

# Homophobic War in Ukraine: a queer eye on International Security

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1. In Cynthia Weber's book *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality, and the Will to Knowledge* (2016), there is a broader definition of "queer" aligned with a political stance that seeks to challenge and destabilize hegemonic discourses and practices. For Weber, "queer" is not solely about one's sexual orientation but encompasses a broader set of ideas and practices related to challenging and subverting normative categories, power structures, and hierarchies.

The war in Ukraine has highlighted how narratives and political discourses are built to justify action toward international security. Is it possible that an "anti-queer agenda" is being instrumentalized by the president Vladimir Putin in his imperialist ambitions in Ukraine? This paper is focused on discussing the role of principles and values in international security, using a queer theory<sup>1</sup> of international relations to explore how States' interaction might be led in this arena.

## A Russian history of homophobia

Since the early 18th century, Russian laws against homosexuality have ruled queer bodies, punished the ones brave enough to live their truth and condemned tens of thousands of futures and dreams. At the beginning, the reach of the law was limited to men serving in the army and navy, but Tsar Nicholas I formally extended it to wider society in a new criminal code introduced in the 19th century. Nevertheless, the law was weaker for upper-class queer people, especially for powerful supporters of the Romanov dynasty and members of the Tsar's family, who were often granted immunity from the throne (THE MOSCOW TIMES, 2012).

After the Russian Revolution in the 20th century, the Bolsheviks revoked all tsarist laws and, by doing so, dismantled the normative mechanisms used to prosecute queer people, which attenuated the persecution against queerness. Unfortunately, Josef Stalin's rise was followed by the criminalization of consensual sex relations between men in 1934. It was just in 1993, under the Boris Yeltsin administration, that homosexuality was finally decriminalized as part of a package to bring Russian legislation in line with Council of Europe standards. However, this came too late for the hundreds of queer men who died in prison under the previous law (ibidem, 2012).

Nowadays, the status of the Russian queer community

remains uncertain, whereas there are no legal instruments regarding the protection of queer rights in Russia. What is different now, according to Emil Edenborg (2021), is that Putin's anti-queer views and language have become even more extreme. Edenborg points out that Putin's speeches have been obsessed with promoting "traditional values", particularly when discussing the war in Ukraine (ibidem, 2021).

## Queer rights at stake

In this context, the conflict has also revealed the fragility of human rights protection in Eastern Europe. Queer soldiers and their partners are not having access to rights and mechanisms historically provided for heterosexual couples. Indeed, partners of queer Ukrainian soldiers who are wounded or killed cannot visit them at the hospitals, identify the deceased, or collect state benefits – rights guaranteed for heterosexual couples (FOREIGN POLICY, 2023).

However, change may be unfolding in Ukraine due to the Russian invasion. Early this year, a bill that would recognize same-sex civil partnerships and grant queer civil partners the same rights as their married heterosexual counterparts was introduced to Ukrainian parliament, which gave rise to a civil society support (ibidem, 2023).

Therefore, Putin's political homophobia may have loosen the chains that imprisoned queer rights in Ukraine. It seems that, after imposing his extremely homophobic government by force in Donbass, Ukrainian people started to show more tolerance toward the queer community than ever, neglecting principles and values of normality and tradition envisioned by their aggressor.

## Queer empowerment in Ukraine as a response to Russia's political homophobia

Russian aggression towards Ukraine has also strengthened the country's desire to join the European Union. Otherwise, we would not see a shift in Ukrainian geopolitical thinking capable of increasing tolerance towards the queer community, even if the motivation is solely to align with European values and reinforce opposition to Putin's anti-queer views.

2. According to Foreign Policy (2023), more than 100 soldiers have shared their coming-out stories on the LGBTIQ Military's 13,000-plus follower Instagram account.

As a result, the Ukrainian queer community is becoming stronger and more resilient, with a record number<sup>2</sup> of soldiers coming out as gay, bisexual, and transgender. Besides, the visibility of queer military members has helped to nudge some conservative members of society to become more tolerant (ibidem, 2023).

Although there is still a long way to go in the fight for equal rights and queer empowerment in Ukraine, considering that parts of society disagree with civil unions between same-sex partners, Putin's anti-queer rhetoric continues to fuel the movement.

## Is Putin protecting Russia from Western queer values?

As I argued, a dispute between queer rights and conservative agenda is, undoubtedly, being instrumentalized by Russia in the Ukraine War disguised as a defense of "traditional values" through, mostly, preventing Ukraine from succumbing to the "Western perverted policies".

On one hand, the Kremlin promotes a heteropatriarchal definition of "family" or "traditionalism" which relates to efforts to control the visibility of queer bodies. On the other, Ukraine strives to become a better ally to the queer community, in an attempt to reinforce a liberal political alignment and, consequently, gather more support from the Western democracies to survive in the international system.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that Putin's fears are beyond the possibility of "Western queer values" dominating Russia's zone of influence. Still, constructing a dichotomous narrative to polarize States regarding the limits of sexuality and gender in international relations might be useful to legitimize his actions towards Ukraine. Thus, an act of aggression by Russia's part, such as disrespecting Ukraine's sovereignty and self-determination, may suddenly turn to a defensive movement if Russian core principles and values are supposedly seen as threatened.

## Referências

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