

Cultural and geopolitical conflicts between the West and Russia: Western NGOs and LGBT activism

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Abstract

Gender norms and sexuality have become a part of cultural and geopolitical tensions between **Russia** and the **West**. In the early 1990s, Russia was ready to embrace Western liberal values welcoming foreign and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to work in the country. In the last two decades, the Kremlin has started to perceive the promotion of Western liberal ideals across the globe as a sign of imperialism. Putin's Russia presents itself as an advocate of "traditional values" and a defender of "traditional family". The rejection of LGBT rights is part of Putin's narrative of resisting Western liberal dominance. The Kremlin views Western NGOs promoting liberal agenda as actors working to undermine the country's sovereignty and security. The paper analyses the role of foreign and international (Western) NGOs in Russian LGBT activism. It discusses how changes in geopolitical orientation and foreign policy that Russia has experienced in the post-Soviet period affected the connections between Russian **LGBT activists** and Western donors.

Keywords: LGBT rights, Russia, sexuality, homophobia, traditional values

Résumé

Les normes de genre ainsi que la sexualité sont devenues des enjeux au sein des tensions culturelles et géopolitiques entre la **Russie** et l'**Occident**. Au début des années 1990, la Russie était prête à adhérer aux valeurs libérales occidentales en accueillant des organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) étrangères et internationales désireuses de travailler dans le pays. Désormais, et ce depuis les deux dernières décennies, le Kremlin perçoit la promotion des idéaux libéraux occidentaux dans le monde comme un signe d'impérialisme. La Russie se présente quant à elle comme un défenseur des « valeurs traditionnelles » et de la « famille traditionnelle ». En outre, Vladimir Poutine assimile le rejet des droits LGBT à un acte de résistance à ce qui est perçu comme une domination libérale occidentale. Le Kremlin considère que les ONG occidentales qui défendent le projet libéral sont des acteurs qui oeuvrent à affaiblir la souveraineté et la sécurité nationales. Cet article analyse le rôle des ONG étrangères et internationales (occidentales) dans l'activisme LGBT russe. Il examine comment les changements d'orientation géopolitique et de politique étrangère que la Russie a connu lors de la période postsoviétique ont affecté les liens entre les **activistes LGBT** russes et les donateurs occidentaux.

Mots-clés : droits LGBT, Russie, sexualité, homophobie, valeurs traditionnelles

Introduction

Feminists (Dalby 1994; Fluri 2011; Hyndman 2004) have long argued for the relevance of sexuality and gender to geopolitics and national security. Regulating sexual relations, gender norms, and family reflects a state's ideology and its approach to accepting and advancing certain ideas and values domestically and abroad. Promotion or rejection of LGBT rights has taken a geopolitical dimension. In Western democracies, the adoption of LGBT rights is often treated as a litmus test for states (Duggan 2003; Puar 2007). At the same time, conservatism and rejection of LGBT rights turn into an indicator of a state's resistance to Western liberal dominance and defence of sovereignty (Edenborg 2020; Weiss and Bosia, 2013; Wilkinson, 2014). Russia has become the leading force in promoting "traditional values" in opposition to the Western liberal agenda (Edenborg 2021). In this light, as Suchland argues (2018), Russia's radically different approach to sexuality, which feeds into state-sponsored homophobia, signifies the country's quest for dominance, especially in the post-Soviet space.

In the last few decades, the post-Soviet region has experienced the spread of liberal ideals of tolerance and LGBT inclusivity, not for a small part due to international actors such as the European Union and Western nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) working with local LGBT activists. This paper examines the role of foreign and international (Western) NGOs in Russian LGBT activism. It discusses how Russia's changes in geopolitical position and relations with the West have impacted the accessibility and importance of Western partners for LGBT Russians. The paper specifically addresses how the Kremlin's promotion of conservatism and anti-liberalism has affected international links of Russian LGBT activists and the work of Western donors in the country. The involvement of Western NGOs in Russian civil society, including LGBT activism, has developed in the context of Russia's changing geopolitical orientation. The mid-1980s witnessed *perestroika* and redirection of foreign policy, indicating closer relations with the West and penetration of Western liberal values and ideas. Since the mid-2000s, however, Russia has displayed increasing distancing from the West and the need to position itself as an independent sovereign power. These changes in Russia's foreign policy are reflected in how the state perceives the work of Western NGOs on its territory. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an apogee of the underlying conflict between Western liberal ideals and anti-Western traditionalist discourses. The invasion aims to prevent the expansion of the European Union and NATO and the spread of liberal values, including the ideas of universal human rights, tolerance, and LGBT rights. For Russia, the diffusion of Western liberal norms is a hidden sign of imperialism aiming for global dominance. At the same time, the war in Ukraine shows Russia's imperialist aspirations. Gender and LGBT rights have become central points of contention in cultural and geopolitical struggles between the West and Russia. LGBT identities are perceived as a foreign phenomenon imported from the West. In that respect, NGOs promoting Western liberal agenda, including LGBT rights, pose a threat to Russia's national integrity and morals.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it discusses the effects of Western NGOs on local LGBT movements across the globe, which is helpful in understanding the impact of their involvement in the Russian case. Then the paper discusses methodology of the study and outlines the development of the Russian LGBT movement. The remainder of this paper examines the role of Western NGOs in Russian LGBT activism. The present study demonstrates that connections with these organisations have been helpful to Russian LGBT activists in terms of material and non-material aid. However, the expectations of Western NGOs do not always correlate with the needs of local LGBT communities. Furthermore, Russia's increasing hostility toward the West complicates international support for overall Russian civil society, including LGBT activists. The ideas and values of tolerance and LGBT inclusivity that these NGOs promote have been identified by the Kremlin as a threat to national security and sovereignty, which has facilitated socio-political backlash against Russian LGBT activists.

1. Western NGOs and LGBT movements

There is an argument (Garcia and Parker 2011; Guigni 2007) for a growing trend among activists, groups, and organisations from different countries to cooperate and work with foreign and international NGOs. Having foreign and international links may lead to forming coalitions of movements and groups from different countries. However, the ability of LGBT activists to build connections with foreign and international (particularly Western) NGOs is highly dependent on how open the country is to the world. As Wan (2001) and Hildebrandt (2012) demonstrated in their studies on Chinese LGBT activism, China's discontinuation of its isolation policy allowed Chinese LGBT activists to build connections with Western LGBT and human rights NGOs. The state's reluctance in international integration and cooperation might create obstacles for local activists in establishing and maintaining international links. For instance, geopolitical developments such as "colour revolutions" in the post-Soviet region made China more hostile toward the West, which facilitated the increase in repression toward Chinese NGOs working with Western partners (Zhu and Jun 2021).

Having connections with Western NGOs can be advantageous and disadvantageous. As Ayoub (2016) and O'Dwyer (2018) show in their studies on LGBT activism in Central and Eastern Europe, establishing links with Western NGOs can be advantageous to the development of local LGBT activism. Foreign and international NGOs might be beneficial for local LGBT movements in various ways. International connections provide local activists with the necessary material and non-material resources, including access to political actors and lobbying their governments to put pressure on the state for policy changes (Ayoub 2015; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tarrow 1998). For instance, European LGBT+ organisations provided informational and financial aid to Mexican and Brazilian LGBT activists (de la Dehesa 2007).

Western partners can also offer resources to protect activists from domestic socio-political prosecution (Siméant 2013). For example, Western LGBT NGOs (e.g., [L'Ardhis](#) in France, [Rainbow Migration](#) in the UK, the [RainbowHouse](#) in Belgium) often help LGBT refugees

by offering a range of support such as legal advice, assistance with housing and health care, and psychological support.

International connections may also provide model examples for local LGBT+ activists and diffuse LGBT+ norms and culture (Brown 1999). The examples of Western LGBT+ movements might offer moral support and power to mobilise for local LGBT activists (Ayoub 2016). Furthermore, international (predominately, Western) NGOs bring Western liberal discourses, norms, and ideas such as “LGBT rights are human rights” (Leksikov and Rachok 2019; Kretz 2013; Ojilere 2018). Some scholars (Puar 2013; Anthagelou 2013), however, identify certain issues with the diffusion of such norms across the globe. These norms can serve the hegemonic goals of Western liberalism when states and people are judged over their acceptance or rejection of LGBT rights (Butler 2009; Weiss and Bosia 2013; Wilkinson and Langlois 2014). The acceptance and support of LGBT rights are often viewed as a path toward modern liberal society (Lind 2014). According to Massad (2007), Western NGOs such as “The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association” (ILGA) or Human Rights Watch represent cultural imperialism reinforcing Western liberal ideals and “offloading” homophobia on non-Western Others. Consequently, foreign aid is often conditional on local activists’ compliance with such norms and ideas without accounting for local political realities and the needs of local LGBT communities (Rao 2010). Ultimately, it poses the question if there is a possibility for the diffusion of such norms in non-democratic states such as Russia and if the work of Western NGOs might put local LGBT activists in the way of harm.

At the same time, the assistance of Western donors comes at a price. Many local LGBT activists and organisations have become highly dependent on Western funding (Nimu 2018). Moreover, as Gould and Moe (2015) and Mole (2016) argue, the promotion of LGBT rights could facilitate negative socio-political reactions toward members of the local LGBT communities. The links between local LGBT activists and Western partners are often blamed and targeted in cultural wars portraying LGBT rights as foreign and imported from the West (Tarta 2015). In countries with political and cultural homophobia (i.e., Nigeria, Uganda, Malaysia), LGBT activists are cautious to use such support, since that may increase negative public and political attitudes toward LGBT people (Kretz 2012; Ndashe 2013). For instance, when Western countries threatened to withdraw aid from Malawi, LGBT activists were held responsible for that (Currier 2014).

There is also another important point to consider, that is, growing authoritarian trends and strengthening conservatism throughout the world. Authoritarian tendencies are on the rise and traditionalist ideas are actively diffused across countries questioning the Western liberal model of universal human rights, which is perceived as a promotion of Western interests. Russia is the leading supporter of “traditional values” based on morality and religion, advocating for national restrictions of Western liberal ideas regarding gender norms and LGBT rights (Edenborg 2021). There is a growing global trend to curb the activities of Western NGOs on the national level since these organisations are often perceived as Western

tools for socio-political changes threatening state security and integrity (Cooley 2015). These developments affect local activists' ability to build and maintain international connections.

Thus, forming connections with friendly foreign and international organisations and activists might provide LGBT activists with needed material and non-material assistance. However, their support might also hinder the development of LGBT activism.

2. Methodology

The paper draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews with thirty Russian LGBT activists from ten regions collected in 2015–2016 and three follow-up interviews with Russian LGBT activists in February 2022. The data also includes interviews with two American activists working with Russian LGBT activists and organisations. Among the interviewed activists, ten identified as gay, six as lesbian, four as bisexual, two as transgender, five as heterosexual supporting LGBT rights, and the rest did not disclose their gender identity/sexual orientation. The ages of their involvement in the LGBT movement ranged from 16 to 45. The majority of them were highly educated (twenty-five interviewees received higher education, three had one or more academic degree) and economically secure. They were from ten Russian regions and had various levels of participation in the LGBT movement: leaders of LGBT organisations, lawyers, project leaders, event organisers, and volunteers. Since the paper involves sensitive topics of sexual orientation and gender identity as well as discussions about civic and political activism, all interview data is anonymised for activists' safety.

The paper also draws on the analysis of Russian legislation regarding civil society, online documents of Russian and international human rights and LGBT NGOs, and online news outlets by using a set of keywords such as “LGBT”, “foreign agent” to examine cooperation between Western NGOs and Russian LGBT activists and how it has been affected by Russia's changes in geopolitical position and foreign policy.

3. The LGBT movement in Russia

Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms (*perestroika*, *glasnost*), the fall of the Soviet Union, and the consequent decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 facilitated growing LGBT visibility in the public sphere, including the rise and development of LGBT activism. The history of Russian LGBT activism can be roughly divided into two waves. The first wave occurred in the late 1980s–mid 1990s. Most LGBT organisations that appeared in that period such as Moscow Gay and Lesbian Alliance, Saint Petersburg group *Wings* [Крылья], Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities, Tchaikovsky Fund in Saint Petersburg, and Moscow Organisation of Lesbians in Literature and Art were centrally based (in Moscow and Saint Petersburg) with a few gay and lesbian activists in other regions (Nemtsev 2008). They focused mainly on fostering the development of LGBT identity and community (e.g., publication of press for LGBT audiences, organisation of entertainment parties, and educational conferences).

These organisations relied heavily on Western donors such as ILGA. It reflects the broader dependence of the emerging Russian civil society sector on Western support. Most Russian NGOs of the 1990s relied solely on international funding (Daucé 2014). The competition for international grants, ineffective management, and the withdrawal of Western funders by the mid-1990s contributed to the decline of the first wave of LGBT activism in Russia (Essig 1999; Nemtsev 2008).

The second wave, beginning in the mid-2000s, signifies a higher level of LGBT visibility through public events (e.g., Moscow Pride) and involves activists, LGBT organisations, and groups actively working on the recognition of their rights. LGBT activism of the second wave is characterised by a wider geographical presence having activists and organisations in various regions across the country (e.g., Russian LGBT Network with branches in 17 regions, LGBT group Coming Out [Выход] in Saint Petersburg, Lighthouse [Маяк] in the Far East, Avers in Samara, Rainbow House [Радужный дом] in Tyumen, Maximum in Murmansk). They engage in a range of activities (e.g., litigation, protests, annual film festivals, educational conferences) to assist the development of the LGBT community, challenge discrimination based on sexual orientation and identity, and demand recognition of LGBT rights. LGBT activists and organisations of the second wave have established connections with foreign and international activists and organisations and receive material and non-material aid from abroad. They also employ fundraising and their individual resources to organise their activities (Buyantueva 2020). Combined, these resources help them to stay afloat even in the context of shrinking opportunities, increasing repression, and homophobia.

Since their emergence in the late 1980s, LGBT activists and organisations have faced various obstacles such as homophobia, discrimination, and even violence. Moreover, Russia's increasing authoritarianism and promotion of conservatism pose significant challenges to the development of LGBT activism, which includes connections with Western NGOs.

4. Benefits of the links between Western NGOs and Russian LGBT activists

In the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, the links between Russian activists and Western donors were built in the context of Russia's goal for greater cooperation with the West, which was reflected in the processes of democratisation and liberalisation of society. Civic activism in Russia has been greatly impacted by foreign and international (Western) NGOs, through which local activists received material and non-material support (Daucé 2014). The focus of these donors was to build the civil society sector in the country with project-specific assistance (Sundstrom 2005). Western NGOs provided directions for local activists on which objectives to focus and which projects were more suitable for attention (Hemment 2004).

Western NGOs were especially important for Russian LGBT activists. Some of the first Russian LGBT activists (e.g., Alexander Kukharskii, Ol'ga Zhuk, who were leaders of the first LGBT organisations) travelled abroad during the *perestroika* period to establish contacts with international LGBT organisations and activists (Essig 1999). Second-wave Russian LGBT

organisations also built connections with foreign and international organisations.

For example, the Russian LGBT Network, the country's largest LGBT organisation with branches in 17 regions, is partners with prominent international human rights and LGBT organisations such as ILGA-Europe, Amnesty International, and Civil Rights Defenders. One of the Moscow Pride organisers accentuated, however, that the assistance of Western partners was mostly provided in the form of informational coverage of events, knowledge exchange, and moral support.

Everything that we managed to do was on the funds of common activists. Not on the money of some international funds, as some like to present it, that the USA and the State Department have allocated another grant for rocking the boat. No, there has never been anything like that. (N3, Moscow)

A Saint Petersburg interviewee (N13) agreed with this observation adding that, at first, their organisation relied on activists' resources but later was successful in attracting foreign grants. Several interviewees from the Russian regions (Far Eastern, Southern regions) noted low levels of cooperation with Western NGOs. According to a Vladivostok activist, there were irregular contacts focused mostly on information and knowledge exchange:

The interaction [between Western NGOs and local LGBT activists] was like that. Well, they [Western organisations] posted photos, which were like reports that a flash mob took place there and there and there. So, there was not much [interaction with Western NGOs]. (N2, Vladivostok)

A Krasnodar interviewee (N28) explained it by urbanisation and a more cosmopolitan population in Moscow and Saint Petersburg with better access to foreign sources, which requires English language skills that Russians from the regions do not have.

We try. But there is a big problem, of course, the English language. We still have problems with this. It's easier in the capitals. There is an urbanisation. It's problematic for us in general... Otherwise, as I understand it, there could have been a good cooperation [with Western NGOs]. (N28, Krasnodar)

It may be also related to the fact that publicly visible LGBT organisations and activists are mostly located in two Russian capitals. However, several Moscow interviewees noticed the lack of funding for Moscow LGBT organisations. One activist accentuated that the reason for it is inefficient management and fragmentation among local organisations:

Basically, those LGBT organisations that are present in Moscow have very poor funding because of bad management. Well, there is no one to teach those people, help them, and so on... And LGBT organisations have been scattered and at odds with each other in Moscow. (N23, Moscow)

Thus, establishing connections with foreign and international NGOs and receiving their assistance is highly dependent on local activists. Two Samara interviewees pointed out that they had activists specifically focused on seeking possible funding opportunities and other ways of cooperation with foreign and international organisations and activists.

Therefore, Western NGOs did offer financial assistance to Russian LGBT activists. The first Russian LGBT organisations relied almost exclusively on funds provided by international organisations (Essig 1999, Nemtsev 2008). When such support decreased by the mid-1990s that was the main reason of why the first wave of LGBT activism ceased as well (Essig 1999). Second-wave Russian LGBT organisations were also able to obtain grants for the organisation of events, launching projects such as monitoring discrimination on the basis of sexual identity and orientation, and hiring professionals such as lawyers. There were several Russian LGBT organisations (e.g., the Russian LGBT Network, Saint Petersburg LGBT organisation Coming Out [Выход]) that received funding for their projects. A Tomsk interviewee also accentuated the important role of these organisations in assisting regional activists to establish connections with potential donors and apply for grants:

For example, the Russian LGBT Network organises events such as forums that offer an opportunity for various activists, various leaders to present their projects... One can attend such sessions and talk to donors, get to know each other, listen to the recommendations from donors, and so on. That is, there is such an opportunity. (N7, Tomsk)

Notably, the Russian LGBT Network is one of the most successful Russian LGBT organisations in obtaining international funding that allows it to fund its projects and offer financial support to regional LGBT activists and organisations. In 2019, for example, the organisation offered around 21,500 USD in support of the local projects (Russian LGBT Network 2019).

Establishing connections with Western LGBT activists and organisations also facilitated knowledge and information exchange introducing new terminology and ideas (e.g., “LGBT”, “queer”, “LGBT rights are human rights”). For example, one of the early organisations was first named the “Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities” and later renamed the “Association of Gays and Lesbians” signifying the adoption of Western terms “gay” and “lesbian” (Nemtsev 2008). Second-wave activists, including all interviewees, employ predominantly terms “gay”, “lesbian”, “transgender”, “bisexual”, and “LGBT” when referring to their identities.¹ An interviewee from Moscow (N16) claimed that knowledge exchange with Western NGOs has helped to learn that “specific goals and tasks are more useful in uniting the community than some general formulas, general events, like, against homophobia”. Thus, Western partners introduced Russian LGBT activists to useful examples of tactics and strategies that could be employed in their work.

5. Drawbacks of the links between Western NGOs and Russian LGBT activists

The findings of this study confirmed the argument (Rao 2010; Ojilere 2018) that Western assistance does not always account for local realities. As the interviews revealed, Russian LGBT activists were divided in assessing the work with Western partners. According to two Saint Petersburg interviewees, international donors offer aid for certain projects, which do not necessarily correspond to the needs and interests of local LGBT communities. An American

activist confirmed this point by stating that some Western NGOs have certain expectations that should be met by local activists and organisations:

They [Western NGOs] want to see some results... Moreover, what is seen as a result is to hold some kind of public event, to be noticed by the media, to be arrested for something, and so on. It is clear that grant recipients understand perfectly well what is expected from them. Because, as you understand, to work with the broader population, to conduct a sociological study requires a long hard work to change public perceptions – this, of course, needs to be done. But unfortunately, it is a painstaking work that is invisible for many years, for decades. And, let's say it, the customer is waiting for some results. (N31, Washington)

A Saint Petersburg activist furthered this point by noting the following:

These grants lead to abuse. In fact, such a vivid example of that abuse is the Queer film festival in Saint Petersburg. Because the organisers are not at all interested in its accessibility to the LGBT community, or in its accessibility to non-LGBT people, or in its events being interesting. It is not in their interest, in fact, due to the peculiarities of this funding system that expects them to hold the QueerFest, report on it, and receive salary. Because if they become too active somehow, they can get in trouble. Our authorities have actively shown what kind of trouble can be there. They can refuse a venue, disrupt events. And the grant will not be justified. (N4, Saint Petersburg)

Another interviewee from Saint Petersburg furthered this point by insisting that, while the support and knowledge offered by Western NGOs are important, it does not apply to the local realities and the needs of the local LGBT community:

It is good to study them [Western tactics and strategies], but you do not need to focus on them and use them. It is a foreign, barely assimilated thing. It is impossible in a country like Russia. (N25, Saint Petersburg)

Moscow Pride could serve as an example of possible unsuitability of Western tactics and strategies to countries like Russia. Russian activists' public announcement to organise Moscow Pride in 2005 signified a shift in tactics of Russian LGBT activists to be more visible in their work. As Butler (2015) argues, when people assemble on the streets to be visible to the media, they signal their presence to claim protection and to be counted as part of society. Visibility and "coming out" are popular strategies for many LGBT movements across the globe, especially in Western democracies (Ayoub 2016; Garretson 2018). Visibility politics was criticised (Newton 2016; Stella 2015) for being the Western model that does not account for local realities when instead of empowering it might make LGBT individuals more vulnerable. Greater visibility brings serious risks for LGBT individuals (Oluoch and Talengwa 2017; Richardson 2017). As Brown (2005) argues, visibility may lead to "radical denunciation, hysterisation, exclusion, and criminalisation" (Brown 2005, 87). Increased visibility might cause a social and political backlash, as it happened in the case of Moscow Pride. From 2006 to 2016, Russian LGBT activists repeatedly attempted to hold Moscow Pride. The Moscow authorities banned the events claiming that the organisation of Pride would cause public disorder since the local population would be against such events (BBC News 2012). Despite the ban, LGBT activists

went marching on central streets in Moscow meeting with homophobic violence and arrests each year between 2005 and 2016.

The attempts to organise Moscow Pride were highly publicised domestically and abroad. Media attention is important in terms of the greater possibility of financial and moral support from Western activists and organisations. Additionally, the participation of international supporters in local events might also attract international media attention and offer a greater perception of safety for members of local LGBT communities to organise and participate in similar events.² The police might abstain from violence and harassment of the events with international participants for fear of negative reaction in the West. However, that depends on how sensitive the state is to international reaction. In Russia, Moscow Pride participants, regardless of them being locals or foreigners, were attacked by homophobes and arrested by the police. Thus, Russia showed minimal concern with how its actions would be perceived abroad.

Russia's sensitiveness to international reaction could be illustrated in the case of Chechnya. The abuse by the Chechen authorities of local members of the LGBT+ community³ led to an international outcry. International activists and organisations raised funds to help LGBT Chechens leave the region as part of the campaign launched by All Out and the Russian LGBT Network (*Crime Russia* 2017). Demands to investigate such atrocities were raised by international human rights and LGBT organisations. For example, Amnesty International (2017) gathered over 500,000 signatures petitioning for an investigation. International human rights and LGBT organisations (e.g., the Council for Global Equality, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Campaign, OutRight Action International) lobbied Western governments to pressure Russia to investigate violence against LGBT Chechens and put an end to it. In August 2018, fifteen Western governments, including Canada, Germany, the UK, and the USA requested Russia to demonstrate what was done to stop these abuses (US Mission to the OSCE 2018). However, how (and if) international pressure is successful is highly dependent on the state's reaction to such pressure. In the case of Chechnya, the Russian federal authorities did not launch an effective investigation. The Chechnya case is the reflection of Russia's changes in foreign policy and geopolitical orientation in regard to the West.

6. Russia's push against Western influence

For the last two decades, Russia has been demonstrating increasing distrust of the West, which eventually manifested in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Certain geopolitical developments (e.g., the EU and NATO enlargement, 'colour revolutions' in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine) made the Kremlin view the West and its actors with growing hostility. Russia's wariness of the West has manifested in the promotion of conservatism and "traditional values" (Muravyeva 2014). The Kremlin perceives conservatism and "traditional values" as vital for Russia (Edenborg 2020). The country's survival depends on preserving its unique national culture from harmful Western influence, which includes

gender norms and LGBT rights (Wilkinson 2014; Buyantueva 2018). The Kremlin's promotion of "traditional values" is juxtaposed with the Western advancement of tolerance and LGBT rights (Weber 2016). The advocacy of liberal values by Western NGOs is viewed as a threat to Russia's security and sovereignty. Western liberal countries are accused of having corrupt morality and forgetting their origins and traditions (Agadjanian 2017). President Vladimir Putin frequently engages in such rhetoric:

[...] many Euro-Atlantic countries are on the verge of rejecting their roots... Moral foundations and any traditional identity are being rejected: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual. Policies are being established that place large family and same-sex partnership on the same level... And these countries are aggressively trying to impose this model upon everybody, the entire world. I believe that this is a direct way to degradation and primitivisation, to a profound demographic and moral crisis (*Rossiiskaja Gazeta* 2013).

For Putin, prospects for Western liberalism are bleak. He claims that "liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the overwhelming majority of the population" (Barber et al. 2019). Following such rhetoric, the notion of "Gay-Europe" [Гейропа] has been introduced in Russia as a geopolitical marker illustrating inherent differences between Western Europe and Russia (Foxall 2019). Russia is presented as a defender of "traditional values" in contrast to the decaying morality of the West (Weber 2016). Interestingly, when promoting conservative anti-Western agenda, Russia displays, as Fillieul and Broqua (2020) put it, the isomorphic effect when opponents of liberal values use frames similar to those employed by liberal actors. For example, the Kremlin employs the human rights discourse but interprets fundamental freedoms as traditional values built on the ideals of traditional family and community (Stoeckl and Medvedeva 2018). As part of the conservative anti-Western discourse, Russia adopted the law banning propaganda of non-traditional behaviour to children in June 2013, which allows the authorities to prevent the distribution of information on LGBT topics. Such legislative changes are not simply a sign of oppression of vulnerable minorities. They signify a resistance to and rejection of Western liberal values. Non-heteronormative (or, as the law put it "non-traditional") identities present a convenient symbol and embodiment of Western influence, socio-economic difficulties, demographic crisis, and moral decay (Baer 2013; Buyantueva 2021).

At the same time, as Neumann (2017) argues, the Kremlin's traditionalist discourse is not plainly anti-Western but presents a more intricate understanding of "wrong" (liberal, LGBT-friendly) and "true" Europe (conservative, heterosexual). It reflects the resistance to the liberal agenda occurring in the West in the form of conservative "anti-gender movements" and "heteroactivism" (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Nash and Browne 2020). The anti-LGBT political rhetoric has spread across the globe and become transnational (Fillieule and Broqua 2020). Russia's conservative discourse has met the active support of right-wing, Christian fundamentalists in the West. For instance, in June 2013, prominent American and French anti-LGBT activists came to Russia to discuss possible measures in protecting the "traditional

family”. They participated in meetings and discussions with political and religious elites, gave interviews on federal TV channels, and spoke at the State Duma meetings accentuating Russia’s role as the protector of “traditional values” and “Christian saviour of civilisation” (Right Wing Watch 2014). In October 2013, Paul Cameron, one of the most prominent American opponents of LGBT rights, visited the State Duma and gave interviews to the Russian media approving the ban on LGBT propaganda and discussing the dangers of homosexuality to society (RT 2013). Thus, while the Russian state cracks down on Western NGOs promoting liberal values, international links with Western ultra-conservatives are fostered on the basis of religious moral frameworks. For example, the Kremlin supports conservative organisations such as the World Congress of Families (cofounded by American and Russian conservatives) and the Center for Family and Human Rights (an American right-wing advocacy group), who were, in turn, openly supportive of the Russian ban on LGBT propaganda (Baranova and Rudusa 2019).

Promotion of conservatism and assertiveness toward Western liberalism have accompanied the Russian state’s increasing authoritarianism and efforts to “manage” civil society. That facilitated the strengthening of state repression of its opponents and created certain implications for the work of Western NGOs in the country. The most harmful in this regard is the legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations” that explicitly targets links between Russian NGOs and Western donors. The “foreign agent” law (adopted in 2012 and amended since then several times) requires politically active Russian NGOs and individuals, who receive financial and organisational support from abroad, to register as foreign agents. The law includes media sources and individuals distributing information on social media. If organisations fail to register as foreign agents, they face substantial fines. If individuals fail to register, they face fines and imprisonment. The “undesirable organisations” law (adopted in 2015 and amended multiple times) bans foreign and international NGOs that threaten Russia’s security, public order, and health. The law also prohibits Russian citizens and organisations (even those located abroad) to work with NGOs that are labelled “undesirable”. The label “foreign agent” allows NGOs to continue their work in the country, albeit under severe restrictions. Being included in the list of “unwelcome organisations” prohibits all kinds of activity in Russia (e.g., having representative offices, working on projects, transferring money).

Overall, the Kremlin’s changes in foreign policy and geopolitical position had a major impact on the connections between Western NGOs and Russian LGBT activists and organisations in the form of repressive policy changes to block foreign aid.

7. The harsh realities for the cooperation between Western NGOs and Russian LGBT activists

While the Russian state has adopted various strategies to control civil society (through repression, management, and cooperation) (Daucé 2014, 2015), it resorts mainly to suppression

concerning LGBT activism. Russian LGBT organisations and activists are among the most often included in the list of “foreign agents” and, thus, experience difficulties in maintaining their international links. Most Russian LGBT organisations were labelled as foreign agents (e.g., the Russian LGBT Network, Initiative Group Revers, Saint Petersburg LGBT organisation Coming Out [Выход], Murmansk LGBT organisation Maximum, Film Festival Side by Side [Бок о Бок]). Not only organisations but also individuals could be labelled as foreign agents, as was the case of Igor Kochetkov, founder of the Russian LGBT Network. The fines for violating the “foreign agent” law are quite large: up to 5 million rubles for organisations and up to five hundred thousand for individuals. As the quote below shows, activists employ fundraising to cover these fines:

Our political regime, the adoption of some absurd initiatives that could limit our funding. That is, the law on “undesirable organisations” was adopted... The law on “foreign agents”. [The fines] are very large for us, for our organisation. This is significant damage to, say, finances. We had to raise funds. (N15, Murmansk)

The legislation hinders the support of Russian LGBT activists by Western NGOs to a great extent. The links between Russian and Western NGOs have become victims of cultural and geopolitical contention between Russia and the West. The legislation implies that certain NGOs and activists are not trustworthy because they may be promoting “foreign” interests, substantially increasing the risks of Russian LGBT activists for their international connections. The authorities interpret the term “political activity” quite broadly. For instance, delivering information to the UN on Russia’s observance of international treaties, conducting and publication of public opinion surveys, and organising discussions on the state’s policies may be understood as political activity by the authorities (Human Rights Watch 2017). A Saint Petersburg interviewee noted the following:

[The authorities] try to label the activities of any organisation that receives funding from abroad as “political activity”. And if there is foreign funding and political activity, the organisation has to go to the Ministry of Justice to register as a “foreign agent”. (N1, Saint Petersburg)

Changes in the Kremlin’s regard for Western NGOs and their involvement in Russian civil society have complicated cooperation opportunities between Russian LGBT organisations and Western NGOs and obstructed international financial aid. As a Nizhnii Novgorod interviewee noted, Russian LGBT activists and organisations are not able or willing to apply for foreign funding for fear of prosecution.

No one wanted to apply for a foreign grant, to become a “foreign agent”... Everyone was afraid somehow because, well, this is such a serious thing already, for which, in principle, you can pay a fine or, in general, be subjected to harassment and will have to immigrate in the future. Nobody wanted to get entangled with it. (N26, Nizhnii Novgorod)

Since there is no domestic source of substantial funding available to Russian LGBT organisations (Buyantueva 2020), the development of LGBT activism has been greatly disrupted by the

political changes in the country (i.e., strengthening of state repression, conservative discourse, and anti-Western political agenda). A Moscow interviewee stated the following:

And now the situation is getting worse. If it was somehow better earlier, now, it is aggravated due to the fact that organisations are squeezed out... They are squeezed out of Russia by the laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations”. And, now, the chances for funding are decreasing. (N23, Moscow)

The repressive policy changes have forced Russian LGBT organisations and activists to adapt in order to survive and continue their work. They come up with various tactics to overcome legislative restrictions. For example, to avoid being included in the list of ‘foreign agents,’ they re-register as an enterprise, as was the case of the Saint Petersburg LGBT organisation Coming Out [Выход]. Or, they close down as a registered organisation and continue working as an unregistered group, as was the case of the Murmansk LGBT organisation Maximum. However, these tactics, as a Saint Petersburg interviewee pointed out, complicate receiving grants from abroad:

Organisations have to close down. Or, they change forms of activity and become, for example, a commercial organisation. But then, it is more difficult to receive grants. (N1, Saint Petersburg)

Moreover, the authorities have begun targeting unregistered groups as well, as happened with the Murmansk LGBT organisation Maximum, which was put on the list of “foreign agents” even without the registered status. Those labelled as “foreign agents” are required to file reports on their activities and financial statements to the authorities and undergo audits. They are also to mark everything they publish as the information distributed by “foreign agents”.

In addition to the risk of fines and imprisonment for being labelled “foreign agent”, Russian LGBT activists face a threat of increased homophobia and violence. According to Natal’ia Solov’eva, leader of the Russian LGBT Network, the “foreign agent” law stigmatises LGBT activists and organisations, impeding their work, especially in the regions where the threat of homophobic violence is higher (Vladykina 2021). Since the state has institutionalised conservatism and singled out LGBT people and activists as a public threat, the number of discrimination and hate crimes has increased significantly (Kondakov 2019). As an interviewee from Saint Petersburg (N1) stated, “foreign agent’ sounds like a bad connotation”. Indeed, the term “foreign agent” has a negative meaning (e.g., “spy”, “traitor”). It echoes Soviet efforts to suppress foreign influence (Daucé 2015). Together with the notion of non-heteronormative identities being foreign and imported from the West, the legislation on “foreign agents” further feeds into public hostility toward LGBT organisations and activists. LGBT activism is associated with a threat to the country’s security. For instance, there were various publications in the pro-governmental media accusing Russian LGBT activists of working for and receiving financial aid from Western countries with the goal to destabilise Russia (Емельянов 2017; Крутиков 2016). In this regard, according to a Saint Petersburg interviewee, Russian LGBT

activists became reluctant of including foreign participants in their public events because the Russian media would use that as proof of Western efforts to undermine Russian society.

We do not invite our foreign, international partners to street events... It is important for us not to advertise, not to draw attention to foreign partners because that will instantly send the message. The media will only cover this. And this will be the only thing they will write about. In the light of the law on “foreign agents” and other attempts to picture the movement as some kind of import from the West, as a Western value, not a Russian value. It would not be beneficial to us. (N5, Saint Petersburg)

Despite these complications, a Saint Petersburg activist insisted on the importance of international support, especially in the light of repressive policies (i.e., the “foreign agent” law, “undesirable organisations” law):

They all [Western partners] are very worried about the additional repressive laws, including the laws about “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations”... There was a conversation with a representative of one American organisation who said that they are afraid that their association with us might bring us harm. I responded that not associating with you would be harmful to us too. (N13, Saint Petersburg)

However, as an American interviewee observed, Western NGOs have not yet come up with solid strategies on how to work with and support Russian activists and organisations in the context of rapidly strengthening state repression and anti-Western political agenda:

International organisations contemplate what to do in this situation. As I understand, there is no common strategy yet. There is an understanding that it is impossible to work in Russia using old methods. We must think of something, do something different... The point is not even, in my opinion, that it has become dangerous to finance LGBT and anyone else for obvious reasons. Here, the problem is different. It is not very clear what to do... In principle, it probably makes sense to think about what is more important than some strategies for the development and protection of civil society. And so far, I would say, we are implementing something like an exit strategy because we need to save people, need to bring organisations to where they can work. Right now, I do not see, to be honest, any real prospects of doing anything at all for human rights and LGBT groups in Russia. (N32, Washington)

Thus, Western NGOs have provided material and non-material support to Russian LGBT activists. However, the level of cooperation between them depends on local activists and their ability and willingness to establish connections. It also depends on local projects and objectives that Western NGOs are interested in supporting and working with. Moreover, repressive policy changes have affected activists’ wiliness to seek Western funding. Several interviewees noticed the overall reluctance among Russian LGBT activists to apply for international funding for fear of repression.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the role and significance of Western NGOs for Russian LGBT activism. Global power relations facilitate the context for how transnational and international links operate on the national level. Overall, the involvement of Western NGOs in Russian civil society as a whole and Russian LGBT activism, in particular, has been impacted by the state's changing foreign policy and geopolitical orientation. Russia's aspirations of the late 1980s–1990s for closer relations with the West welcomed Western NGOs to assist the development of civil society in the country. Since then, however, the relations between the West and Russia have chilled significantly. Geopolitical developments (e.g., the expansion of NATO and EU, “colour revolutions”) had a significant impact on the Kremlin's regard for Western donors. Ultimately, the case of Russia shows the failure of democratisation and diffusion of liberal ideals. The universality of Western liberal norms has been put under question. The Kremlin's anti-Western conservative discourse and legislative changes (e.g., the “foreign agent” law, the “undesirable organisations” law) have affected the international connections of Russian LGBT activists disrupting cooperation possibilities with Western partners.

Since the early 1990s, Western NGOs have offered material and non-material support to Russian LGBT activists and organisations as well as lobbied for international pressure on the Russian state. In the last two decades, however, the Kremlin has put consistent efforts to impede Western aid to Russian civil society, including LGBT organisations and activists. For Western NGOs, it is important to develop a comprehensive strategy for influencing Western policymakers to negotiate Russia's recognition and support of LGBT rights. Furthermore, in light of the “foreign agent” and “undesirable organisation” laws, it is important for foreign and international NGOs to develop tactics and strategies to support Russian activists that would avoid violation of the Russian legislation and prosecution of activists. Finally, continuous efforts are needed for Western partners to support LGBT Russians since, as the study revealed, local activists find such support important in boosting their confidence.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed discussion on the terminology regarding gender identities and sexual orientation in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia see Laurie Essig 1999 and Francesca Stella 2015.
- 2 Moscow Pride involved the participation of prominent international LGBT activists such as British activist Peter Tatchell (Founder of the Peter Tatchell Foundation), American activist Andy Thayer (Co-founder of the Gay Foundation Network), French activist Louis Georges-Tin (Founder of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia).
- 3 In April 2017, *Novaia Gazeta* [New Journal], Russian independent news media, published shocking information about the brutal prosecution of LGBT Chechens. The Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and other government officials denied these allegations claiming that, since there was no LGBT population in the region, no such abuse could occur (Taylor 2017).

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