Hungary, Romania, and even Ukraine itself with its anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda law proposal. This would provide rich and multifaceted opportunities for Russia to exploit divisions within society, at a time when the Ukrainian government is looking for deeper cooperation with the EU. This is a phenomenon that already has precedent, with the Russian government's backing of anti-

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>; <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/>.

LGBTQ+ rights movements in post-Maidan Ukraine (Bonacker & Zimmer, 2020).

Ukraine can be susceptible to such rising polarization and a revival of traditional values in times of economic, social, and political instability as there is a precedent to it in the 1990s. After gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine was the first former-Soviet republic to decriminalize homosexuality. During the transition in the 1990s, men found themselves in charge of their destiny again without interference from the state; however, the structural problems they faced also limited their ability to take full advantage of this newfound liberty, leading to what scholars describe as a crisis of masculinity during Ukraine's first decade of independence (Riabchuk, 2017). In demographic terms, men have been at a disadvantage in comparison to women in Ukraine due to their shorter life expectancy and higher rates of alcoholism and suicide (ibid). Consequently, there was a perceived need to go back to the true traditional Ukrainian values which the Soviet state was held guilty for having erased. The Berehynia and the Cossack ideal emerged in the post-Soviet period as a reversal back to 'true' Ukrainian femininity and masculinity (Bureychak, 2017). The Berehynia is based on the idea of matriarchy as inherent to Ukrainian society and understands this type of woman to be a symbolic matriarch and guardian of Ukrainian national culture and ethnic identity (Kis, 2017). The Cossack ideal presents the militaristic ideal, the devotion to state principles, and heroic masculinity as a return to the gender roles disrupted by Soviet rule. The role of the Church is also important to consider when thinking about the prominence of traditional gender roles as it emphasized the role of the man as the breadwinner and that of the woman as the family guardian. Such a phenomenon was not unpredictable. Nationalist politics in the post-socialist period did emphasize women returning to their 'proper' role as caretakers in the private sphere to reverse the damage done to the nation and to 'natural' gender relations by Soviet power (Verdery, 1996). Less opportunities for employment, deterioration of living standards, and men's higher rate of mortality sharpened the perception that these ideal models of the man and the woman were necessary to protect recently acquired independence.

Considering the various national specificities tied to culture, history, and regional dynamics in Ukraine, developing an action plan in

collaboration with local actors possessing relevant experience and expertise can enhance the efficiency of EU policies. This approach minimizes the likelihood of backlash by organically rooting these policies in local initiatives. A profound grasp of Ukraine's national history and its ramifications for LGBTQ+ individuals is imperative for implementing effective, comprehensive, and enduring changes. This, in turn, counters assertions that LGBTQ+ rights are imports incongruent with Christian 'traditional' values.

Conclusion

In the context of the war in Ukraine and considering historical precedents of reversals back to traditional conceptions of female and male gender roles, pushing for Ukraine to abide by EU standards of human rights is important, but it must consider the historical traditions that exist and what grievances might arise from the end of the war. Such factors must be considered, especially as the period of reconstruction and competing postwar priorities will put the rights of sexual minorities on the backburner. Conditionality politics could have (as previously experienced in Hungary and Romania) unintended consequences for the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ community, since it demands of a people polarized on the topic to unite and respect a minority they, at best, do not consider their own and, at worst, perceive as sinners and a threat. Additionally, the homophobic rhetoric is promoted by political parties or groups that have little or no political representation in government or the Parliament, but which own national and regional media outlets to spread their message (Shevtsova, 2020). Due to the lack of major independent media outlets not owned by oligarchs or specific political powers, Ukrainian public opinion is ever more susceptible to fostering these non-heteronormative sexualities if the message diffused supports anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination.

Some member states and candidate countries are suffering from 'enlargement fatigue' and doubts regarding the absorption capacity of the EU have been raised. Candidate countries are dependent on domestic factors, which limit or challenge EU integration, and on pressure from the EU to abide by the Copenhagen criteria and thus prioritize the respect of human rights (Slootmaeckers & Touquet, 2016). In Eastern European and Balkan countries, the universal

human rights discourse clashes with notions of national identity that resonate more deeply with the national population (Mole, 2016). Therefore, as the enlargement process becomes increasingly more politicised, a better sociohistorical understanding of local LGBTQ+ communities and rights is required to produce comprehensive and long-lasting changes that will override claims that LGBTQ+ people are a foreign import and incompatible with Christian 'traditional' values. If ignored, this value schism will once again be utilized by political parties, Russian sharp power that offers the rhetoric to fuel polarization will gain ground, and the queer community will once again be at the mercy of a political environment divided between tradition and liberal values.

By justifying the war as a necessary means to protect a shared system of values and tying it to the survival of the nation against the threat of the propagation of western politics in Ukraine, Putin, Kremlin officials, and the Russian Orthodox Church are able to make CEE societies relate to the fight against intruding western values. Specific meanings are attached to non-heteronormative sexuality because post-socialist countries all share their first societal exposure to LGBTQ+ people and issues in the 1990s amidst political and economic transition, thus making it easier to associate queerness with a foreign character. The Kremlin can capitalize on this perception and claim moral leadership as well as social and political hierarchies, legitimating discrimination truth-regimes. This rhetoric is not designed to create outright pro-Russian public opinion and national governments per se, but rather to signal allegiances to critics of the 'moral decay' that has ensued from EU intervention in internal affairs of Member States. Patriarch Kirill and Putin exploit critics of the EU's universalist application of liberal values and their grievances to enhance conflict with the EU and to polarize and destabilize countries where the state, national churches, and national identity are deeply intertwined.

As a result of the communist past and its legacies, ethnic nationalism has come to play a crucial role in CEE politics. Letting these forces operate will leave sexual minorities at the mercy of ethnonationalist states that seek conformity over the respect of human rights. The case of Ukraine offers the EU an opportunity to address its own past naivety by considering local history and culture, imperatively relying on grassroot initiatives and actors to counter the

argument that LGBTQ+ are foreign and ensuring that other institutional means are taken to protect LGBTQ+ people, i.e. anti-discrimination laws and meaningful enforcement of such legislation. The lingering cultural and institutional legacies of socialism must be considered; one cannot discount how this impacts the nature and strength of public mobilization and social attitudes toward homosexuality in CEE. The possibilities and limits of visibility for sexual minorities must be assessed with this sociohistorical past in mind while also noting rising religious and anti-EU sentiments in the region, and the Kremlin's ability to fuel said attitudes. The struggle for minority rights must also account for social and economic inequalities in Europe that, due to globalization and neo-liberalization, should go beyond legislative changes like legalize same-sex marriage and civil partnership to promote positive rights such as the right to work, sex education, and sexual health, indicative of the greater struggle for equality. This drive to promote equality must incorporate the experiences and desires of local LGBTQ+, catering for different national specificities in this diverse region with the active participation of these communities.

These issues have taken on added significance given Ukraine's ongoing accession talks. In November 2023 the European Commission recommended that formal negotiations begin. Under such circumstances, it is imperative that the EU adapt its existing rigid and inflexible criteria to consider Ukraine's sociohistorical specificities that explain present negative attitudes to non-conforming sexual identity. Simply promoting legal change as the solution for the respect of minority rights is not sufficient to ensure widespread societal acceptance and avoid Russian-enhanced anti-discrimination discourse. The EU's *modus operandi* must be reassessed to counter the pervasiveness of Russia's use of gender politics as a way to legitimize discriminatory attitudes toward sexual minorities and consequently fuel anti-EU sentiment. Failure to do so will result in the same patterns of hostility, grievance and susceptibility to Russian discourse that are already placing immense pressure on European solidarity and undermining the viability of the very values that the EU wishes to see flourish in these countries.

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