

Sexuality and Revolution in Post-Soviet Ukraine: LGBT Rights and the Euromaidan Protests of 2013–2014¹

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***Abstract:** While some attention has been paid to the role of women and gender aspects during the Euromaidan protests (2013–2014), there is a lack of research focusing on questions of homosexuality in this connection. This article examines the evolution of the situation regarding homosexuality and LGBT rights during the Euromaidan protests. The empirical base consists of 20 interviews conducted in July–August 2014 with LGBT rights activists, all of whom were involved in the Euromaidan protests. The respondents were asked a number of questions about the visibility of the LGBT community during the Euromaidan; about which events they considered to be significant for the LGBT community; and about the positive and negative aspects of the Euromaidan with regard to the human rights situation for LGBT people. The “strategy of invisibility” chosen by LGBT activists during this protest is analyzed and criticized here with the help of the concept of “homonationalism.” In addition, the article investigates the ways in which LGBT activists in Ukraine reproduce the West vs. East and EU vs. Russia binaries.*

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In the twenty-first century the term “Gayrope”² has become increasingly common in everyday vocabulary in Ukraine and Russia. This term exemplifies the homophobia that is prevalent in both countries and that has been backed up by legislative initiatives, hate speech, and violence. Even public statements made in support of gay rights in Ukraine are often couched in homophobic terms—in 2014, for example, Ukrainian politician, Yurii Lutsenko, said that it would be “better to allow gay parades once a year in Kyiv than to wait every day for Russian tanks” (*Nash Mir*, 2014a: 1). At the same time, according to Russian scholars Tatiana Riabova and Oleg Riabov (2015: 84), the notion of the “deviant” nature of “Gayrope”’s gender order has become popular in light of the discussion surrounding the Ukrainian crisis, which is constructed in terms of a putative civilizational choice between Europe and Russia.

In recent years, in post-Soviet societies in general and in Ukraine in particular the topic of (homo)sexuality seems to have become a litmus test for democracy and respect for diversity. Members of the right-wing political party “Svoboda”, and some churches and religious NGOs (such as the Parents’ Committee of Ukraine, for example) have claimed that a “homo-dictatorship” has been put in place in Ukraine.³ For anti-gay activists, this “homo-dictatorship” is manifested, for example, in the supposed prohibition against “defending traditional family values” or “criticizing opponents of homosexuality” in contemporary Ukraine. This discourse of “homo-dictatorship,” legislative attempts to

² Gayrope or *Heiropa* is a derogatory term used to refer to Europe as a place where homosexuality is widespread, same-sex marriages are legalized, and the traditional family is in crisis.

³ This terminology is used mainly by anti-gay activists; see for example: “Homodictatorship in Europe and its Prospects in Ukraine,” *Encyclopedia of Safety*, 13 November 2013, <http://survincity.com/2013/11/homodictatorship-in-europe-and-its-prospects-in/> (accessed 15 January 2016); “Ukrainian Antigay Activists Demand Amendments to EU Pact,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 31 October 2013, available at UN Refugee Agency official website, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/528b68565.html> (accessed 15 January 2016); “Forcible Establishment of a Homodictatorship in the EU,” Ukrainian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church official website, 1 December 2010, <http://uogcc.org.ua/en/letters/article/?article=3779> (accessed 15 January 2016).

criminalize pro-homosexual propaganda, and the routine use of hate speech by public figures in Ukraine are combined with a general lack of education about human rights, about the policies in place regarding LGBT communities around the world, and about the actual requirements that European integration would involve for Ukraine on this issue.

As the LGBT activist Andrii Kravchuk pointed out in an essay written in August 2014, since the beginning of the Euromaidan “the situation of the Ukrainian LGBT community in general disappeared from the sight of the general public and does not raise any public interest” (Kravchuk, 2014). The popular view amongst Euromaidan activists is that this issue is a lower priority given the situation of war in Ukraine. In this context, the question of (homo)sexuality fades into the background. The Euromaidan protest offers a useful case for re-examining the situation regarding (homo)sexuality, an issue that is highly sensitive for Ukrainian society. The Euromaidan protesters took to the streets precisely and explicitly to defend civil and human rights. Where, then, if at all, did the issue of LGBT rights fit in here?

This article analyzes the evolution of the situation regarding homosexuality and LGBT rights during the Euromaidan protests. The empirical base consists of 20 interviews conducted in July-August 2014 with LGBT rights activists, all of whom were involved in the Euromaidan protests. I aim not only to provide a critical perspective on LGBT issues during the Euromaidan but also to demonstrate some positive aspects of human rights protection for LGBT people that emerged as a result of the Euromaidan protests. In the article, I use the phrase “strategy of invisibility” to describe the choice which many LGBT people made to participate in the Euromaidan first and foremost as Ukrainian citizens rather than as members of a sexual minority. At the same time, LGBT activists had not only fears but also hopes to change the status quo through their participation in the Euromaidan protests.

Methodology and Data

The analysis below relies on original data collected by me from June to August 2014. The questionnaire which I used consisted of ten questions, which invited open answers in the form of detailed comments. First, I e-mailed my “key informants” (people whom I had interviewed for an earlier study of the LGBT movement or whom I know from human rights activism). Then my informants were asked to suggest three more interviewees. The sample was then formed using a “snowball” method.

In total, 40 questionnaires were sent out, but only half of these yielded a response. Some recipients declined the invitation to take part; others indicated an intention to take part but ultimately never submitted their completed questionnaires; and others still did not respond to my request at all. Thus, 20 completed questionnaires were received from 7 male and 13 female human rights activists from the LGBT community.

The main criterion according to which the respondents were selected was having at least one year of experience in LGBT rights activism and participation (in various capacities) in the Euromaidan protests (from November 2013 until March 2014). As it turned out, the respondents’ experience of activism in LGBT issues in Ukraine ranged from three to ten years. In addition, respondents said that they had organized or participated in a number of human rights events, including those related to LGBT rights, such as “KyivPride” in 2014, a flash mob against homophobia in the end of 2013, a round table discussion “Barriers and Challenges of HIV/AIDS and Human Rights: Legislation and Politics. What Needs to be Done?” (July 2014), and other educational activities focusing on human rights, as well as national LGBT conferences. The forms which their participation in the Euromaidan protests had taken were also diverse, ranging from different volunteer activities (from preparing food to preparing Molotov cocktails) to organizing human rights demonstrations. Some respondents stated that they were not physically present at the protests but had been involved either online or in other supporting capacities.

The majority of the respondents were from Kyiv, or the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. I received only one completed questionnaire from a respondent from the western part of the country. This situation reflects the overall picture of the regional representation of LGBT activism in Ukraine: there are only a few organizations in the western part of Ukraine that deal with the rights of the LGBT community (Council of LGBT Organisations of Ukraine, 2014a). This can have an impact on the visibility of the community for society in general and for human rights activism in particular. It may also serve to increase the potential danger in holding or participating in public events focusing on LGBT issues or “coming out.”⁴

One of the respondents summarized the situation as follows: “the Maidan was a reflection of society, and society as a whole is not supportive of LGBT” (Interviewee 1). Certainly for this reason it was unsurprising that the Euromaidan should have been marked by manifestations of homophobia. At the same time, the protest space could provide a chance for different groups to stand up for their rights. That is why it is crucial to ask the following questions: was the LGBT community visible during the Euromaidan? What does visibility or invisibility mean for LGBT activists? Have there been any positive developments in relation to the rights of the LGBT community in Ukraine since the start of the Euromaidan in November 2013? I tried to formulate broad questions on these topics with a view to avoiding my personal biases. At the same time, I acknowledge that my questionnaire could be constructed to provide “forced-choice answers” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004: 141). As I do not belong to the LGBT community, there are also epistemological challenges in researching “others” (on which see further Fawcett & Hearn, 2004).

As the research topic of sexual rights is quite sensitive, I preferred to make all participants anonymous even if they indicated

⁴ The most recent event illustrating such danger happened in March 2016 in L’viv; see “LGBT Festival in Ukraine Abandoned after a Far-Right Protest,” *The Guardian*, 20 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/20/lgbt-festival-in-ukraine-abandoned-after-far-right-protest> (accessed 5 April 2016).

that they did not mind being openly cited. I used conventional content-analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to analyze the respondents' answers to the questionnaires.

LGBT Community and LGBT Rights in Ukraine

The first registered LGBT organization in Ukraine was the All-Ukrainian Association “Ganymede” (Kyiv), which operated from 13 May 1994 to 1999 (Council of LGBT Organisations of Ukraine, 2014a). According to the Council of LGBT Organizations of Ukraine’s Register of LGBT organizations in Ukraine and Ukrainian organizations involved in the LGBT community, as of 5 August 2014 in Ukraine there were 44 officially registered civic and charitable LGBT organizations (of which 26 were active, and 18 existed only nominally); one registered union of LGBT organizations; and five registered public and charitable organizations involved in LGBT issues or those closely related to LGBT (Register of LGBT Organizations Ukraine, 2014). Most of my respondents belong to LGBT NGOs mentioned above. From 2010 to 2014 the number of such organizations almost doubled (Martsenyuk, 2010: 135). Moreover, their activities are quite diverse—from providing services for gay and lesbian people to conducting sociological research on LGBT topics (Interregional Center for LGBT Studies “Donbass-SocProjects”⁵), or supporting the movement for LGBT Christians of Ukraine (the Public Organization “Association Queer-Credo”).

Ukraine decriminalized homosexuality in December 1991, but homophobia remains a challenge for Ukrainian society. Although in recent years the LGBT community in Ukraine has dramatically increased in size and diversified its main spheres of activity, it retains certain weaknesses. These include internal stratification, ghettoization of the community, limited street activism, and a limited willingness on the part of the LGBT community to stand up in an organized way for the group’s human and civil rights. All of

⁵ More information about the NGO Interregional Center for LGBT Studies “Donbass-SocProjects” can be found on its webpage <http://donbass-socproject.blogspot.com/> (accessed 15 February 2016).

these have hindered the development of tolerance toward LGBT people.

At the same time, since 2010 there has been a noticeable de-ghettoization of the LGBT movement and closer cooperation with the human rights movement in general. The struggle for LGBT rights also reveals the importance of intra-civil society collaboration, a point underlined by the successful coalition between the gay-rights and human-rights movements (Encarnación, 2014: 99). Some of my respondents also expressed the view that it was imperative for civil society in Ukraine to “involve other minorities and human rights groups” (Interviewee 9). Another respondent recalled that LGBT organizations had encouraged civil society to create a national coalition to combat discrimination (Interviewee 1).

The Coalition for Combating Discrimination (CCD) is a Ukraine-wide non-governmental civic human rights initiative which was founded by Ukrainian non-governmental organizations when they signed a special joint Memorandum on 5 April 2011 (CCD, 2014). Among the achievements of the Coalition worth noting here are writing, lobbying, and adopting anti-discrimination legislation in Ukraine. As I have written elsewhere, the Coalition’s position has been to emphasize the fact that it is “more productive to create general national mechanisms to fight discrimination that is often of a multilayered nature” (Martsenyuk, 2010: 136-137).

In 2014 the “Freedom House” annual country-by-country report on global political rights and civil liberties *Freedom in the World* noted in the sub-chapter “Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights” that LGBT people continue to face discrimination and hostility in Ukraine (Freedom House, 2014). According to LGBT Rights *Nash Mir* Center data (2013: 14), “65% of respondents (out of 499 interviewed, mainly gay men from large cities of Ukraine) reported that they faced homo- or transphobia at least once a year.”

Overall, for the period from September 2012 to August 2013 *Nash Mir* Center documented 50 detailed cases of human rights violations and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity. More than half of these were associated with hate-motivated actions towards LGBT persons, including actual or

threatened physical violence (20), disclosure of sexual orientation of victims or threats of disclosure (8), and damage to property (4). In almost all cases insulting remarks were made about the sexual orientation or gender identity of the victims (*Nash Mir*, 2014a; *Nash Mir*, 2014b). The Equal Rights Trust Country Report 2015 on Ukraine underlines that “the high levels of stigma and prejudice and the failure of the legal framework to provide protection from discrimination has resulted in particularly high levels of discrimination against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity” (“In the Crosscurrents,” 2015: 62).

The Euromaidan Protests, Social Inequalities, and Human Rights

As diverse and dynamic social phenomena, all instances of mobilization and social protest inevitably include both aspirations and failures when it comes to achieving equality for different groups. The Euromaidan was no exception. During the Euromaidan protests, the nationalist rhetoric that was reproduced served to promote a patriarchal perception of gender roles. This is exemplified in the caption from one of the self-made posters circulated online: “A nation exists as long as there are men ready to fight for it.”⁶ This citation encapsulates the perception of the Euromaidan that was reproduced by the mainstream media, where the “revolution” was connected with the glorification of armed force and violence in defense of the nation. Any other important issues raised by the protesters were ignored in this context.

While some attention has been paid to the role of women and gender aspects during the Euromaidan protests (Khromeychuk, 2015; Martsenyuk, 2015; Martsenyuk, 2014; Onuch & Martsenyuk, 2014; Phillips, 2014), there is a lack of research focusing on questions of (homo)sexuality in this connection. At the same time, a number of studies discuss the diversity of the protest’s audience and

⁶ Author’s private archive (collected mainly from *Facebook* since November 2014). Translated from Ukrainian: “Natsiia isnuie, poky ye choloviky, hotovi za neii voiuvaty.”

initiatives (see Diuk, 2014; Onuch, 2014; Stepurko et al., 2014) and examine the Euromaidan as a heterogeneous space (Martsenyuk, 2015; Martsenyuk, 2014; Onuch & Martsenyuk, 2014). For example, it has been pointed out that the Euromaidan “included LGBT advocates, anarchists, feminists, liberals, national democrats, young professionals, Afghan War veterans, and the unemployed from small towns and villages” (Risch, 2015: 142). It has been argued that although traditional gender roles were reproduced on the Maidan, this space also provided an opportunity for women to reclaim equality and inclusivity (Martsenyuk, 2014).

There are different opinions on the inclusivity of the Euromaidan. Some scholars and activists support the idea that

the Euromaidan was ideologically friendly and open to everyone. There was no division based on language or ethnicity. Provocations aimed at exploiting LGBT issues failed repeatedly. LGBT community leaders and the leaders of socially conservative groups found common ground on the Maidan. Many were surprised when the Euromaidan was supported by football fans, “ultras,” in all of Ukraine’s regions (Kvit, 2014: 31).

At the same time, the Euromaidan has also been criticized (sometimes by the very same commentators) for being discriminatory against women, LGBT people, and others (see Mayerchuk, 2014; Martsenyuk, 2015; Martsenyuk, 2014; Onuch & Martsenyuk, 2014; Ryabchuk, 2014 etc.). Certainly it is the case that women, children, and the elderly were discouraged from participating in the protests when the situation became violent (Martsenyuk, 2014: 16). When the Euromaidan became a paramilitary space with its own paramilitary units [*sotni*] and barricades, the number of women staying in the tents on the Maidan decreased from 44 percent to only 12 percent (Martsenyuk, 2014: 17).

Adriana Helbig has analysed heteronormativity and the Euromaidan in her article “The Struggle for LGBT Rights in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine” (2014). The author concludes that “LGBT people in Ukraine choose to be closeted for fear of discrimination and violence” (Helbig, 2014: 78). In this article I will not only support this conclusion but also highlight new opportunities for change that LGBT activists were able to identify as a result of the Euromaidan.

LGBT Issues and Homophobia during the Euromaidan

As noted above, the Euromaidan reflected certain broader tendencies in Ukrainian society, including the prevalence of homophobia, manifested in repeated and ongoing homophobic hate speech incidents (Martsenyuk, 2012a; Martsenyuk, 2012b; *Nash Mir*, 2014a; *Nash Mir*, 2014b). Almost all Ukrainian leading politicians exploit the conservative topic of “traditional values,” in which homophobia invariably appears in one form or another (Kravchuk, 2014). One of my respondents cited the popular slogan “Yanukovych Pidaresht”⁷ as an example of this tendency (Interviewee 8).

If we try to map the evolution of LGBT rights activism against a chronology of events on the Maidan, then we might identify the following three periods: (1) “pro-European Maidan” (until the dispersal of the students on 30 November 2013); (2) “Maidan on the barricades” (from December 2013 until the end of February 2014); and (3) “post-Maidan.” Each of these three phases was marked by a different attitude towards LGBT activism. In the first “pro-European” phase, there were attempts by some LGBT activists to come out into the public space with pro-human rights and anti-homophobic slogans. One of the activists described the negative reception they faced:

Even before the first crackdown on the Maidan on 30 November, when the leading theme of the protest was the Association Agreement with the EU, my friend and I joined the general protest with placards “If you want to join Europe—give up sexism and homophobia” and “Feminism is a European value.” The general reaction of the people was not aggressive, however, but rather indifferent, some people tried to snatch our placards twice, accusing us of provocation (Interviewee 11).

The second period, “Maidan on the barricades,” could be characterized by militarization of society, intensification of

7 Produced by the Democratic Alliance political party, http://dem-alliance.org/districts/kiyiv-ta-kiyivska-oblast/district_news/desyat-dniv-maydanu-vidatki-ta (accessed 27 August 2015). The word “pidar” is an abbreviation and variation of “pederast” which is a pejorative term for “gay” or “faggot” (Urban Dictionary, 2015). The slogan also plays on the fact that *pidaresht* means “under arrest”.

violence, and, as a result, the threat of an increase in homophobia. One activist argued that the “traumatic experience of violence may have opened the field for manipulation by church representatives who often use the LGBT community to create an enemy and spread hatred among the population in Ukraine” (Interviewee 11). Another respondent voiced caution regarding further developments: “In general radicalization of attitudes in the society, which is once again at risk of being deceived, does not promote tolerance. The devaluation of human life as seen in the recent events puts minority groups in greater danger of physical violence, and LGBT people are the first candidates to face this threat” (Interviewee 12). The patriarchal ideology that was visible during the events on the Maidan was criticized by some respondents: “In general, little has changed in the mood of society. I heard from my friends who used to be fairly moderate the following thesis many times: in this situation, we need a strong traditional family—we should give birth to Ukrainians who will defend Ukraine” (Interviewee 13). Thus, the period of “Maidan on the barricades” involved a revival of the discourse of traditional gender roles where normative masculinity reproduces anger and domination through physical force. As a result, other (alternative) masculinities (for example, homosexual ones) or femininities were challenged or even suppressed.

The topic of gender roles polarization is not new in the context of the study of radical social events (Khromeychuk, 2015; Mayerchuk, 2014; Martsenyuk, 2015; Martsenyuk, 2014; Onuch & Martsenyuk, 2014). In the case of the Euromaidan, such polarization was especially marked given that this was a situation involving the creation of a paramilitary space in the form of the *sotni* on the barricades and the widespread reproduction of patriarchal ideas about the place and roles of women and men, where women belong in the kitchen while the men fight on the barricades. “There was a lot of misogynist sentiment on the Maidan and it was only partly challenged by the creation of the all-female *sotnia*. Where there is misogyny, homophobia is also necessarily present” (Interviewee 12). In this case, to legitimize the protest space, normalization mechanisms were used that appealed to so-called “traditional values” based on gendered roles. As one interviewee put it, “the

Maidan positioned itself as a space of ‘real men—heroes,’ where there was no place for the weak” (Interviewee 9).

During the Euromaidan a number of homophobic actions took place, including an “attack on two LGBT clubs in downtown Kyiv by nationalist participants of the Euromaidan” (Interviewee 3), and “the brutal beating of two gay men somewhere near Independence Square by people from the self-defense of the Maidan”⁸ (Interviewee 12).

During the third “post-Maidan” stage the LGBT community tried to lobby sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) issues as human rights issues. There are diverse opinions among LGBT activists concerning the results of their communication with the authorities and the media during Euromaidan. On the one hand, despite the numerous suggestions and support of national and international organizations, Bill 4581 “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine (on the Prevention and Combating of Discrimination),” adopted on 13 May 2014, did not include SOGI. Commenting on this outcome, one respondent concluded that “The Euromaidan showed that there is no concept of human rights in the national ideology” (Interviewee 1).

On the other hand, other respondents could see some positive developments when it came to the LGBT agenda:

It was important to have some public discussion of it [the legislation], and particularly the topic of “sexual orientation”. This has forced at least some discussion of the issues, and some representatives of ministries publicly stated that they understand the need to include sexual orientation onto the list of protected characteristics, but that right now it was hard to do this (Interviewee 10).

The post-Maidan phase was also dominated by the discourse of war. By this stage, LGBT questions were routinely dismissed as “untimely”. In the questionnaire responses of some activists one can make out a tangible disappointment over the lack of opportunities to defend their rights during this period, with one respondent commenting that “International human rights organizations such as

⁸ For more information on this case, see *Nash Mir* (2014c: 23).

Human Rights Watch are more interested in human rights violations in the war zone than in LGBT rights” (Interviewee 8).

One openly gay activist, Bogdan Globa, even tried to use the Euromaidan’s pro-democratic notions as “a window of opportunity” to enter the post-Maidan political scene. But he was not allowed to join the political party Democratic Alliance because of his active stance in advocating equal rights for LGBT people, as the National LGBT Portal of Ukraine reported in July 2014. The Kyiv branch of the party justified this refusal on the grounds that the party was a Christian Democratic party. A party representative stated that “family values are important for us. And here we have serious disagreements with the position of the LGBT community. We oppose attempts to extend the value of family, the sacrament of marriage and so on” (National LGBT Portal of Ukraine, 2014). The deputy head of the Democratic Alliance also made a statement explaining that the party tried to avoid discussions on “socially sensitive” topics (National LGBT Portal of Ukraine, 2014). Some respondents evaluated Globa’s attempt at political dialog as a gesture that was quite innovative for LGBT activism and as a positive feature of the post-Maidan period.

The LGBT Community in the Euromaidan: a Strategy of Invisibility

On 17 December 2013 the LGBT activist community of Ukraine publicly defined its position on the Euromaidan protests. Representatives of a total of twenty-one organizations signed a joint statement:

These days many of us stand on the Euromaidans all over the country. But today we are not fighting for the special rights for LGBT people. We stand under the colors of our country and the European Union as male and female citizens of Ukraine, fighting for a better life for themselves and their loved ones according to European standards (Euro Revolution in Ukraine, 2013).

In another similar statement issued in January 2014, the Council of LGBT Organizations of Ukraine stated that

We announce that we have not planned and do not plan any street protests on LGBT topics as part of the Euromaidan precisely because we understand by whom and for what purpose they will be used (Council of LGBT Organizations of Ukraine, 2014b).

The general strategy employed by the LGBT community in the Euromaidan might be described as a strategy of compromise (Martsenyuk, 2010: 139), or even a strategy of invisibility. As one of the respondents aptly put it, “Ukrainian LGBT activists took implicit homophobia for granted and concluded that the ‘Revolution of Dignity’ was not the time to wave the rainbow flags on the barricades” (Interviewee 1).

A number of my respondents supported this strategy: “the LGBT community was not visible during the events of the EuroMaidan because of its own appropriate choice” (Interviewee 3). Representatives of the LGBT community went to the Maidan primarily as citizens of Ukraine: “everyone who wanted to fight was fighting for one goal, and I would not distinguish between the LGBT community and other citizens of Ukraine who sought freedom” (Interviewee 4).

State and nation in this case received priority over social group: “LGBT citizens faced problems more important than self-presentation and protection of their rights. We, together with others, defended our country’s right to a decent future, and in a sense, for some time renounced our identity in favor of our country” (Interviewee 5). Another activist said that such a strategy aimed “to avoid speculations on this topic, and to preserve the integrity of the Euromaidan” (Interviewee 6).

The threat of violence should also be mentioned among the causes of the invisibility strategy. One respondent said that the LGBT community “deliberately avoided confrontation with radical nationalists” (Interviewee 7); another stated that “Everyone understood that LGBT events would open aggression by traditionalist and right-wing groups” (Interviewee 8). There are other testimonies too which refer to the Euromaidan as a space which was not always safe:

Another part [other activists] maybe wanted to somehow declare their presence as LGBT, but it was dangerous as there were large numbers of far-right activists (first, the “Svoboda” Party and then the “Right Sector”). During the first days of mass demonstrations after the students got beaten up on 30 November I was with an LGBT group and we had a few rainbow flags in bags, which we decided not to pull out, because next to us there were columns of activists of the “Svoboda” Party who looked, as usual, rather aggressive. In addition, later there were several cases of attacks by ultra-right-wing activists on girls from the feminist and leftist community, who stood with posters to support the rights of women (very reasonable ones, like “Europe = equal wages for women”), as well as leftist activists (Interviewee 10).

During the “Maidan on the barricades” period there were several attempts by the pro-Russian and anti-European political forces to organize provocations against the Euromaidan by disguising themselves as members of the Ukrainian LGBT community and playing on the homophobic sentiments of the general public and especially Ukrainian nationalist groups (Council of LGBT Organizations of Ukraine, 2014b). A *Nash Mir* Center report describes examples of provocations of this kind, one involving a public show of nudity carried out in the name of a seemingly fake NGO ostensibly in support of Bill 2342,⁹ and the other a staged protest apparently carried out by a group of homeless people who had been paid to pose as members of the LGBT community (*Nash Mir*, 2013: 10). These attempts at discrediting the LGBT rights cause via choreographed media scandals were quite transparent and were ultimately foiled by the joint efforts of Ukrainian LGBT organizations and the Maidan leadership.

My respondents repeatedly raised the issue of fake LGBT demonstrations, which were “organized to discredit the EuroRevolution” (Interviewee 2). For example, on 10 January 2014 one fake LGBT Euromaidan organization held a press conference supposedly in order to provide “a chance for everyone to be heard and to defend their rights” (Interviewee 2), and on 11 January the same people tried to break into the Maidan, in order to set up their

⁹ Bill 2342 “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Prevention and Combating Discrimination in Ukraine” was submitted by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine within the state’s obligations under the EU-Ukraine Visa Liberalization Plan (*Nash Mir*, 2013: 2-3).

own tent there, presumably with the aim of infiltrating and perhaps discrediting the protest movement.¹⁰ Such methods apparently enjoyed only limited success, however. As one respondent explained, “LGBT organizations have a long [history of] cooperation with the leading media, so fake news about LGBT issues in Ukraine will never become popular, because the media are able to separate the wheat from the chaff” (Interviewee 1). Nevertheless, provocations of this kind, conducted with the aim of stirring up negative feelings against the LGBT community, were quite common occurrences, and they added to the atmosphere of hostility.

Thus, the strategy of invisibility is explicable as a conscious choice by LGBT activists aimed at avoiding violence and provocations during protests. Actually, participants of the Euromaidan from the LGBT community were exposed to a double danger: as citizens who came to protest against the regime, and as representatives and members of a marginalized community.

Homonationalism as a Critique of the Invisibility Strategy

It is clear that not all members of the community supported the idea that civil rights should have priority over human rights for LGBT people. The question, however, is whether such LGBT activists had the opportunity to express and promote their position. The LGBT strategy of invisibility can be criticized for excluding other opinions on this issue. Some scholars like Maria Mayerchyk have criticized the LGBT activists for their choice not to be “visible” in the protests:

They do not say: here we are—standing with you side-by-side defending the barricades, we have the same objectives. They do not say this. Some daredevils tried talking about it, but they faced a total lack of understanding. Unstable and uncertain though it was, a discursive platform from which such statements could have been made had become blurry and shaky even before anybody noticed its disappearance... (Mayerchyk, 2014)

¹⁰ The Euromaidan protest lasted around three months and some people were staying in tents which were organized into a so-called tent-city.

Since the Euromaidan protests took place under pro-EU slogans (especially at first), the LGBT community had hopes of changing the status quo. Of course, activists understood that EU countries differ when it comes to regulating LGBT issues. Indeed, LGBT activists made a point of refuting the false information that was being widely disseminated regarding the alleged requirements set by the EU on the legalization of gay marriage in Ukraine:

Unfortunately, lately senior officials have been issuing manipulative statements that the EU allegedly demands the legalization of “gay marriages” in Ukraine. Of course, such statements, along with other attempts to exploit the existing prejudice against LGBT people, are intended to prevent the European integration. We welcome a prompt retraction from the EU about this nonsensical claim about “gay marriages” and believe that such false declarations coming from the Ukrainian officials should carry political and legal responsibility (Euro Revolution in Ukraine, 2013).

Certainly, a pro-EU political vector would not mean the automatic legislation of LGBT rights in Ukraine. At the same time, the LGBT community was acutely aware of the alternative scenario represented by the homophobic legislation now in place in the Russian Federation.¹¹ Therefore, geopolitical choice, and the principle of choosing “the lesser of two evils,” as in Lutsenko’s abovementioned comment that it would be “better to allow gay parades once a year in Kyiv than to wait every day for Russian tanks,” played a role here. As Kravchuk has explained, “The Ukrainian LGBT community hoped that the pro-European opposition victory in any case was more advantageous for protecting its rights and interests than for preserving the post-Soviet status quo, not to mention the victory of pro-Russian forces” (Kravchuk, 2014). The LGBT community was aware of the policies of most EU countries regarding various rights for the LGBT community (such as same-sex partnerships and marriages). When faced with a choice between the

¹¹ In June 2013, the Russian State Duma in Moscow passed a new law banning the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships to minors.” More information can be found, for example, at “The Facts on LGBT Rights in Russia,” The Council for Global Equality, <http://www.globalequality.org/news/room/latest-news/1-in-the-news/186-the-facts-on-lgbt-rights-in-russia> (accessed 15 January 2016).

European and Russian approaches, the LGBT community, naturally, chose the first option. At the same time, as other research demonstrates (Lavryk, 2015), this uncritical pro-European position on the part of the leading LGBT NGOs and some activists did not allow the LGBT community to consolidate with other groups experiencing discrimination (based on ethnic, religious, or linguistic grounds).

Moreover, some answers given in the questionnaire on the topic of European integration reveal an “othering” strategy, where “we” are those who are in favour of European integration and “they” are those who are against it. This unconditional and uncritical orientation towards “Western” (“European”) understandings of the value of “sexual citizenship” can be identified as an example of what Jasbir Puar has called *homonationalism* (Puar, 2007).

Homonationalism is the normative homosexual identity and practices that take “neo-liberal democratic ethics” and the nationality of the “global north” for the “standard” and reflect the related racial and class privileges (Kulick, 2009: 28). It involves the attempt to construct the “correct gay identity”, which is mainly connected with the global West as the norm for LGBT activism. Pro-LGBT (anti-homophobic) policies in the West are often held up in order to demonstrate the superiority of the USA (or the EU in our case) over other cultures or sexualities.

The concept of homonationalism can be usefully applied and adapted to the case of contemporary Ukraine, where the juxtaposition of two potential political vectors—pro-European and pro-Russian—encourages attempts to create a “correct” gay identity. In the context of Ukrainian domestic politics the “correct gay identity” is constructed primarily through an affiliation with the Ukrainian nation and inclusion in the “national project” (via participation in the events on the Maidan, in the Anti-Terrorist Operation, the support of the army, etc.). Other identities and practices are, therefore, constructed and seen as “incorrect”.

There is a clear contradiction here. After all, human rights protection mechanisms should address inclusivity, rather than promoting othering and exclusion. Let us recall once again the quote from Lutsenko on gay parades as preferable to Russian tanks,

with which I opened this article. Although Lutsenko's words have the intention of tolerance, this "tolerance" is itself fundamentally xenophobic and homophobic, and is offered only in relation to the "common enemy" of the Ukrainian nation. It would seem, then, that one type of phobia and hatred could be easily and successfully replaced by another. It might be possible to argue that this option is acceptable for strategic reasons, but in the discourse of diversity Lutsenko's statement is highly problematic. Some of my respondents, however, reacted positively to Lutsenko's words, arguing that it was "a small victory to move from hatred to the possibility of tolerance" (Interviewee 2).

The Maidan has now been transformed into a "battlefield" and those who were killed there are now revered as martyrs and commemorated under the name of the Heavenly Hundred (*Nebesna sotnia*). For some of my respondents, it was important to point out that there were also homosexuals among the Heavenly Hundred. "By and large, people on Independence Square did not know that LGBT people were creating a 'revolution' together with them," said one respondent. "Some guys from the gay community were killed by snipers. Protecting the privacy of our comrades, their families and boyfriends, we cannot disclose the names of the victims" (Interviewee 1).

LGBT Rights and Opportunities for Change

A strategy of invisibility does not automatically or necessarily mean non-participation. In fact, some respondents point out that LGBT activists had a visible presence in the context of wider human rights movement: "During every large demonstration, the 'Insight' NGO carried out a campaign with the following slogans: 'Human Rights above all,' ... 'stop discrimination,' 'human rights are the rights of minorities,' etc." (Interviewee 9). Nicole Dissler, in her field notes on grassroots anti-homophobic activism in Ukraine and Russia comments on the alternative path taken by LGBT activism in both countries:

Given the political, religious and legislative moves against LGBT citizens in both countries, activists have been carving out their own third way. Their tactics include education, training for journalists and teachers, practical assistance to LGBT citizens for everything from health matters to finding gay-friendly landlords, spreading tolerance and awareness via social media. This workaround strategy has little to do with the East-versus-West battle invoked by their respective governments but instead seeks to inspire change at the societal level (Disser, 2014).

It should also be noted that not all my respondents agreed that homophobia was widespread on Maidan. Some expressed the opposite view: “The level of homophobia on the Maidan was significantly lower than the average in the country” (Interviewee 15); “I personally had the feeling that we can defend our rights, and we should do this, particularly in the way of street actions” (Interviewee 16).

Respondents saw as one of the most significant positive developments in the field of human rights for the LGBT community during this period a May 2014 letter from the High Specialized Court of Ukraine for Civil and Criminal Cases to the appellate courts to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment (Ofitsiinyi visnyk Ukrainy, 2014). As one respondent commented,

the LGBT movement had been demanding such clarification from the judiciary since 2008, when we announced this at a special press conference of UNIAN [Ukrainian Independent Information Agency]. Now this [positive outcome] was due to the attention from the Ukrainian government, which thus sought to enforce pesky EU requirements in the context of visa liberalization for Ukrainian citizens (Interviewee 1).

As a consequence, some homophobic laws were removed from consideration in Parliament, including those initiated by the Party of Regions. As the press service of the Ukrainian LGBT association “Gay-Forum of Ukraine” reported, one of the most scandalous bills, “On the Prohibition of Propaganda of Homosexual Relations aimed at Children” (No. 1155) was revoked on 15 April 2014. “Its author was Vadym Kolesnichenko and since he was denied deputy status, all bills proposed by him, not considered by the Parliament, went into oblivion” (Interviewee 1).

Another respondent saw some positive features in the abovementioned story about the denial of membership to LGBT activist Bogdan Globa by the “Democratic Alliance” party: “In this conflict, Ukrainian media widely supported an openly gay person, but not party members (who proved to be conservative). As far as I can remember, this was the first time this had happened. This is a sign of changes in public opinion” (Interviewee 5).

What should be done by the LGBT community in order to gain more visibility in society? What are the possibilities for change? The respondents’ answers here were not strongly connected with the Euromaidan protests and had little to do with a critical reassessment of the post-Maidan phase. A significant number of the respondents described the act of “coming-out”—an important topic for the LGBT community. They spoke of the significance of not being forced “to hide their sexual orientation/gender identity ... in daily life, at work, in social or political activities, etc.” (Interviewee 6); and they noted that “openness is the only way to acceptance” (Interviewee 11).

In the questionnaire responses, the visibility of the group emerged as an issue of secondary importance. Visibility means holding more public events as well as more active participation in other protests, “to occupy spaces—informative, communicative, on the street, etc.” (Interviewee 16). Another respondent believed that “now is the time for increasing the visibility of the community” (Interviewee 17). The question is relevant in the context of the “invisibility strategy” produced during the “Maidan at the barricades” phase and trends in the spread of homonationalist ideology. It is important to discuss what a viable forward-looking strategy for the whole LGBT community might look like. In particular, some respondents are convinced that LGBT organizations need to build institutional capacity and cooperation in the media field. But is it possible and feasible to build such a strategy, especially in a situation of diverse interests of individual subgroups within the LGBT community?

The respondents mentioned the importance of education in the field of human rights, of holding educational events, and producing more research on LGBT issues. Others were convinced

about the need to “de-ghettoize” LGBT questions, “to overcome the line of separation between ‘us’ (LGBT) and ‘others’ (the rest of society),” “to promote diversity and multiculturalism, as under this paradigm there is a place not only for the LGBT, but also for other social groups that differ from the majority of the society” (Interviewee 1). One respondent said that there was a need to form a movement of heterosexuals for LGBT rights and an LGBT parent movement (or ally movement). In fact, a movement of parents of LGBT children in Ukraine has now emerged and is beginning to develop; the NGO “Tergo” is one example of this.¹² A project based on cooperation with medical staff “Friendly doctor: the provision of health services for LGBT community”¹³ has also been launched.

As many of my respondents noted, it is important for LGBT activists to go out into public space. Incidentally, the current political scene in Ukraine features a so-called “free niche” because, as one respondent put it, “among the leading political forces there is nobody who would consider human rights and freedoms among their priorities” (Interviewee 1). The same respondent suggests “forming a new political platform, the main focus of which would be to improve and expand the rights and freedoms for all Ukrainians” (Interviewee 1). On 17 September 2014, the National LGBT news portal of Ukraine reported that the political party “Spil’na diia” [Joint Action], headed by famous Ukrainian lawyer and blogger, Tetiana Montian, had advocated the legalization of same-sex partnerships and adoption of children by gay couples. Montian, however, lost the autumn 2014 election.

Conclusion

Overall, for the LGBT community of Ukraine and for the human rights situation in Ukraine the events of the Euromaidan were ambiguous and even contradictory. On the one hand, the

12 More information about the NGO “Tergo” can be found on its website <http://tergo.org.ua> (accessed 15 February 2016).

13 More information on the project “Friendly Doctor: the Provision of Health Services for the LGBT Community” can be found at <http://www.friendlydoctor.org> (accessed 15 February 2016).

radicalization of the protest and the militarization of space have excluded the possibility for the LGBT community to promote their rights—they were not provided with an opportunity to be present at the Maidan representing their own political interest. Therefore, for the Ukrainian LGBT community, participation in the Maidan was a kind of “veiled” form of participation, devised and adopted both for the sake of personal safety and with a view to supporting the interests of the Ukrainian nation, said to be “rising up off its knees” (Interviewee 2). Such participation was embodied in the “invisibility strategy” and in the acceptance of the ideology of homonationalism by a majority of active LGBT organizations. On the other hand, the overall protest potential of the Euromaidan and the belief in the ability to change the system which it reflected and promoted, together with support for its European integration result (rather as a rejection of the pro-Russian choice of homophobic legislation) was welcomed by human rights and LGBT activists.

LGBT activists are aware of a vacant political niche, for a gay-friendly political party or political leaders to promote their rights and the introduction of sexual orientation and gender identity issues into Ukrainian legislation. At the same time, by using the concept of homonationalism it is possible to reveal an uncritical perception of Western LGBT politics in particular and of geopolitical binaries (West vs. East or EU vs. Russia) more broadly. There is a risk that this homonationalist discourse of West vs. East might ignore mechanisms serving to promote homophobia and to keep LGBT interests silenced from both sides. It remains unclear whether it will prove possible for the LGBT community in Ukraine to challenge and overcome the West vs. East geopolitical binaries, and to prioritize Ukrainian LGBT communities’ interests first and foremost.

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