



**The rise of illiberal  
civil society in the  
former Soviet Union?**

## Executive Summary

This publication examines the growing influence of illiberal, anti-Western and socially conservative civil society groups, popular movements and political forces in five post-Soviet states: Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova. It finds that illiberal social attitudes remain prevalent across the region, particularly in relation to LGBTI rights, and that they are increasingly being used as opportunities for political mobilisation within these societies. While there have been attempts to create illiberal civil society groups that mirror pro-Western/liberal NGOs or think-tanks, they remain significantly less influential than the institutions and groups linked to the dominant religious organisations in these countries such as the Orthodox Church, or political factions with influence over state resources.

What is clear, however, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia, is that there has been a significant rise in far-right and nationalist street movements, alongside smaller but active homophobic gangs. These 'uncivil rights movements' still lack broad public support but their political energy and rate of growth is influencing the wider politics of the region. It is clear that illiberal civil society is on the rise in these five countries but it is growing in its own way rather than simply aping its liberal counterparts.

Russia has an important role in the rise of illiberal civil society across the region, in particular the way it has disseminated and promoted the concept of 'traditional values'; however it is important to recognise that while some groups have direct or indirect contact with Russia, many do not and that the primary drivers of such activity are to be found in the local societies of the countries at hand. The Russians are being increasingly joined by US evangelical groups who see opportunities to promote a shared traditionalist agenda in the region. Attempts by the EU and other international actors to encourage or require countries to implement measures on anti-discrimination or tackling domestic violence have been used effectively by illiberal civil society groups, religious institutions and political factions as a rallying point for illiberal opposition.

The publication argues that there is a need to more robustly tackle corruption and malpractice by politicians who may be notionally liberal or pro-European but who are bringing these concepts into disrepute. Civil society should work to identify the 'moveable middle' groups in society who are currently sceptical about liberal social values but are not passionate in their opposition to them and who might be open to engagement and persuasion.

The publication makes a number of recommendations:

The Governments of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan should:

- Take urgent measures to tackle corruption and improve transparency;
- Investigate attacks on minorities and scrap any partnerships with nationalist groups involved;
- Protect the ability of liberal civil society groups to operate freely without intimidation;
- Disband any armed militias affiliated to political parties or extremist groups.

The international community should:

- Increase political pressure and sanctions on the activities of ostensible 'pro-European' or 'liberal' allies whose corruption or malpractice brings such principles into disrepute;
- Insist on action to tackle hate crimes and offer greater support and resources to do so if political willingness to act can be ensured;
- Look for opportunities for diplomatic dialogue with the dominant religious institutions;
- Continue to refine and improve 'myth-busting' and anti-propaganda responses;
- Support efforts to improve survey and research data about illiberal civil society attitudes;
- Work with liberal minded NGOs to find new ways to engage the 'movable middle'.

## Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	1
<b>Introduction: The Rise of Illiberal Civil Society?</b> Adam Hug	3
<b>What our authors say</b>	13
<b>From a Pro-Russian to a Pro-Georgian Narrative</b> Nata Dzvelishvili	15
<b>Public Space: Battleground in the Revanchist City</b> Eka Chitanava and Katie Sartania	22
<b>Rise of the illiberal civil society in Georgia and its organisation</b> Mariam Ubari	29
<b>The unique extra-parliamentary power of Ukrainian radical nationalists is a threat to the political regime and minorities</b> Volodymyr Ishchenko	35
<b>Moldova: How can we get back to the future?</b> Mihaela Ajder	40
<b>The rise of illiberal civil society in Moldova</b> Dumitru Sliusarenco and Ion Foltea	48
<b>The ‘Nation-Army’ concept: The story of failed national-militaristic propaganda in Armenia</b> Anna Pambukhchyan	53
<b>The Changing Landscape of Uncivil Society in Kyrgyzstan</b> Dr Eric McGlinchey	61
<b>Illiberal forces put women’s rights under strain in Kyrgyzstan</b> Ryskeldi Satke	66
<b>Transnational norm mobilization: The World Congress of Families in Georgia and Moldova</b> Dr Kristina Stoekl	73
<b>Conclusion and Recommendations</b> Adam Hug	76
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	79

## **Introduction: The Rise of Illiberal Civil Society?**

Adam Hug

From Trump to Duterte, from Orbán to Erdogan, from Putin to PIS, socially conservative, nationalist and populist political forces are on the rise across the globe. The claim that we are living through a crisis for liberal democracy seems less hyperbolic by the day. After almost two decades which saw the advance of liberal democracy in the wake of the cold war, the period since the 2008 financial crisis undermined faith in and the perceived inevitability of the 'Western model', just as Russia (actively) and China (somewhat more passively) are displaying alternative economic and political models. It is a time of uncertainty fuelled not only by political instability but increasing concerns over rapid economic, technological and social change. It is this latter dimension – the pace of social change and reactions to it – that are at the heart of this publication which examines the extent of the counter-reaction.

This publication assesses the growing influence of illiberal, anti-Western and socially conservative civil society groups, popular movements and political forces in five post-Soviet states – Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova – looking at who they are and what they are seeking to achieve, and trying to understand why. These countries have been selected as they remain the five freest societies in the region that are not already part of the European Union (the Baltic States), and they are the sites of geopolitical competition for influence between the 'West' (predominantly the EU but also the historically the US) and Russia. As societies at the more open end of the regional spectrum, they all have the ability for groups of citizens to come together to advocate for political change in relative freedom. These countries also have well established 'liberal' non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that often receive funding from international donors including western nations and institutions, as well as private philanthropy such as the Open Society Foundations, the supporters of this publication.

This research is primarily focused on the activity of four, often overlapping, types of group:

- NGOs, think tanks and other research institutes that promote socially conservative values, both in relation to domestic policy and as a reason for closer ties with Russia, but whose form and function ostensibly mirrors that of liberal civil society
- Socially conservative pressure or campaigning groups
- Far-right or radical nationalist groups
- Groups linked to religious institutions (which may well include a number of the above)

### **Social attitudes: the power of religion and tradition**

All of the five societies under examination in this publication can be defined as broadly retaining socially conservative social values and traditions, despite their varying degrees of openness to engagement with the West. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union these countries have been developing – both rediscovering and creating – their national identity. In the context of emerging national identity and the desire for stability in the wake of the political and economic upheavals of the early 90s, it can become easy for individual rights to be seen as a threat to social cohesion (as well as entrenched power structures), something that is particularly pointed in the context of four of these five countries having either an active or unresolved territorial conflict.

Furthermore since the collapse of Soviet atheism religious identification and observance has boomed, with faith returning to the public square in a significant way. The identity of the dominant faith group has been used as a tool to define national identity across the region, either formally with special provisions in constitutions such as in Georgia and Armenia for the dominant church, or informally with politicians using religion as a way to define the identity of the nation, notably in Kyrgyzstan and Moldova.

The dominant religious organisations are the most trusted institutions in the five countries examined, with trust levels far exceeding those of civil society and secular politicians. For example 70% of Georgians rather

or fully trust their religious institution;<sup>1</sup> despite having one of the most established and active NGO sectors in the region, the comparable figure for NGOs is only 23%.<sup>2</sup>

In Georgia and Armenia the churches are independent institutions. While the Georgian Church leadership is more pro-Russian than the country as a whole, has good relations with the Russian Orthodox Church and shares a distaste for Western social liberalism, it operates on its own terms and has become an extremely powerful force for social mobilisation and political influence. While the Armenian Church has traditionally been a less proactive and more passive part of the previously ruling elite, it stakes a claim to be the keeper of Armenian identity, a role it played for centuries after the destruction of the Armenian state of antiquity. Neither church has a dependent relationship with its Russian counterpart: the Georgian Church is autocephalous (self-governing) within Eastern Orthodoxy, and Armenia's Apostolic Church is part of the separate Oriental Orthodox church family. This is unlike the situation in Moldova and Ukraine where the largest branches of the Orthodox Church are branches of the Russian Orthodox Church, though in Ukraine its dominance is being challenged by the rival Kiev Patriarchate. In Kyrgyzstan Islam remains dominated by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, a centralised Muftiate with close relations to the state.

As this publication makes clear, these religious institutions are the most-powerful non-governmental actors<sup>3</sup> in their societies and there are clear links with pressure groups on conservative social issues. While overall levels of religious identification and practice have risen, this rise in religious sentiment dovetails with longer-standing cultural attitudes prevalent in these societies, helping to provide a firm foundation for a cultural backlash against liberalising legislation often encouraged by 'outside powers', such as the EU through its Eastern Partnership processes.

Persistent hostility to LGBTI rights has been a common feature across the region. In Moldova 87% of people in 2016 saw homosexuality as not being justified, up from 85% in 2008.<sup>4</sup> Similarly the 2014 World Values survey showed that 86% of Georgians, 95% of Armenians and 68.5% of Kyrgyzstanis believed homosexuality was never justifiable.<sup>5</sup> There is also data in a number of countries suggesting that there are not the dramatic variations in views by age seen in Western societies (where young people are dramatically more liberal), with Eric McGlinchey's essay highlighting that levels of homophobia in Kyrgyzstan are broadly static across the age spectrum and data suggesting that examples of extreme homophobia may be higher amongst young Georgians than the older generations.<sup>6</sup> Both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan<sup>7</sup> have taken steps explicitly to outlaw gay marriage in their constitutions.

The one bright spot in the data has been the significant improvement in Ukrainian attitudes on LGBTI rights in the wake of pro-European reorientation brought about by the Maidan protests and the Revolution of Dignity, despite the clear rise in far right pressure discussed in this publication. Research by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) shows that in 2017 56% of Ukrainians supported equal rights protections for LGBTI people while only 21% were opposed, with 59% supporting workplace

---

<sup>1</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centre, Trust-Religious Institutions respondent belongs to, Caucasus Barometer 2017, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/TRURELI/>

<sup>2</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centre, Trust-NGOs, Caucasus Barometer 2017, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/TRUNGOS/> The same number 23% distrust NGOs, with the majority (39%) unsure either way.

<sup>3</sup> Though in some cases the divide between 'church' and state has become blurred.

<sup>4</sup> Ovidiu Voicu, Jennifer Cash and Victoria Cojocariu, Church and State in the Republic of Moldova, The Center for Public Innovation and Soros Foundation Moldova, 2017, [http://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu\\_Biserica%20si%20Stat\\_EN.pdf](http://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_Biserica%20si%20Stat_EN.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.). 2014. World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile Version: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp> The figure in Kyrgyzstan was notably lower because respondents gave less intense negative answers rather than a significant positive score, with only 4.9% of Kyrgyz respondents saying homosexuality could be to some extent justifiable.

<sup>6</sup> CRRC, Five data points about homophobia in Georgia five years after a homophobic riot, OC Media, May 2018, <http://oc-media.org/five-data-points-about-homophobia-in-georgia-five-years-after-a-homophobic-riot/>

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Pannier, What's In Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Referendum?, December 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-constitutional-referendum-whats-at-stake/28164053.html>



discrimination laws to protect them.<sup>8</sup> Ten years earlier only 34% of Ukrainians were willing to support equal rights protections for LGBTI people.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its legality during most of the Soviet-era, there are signs that cultural acceptance of abortion remains far from certain. 67% of Georgians believed that ‘an abortion can never be justified’<sup>10</sup> while in Moldova the similar figure was 53%.<sup>11</sup> The essay contributions in this collection show how women’s health issues, issues around sex education, domestic violence, and in the case of Kyrgyzstan bride kidnapping and polygamy, are being used as wedge issues by conservative and religious groups. The term ‘gender’ has been adapted by illiberal actors as a shorthand conflate a range of liberalising measures from attempts to promote gender equality to LGBTI rights as something to resist.<sup>12</sup>

### Local politics and external actors

The ‘traditional values’ debate is one rooted in power and influence. Given that illiberal social attitudes towards LGBTI rights, immigration and women’s role in society have significant domestic support, it is far from unusual that political figures would seek to harness such forces, in some cases out of genuine support and often for more cynical motives to provide a compelling narrative to distract from state capture and corruption. A number of our authors highlight how leading figures of notionally pro-European governments have been seen to utilise illiberal forces to achieve their political ends, including the close relationship between Georgian Dream and the Georgian Church, Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov’s relationships with far right militias, and the murky relationship in Moldova between pro-European government power broker and oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc and the socially conservative, pro-Russian President Igor Dodon.

The nature of and tools for Russian influence in promoting illiberal values in the post-Soviet Space have been addressed in detail in the previous Foreign Policy Centre publications *Sharing Worst Practice* and *The Information Battle*.<sup>13</sup> These publications show how Russia has tried to promote a ‘traditional values’ agenda that places the Russian political model as a guide for emulation by those in the region wary about the pace of social change, supportive of the Orthodox Church, opposed to LGBTI rights and sympathetic to a vision of a male-headed nuclear family. It disseminates these messages through its media, both domestic television rebroadcast across the region and targeted tools such as the Sputnik News Agency, whose messages are then adapted and repeated by local channels and websites. Media penetration is buttressed by the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church and a series of soft-power foundations and organisations that promote Russian values abroad, such as the state-backed Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation and the private initiatives of oligarchs close to the Kremlin.

When starting this project one of its goals was to seek to analyse the extent of Russian involvement in orchestrating local activities by traditionalist groups. Given the opaque nature of the funding structures of many of the groups analysed,<sup>14</sup> it has been difficult to definitively map direct Russian involvement; however the essay contributions identify a number of groups which are seen to have close ties (in some cases a directly financial relationship) with the Russian government and Russian institutions. For the most part

---

<sup>8</sup>ILGA-RIWI Global Attitudes Survey, October 2017, <https://ilga.org/ilga-riwi-global-attitudes-survey>

<sup>9</sup>Nash Mir Centre, One Step Forward, Two Steps Back, Situation of LGBT in Ukraine in 2010-2011, 2011, [https://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/EVZ\\_Uploads/Handlungsfelder/Handeln\\_fuer\\_Menschenrechte/Stop\\_Hate\\_Crime/Projekte/report2011cover-e.pdf](https://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/EVZ_Uploads/Handlungsfelder/Handeln_fuer_Menschenrechte/Stop_Hate_Crime/Projekte/report2011cover-e.pdf)  
<sup>10</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centre, JUSABOR- justified/never justified: having an abortion, Caucasus Barometer 2017, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/JUSABOR/>

<sup>11</sup>Ovidiu Voicu, Jennifer Cash and Victoria Cojocariu, Church and State in the Republic of Moldova, The Center for Public Innovation and Soros Foundation Moldova, 2017, [http://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu\\_Biserica%20si%20Stat\\_EN.pdf](http://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_Biserica%20si%20Stat_EN.pdf)

<sup>12</sup>Samson Martirosyan, The ‘Gender Equality Law’ Hysteria in Armenia, The Armenian Weekly, September 2013, <https://armenianweekly.com/2013/09/20/the-gender-equality-law-hysteria-in-armenia/>

<sup>13</sup>Adam Hug (ed.), *Sharing worst practice: How countries and institutions in the former Soviet Union help create legal tools of repression*, Foreign Policy Centre, May 2016, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/sharingworstpractice/> and Adam Hug (ed.), *The information battle: How governments in the former Soviet Union promote their agendas & attack their opponents abroad*, Foreign Policy Centre, March 2017, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/infobattle/>

<sup>14</sup>While NGO donor transparency is desirable care needs to be taken to avoid encouraging requirements that would echo Russian ‘Foreign Agents’ laws.

however the approach by local groups is emulation or imitation rather than direct control, with a few examples of movements as ‘franchises’, such as the operationally separate but closely related ‘Occupy Paedophilia’ organisations.

As Kristina Stoeckl shows in her essay about the World Congress of Families, Russian influence is increasingly dovetailing with the efforts of a number of radical US evangelical groups that are seeking to form a common front against the spread of liberal values, particularly on LGBTI rights and abortion.<sup>15</sup> Work by Melissa Hooper in previous FPC publications<sup>16</sup> and others such as Chris Stroop<sup>17</sup> and Casey Michel<sup>18</sup>, highlight this evolving collaboration to promote illiberalism in the post-Soviet space and across Europe, trends that predate but are magnified by the impact of the Trump presidency on the relationship between the US right and Russia.

### **The Five Countries: Georgia**

In this collection our three Georgian authors clearly set out the web of interlocking personalities and organisations that have developed a series of illiberal NGOs and institutes. This is the clearest example of mimicking the form of liberal civil society from all five case studies, perhaps unsurprising given Georgia’s comparatively well-established and active NGO sector providing a model for emulation.

The authors confirm the analysis clearly expressed in past Foreign Policy Centre publications that the Georgian Orthodox Church is the most powerful illiberal force within Georgian society.<sup>19</sup> It is clearly the most proactively influential of the religious institutions within the five countries assessed in this publication, and it is probably fair to see it as being the most influential non-state<sup>20</sup> actor within an individual society from across the five countries assessed.

As in Ukraine the issue of direct Russian involvement in Georgian society is particularly fraught, with the wounds of the 2008 conflict still raw. However there has been a limited thawing in relations, in part led by contact between the Georgian Church and its Russian counterparts, despite Georgia’s continued steps towards the European Union. Research in 2015 by Nata Dzvelishvili,<sup>21</sup> which is expanded upon in her contribution to this collection, by the Media Development Initiative in 2017<sup>22</sup> and Transparency International Georgia in 2018<sup>23</sup> have helped map some of the potential links between an intertwined set of Georgian organisations and donors and partners in Russia. Some Georgian groups do directly advocate improving ties with Russia; however it is clear that analysts believe there remain links between Russia and organisations that promote opposition to liberal values who frame such activity as ‘pro-Georgian’ rather than ‘pro-Russian’. This is seen as an attempt in the short term to undermine Western influence, an approach that has a greater potential audience than explicitly pro-Russian activity.

---

<sup>15</sup> Southern Poverty Law Centre, How the World Congress of Families serves Russian Orthodox political interests, May 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>

<sup>16</sup> Adam Hug (ed.) *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Stroop, Between Trump and Putin: The right-wing international, A crisis of democracy and the Future of the European Union, May 2017, <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/05/11/between-trump-and-putin-the-right-wing-international-a-crisis-of-democracy-and-the-future-of-the-european-union/#sthash.VY50H59S.idSQ3Uub.dpbs>

<sup>18</sup> Casey Michel, The Rise of the ‘Traditionalist International’: How the American Right Learned to Love Moscow in the Era of Trump, March 2017, [http://www.rightwingwatch.org/report/the-rise-of-the-traditionalist-international-how-the-american-right-learned-to-love-moscow-in-the-era-of-trump/?\\_ga=2.228502877.1900447021.1531651021-399355175.1531651021](http://www.rightwingwatch.org/report/the-rise-of-the-traditionalist-international-how-the-american-right-learned-to-love-moscow-in-the-era-of-trump/?_ga=2.228502877.1900447021.1531651021-399355175.1531651021) ‘Traditionalist International’ had been a working title for this research before the FPC became aware of its use by Michel and that our research findings more clearly emphasised the local dimensions of illiberal mobilisation.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Hug (Ed.) Traditional religion and political power: Examining the role of the church in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova, Foreign Policy Centre, October 2015, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/orthodox/>

<sup>20</sup> While there is much debate about the closeness of church and state in Georgia, the perception is not that the state controls the church but there are concerns around the extent of the Church’s influence over the state.

<sup>21</sup> Nata Dzvelishvili and Tazo Kupreishvili. Russian influence on Georgian NGOs, May 2015 [https://www.academia.edu/36353738/Russian\\_influence\\_on\\_Georgian\\_NGOs\\_and\\_Media](https://www.academia.edu/36353738/Russian_influence_on_Georgian_NGOs_and_Media)

<sup>22</sup> Media Development Fund, Kremlin Influence Index 2017, [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/67/file/eng/dm\\_iik\\_engl-compressed.pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/67/file/eng/dm_iik_engl-compressed.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Transparency International. ‘Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism’, May 2018, <http://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>

Of particular concern is that the three Georgian authors clearly identify a growing presence on the street of burgeoning nationalist, far-right movements that poses a major challenge to the promotion of liberal values in Georgia. These groups are building on the momentum of past protests by the Church and its allies against the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT)<sup>24</sup> but they have been broadening out their attacks to a wider selection of liberal targets from nightclubs to vegan restaurants.<sup>25</sup> There seems some evidence of links between members of the emerging nationalist protest groups and Russian groups, just at a time when Russia has cracked down on its domestic far-right movements.<sup>26</sup>

## Ukraine

The debate over the extent of the involvement of the Ukrainian far-right in the Maidan movement, the Revolution of Dignity and its aftermath can be a painful one. This is in part because of the narrative, projected to the (physical) exclusion of all others to the citizens of Crimea and Donbass, by the Russian government, intelligence service and media outlets, was the ludicrous and slanderous narrative that ‘the fascists have taken Kiev’. It is also due to the deep emotional investment in the Maidan Movement from across large sections of Ukrainian society, particularly amongst liberal civil society. In this context the analysis provided by Volodymyr Ishchenko here and elsewhere<sup>27</sup>, which argues that the far-right had a greater involvement than some observers are willing to recognise, can be challenging for those who see the Maidan as a decisive national moment for liberal social change.

While the extent of its involvement is clearly a matter of heated debate, Ukrainian far right groups were clearly disproportionately involved in the physical confrontation elements of the protest movement, notably at the denouement when Yanukovich’s security forces ended up shooting protestors – the act that led to his ouster. Furthermore from the example of protest movements elsewhere in the world it can be argued that organised groups with clear agendas, structures and experienced members tend to have an outsized role in the coordination of protest action, irrespective of their size relative to the overall number of people ultimately participating in the protest or movement.<sup>28</sup> As a result they may come into contact with new recruits and more broadly their influence may, as a result of their attachment to a popular cause particularly over time, shape the mainstream debate in their direction. This ability to influence the wider political environment is particularly relevant in a society where political parties are primarily personality-led rather than built on firm ideology and organisational structures. Such analysis should be tempered by the recognition that the coalition of forces that came together to support the Maidan was extremely broad, from LGBTI Rights activists to Catholic and Kiev Patriarchate Orthodox priests, while many of the public faces of the movement tended to be a mix of mainstream pro-European politicians and more liberal activists.

What is undoubtedly true is that, while the power and presence of the far-right was strengthened by involvement in the revolution, the outbreak of conflict and the far right’s direct participation in leading pro-government militias, both inside and outside official Ukrainian government structures, has dramatically enhanced their position. Volodymyr Ishchenko’s essay analyses in detail the rise of the three largest organisations:

- the Azov Battalion and its affiliated organisations (including the National Corps political party and a

---

<sup>24</sup>JAM News, Georgian ultra-rightists promise to prevent Tbilisi from celebrating International Day Against Homophobia, May 2018, <https://jam-news.net/?p=102509>

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Collin, Georgian techno fans and extremists clash in Tbilisi in fight for club culture, Guardian, May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/14/georgian-techno-fans-extremists-clash-tbilisi-fight-club-culture> and Georgian vegan cafe attacked by ‘sausage-wielding nationalists’, Guardian, May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/31/georgian-vegan-cafe-attacked-by-sausage-wielding-nationalists>

<sup>26</sup> Mariya Petkova, The death of the Russian far right, Al Jazeera, November 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/11/death-russian-171123102640298.html>

<sup>27</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Denial of the Obvious: Far Right in Maidan Protests and Their Danger Today, Vox Ukraine, April 2018, <https://voxukraine.org/en/denial-of-the-obvious-far-right-in-maidan-protests-and-their-danger-today/>

<sup>28</sup>For example in a UK context you could note the disproportionate influence of small far and radical left groups in organised protests in the UK. The Socialist Workers Party for example is a tiny organisation, yet their placards are a major feature of all most any left-leaning public demonstration because they are well organised and turn up to each protest with huge numbers of posters and placards with their name and slogans on that are handed to any rally attendee who will take them. Similarly such small groups can play dominant roles in the coordination or executive bodies of ‘popular front’ organisations with a notionally much broader reach and remit.



- vigilante group)<sup>29</sup> which are seen as having ties to the current Minister of Interior Arsen Avakov
- the Right Sector far-right coalition (including its Tryzub –Trident- militia, whose members see themselves as heirs of World War II guerrilla movement the Ukrainian Insurgent Army)<sup>30</sup>
- the Svoboda (Freedom) party a far-right populist, socially conservative party and organisation, whose influence has somewhat waned with the rise of Azov.<sup>31</sup>

Not only are such groups and their affiliates active on the battlefield in Donbass, but they are seeking to play a role domestically too. For example, despite the Azov-affiliated vigilante group National Druzhyna being involved in intimidation and violence against civil society groups and minorities as noted below, it is seeking under provisions of the law ‘On the participation of citizens in protection of public order and the state border’ to involve 600 of its activists in a legally sanctioned ‘civic formation’ that would seek to shadow the police and notionally assist them in tackling anti-social behaviour and public order issues.<sup>32</sup>

There is also c14, a group often accused of being neo-Nazis, whose structures mirror Azov and which recruits actively amongst football club ‘ultras’, formerly had been affiliated with Svoboda. Its primary focus has been in targeting Russians and institutions seen as pro-Russian, since its time leading street battles against pro-Yanukovich gangs at the time of Maidan.<sup>33</sup> It has been listed by the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium as a domestic terrorist group,<sup>34</sup> been involved in attacks on Roma camps across Ukraine<sup>35</sup> and yet it has also been the recipient of government funding from the Youth and Sports Ministry for ‘national-patriotic’ education projects.<sup>36</sup>

As with other countries in the region there are a number of Ukrainian organisations that seek to copy the model of the Russian Occupy Paedophilia movement such as the White Lions, Heritage and perhaps the most notable group Fashion Verdict.<sup>37</sup> These groups deal in entrapment, public humiliation and violence against LGBTI individuals and groups.<sup>38</sup>

Efforts to promote the rehabilitation and promotion of nationalist groups from Ukraine’s past, such as the World War II nationalist movement the Ukrainian Insurgent Army that fought against both the Soviets and the Nazis, has been supported by more mainstream organisations such as the government-funded ‘Ukrainian Institute of National Memory’.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the substantive improvement in public attitudes towards LGBTI rights and some legislative progress in the post-Maidan period, these anti-LGBTI groups and the larger far-right groups are becoming increasingly brazen in their attacks on LGBTI people and on organisations working with them. Incidents have included an attack on the international human rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in a Kiev

<sup>29</sup> Open Democracy, The rise of Azov, Denys Gorbach and Oles Petik, February 2016

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach-oles-petik/rise-of-azov>

<sup>30</sup> Information about Tryzub is available on this website <http://banderivets.org.ua/>

<sup>31</sup> The Svoboda Party website is here: <http://svoboda.org.ua/>. Their facebook page has 57k likes.

<sup>32</sup> Hromadske international, What’s Behind Ukraine’s Shocking “National Druzhyna” Militia?, February 2018, <https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/whats-behind-ukraines-shocking-national-druzhyna-militia>

<sup>33</sup> Hromadske International A Fine Line: Defining Nationalism and Neo-Nazism in Ukraine, May 2018, <https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/does-neo-nazism-exist-in-ukraine>

<sup>34</sup> Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, C14 aka Sich – Ukraine, <https://www.trackinterrorism.org/group/c14-aka-sich-ukraine>

<sup>35</sup> Halya Coynash, Ukrainian neo-Nazi C14 vigilantes drive out Roma families, burn their camp, Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, April 2018, <http://khp.org/en/index.php?id=1524441220>

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Miller, Ukrainian Militia Behind Brutal Romany Attacks Getting State Funds, June 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-militia-behind-brutal-romany-attacks-getting-state-funds/29290844.html>

<sup>37</sup> Hromadske International, Russian Anti-Gay Vigilantes Find New Home in Ukraine, May 2017, <https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/russian-anti-gay-vigilanties-find-new-home-in-ukraine>

<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Marie Anderson, 6 things ‘Gaycation’ taught us about Ukrainian LGBT+ culture, SBS, <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/sexuality/fast-lane/article/2017/01/21/6-things-gaycation-taught-us-about-ukrainian-lgbt-culture>

<sup>39</sup> Mariya Shchur, Are scholars from the Institute of National Memory “whitewashing” the history of Ukraine? Volodymyr Vyatrovych responds to Josh Cohen’s article in Foreign Policy, RFE/RL via Euromaidan Press, May 2018, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/05/04/92324/>  
<http://www.memory.gov.ua/>

incident in May 2018<sup>40</sup> and the disruption in April of a Freedom House event in Poltava by the National Corps.<sup>41</sup> As Vyacheslav Likhachev puts it, while these groups are unlikely to achieve direct political power for themselves, they are, however, aggressively trying to impose their agenda on Ukrainian society, including by using force against those with opposite political and cultural views. They are a real physical threat to left-wing, feminist, liberal, and LGBT activists, human rights defenders, as well as ethnic and religious minorities.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to these violent extremists, a number of non-violent anti-LGBTI groups and movements such as the All Together-for a family! Movement led by evangelical activist Ruslan Kukharchuk are emerging.<sup>43</sup> The All Together for a Family 2017 two-day festival claimed an attendance of 30,000,<sup>44</sup> with musicians, clowns and other family-friendly entertainment to complement the religious preaching and anti-LGBTI activism. There is also the Orthodox conservative group Katehon, relatively small but heavily engaged in homophobic protests in Ukraine and with alleged ties to the much larger conservative group in Russia with the same name.<sup>45</sup>

The mainstream religious institutions in Ukraine have been somewhat more muted in their attacks on LGBTI rights than their counterparts elsewhere. However the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO), the umbrella body comprising most of the church groups in the country, does actively promote an annual All-Ukrainian March for the protection of the rights of children and families.<sup>46</sup> Of the major institutions however it is only really the Moscow Patriarchate which has institutionally spoken out actively against the Equality March and taken a more proactive position.<sup>47</sup>

Given the understandable sensitivities around anything to do with Russia, despite emulating some of the rhetoric and behaviours of the Russian-inspired 'traditional values agenda', Ukrainian conservative and religious groups are often looking towards a concept of 'traditional European values' that they seek to return to as the country reorients westwards, as opposed to the liberalising tendencies of the EU as an institution. It is worth noting of course that tensions over language rights and historic territorial sensitivities may be limiting the potential for collaboration with the emerging European illiberal forces in Hungary and Poland, a position that may evolve in a more collaborative direction over time.

As Andrew Wilson of ECFR has pointed out, at time of writing in summer 2018, the post-Maidan political environment looks pretty bleak.<sup>48</sup> Continuing political dominance by oligarchs and their supporters has provided fertile ground for anti-elite populists who may seek to fuse their anti-corruption messages to other less savoury populist causes. Such a febrile political environment can only encourage the radical groups identified here to further expand their memberships and influence.

## Moldova

Of the five countries under analysis Moldova is the country where the tensions between Russian and Western influence, liberal and illiberal social and political forces are most delicately balanced. What at first

---

<sup>40</sup> RFE/RL, Amnesty Says Attack On Gay Event In Kyiv Shows Police Inaction, May 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/attack-on-lgbti-event-in-kyiv-highlights-police-inaction-says-watchdog/29221677.html>

<sup>41</sup> Via the twitter feed of Bellingcat's Aric Toler, <https://twitter.com/AricToler/status/981572464609148928>

<sup>42</sup> Vyacheslav Likhachev, Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy, Freedom House, May 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/ukraine%20brief%20final.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> LGBT Human Rights Nash Mir Center, On the Rise: LGBT situation in Ukraine in 2017, 2018, [http://gay.org.ua/publications/lgbt\\_ukraine\\_2017-e.pdf](http://gay.org.ua/publications/lgbt_ukraine_2017-e.pdf). The organisation's website is <http://vsirazom.ua/> and Ruslan's personal site is available in English, <http://ruslanstory.com/en>.

<sup>44</sup> Ruslan Kukharchuk, United Together – For the Family! A national movement in Ukraine, July 2018,

[http://evangelicalfocus.com/yourblog/3556/United\\_Together\\_For\\_the\\_Family\\_national\\_movement\\_in\\_Ukraine](http://evangelicalfocus.com/yourblog/3556/United_Together_For_the_Family_national_movement_in_Ukraine)

<sup>45</sup> Ganna Grytsenko, What are the real barriers to freedom of assembly in Ukraine?, Open Democracy: Russia, May 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ganna-grytsenko/the-real-barriers-to-freedom-of-assembly-in-ukraine>

<sup>46</sup> Religious Information Service of Ukraine, Ukrainian Churches call to join on June 2<sup>nd</sup> the All-Ukrainian March for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Families, May 2018, [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/confessional/auccro/71031/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/confessional/auccro/71031/)

<sup>47</sup> LGBT Human Rights Nash Mir Center, On the Rise: LGBT situation in Ukraine in 2017, 2018, [http://gay.org.ua/publications/lgbt\\_ukraine\\_2017-e.pdf](http://gay.org.ua/publications/lgbt_ukraine_2017-e.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Wilson, Ukrainian elections: Poroshenko and proliferating populists, ECFR, May 2018, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_ukrainian\\_elections\\_poroshenko\\_and\\_proliferating\\_populists](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_ukrainian_elections_poroshenko_and_proliferating_populists)

glance may seem like a standoff between a pro-Russian President and a pro-European Government with their respective outriders in civil society, is in fact a good deal murkier.

The geopolitical fault lines are real and significant, although they are sometimes exaggerated and often used cynically by the ruling elites of both factions to preserve a political system that concentrates their hold on power and access to resources and in 'rents'. The ingrained anger against corruption in the ruling government, including forces close to it such as former PM Vlad Filat being involved in a \$1 billion bank fraud, has helped to undermine the credibility of pro-European forces in Moldova.

At time of writing the EU has frozen a €100m euro aid package as a result of the Moldovan Supreme Court's decision to nullify the election of a pro-European Mayor of Chisinau who narrowly beat the candidate of President Dodon's pro-Russian socialist party. The court decision is seen to have been influenced by forces close to billionaire power broker Vladimir Plahotniuc<sup>49</sup>, of whom would be Mayor-elect Andrei Nastase is a longstanding critic. While the power behind Prime Minister Pavel Filip's Democrat Party and the Deputy President of the Socialist International, many Moldovan observers argue that Plahotniuc has close ties with President Dodon, a 'binomial': Plahotniuc-Dodon has become a short hand for the oligarchic nature of the ruling elites.<sup>50</sup>

The EU's decision is part of a somewhat belated shift in taking concerns about malpractice by its notional allies in the 'pro-European' Moldovan government increasingly seriously, given that claims of corruption against the government have been used successfully to undermine support for Europeanisation by both pro-Russian political forces and illiberal civil society actors alike. However it is worth noting that the largest EU political grouping, the centre-right European People's Party (not always on the side of the angels when it comes to democratic values in the region), has taken as new observer members the two main pro-European but 'anti-system' opposition parties, 2016 Presidential Candidate Maia Sandu's Action and Solidarity Platform and Nastase's Dignity and Truth platform. Subsequently EPP President Joseph Daul has been vocal in criticism of the government and in particular the decision to overturn Nastase's Mayoral win.<sup>51</sup>

EU-required legislation and reforms have provided some of the main cultural flashpoints for the mobilisation of illiberal civil society, most notably the 2014 Anti-Discrimination Law. In their essays both Mihaela Ajder and Dumitru Sliusarenco look at the ways in which illiberal political organisations, civil society groups and the Moldovan Orthodox Church have actively challenged efforts to bring in equalities legislation and pushed back against groups pushing for LGBTI and women's rights.

## Armenia

While, as set out above, Armenian social attitudes remain deeply conservative, the debates on LGBTI issues or women's rights have been somewhat more muted than in some of their neighbouring countries, lacking the passionate intensity of the debate in Georgia or the sharp geopolitical divides of Moldova. The Armenian Apostolic church, traditionally close to past Armenian governments and its oligarchic elite, has so far not shown concerted efforts to dominate debates over social policy, pursuing a more 'quietist' approach, in part with one eye on how its actions be would be seen by US- and French-based diaspora donors.

There is a reasonably small sector of research institutes whose work is often focused directly at internally to government or to an international audience (notably the diaspora) with limited levels of public engagement in their own country.<sup>52</sup> Armenia has also an array of more nationalist organisations either focused on

---

<sup>49</sup>Eugen Tomiuc, Moldova's Andrei Nastase: The Man Who Would Be Mayor -- Or More, RFE/RL, July 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-andrei-nastase-the-man-who-would-be-mayor-or-more/29336544.html>

<sup>50</sup>Kamil Catus, Moldova's odd couple: Plahotniuc and Dodon, New Eastern Europe, June 2017, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/06/01/moldova-s-odd-couple-plahotniuc-and-dodon/>

<sup>51</sup>EPP, Plahotniuc-Dodon cartel have robbed Moldovan citizens of their last democratic right, June 2018, <http://www.epp.eu/press-releases/plahotniuc-dodon-cartel-have-robbed-moldovan-citizens-of-their-last-democratic-right-enro/>

<sup>52</sup>Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, Think Tanks in Armenia: Who Needs their Thinking?, On Think Tanks, October 2015, <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/think-tanks-in-armenia-who-needs-their-thinking/>

Nagorno-Karabakh and others, such as Aragats Akhoyan's Return Foundation looking west to Turkey, operating with support both from the state and the diaspora.

It is clear that until now the state has been the dominant institution in promoting nationalist and sometimes socially conservative positions. Anna Pambukhchyan's essay shows how the state sought to directly engineer popular mobilisation behind its 'nation army' concept, bringing together government institutions and agencies with the backing of the church to push a controversial values agenda. Perhaps the longstanding co-option of nationalist positions and rhetoric by the state has somewhat closed the political space for the emergence of street-based far-right organisations along the lines seen in Ukraine and Georgia.

Like elsewhere in the region there have been cases where internationally supported equalities legislation received a backlash from illiberal campaign groups. In autumn 2017 conservative groups targeted the Armenian government's attempt to pass legislation against domestic violence. Perhaps unsurprisingly the legislation was attached to the conditions for the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2017. These protests<sup>53</sup> were led by the For the Sake of Sovereignty Restoration organisation headed Hayk Nahapetyan and the Pan Armenian Parental Committee headed by Arman Boshyan<sup>54</sup>, a group that was active the 2013 'Anti Gender Protests'<sup>55</sup> and has a Facebook following of over 18,000 likes. Boshyan is also President of the pro-Russian Yerevan Geopolitical Club.<sup>56</sup> Arman Gukasyan, leader of a small NGO called International Humanitarian Development, also used the protests against the law as a way of getting public attention, having previously gained notoriety in 2015 claiming that Western-funded NGOs were fomenting a 'colour' revolution<sup>57</sup> and became the editor of the 'Stop-G7' website dedicated to attacking LGBTI rights and their supporters including the EU and Western donors.<sup>58</sup>

In the wake of the 2018 Velvet Revolution that brought liberal opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan from the streets to the office of Prime Minister it is clear that Russia will be reconsidering the extent of its soft-power engagement in Armenia. Given Armenia's security dependency on Russia, Russian control of leading companies and, until recently, a broadly Russia-sympathetic political elite whose governance style followed a similar model, Moscow has not engaged particularly intensively or effectively in promoting its values agenda in the country. Leading Armenian policy analyst Richard Giragosian has described Russia's soft power in Armenia as 'neither soft nor powerful' and that Moscow was taking its dominant position in Armenia for granted<sup>59</sup>, particular given the 2015 public protests against the Russian owned energy monopoly (the Electric Yerevan Movement) and over the killing of an Armenian Family by a Russian soldier.

However the sudden collapse of Serzh Sargsyan's government, in a botched attempt to replicate Putin's 2008 switch from President to the role of Prime Minister, and his government's replacement by a reformist group with cautiously pro-Western inclinations has shifted the terms of debate.

The change in Armenia has not gone unnoticed in Azerbaijan, which has been strengthening its relationship with Moscow in recent years as its engagement with the West suffered setbacks over human rights, with some Russian politicians arguing that Azerbaijan should supplant Armenia as Russia's primary partner in the South Caucasus.<sup>60</sup> While new Prime Minister Nikol Pashayan shows no sign of wanting to radically shift

---

<sup>53</sup> Joshua Kucera, Armenia: EU Officials Making Tactical Retreat in Values War, Eurasianet, October 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/s/armenia-eu-officials-making-tactical-retreat-in-values-war>

<sup>54</sup> Pan Armenian Parental Committee website (in Armenian) <http://hanun.am/>

<sup>55</sup> Anna Nikoghosyan, In Armenia, gender is geopolitical, Open Democracy: Russia, April 2016 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anna-nikoghosyan/in-armenia-gender-is-geopolitical>

<sup>56</sup> Anna Nikoghosyan, The paradox of Armenia's domestic violence law, Open Democracy: Russia, November 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anna-nikoghosyan/paradox-of-armenia-s-domestic-violence-law>

<sup>57</sup> Arman Ghukasyan, Sakunts has confirmed the findings of our survey, July 2015, <https://www.aravot-en.am/2015/07/27/171285/>

<sup>58</sup> Arthur Minasyan and Olya Azatyan, The battle against the Kremlin's online homophobic propaganda, Global Information Society Watch, <http://www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/economic-social-and-cultural-rights-escrs/armenia>

<sup>59</sup> Richard Giragosian, Soft power in Armenia: Neither soft, nor powerful, ECFR, August 2015, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_soft\\_power\\_in\\_armenia\\_neither\\_soft\\_nor\\_powerful3094](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_soft_power_in_armenia_neither_soft_nor_powerful3094) and Malgosia Krakowska, Giragosian: Russia is taking Armenia for granted, Georgia Today, November 2017 <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/8296/Giragosian:-Russia-is-taking-Armenia-for-granted>

<sup>60</sup> Joshua Kucera, Following Armenian uprising, Azerbaijan's sabre rattling grows louder, July 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/following-armenian-uprising-azerbaijans-saber-rattling-grows-louder>

Armenia's geostrategic position, going out of his way to reassure Russia about the strength of their partnership and his narrow focus on domestic reform, Yerevan-based analysts are confident that Russian interests may start to play a more active role in Armenian civil society to hedge against future overtures to the West. Particularly given that the anti-corruption crackdown on the business elite close to the formerly ruling Republican Party is likely to lead to resentment against the new government from the groups being targeted it is an open question as to how such forces might choose to retaliate by challenging the popularity of Pashayan's administration. There are already signs that nationalist activists such as Artur Danielyan, Narek Malyan, Narek Samsonyan who were involved in the 'Army Propaganda Team' to support the nation army concept and with connections to ex-defence minister Vigen Sargsyan are now mobilising to attack the new government as being too liberal (and LGBTI friendly) and not patriotic enough through a new online channel called Adekvad (Relevant).<sup>61</sup> Any snap parliamentary elections may provide an opportunity to assess how both Russia and the old elite are responding to the new political environment.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

The one Central Asian state under examination in this collection displays a number of shared characteristics. As set out in the essay contributions by Rsykeldi Satke and Eric McGlinchey, new nationalist movements have emerged in the last decade, most notably Kalys (Justice), Erkin El and Kyrk-Choro (Forty Knights). Kalys, led by Jenishbek Moldokmatov, staged protests in favour of an anti-gay propaganda law, publically challenged Western funded NGOs and burning a photo of a Ukrainian blogger who they claimed was an LGBTI activist. Erkin El, led by Mavlyan Askarbekov, protested against sex education leaflets, claiming they were 'destructive brochures that ruin the minds of youth'.<sup>62</sup> Kyrk-Choro, the most eye catching (in their traditional felt kalpak hats and often riding on horses echoing the forty knights of the Epic of Manas – the mythological tale after which they are named), has been active in attacking ethnic minority groups, such as ethnic Uzbeks, Uyghurs and Chinese migrant workers<sup>63</sup>, as well as those seen as promoting LGBTI or women's rights. 'Patriot' groups linked to Kyrk-Choro have been involved in attacking Kyrgyz women perceived to be dating foreigners – particularly when they are working in Russia as migrant workers. They also claim inspiration in their recent actions from the Ukrainian Right Sector.<sup>64</sup>

These overt nationalist groups are seen as a 'lunatic fringe'<sup>65</sup>; while we live in times when groups and personalities can move swiftly from the fringe to mainstream, at present these are not the primary non-governmental actors in reinforcing conservative attitudes. As elsewhere in the region it is religious institutions (including their popular social support networks) and clerics, particularly in South Kyrgyzstan, that are the driving force for such change. Both the Grand Mufti Maksat Hajji Toktomushev and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan have issued Fatwas against same-sex relations, with the Mufti challenging Human Rights Watch and other NGOs by calling on the authorities "to pay special attention to the activities of some public organizations that disseminate social discord while using humanistic ideas."<sup>66</sup>

With some similarities to Georgia, there is some evidence to suggest that levels of religiosity and conservative social attitudes are higher among young people than older generations who lived through Communist-era official atheism. A 2015 USAID study argued that 'older people tend to view religion, particularly Islam, with suspicion, and are concerned about the spread of more austere forms of Islam into the Kyrgyz Republic. Younger people, on the other hand, seem to be identifying more with religion. In UNDP's

---

<sup>61</sup> Their Facebook page is at <https://www.facebook.com/adekvadism/> and their Youtube at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-BYUsHHERUWbi3Lw4-2VA?sub\\_confirmation=1](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-BYUsHHERUWbi3Lw4-2VA?sub_confirmation=1)

<sup>62</sup> Eurasianet, Kyrgyzstan: Conservatives Cite 'Family Values' to Fight Sex Ed, November 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67744>

<sup>63</sup> Based on concerns about increasing Chinese economic influence.

<sup>64</sup> Gulzhigit Ermatov, Understanding Illiberal Sentiments of Kyrgyz Youth in Marlana Laruelle (ed.), Kyrgyzstan: Political Pluralism and Economic Challenges, The George Washington University Central Asia Program, 2017, <http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Kyrgyzstan.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> In the blunt assessment of a head of a leading Western organisation based in the country.

<sup>66</sup> RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, Toktomushev, Known For Antigay Fatwa, Elected Kyrgyz Grand Mufti, March 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-antigay-mufti-approved/25284924.html>



analysis of young people, 68% of respondents identified themselves first as Muslims and second as citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic'.<sup>67</sup>

As part of the drawdown from Afghanistan the US closed Manas air force base in 2014 under pressure from both former President Atambayev and the Russians. Since that period Western influence has been seen to decline in comparison to Russian and Chinese economic and political influence. There are limited political tools to change this situation, particularly as the country falls outside the range of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative.

#### **What our authors say:**

Nata Dzvelishvili discusses how a pro-Russian narrative has been renamed as 'pro-Georgian', yet its objective still implies a discrediting of the West and stimulating euroscepticism. Some pro-Russian NGOs have stopped functioning, though the number of media organizations remains unchanged. However, there is an apparent increase in the number of Facebook pages that promote anti-Western sentiments, focusing on the cultivation of nationalist ideas and using the fear of losing national values and traditions to distribute anti-Western information, which is mostly homophobic, xenophobic or misinformation. The growth of nationalist aspirations has affected public attitudes and driven legislative changes. The State Security Service has recognized the peril of Russian propaganda, but hasn't specified the exact responsibility for the distribution of anti-Western or nihilistic sentiments in the country which has dramatically increased.

Eka Chitanava and Katie Sartania examine the rise of socially conservative, illiberal groups in Georgia, who have recently become increasingly active in public spaces, media and social networks. These groups try to shape modern concept of Georgian nationalism. Chitanava and Sartania attempt to start mapping urban and digital frontiers of social hostilities and put the events in social and political contexts. Their essay briefly provides general profiles of those involved, their demands and targets of their physical and verbal violence. Extremism against liberal groups is not a new phenomenon in Georgia and there are some ideological and institutional affiliations with the Georgian Orthodox Church. The frontline of the conflict between social groups is a public space which embodies political power and cultural hegemony. The article employs the concept of a 'revanchist city', where who wins the public space, has his or her national identity reaffirmed.

Mariam Ubari argues that Georgia has witnessed a significant rise in violence and aggression towards liberal groups since 2017. The rise of Neo-Nazi groups has been consolidated as a protest in response to the government's migration policies or as need to protect national identity from the emerging threats in Georgia. Some ultra-right groups have Russian backing, whilst within others with an openly fascist ideology- no direct Russian links can be established. The Georgian Orthodox Church officially supports the Euro- Atlantic aspiration of the Georgian state, but the behaviour of its clergy and Church policies sometimes suggest otherwise.

Volodymyr Ishchenko's essay looks at the Ukrainian far right, meaning a range of Ukrainian ultranationalists including parties, organizations and informal groups committed to the ideology of radical Ukrainian nationalism, who see the nation as of absolute value and the nation-state as a tool to realize the nation's will. Contrary to the position of moderate Ukrainian national-democrats, the radical nationalists see liberal-democratic values as a danger to Ukraine rather than embracing them. Pro-Russian ultranationalists did exist in Ukraine, however, they used to be by far weaker even before Maidan uprising and has become completely irrelevant after the start of the war in Donbass in 2014, with exception of in the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Lugansk. Instead Ishchenko argues that the strength and political impact of Ukrainian radical nationalists has been systematically underestimated, even as they are significantly contributing to the fragility of the post-Maidan political settlement and have become a real threat to political freedoms and human rights in Ukraine.

---

<sup>67</sup> USAID, Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic: Values, Social Mood and Conflict Behaviour, 2014  
<https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/youth-kyrgyz-republic-values-social-moods-and-conflict-behavior-report-research>

Mihaela Ajder's contribution catalogues and analyses the range of different groups that seek to challenge liberalism in Moldova. These include far-right organisations and conservative pressure groups that have been building a following in Moldova, often through attacks on and pressure against LGBTI groups and other minorities. However the most powerful group active on conservative issues remains the very influential Moldovan Orthodox Church. Ajder places these players in the context of a Moldovan political environment lacking in trust due to years of corruption and mismanagement that breeds the societal resentment in which reactionary groups can thrive.

Dumitru Sliusarenco and Ion Foltea write that the Republic of Moldova is a former Soviet Union country facing many difficulties in its transition to democracy. One of the important causes of these is the growing influence of illiberal and conservative groups, which promote an anti-Western values agenda. They are linked in particular with two largest socially conservative forces in Moldovan society: the Socialist Party and the Moldovan Orthodox Church. The values pursued by these organisations and 'illiberal civil society groups' with ties to them can be seen as endangering human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Anna Pambukhchyan's essay provides a short introduction to the 'nation-army' concept, a nationalist education and social mobilisation project that was introduced to the Armenian public in October 2016. The concept which despite being the core of the Armenian defence agenda for one and a half years was never down written on paper. This led to misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the concept. This paper analyses the essence of the concept and argues that rather than being natural ideology it was an artificially created top-to-bottom propaganda tool that was spread through society to deflect criticism over the former Governments' failure to tackle corruption in the military.

Dr Eric McGlinchey writes that Kyrgyzstan, the only democratic-leaning post-Soviet Central Asian state, has seen periodic upticks in uncivil society. Extreme ethno-nationalism, anti-LGBT rhetoric, and militant Islam have all found voice among elements of the Kyrgyz polity. One shared driver is behind each of these forms of illiberalism: competitive politics. Illiberalism sells in Kyrgyzstan, just as illiberalism is now popular in Europe and the United States. Kyrgyzstan, along with its European and North American counterparts, demonstrates that democracy is no sure guarantee against illiberalism. Only through sustained and local advocacy for human rights and civil liberties can competitive politics offer enduring safeguards for civil society.

Ryskeldi Satke argues that in these challenging times of transition in a politically unstable region, the rights of women in Central Asia can no longer be ignored as the women's rights movement picks up speed elsewhere around the globe. He suggests that the international community and donor states that are providing crucial aid and political support to Kyrgyzstan must address the blatant disregard of the rights of women. It is important for policymakers in the West and international development organizations to implement proactive policies on gender equality and women's rights in Kyrgyz Republic and the wider region.

Kristina Stoekl examines the development of the World Congress of Families looking at the way radical US evangelicals are developing partnerships with conservatives from Russia and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space to promote illiberal values and push back against LGBTI rights and other liberalising social measures. She charts the development of the organisation and looks at the preparations for the meeting in September 2018 in Chisinau.

## From a Pro-Russian to a Pro-Georgian Narrative

Nata Dzvelishvili<sup>68</sup>

The 2018 State Security Service of Georgia report<sup>69</sup> set out for the first time, the major objectives of ‘foreign intelligence services’ in Georgia:

- to encourage anti-Western sentiments in Georgian society;
- to damage Georgia’s image as a reliable partner at an international level;
- to stimulate distrust, uncertainty, hopelessness and nihilism in society;
- to create the grounds for destabilization on ethnic and religious grounds, with the aim to cultivate disintegration processes throughout the country and to promote the polarization of Georgian society.

The State Security Service report suggested that a ‘propagandist media campaign and the disinformation components’ are some of the tools for the implementation of those goals, and added ‘foreign intelligence services attempt to establish expert scientific-research centres and agencies, to affect public opinion and disseminate disinformation’.

A comprehensive list of these centres and media organizations were revealed in a study<sup>70</sup> published in 2015. Two organizations, the Eurasian Institute and Eurasian Choice, were the main pro-Russian organizations in Georgia. The founders of these organizations are also in charge of other organizations. The aforementioned organizations pursued their activity in two directions. The Eurasian Institute is mainly engaged in analytical activity and the organization of conferences and seminars, whereas Eurasian Choice carries out more proactive activities by holding various rallies and demonstrations in support of membership of the Eurasian Union. Both of them portray Russia as a partner and friend.

But today, the pro-Russian narrative has been rebranded as ‘pro-Georgian’, yet its objective still discredits the West and stimulates euroscepticism. Some pro-Russian NGOs stopped functioning, while the number of media organizations remains unchanged. However, there is an apparent increase in Facebook pages that promote anti-Western sentiment, focusing on the cultivation of nationalist ideas and using the fear of losing national values and traditions to distribute anti-Western information, which is mostly groundless homophobic and xenophobic misinformation. However, the growth of nationalist aspirations has affected public attitudes and driven legislative changes.

### 1. NGOs

Throughout the years the Eurasian Institute has been a popular pro-Russian NGO, expressing a positive attitude towards Russia and discussing the improvement of Russian-Georgian relations. There are also many other organizations such as Global Research Center, Club of Young Political Scientists, and Center for Globalization Issues which are associated with Eurasian Institute and participated in the joint conferences and organized study tours in Russia, as well as some other activities. However, they have not succeeded in becoming stronger and gaining influence. Moreover, some of these organisations have stopped functioning, while the rest have not engaged in public activities with other civil society members for a long time.

---

<sup>68</sup> Nata Dzvelishvili is the executive director of Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. Prior to this, Nata worked on media issues for NGO Institute for Development Freedom of Information (IDFI). She also was one of the authors of media criticism portal [mediachecker.ge](http://mediachecker.ge) and the project coordinator of the Training Center for Liberalism. Both projects were implemented by the Charter. From 2010-2014 Nata worked as a journalist for [www.media.ge](http://www.media.ge) website. She is the author of several papers and studies

<sup>69</sup> The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, 01.01.2017-31.12.2017

<https://sbg.gov.ge/uploads/%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%A8%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98/SSSG%20Report%202017.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> Nata Dzvelishvili and Tazo Kupreishvili. Russian influence on Georgian NGOs, May, 2015

[https://www.academia.edu/36353738/Russian\\_Influence\\_on\\_Georgian\\_NGOs\\_and\\_Media](https://www.academia.edu/36353738/Russian_Influence_on_Georgian_NGOs_and_Media)

The information published by Eurasian Institute on its website, on December 21 2017 stated that the management of the Institute and its regional representatives decided to suspend the active work of the institution. Head of Eurasian Institute, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, expressed dissatisfaction with the inactivity on the Russian side, particularly with the functioning of the Russian World Foundation (Russky Mir), the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Foundation, Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center and Sputnik Georgia. He said that Russian World could not go beyond Russian language courses, and called the activity of the Gorchakov Fund ‘beating the air’, as the Fund had spent considerable funds sending anti-Russian Georgian-based journalists on a trip to Russia including Moscow and Grozny, but only received mocking articles and reports in return<sup>71</sup>.

Overall, Eurasian Institute has failed to raise funds, while its members have neither participated in expert debates nor invited to comment on issues by the media. That became the reason for the suspension of its activities. In 2018 there has been no public activity on the part of other pro-Russian organizations associated with Eurasian Institute, such as, the Global Research Center, the Club of Young Political Scientists, and the Center for Globalization Issues.

## **2. Russian foundations in Georgia**

As with the Eurasian Institute the pro-Russian website Saqinform.ge has also published materials criticizing Russian foundations as well, saying that ‘Russian soft power doesn’t actually exist, as the efficiency of the virtual activity of those organizations in Georgia is near zero’. Even though these Russian-funded organizations have essentially ceased functioning, the activity of Russian foundations persists in Georgia implementing various small scale projects.

Russky Mir is one of the major foundations, still active in Georgia, set up<sup>72</sup> in 2007 by order of the President of the Russian Federation to popularize the Russian language ‘as Russian national heritage and an important cultural element of the world’. Russky Mir has been financing Russian language courses for many years in Georgia, and continues to be active in the cultural field. For instance, it sponsored an essay contest for the Russia-Georgia Youth Organization, founded by Irakli (Merab) Kipiani in 2017. Kipiani is a former member of Eurasian Institute known for his pro-Russian statements. The winner of the essay contest could win a visit to Moscow. This organization was going to import chocolate with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s image. According to Irakli Kipiani, he supported Vladimir Putin in the March 18<sup>th</sup> 2018 elections, and the chocolate portraying the Russian leader symbolized that support<sup>73</sup>. However, the chocolates didn’t make it to the Georgian market. The other activity of the organization remains unknown to the public, except for commemorating the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with flowers. Their social network page has 600 likes and shows little activity.

Another organizations supported by Russky Mir is the Cultural and Educational Union called the Russian Club. Founded in 2003, it has been organizing cultural evenings over the years in an effort to establish friendly relations between Russia and Georgia<sup>74</sup>. The Russian Club is headed by Nikoloz Sventitsky, who is also the director of the Griboedov Theatre in Tbilisi and chairman of the Coordination Council of the Russian Compatriots’ Organization. During his press conference Sventitsky told the audience about possibilities for Georgian applicants to get free education at Russian universities<sup>75</sup> and other opportunities. Russky Mir conducts Dictation contest in partnership with this organization. The event is aimed at enhancing the

---

<sup>71</sup> Eurasian Institute statement, December 2017 <http://politforumi.com/geo/1677/evraziis-institutis-gamgeobis-shemajamebeli-kreba.html>

<sup>72</sup> Information about the Russky Mir Foundation <https://www.russkiymir.ru/en/fund/index.php>

<sup>73</sup> Dmitry Alexandrov, Candy with the image of Putin on the label is planned to be sold in Georgia, January 2018 <https://vz.ru/news/2018/1/20/904401.html>

<sup>74</sup> Information about The Cultural and Educational Union Russian Club <http://russianclub.ge/content/view/13/38/>

<sup>75</sup> Free learning for Georgian Students – Chances and Advices, Sputnik Georgia, February, 2018 <https://sputnik-georgia.com/reviews/20180206/239202953/ufaso-swavla-ruseTSi-qarTveli-abiturientebisaTvis-Sansebi-da-rCevebi.html>

knowledge of Russian language. In 2018, only 50 applicants participated in the contest, which is significantly smaller compared to over 100 participants in 2017<sup>76</sup>.

Lika (Anzhelika) Zakharova who represents various organizations also collaborates with Russky Mir. The most active of these organizations is the National Congress of Slavic People, which holds discussions about the Russian language. This organization arranged on May 9<sup>th</sup> 2018 the march of the Immortal Regiment in honor of the victory in the so-called Great Patriotic War (World War II) in various cities of Georgia, using the officially banned Soviet symbols during the rally, which resulted in conflict with the locals. It was Lika Zakharova whom the editor of pro-Russian Saqinform, Arno Khidirbegishvili, accused of hampering ‘the spread of propaganda’, and called ‘Muscovites and their Georgian partners corrupted thieves that steal funds destined for Russian propaganda’<sup>77</sup>.

Another Russian foundation which works in Georgia is The Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund. It was founded in 2010 by decree of the former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The fund’s board of trustees embraces Russian politicians and businessmen. Similar to other foundations, the Gorchakov Fund has not stepped up the scale of its activity. Its main partner in Georgia is the Yevgeny Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center which was founded in 2013, initially called the Russian-Georgian Public Center. In November 2017 Dimitri Lortkipanidze became the new head of the organization. Lortkipanidze a politician from the Democratic Movement<sup>78</sup> known for his anti-Western narrative, and is associated with Georgian March-an organization expressing fascist and nationalistic rhetoric. The Russian-Georgian Public Center is basically engaged in a limited number of activities. For instance, it offered free Russian language courses to young people, hosted war veterans on May 9, delivered a series of lectures on ‘Russian-Georgian relations in the context of the US and Europe’, the Karabakh conflict, tourism, investment policy, etc. These lectures have not reached any significant scale.

### 3. Media

Studies shows that Georgian-language media is a main distributor of anti-Western narratives in the country<sup>79</sup>, as Russian-language media lacks popularity in Georgia, parallel to the declining demand for foreign language media in general<sup>80</sup>. As in the case of NGOs, recent years have not seen the appearance of new media outlets linked to Russian foundations on expressing Russian narrative. Russian propaganda in Georgia is mainly associated with boosting anti-Western sentiments. This is the reason why media outlets that essentially use hate speech against the Western world and foreigners concur with the Russian narrative. Such media outlets inherently try to spread hate speech, misinformation and manipulative materials.

The websites that are seen to use profuse euroscepticism and hate speech (geworld.ge, saqinform.ge SAQINFORM.GE, RU.SAQINFORM.GE, GRUZINFORM.GE, RU.GRUZINFORM.GE) have not made progress in terms of popularity<sup>81</sup>. Judging by the absence of ad banners, they generate no income from advertisement. All domains, including geworld.ge are registered to head of the Historical Heritage NGO Taras Gagnidze. Also, political scientist Alexander Chachia has been a member of the Public Council of the National Heritage since the day of its foundation. In 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev awarded Chachia with an order for “his great contribution to strengthening friendship and cooperation with the Russian Federation”.

---

<sup>76</sup> Total Dictation 2017 – Participants and winners were awarded in Tbilisi, Sputnik Georgia, May 2017 <https://sputnik-georgia.com/society/20170501/235818422/totaluri-karnaxis-shedegebi.html>

<sup>77</sup> Arno Khidirbegishvili: Moscow pests (in Georgian), 2018, <http://saqinform.ge/news/36195/arno-xidirbegishvili%3A+moskoveli+mavneblebi.html>

<sup>78</sup> The centre-right opposition party headed by Nino Burjanadze with a notably pro-Russian orientation

<sup>79</sup> Anti-Western propaganda, Media Development Fund, 2017 [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/anti\\_dasavluri\\_propaganda\\_2017\\_-\\_GEO.pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/anti_dasavluri_propaganda_2017_-_GEO.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> Gela Bochikashvili, trust and source of information – tendencies based on NDI polls, mediachecker.ge, May, 2018

<https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/mimokhilva/article/52005-informaciis-mighebis-gzebi-da-gavlana-tendenciebi-ndi-s-mikhedvith>

<sup>81</sup> Geworld.ge rates 1076 among Georgian websites, saqinform.ge -2650.



The size of Russian news agency Sputnik's audience has not grown significantly in recent years. It only functions as an online media platform spreading Russian propaganda. The Georgian version (sputnik-georgia.com) ranks 160<sup>th</sup> among the websites in Georgia, with its Russian language version (sputnik-georgia.ru) in 109<sup>th</sup> place<sup>82</sup>.

Since 2015, a few other homophobic and xenophobic websites have been established. For instance, TB24.ge and marshalpress.ge, whose founders were journalists that had worked for news portal Info9.ge that belonged to Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream. The founder of marshalpress.ge, Oto Stephanishvili, was also a campaigner for Georgian Dream. The founder of TB24, Gocha Nachkebia, is a member of the board of Public Monitoring Center along with Vladimir Bedukadze that took the spotlight after disclosing footage of inmate tortures in prison<sup>83</sup>. TB24 got an authorization for broadcasting, but failed to start broadcasting. According to the data of the regulatory commission, the company did not have any income. As for broadcasters, Obiektivi TV which is founded by members of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia party remains as a homophobic and xenophobic media outlet with pro-Russian narrative<sup>84</sup>.

#### **4. Facebook pages of neo-Nazi and fascist forces**

The failure of NGOs and media outlets to make progress, has led to those promoting illiberal values increasingly using Facebook to get their message across with their Facebook pages seeing a rapidly growing number of likes. And even though the content distributed by those pages do not portray Russia as a positive power, describing it as an enemy (a sensible tactic given the lingering resentment following the 2008 war), their basic narrative nonetheless complies with the primary messages of Russian propaganda- that the West tries to destroy national identity. Consequently recent cases witness the transformation of anti-Western sentiments into a nationalist narrative, with the appearance of groups generally organized through social networks and trying to discredit the West with their content, accusing it of assaulting national values, traditions and identity, and striving to impose homosexuality. This is why they promote racist, xenophobic and homophobic sentiments.

The protest rallies following the police crackdown on nightclubs on May 12<sup>th</sup> 2018 and May 17<sup>th</sup> International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia have consolidated the country's neo-Nazi and fascist forces. They have joined forces and organized a counter-rally to stave off so called 'LGBT propaganda' and protect 'nationality', fear of which was given by police as the reason for preventing a subsequent rally by liberal opponents of the police's behaviour and supporters of drug liberalisation. The Interior Minister informed the organizers of this rally of the government's inability to stop the counter-effort of fascist and neo-Nazi forces, and asked them to cancel the rally in order to prevent further clashes. They were then taken away by police escorted buses from the location, which was later taken over by the neo-Nazi and fascist forces.

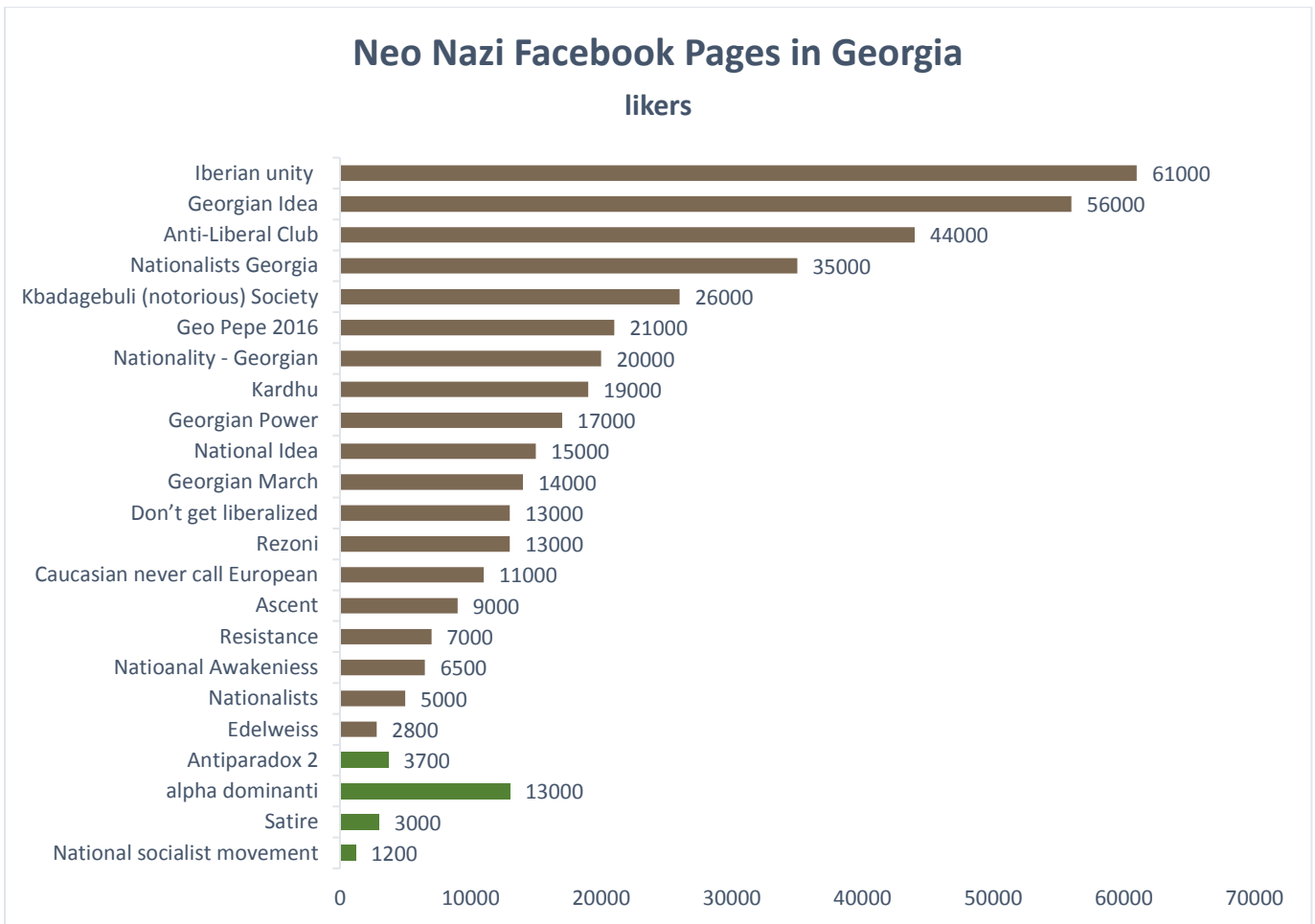
A few days later the activists were unable to celebrate International Day against Homophobia on May 17, as they had no security guarantees from the authorities. As a result, neo-Nazi and fascist forces once again managed to occupy Rustaveli Avenue. The groups actively employ dozens of pages on social networks mostly created after 2017. These pages are used for spreading their particular narrative and for organizing rallies, as well as for sharing videos and arrangement of events. Currently their content has thousands of views. The pages often stress their goal to win the information war for against, the liberally thinking society. Some pages manage to increase the number of likes by 2-3 thousand a month.

---

<sup>82</sup> Source: [www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com)

<sup>83</sup> Bedukadze served at No.8 establishment of the penitentiary department and recorded inmate tortures, and was also accused of participating in the violence. He was later released on plea bargain, as he noticeably contributed to the victory of Georgian Dream by releasing the so-called prison footage in the pre-election period.

<sup>84</sup> The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, Results of Media Monitoring for the 2017 Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia, December 2017 [http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads\\_script/accounts/MM\\_FINAL\\_REPORT\\_2017\\_ENG.pdf](http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads_script/accounts/MM_FINAL_REPORT_2017_ENG.pdf)



■ These pages were banned by Facebook administrators in May 2018. Soon they re-opened

Neo-Nazi forces start to show up in Georgia since 2015 with the appearance of Georgian Power, followed by the creation of Georgian March, which has been an active organization since 2017. Both staged protests with xenophobic appeals. Georgian Power is a more ideology-oriented entity backed up by the youth, while Georgian March is ruled by former politicians and individuals expressing pro-Russian views (Dimitri Lortkipanidze, Sandro Bregadze, Guram Palavandishvili). They have good relations with Levan Vasadze, a businessman with a Russian background who is also lashing out at the so-called LGBT propaganda.

Though the narrative of the nationalist powers comply with Russian propoganda, it's difficult to prove that they are funded by the Kremlin. However, it's evident that Georgian March is similar to the xenophobic marches in Ukraine, Russian and Moldova, therefore it is obvious that they have similar agendas. And the fact of its leadership being comprised of former politicians with obvious pro-Russian views confirms these doubts.

As for Georgian Power, its leader is Nikoloz Burnadze, a US citizen living in the USA, which criticizes Georgian March, saying that pro-Russian people manage this organization, which is unacceptable to him.

A fascist organization Georgian National Unity popped up in 2016, and has already managed to conduct a number of demonstrations with xenophobic messages. Regardless of the differences, all three groups (Georgian March, Georgian Power and Georgian National Unity have consolidated under a national idea of 'fighting against LGBT propaganda'. They engaged dozens of their Facebook pages to organize their protests.

The page Iberian Unity was created in 2017 and became proactive in 2018. It promotes neo Nazi ideas and claims that users with pro-Russian or pro-Turkey ideas will be blocked. The page shares posts of other anti-liberal pages, supports demonstrations against LGBT people.

Another Facebook large page, the Anti-Liberal Club, appeared in 2015 and has approximately 44K followers posting homophobic and xenophobic statuses using disinformation and manipulation. The administrator of the page is Shota Martinenko, who also owns web site altinfo.com, which is used for distributing anti-liberal opinions. Its articles are shared by above-mentioned pages.

Georgian Idea is the Facebook page of a political party with the same title founded in 2014 and participated in 2016 parliamentary elections. The leader is Levan Chachua, who was arrested after a fight at TV Kavkasia in 2010. 3 years later he was released as a political prisoner. Georgian Idea cooperates with Georgian March and other neo Nazi groups, participating in homophobic and xenophobic demonstrations.

## 5. Change of popular sentiments and legislative regulations

The new 'pro-Georgian' narrative basically relies on the fear of losing traditions and national identity, and has manifested itself in two directions- an increasingly negative attitude for foreigners and the 'protection of families' from LGBT propaganda. Both issues have translated into particular activities and have also affected the policies of decision makers. Moreover, an entry appeared in the constitution in 2017 defining agricultural land as a resource of special importance that can only be owned by a Georgian citizen, thus precluding foreigners from the acquisition of land in the country. Another entry defined the marriage as a union between man and woman, and being the only kind of union that entitles to marriage-related civil rights. These restrictions did not exist in the Georgian constitution until 2017.<sup>85</sup>

NGOs, media outlets and neo Nazi forces discussed support both, for the protection of Georgian land and the consolidation of heterosexual families. The sharp increase in negative popular attitude for foreigners can be clearly seen in corresponding studies. Period between 2015 and 2017 saw the increase of people dissatisfied with foreigners staying in Georgia over three months from 5 to 16 percent<sup>86</sup>, and the number considering Georgian land exclusive property of Georgian citizens, regardless of the type of use, increased from 41 to 64 percent<sup>87</sup>.

The Orthodox Church of Georgia has also contributed to the protection of Georgian national values in the fight against LGBT propaganda by declaring May 17, commonly associated with International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, as the International Family Sanctity Day. The decision was preceded by violent actions by Orthodox believers and clergy against LGBT rights defenders. May 17 has never been celebrated without incidents in Georgia. The already high number (71 percent) of people believing that the proper citizen must protect traditions has increased by 5 percent<sup>88</sup>.

The overall increase of negative attitude against foreign citizens and the growing fear of losing traditions, which in turn boosts reluctance towards the Western world, also revealed itself in 2017 data suggesting an increase in the number of people opposing Georgia's accession to the EU. The number dropped in 2018 and stopped at 15 percent and one of the main reason for 14% is the fear of losing national identity.

Unlike in other post-Soviet countries, it's very difficult to create an image of 'saviour' from Russia, as it had occupied 20 percent of Georgian territory. This is why explicitly pro-Russian organizations and media outlets have failed as 'shapers' of popular opinion, having instead turned into marginal groups. The main objective –

---

<sup>85</sup> Constitution of Georgia, article 31, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346>

<sup>86</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, *Caucasus Barometer* 2015/2017 <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015ge/IMMIGATT/>

<sup>87</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2015/2017 <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu2017ge/LANDOWN/>

<sup>88</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, *Caucasus Barometer* 2017 <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu2017ge/ICITTRAD/>

slurring the West and boosting Euroscepticism- now implements a new strategy, emphasizing the negativity of Europe and America, rather than Russia's positivity.

This particular narrative is a conveyor of xenophobic and anti-liberal content that seemingly protects national identity, while in fact promoting anti-Western sentiments, which naturally implies resistance to European membership, claiming the West to be the main power that wants to strip national values and traditions. The State Security Service has recognized the peril of Russian propaganda, but has not specified the exact responsibility for the distribution of anti-Western or nihilistic sentiments in the country which has dramatically increased<sup>89</sup>. These organizations have clearly made certain progress in their mission. In these conditions the government's action plan to respond the looming threats of Russian propaganda becomes ever more important.

The government and donor organizations should have common strategic view for countering propaganda and anti-western narratives. Georgian high quality media needs support, increasing their accessibility especially in the regions near the border and the occupied territories is crucial. The government should create relevant legislation to bolster media pluralism. As the main source of funding for independent high quality media is donor organizations their strategy should be renewed support and engagement. There remains a need for investment in the institutional development and sustainability of media companies and also in promoting media literacy amongst society to reduce vulnerability to media manipulation and disinformation.

---

<sup>89</sup> International Republic Institute, Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia, April, 2018 [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29\\_georgia\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf)

## Public Space: The battleground in the Revanchist City

Eka Chitanava and Katie Sartania<sup>90</sup>

On May 13<sup>th</sup> 2018, the space encompassing the Parliament building, Kashueti church and Freedom Square, Las Lieux de Mémoire<sup>91</sup> in Tbilisi for the most of Georgians, was physically and symbolically divided between at first glance two social groups: citizens standing for freedom of expression and self-declared fascist<sup>92</sup> organization members and their supporters. The latter, led by the group Nationalist-Socialist Movement and Georgian National Unity, gave Nazi salutes and chanted “glory to the nation – death to the enemies”. Space was split up by the lines of police barricades and yellow buses. It was a peculiar event for many reasons. Far-right groups had thronged Tbilisi’s streets showcasing Nazi symbols before, however their protests were more spontaneous and physically isolated from their ideological adversaries. This time, two separate wide-scale demonstrations were taking place within the same spatial and temporal boundaries<sup>93</sup>. This experience echoed recent traumatic events of May 17<sup>th</sup> 2013, when peaceful pro-LGBTQI demonstrators were violently dispersed by the Orthodox clergy and lay citizens, reportedly around 20,000 people<sup>94</sup>.

*Georgian National Unity* was founded in 2016, as a non-governmental organization. According to its founding statutes, the organization’s aim is to prioritise a ‘Georgian mentality and worldview.’ Among its goals are listed the: ‘Annulment of the President’s Institute; reforming the education system according to national traditional values; abrogating the anti-discrimination laws; banning the sale of lands to foreigners’ etc. According to internal rules of the organization, ‘racial mingling’, same-sex marriages, converting to certain religions are strictly prohibited<sup>95</sup>. Organization’s symbol is black, while the Nazi swastika is replaced by the Borjgali (sun symbol)<sup>96</sup> and a cross.

“We will get involved in the battle. We will use irons, forks and everything at our disposal.” - said the head of Georgian National Unity, Giorgi Chelidze<sup>97</sup> on May 13 2018 promising to be “brutal” against his opponents.

Later this quote gave an inspiration to netizens create memes<sup>98</sup>, ridiculing Chelidze and his supporters. Irony might be a smart way to confront, however, recent years have shown that extremist groups have become quite active and visible in public spaces, media and social networks.

---

<sup>90</sup>Ekatrine Chitanava is a human rights activist and the director of a non-governmental organization, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), based in Tbilisi, Georgia. Her work is focused on freedom of religion and belief as well as minority rights. The organization is providing free legal aid to people experiencing discrimination on religious, ethnic and/or racial grounds in Georgia, as well as conducting various educational activities, state policy research, legal analysis and sociological studies. From 2009 to 2011 Ms. Chitanava, as a journalist was regularly writing for Georgian analytical magazines and international outlets. She was also producing short documentaries about religious and ethnic minorities in Georgia for the Tolerance Centre under the auspices of Public Defender. Currently she is contributing to Forum 18, different international media outlets and academic journals.

Katie Sartania graduated from the faculty of social and political sciences of Tbilisi State University, she holds a BA degree in sociology. Her research interest includes the minority groups, post-soviet space and social media. Since 2014 she has been involved in research of different social groups, concentrated on minorities (religious; ethnic; IDP groups) in Georgia. She has authored a number of articles on social issues. Currently she is an independent researcher based in Tbilisi.

<sup>91</sup>Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7-24. doi: 10.2307/2928520. A 'lieu de mémoire' is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community. It may refer to any place, object or concept vested with historical significance in the popular collective memory, such as a monument, a museum, an event, a symbol like a flag or even a colour vested with historical memory.

<sup>92</sup>The video featuring counter-demonstrator far-right group members, Kviris Palitra, May 2018, <https://palitraneews.ge/video/chven-vart-kartveli-fashistebi-danarchenze-pasukhi-metaurma-gatsa-sakartvelos-erovnuli-ertobis-tsevrebi-kashvetis-tadzarshi-mividnen>

<sup>93</sup> Drug raids in two leading clubs in Tbilisi in the early hours of 12 May, 2018 and the police’s heavy-handed tactics, caused an outcry among the youth and drug policy activists, prompting calls for the resignation of the Prime Minister and Interior Minister. In response to the large-scale rally in front of the Parliament building, self-declared fascist, Nationalist-Socialist organization members and Georgian March organized counter-demonstrations. The endeavor to win the public space by human rights activists and the youth protesting the takeover of freedom of expression was finally unsuccessful. With the argument that they were unable to protect the demonstrators from aggressors, State officials asked the organizers to stop the rally and promised them to revise the punitive policies on drug use.

<sup>94</sup> Conservatives attack gay activists at rally in Tbilisi, BBC news, May 2013, <https://bbc.in/2kXB3WP>

<sup>95</sup> Facebook page of the organization, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/GeoNSM/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/GeoNSM/about/?ref=page_internal)

<sup>96</sup> Georgian symbol of the sun, It consists of an ancient, seven-winged solar wheel, often shown rising from a symbolic tree of life. <http://symbolictionary.net/?p=984>

<sup>97</sup> We will use irons, forks and everything that will be in our hands to protect our homeland and the nation" - Giorgi Chelidze "Free space" (in Georgian language), Iberia TV, May 2018, <https://goo.gl/RaSQDf>

<sup>98</sup> Facebook page, Only Fascist Child, <https://www.facebook.com/Jarshiverwaval/>



### Who are the actors and what do they want?

They are organized groups and individuals, leaders and followers. The group of actors at first glance is homogeneous, but if we examine more closely, it is quite diverse. While zooming out, they still gather around the same values and the ways of articulation of their protest are similar - verbal and physical violence.

Transparency International Georgia's report lists some of the organizations (*Georgian March, the Agreement of National Powers, the 'Nationals' movement, Georgia's National Unity, Civil Solidarity Movement, Social-Political Movement, Georgian Mission and a number of other individuals*) that are interconnected as well as financially and politically linked to Russia<sup>99</sup>. For instance, one of the leaders of the *Agreement of National Powers*, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, was appointed director of the *Y.M. Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre*. The Centre was founded in 2013 by the *International Relations Institute and Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund* established by Russia's former President, Dmitry Medvedev.

One of the prominent groups is *Georgian March*, the union of illiberal, neo-Nazi organizations, led by a former deputy minister under the current government, Sandro Bregadze. *Georgian March* held their first big demonstration of around 2000 people in 2017, in one of Tbilisi's main avenues in the Middle Eastern retail district, an area largely built by German settlers and architects. They called for an end to Muslim immigration, changing state policy regarding foreigners and banning overseas funding to civil society organizations<sup>100</sup>. In 2018, Bregadze announced his plans to run in the presidential elections and, in his own words, on a "Marine Le Pen"-style platform.

Some individuals and organizations are also associated with Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC)<sup>101</sup> or splinter civil groups of the church who were rarely, if ever, publicly condemned for intolerance by the Patriarchate. Empirical evidence in Georgia suggests that far-right, fascist, pro-Russian civil and political groups, active Orthodox clergy, the ones formally and/or informally affiliated with the GOC, allegedly acted in concert. At the same time, these ideas often accord with the policies of the Russian government, creating strongholds of soft power<sup>102</sup>.

Comparatively, Giorgi Gabedava, a leading member of the *Nationals Movement* was one of the active organizers of violent dispersal of anti-homophobia rally in Tbilisi on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2013. Gabedava and several other extremists were released as political prisoners in 2012, under the current government. They had previously been jailed for storming TV Kavkasia in 2010 when the attackers had physically abused a number of employees, guests, as well as the head of the TV company during live broadcasting of a program, dedicated to the book *Saidumlo Siroba (Holy Crap)* by young Georgian writer, Erekle Deisadze.<sup>103</sup> These individuals are also associated with religious extremist organizations, the Orthodox Parents' Union and the People's Orthodox Union. Notably, two days after the incident at TV Kavkasia, the Patriarch Ilia II awarded Archpriest David Isakadze, the spiritual leader of these religious extremist organizations, with an embellished cross and the right to wear a mitre<sup>104</sup>. Isakadze and his supporters are notorious for their intolerant and xenophobic sentiments. For instance, they protested the arrival of the Pope Francis in Georgia in 2016. They met the Pope in Tbilisi airport with banners declaring, 'The Pope is a heretic' or 'Antichrist!'<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism, Transparency International Georgia, May 2018

<http://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>

<sup>100</sup> Civil.ge, Ultrationalists March Against Immigration, Counter-Protesters Rally Against Occupation, July 2017,

<https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30272>

<sup>101</sup> Civil.ge, 'Family Day', Rally Against Gay 'Propaganda' Planned for May 17, May 2014, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27237>

<sup>102</sup> Dmitri Trenin, Demands on Russian Foreign Policy and Its Drivers: Looking out Five Years, Carnegie Moscow Center, August 2017,

<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/72799>

<sup>103</sup> Radical Orthodox Christian Group Stirs Fistfight in TV Station, Civil.ge, May 2010 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22278>

<sup>104</sup> Kekelia, Tatia. 2012. Modernization and Secularization - Georgian Case Study. Identity Studies, Vol. 4, p. 97.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Higgins and Jim Yardley, Pope Francis Navigates Orthodox Georgia's Rocky Terrain, The New York Times, October 2016,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/pope-francis-georgia.html>

The Union of Orthodox Flock (commonly known as the People's Orthodox Union) named after St. King David the Builder is an unregistered organization, 'based on volunteerism'. "One of the key goals of the Union is to defend Orthodox Church from dissidence, to fight against the introducers or instigators of the split."<sup>106</sup> The organization is known for its conservative views and physical attacks on citizens of different values and positions. Members of the Union of Orthodox Flock, together with another organization with a similar name, the Orthodox Parents' Union were involved in demonstrations against JK Rowling's Harry Potter books in 2002<sup>107</sup> and the film the Da Vinci Code in 2010<sup>108</sup>, an attack on a Halloween party in 2008, demonstrations against the book Saidumlo Siroba (Holy Crap) in 2009 in front of Ilia State University<sup>109</sup> and the Kavkasia TV incident<sup>110</sup> in 2010 mentioned above, an attack on citizens marking anti-homophobia day (second IDAHOTB) on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2012<sup>111</sup> and so on.

Illiberal political and civil groups use the GOC for their political legitimacy, as well as GOC's requests are articulated by the same groups. For instance, the Orthodox clergy from time to time directly or covertly request administrative/criminal charges<sup>112</sup> for 'insulting religious feelings.' In 2013, GOC openly backed the law put forward by then-Deputy Interior Minister Levan Izoria; In 2016, Zviad Tomaradze, the head of Demographic Society XXI was the author of the bill, proposed by a Georgian MP from the ruling Georgian Dream coalition,<sup>113</sup> In 2018, Emzar Kvitsiani, a member of Parliamentary party, Alliance of Patriots put forward the bill. To be noted, in 2018 Kvitsiani publicly admitted that in 2006-2012 he had been collaborating with the Russian security services<sup>114</sup>, spreading Russian propaganda. The bill's author again was Zviad Tomaradze. Furthermore, along with Sandro Bregadze, the former minister under the current government and currently the most prominent face of Georgian March, Tomaradze was a member of the initiative group that in 2016 requested holding a referendum on defining marriage as union of a man and a woman. The same idea had been put forward by some Orthodox clergy, including David Isakadze<sup>115</sup>.

Tomaradze works for another influential actor, Levan Vasadze, founder of the Georgian Demographic Society XXI, a Georgian businessman who accrued his wealth in Russia (1998-2006)<sup>116</sup>. Vasadze is widely known for his homophobic rhetoric and allegiance to the GOC. On May 15-17<sup>th</sup> 2016 he hosted the World Congress of Families' event in Tbilisi<sup>117</sup>, dedicated to Family Purity Day, pronounced by the GOC to counter the symbolism of the May 17 anniversary of the mob attack on LGBTQI supporters<sup>118</sup>.

The World Congress of Families is a U.S.-based organization founded in the mid-1990s as an international umbrella organization for groups supporting conservative social values. The WCF also has close links to Konstantin Malofeyev and Vladimir Yakunin, oligarchs with close ties to the Russia's government. Another person affiliated with the WCF is Alexander Dugin, the founder of the Eurasianist movement and ultranationalist philosopher, who promotes Russian territorial and ideological expansion. "Together with our Russian friends, we got rid of and defeated first fascism and then communism, both of which came from the West," Vasadze said at an event in Tbilisi<sup>119</sup>.

---

<sup>106</sup> Webpage of St. King David the Builder's Union of Orthodox Flock, <http://www.religia.ge/about.html>

<sup>107</sup> Beka Mindiashvili, A Formula For Victory, Tabula, May 2010, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/69931-a-formula-for-victory>

<sup>108</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church Joins 'The Da Vinci Code' Protests, Civil.ge, May 2006 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12591>

<sup>109</sup> Video of the rally in front of Ilia State University, Netgazeti, May 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHj9h6hclU8>

<sup>110</sup> Radical Orthodox Christian Group Stirs Fistfight in TV Station, Civil.ge, May 2010 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22278>

<sup>111</sup> March of Gay Activists Ends in Scuffle in Downtown Tbilisi, Civil.ge, May 2012 <https://civil.ge/archives/121936>

<sup>112</sup> Statement of the No to Phobia! civil platform regarding the initiative on punishability of insults to 'religious feelings', Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), May 2018, <http://tdi.ge/en/statement/statement-no-phobia-civil-platform-regarding-initiative-punishability-insults-religious>

<sup>113</sup> Mariam Gvartadze, Eka Chitanava, GEORGIA: Proposed insulting religious feelings law withdrawn – for now, Forum 18, February 2016, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2152](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2152)

<sup>114</sup> Emzar Kvitsiani about his collaboration with Russian special forces, Rustavi 2, April 2018 <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/102416>

<sup>115</sup> Eka Chitanava, Georgia's Politics of Piety, Open Democracy, September, 2016 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/eka-chitanava/georgia-s-politics-of-piety>

<sup>116</sup> Davit Batashvili, Levan Vasadze - A Political Project, Tabula, December 2013 <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/78568-a-political-project>

<sup>117</sup> Tbilisi, Georgia: Site of World Congress of Families X, November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQzftojCzm0&t=33s>

<sup>118</sup> Giorgi Lomsadze, Georgia: A "Family" Gathering Commemorates an Anti-Gay Riot, Eurasianet, May 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/s/georgia-a-family-gathering-commemorates-an-anti-gay-riot>

<sup>119</sup> Russian Links of World Congress of Families, Myth Detector by Media Development Foundation (MDF), May 2018, <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/russian-links-world-congress-families>

There are other examples of collaboration between the Orthodox clergy and self-declared pro-Russian organizations, such as the Alliance of Eurasia, the Institute of Eurasia, Eurasian Choice, the Erekle II Society, etc. According to the Georgian Institute of Politics<sup>120</sup>, the leaders of these respective organizations admit cooperating with Orthodox priests and some representatives of the GOC are actively involved in their activities.

### **Who and what do they target?**

Mainly in the fight against liberal values, modernism, democracy and the concept of human rights these groups use distorted narratives of Georgian traditions and symbols to prove the West is undermining the authentic Georgian identity. They also use the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) for legitimacy in their fight against different minority social groups, non-Orthodox religious entities and LGBTQI; crackdown on so called 'illegal migrants' (foreigners of Asian and African descent); request that the State ban the sale of land to non-Georgians; prohibit foreigners settling in Georgia; they request the government to outlaw NGOs<sup>121</sup> and international organizations, especially the Open Society Foundation, as traitors of the nation; they fight against freedom of expression<sup>122</sup>, nightclubs, art, literature and films. The targets change according to the current political, social and cultural context. Usually, the aggression is directed towards those who manifest their existence and the rights in a public space. Offenders often say, "They can do whatever they want in their bedrooms, as long as they do not take it outside"<sup>123</sup>This formulation demonstrates that non-dominant group have to respect specific boundaries set for them in order to be tolerated and remain subordinated to the majority. The frontline of this conflict is a public space which embodies political power and cultural hegemony. Imagining society as a homogeneous social group, excludes the concepts of individual rights and liberties.

### **The political and religious context of social hostilities**

83.4 percent<sup>124</sup> of Georgian citizens identify as Orthodox Christians. While their trust in state institutions remains low, dominant religious organization, like the Georgian Orthodox Church (GoC), preserves its clout<sup>125</sup>. Understanding the role and the influence of the church is essential to deconstruct how illiberal groups operate.

The post-Soviet history of Georgia can be construed according to the forms of nationalism and political transitions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tenure of Georgia's first President Zviad Gamsakhurdia's (1991) was characterised by ethnic<sup>126</sup> or ecstatic nationalism<sup>127</sup>. Whilst the second President and former Soviet high-ranking official Eduard Shevardnadze (1992-2003) shifted politics to a system of elite-mediated liberalism. During Shevardnadze's tenure, 'nationalism turned into an 'institute', which he used as a framework to talk about conciliation and the importance of an alliance with Europe"<sup>128</sup>. President Mikheil Saakashvili's tenure (2003-2013) is defined by some scholars as a period of civic or 'revolutionary nationalism'. The State, on the levels of both policy and official discourse, stopped differentiating between its citizens according to their ethnic backgrounds and defined citizenship as a main

---

<sup>120</sup> Policy brief, Georgian Orthodox Church as a Civil Actor: Challenges and Capabilities, Georgian Institute of Politics, May 2017, <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Policy-brief-8-Salome-Minesashvili.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> Ultrationalists Rally Against Soros Foundation, Land Ownership Changes, Civil.ge, September 2017 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30436>

<sup>122</sup> Public TV Show in Limbo after Church Meddling, Civil.ge, January 2009 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20281>

<sup>123</sup> Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI). Student Attitudes Towards Minorities and the Role of Media. Tbilisi, 2017. <http://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi-research-cover-eng-web.pdf>

<sup>124</sup> 2014 General Population Census, [http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site\\_images/files/english/population/Census\\_release\\_ENG\\_2016.pdf](http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf)

<sup>125</sup> Although According to the polls of National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2018, the church's favorability has significantly dropped to 56 percent from almost 80 percent in 2015. The reason for this decline could be an active media coverage of the corruption inside the GOC and the scandal around the alleged poisoning of Patriarch Ilia II.

<sup>126</sup> Vachridze, Zaza. 2012. Two Faces of Nationalism and Efforts to Establish Georgian Identity. Identity Studies in the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region, Ilia State University, p 82-87. <http://ojs.iliauni.edu.ge/index.php/identitystudies/article/viewFile/47/35>

<sup>127</sup> Jones, Stephen F. 2013. Georgia: A Political History Since Independence. London: I.B Tauris.

<sup>128</sup> Revaz Koiava, Georgian National Narratives of Conflicts: 1991-2012, Regional Dialogue, March 2016, <http://regional-dialogue.com/en/georgian-national-narratives-on-conflicts-1991-2012/>

marker of Georgian identity<sup>129</sup>. According to Georgian philosopher and sociologist Giga Zedania, the new narrative was inclusive, not exclusive. 'But this trait could not—and did not—take away its revolutionary character.'

The government started protecting the rights of minorities and punishing extremists for hate crimes, however, they did not stop using the church for political legitimacy. Consequently, it was not difficult to observe the rise of religious nationalism, the ideology which makes religious affiliation to Orthodoxy an essential factor in determining national identity. In this case, any challenge to church dominance is seen as a challenge to Georgian nationhood.<sup>130</sup> Living under this paradigm, non-Orthodox, especially, Georgian Muslims are being constantly reproached for their religious identities and their 'Georgianness' is often questioned. Eventually, the GOC constructed 'political Orthodoxy', 'through which Georgians would satisfy their patriotic passion by condemning the West'.<sup>131</sup>

As for the current ruling political party, Georgian Dream, there is enough empirical evidence to conclude that the government is particularly loyal to the GOC and neglectful of the offenses committed on the grounds of intolerance against religious minorities and LGBTQI (Assaults on Muslims in Tsintsikaro (2012), Nigvziani (2012)<sup>132</sup> and Samtatskaro villages (2013)<sup>133</sup>; forceful removal of the minaret in Chela village (2013)<sup>134</sup>; nailing a pig's head to the Muslim boarding school in Kobuleti (2014)<sup>135</sup>; physical abuse of Muslims in Mokhe village (2014)<sup>136</sup>, and IDAHOTB on May 17, 2013). None of these cases have been fully investigated and alleged perpetrators have not been punished, and some representatives of law enforcement bodies has supposedly verbally and physically abused Muslims<sup>137</sup>. These events, clustered in the first 18 months of the initial Georgian Dream government look symptomatic, rather than coincidental. The high-ranking politicians and MPs regularly demonstrate their discriminatory and biased approaches. Taken into consideration, the GOC's open support of Georgian Dream in the 2012 Parliamentary elections, the new government knew whom to thank, which later revealed in impunity of the Orthodox clergy, legislative initiatives examined below, and generally, in church-government ideological convergence. Public defence of the GOC became an imperative for many politicians, just as loyalty to the communist faith was decades ago<sup>138</sup>.

In Georgia, members of the GOC regularly fight against fundamental human rights, pluralism and cultural diversity. For instance, the majority of Orthodox clergy were against adopting the law on the elimination of all forms of discrimination in 2014. This was also a result of an EU-Georgia visa liberalization agreement, in which Georgia agreed to increase its efforts to eliminate various forms of discrimination. Anti-discrimination bill was considered by some clergy as "propaganda and legalisation" of a "deadly sin", because it included "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" in the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination<sup>139</sup>.

These groups periodically request that the State limit freedom of expression in traditional media, social networks and art. Some Orthodox priests allegedly physically abuse civil rights activists<sup>140</sup>. Other priests

---

<sup>129</sup> Zedania, Giga. 2011. The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia. Identity Studies, Ilia State University, Vol. 3, p. 121.

<sup>130</sup> Jones, Stephen F. 2013. Georgia: A Political History Since Independence. London: I.B Tauris.

<sup>131</sup> Beka Mindaashvili, The Law of Georgian-Russian Eternity, Tabula, February 2013, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/70787-the-law-of-russian-georgian-eternity>

<sup>132</sup> Londa Beria, Group criticizes Georgia for handling of religious conflicts, Democracy and Freedom Watch, December 2013 <http://dfwatch.net/group-criticizes-georgia-for-handling-of-religious-conflicts-57907-25192>

<sup>133</sup> Felix Corley, GEORGIA: Will police protect Muslim prayers from mobs?, Forum 18, July 2013 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1854](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1854)

<sup>134</sup> Minaret back up in Georgian village Chela, Democracy and Freedom Watch, November 2013 <http://dfwatch.net/minaret-back-up-in-georgian-village-chela-79904-24443>

<sup>135</sup> Pig's Head Nailed to Planned Muslim School in Kobuleti, Civil.ge, September 2014 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27654>

<sup>136</sup> Analysis of Occurrences in Mokhe Village, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), October 2014 <http://www.tdi.ge/en/news/164-analysis-occurrences-mokhe-village>

<sup>137</sup> Annual report of the Public defender of Georgia, the Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia 2015 <http://www.ombudsman.ge/uploads/other/3/3892.pdf>

<sup>138</sup> Jones, Stephen F. 2013. Georgia: A Political History Since Independence. London: I.B Tauris.

<sup>139</sup> Georgian Church Speaks Out Against Anti-Discrimination Bill, Civil.ge, April 2014 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27175&search=>

<sup>140</sup> Violence Against Anti-Homophobia Rally, Civil.ge, May 2013 <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26073>

condemn writers, journalists and human rights organizations from the pulpits. Official press of the GOC is saturated with homophobic, intolerant and insulting statements against people of different religious identities.

Taking into consideration rapidly accumulated wealth and documented corruption within the church, some scholars argue, that real motivation of the Orthodox clergy is far from fundamentalist doctrine and there is predominantly an economic interest behind their religious requests to the Georgian government. In other words, the church is bargaining with the State.

Religious extremism and attacks on minority members is not a new phenomenon in Georgia. In the beginning of the 1990's, radical groups within Orthodox Church started continuous persecution of non-Orthodox<sup>141</sup>. Despite hundreds of documented physical attacks on members of religious minorities, predominantly Jehovah's Witnesses, including people being hospitalised, and places of worship and religious literature being destroyed, the alleged attackers were not punished<sup>142</sup>. The State not only neglected hate crimes but also acted in collusion with offenders. At this time serving clergy of the Patriarchate and affiliated groups personally organized and participated in violent physical attacks on the non-Orthodox and human rights activists<sup>143</sup>. The impunity with which such actions were treated encouraged further social hostilities. Later the protests swirled up against books, paintings, theatre plays, films, universities, and media, everything that questioned dominant narratives and established frameworks of thinking. Illiberal sentiments were fostered by the most respected religious authority, the Patriarch Ilia II himself. In his sermons, he condemned what he called 'extreme liberalism'<sup>144</sup>.

### Modern-day digital actors

Initially illiberal, socially conservative groups were represented in physical public spaces and later various groups with different digital profiles emerged. This is related to the increasing popularity of the internet and social networks. In a country with a population of 3,907,131, there are 2,100,000 Facebook subscribers<sup>145</sup>.

Illiberal digital groups shape the modern Georgian discourse of nationalism. Central topics are religion and history, namely, the authority of religious and historical persons used for social mobilisation - pictures of saints, kings and writers, quotations or videos are the main tools used to keep users involved and active<sup>146</sup>.

The flow of information from these Facebook pages is well targeted, fills up the ideological vacuum and strikes a chord with ultra-nationalist sentiments, which makes it easier to maintain and even increase the audience. Information is spread by public Facebook pages, as well as semi-closed Facebook groups (e.g. Georgian National Awakening, Nationalists, Georgians, National self-consciousness, Nationalistic Legion). They are divided into thematic categories such as nationalists, Georgia and/or Georgians, News, World and others. For instance, the group of *Emigrant's* personal page with 18 000 members, is a very active group. Accounts with individual names or news web-pages spread information, share links of their own or other agencies on topics, such as gender, political parties, poems, advertisements, religious news or current issues. Besides their online activity, they often go to streets, hold public demonstrations or small gatherings around the city centre to mark some historic dates or protest new legislative initiatives.

---

<sup>141</sup> Felix Corley, GEORGIA: Georgian Orthodox priests incite mobs against religious minorities, Forum 18, May 2005 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=569](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=569)

<sup>142</sup> Felix Corley GEORGIA: Attacks on religious minorities unpunished, Forum 18, January 2005 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=492](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=492)

<sup>143</sup> Felix Corley, Georgia: How should religious violence legacy be overcome? Forum 18, January 2005 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=499](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=499)

<sup>144</sup> Jones, Stephen F. 2013. Georgia: A Political History Since Independence. London: I.B Tauris.

<sup>145</sup> Internet World Stats, Asia Marketing Research, Internet Usage, Population Statistics and Facebook Subscribers, 2,100,000 Facebook subscribers in Dec 2017, 53.7% penetration, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#ge>

<sup>146</sup> To be noted, national narratives are often distorted, the attitudes of Georgian historical figures, including the Orthodox clergy, regarding the West and tolerance towards cultural minorities are misconstrued.



## Summary

Observation of the emergent violent groups suggests, that they construct their identities in opposition to imagined enemies. The difference is a sign of threat - cultural 'others', religious minorities, immigrants, LGBTQI and organizations that 'plant' liberal values. Religious extremists, socially conservative populists and neo-fascist groups and individuals endeavour to acquire dominance on urban public spaces. Who wins the space, his/her 'Georgianness' is reaffirmed. *Revanchist City*, the concept of Neil Smith<sup>147</sup> might be applicable in Georgian case. He suggests, that revanchist anti-urbanism represents a reaction against the supposed *"theft of the city, desperate defense of a challenged phalanx of privileges, cloaked in the populist language of civic morality, family values and neighborhood security. [...] it portends a vicious reaction against minorities, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants"*. The whole process is about rediscovery of the enemy within, rather than fathoming real external threats.

Counter-demonstrations, producing Facebook pages and other digital content, shows that they fight for physical and digital public spaces but only when these spaces are busy /occupied by so-called liberal groups. From a very short observation it can be assumed that these groups need demonstrations against homophobia, 'clubbers' gathering against police raids, public events of religious minorities, or Halloween party to reassert their existence. These groups also have political aspirations. The leader of Georgian March, Sandro Bregadze, named as the Presidential candidate for October 2018 elections, recently stated: *"I will not be the candidate of the Americans or Russians. I will be the presidential candidate of the Georgians"*.<sup>148</sup> Based on the increased activities in public, as well as in online spaces, it can be assumed that these groups have become more proactive, instrumentalizing twisted notions of Georgian nationalism. As for motivating factors of the followers/supporters, they might be various - pragmatic, as well as a continuum of ideological, social and psychological factors, identification of which, requires a particular examination.

Taking into consideration the rise of the far-right in European states, the image of Europe and the West is seen through different lenses: Europe N1 is a place of LGBTQI, infidels, people against family and 'traditional values' and the Europe N2 with far-right, ultranationalist, patriot groups who defend 'traditional values' (Hungary, Poland, Germany, etc.). Basically, this paradigm is seen in the light of the contradiction of tradition and modernity, the old and the new, conservative and liberal. This binary is beneficial for those groups who are in search of enemies to maintain their own image and justify their existence

Moreover, these groups capitalise on the growing discontent and concerns of Georgian citizens due to economic problems, unemployment, growing inequality and the unresolved issue of territorial integrity to buttress their xenophobic agendas and scepticism towards the EU-integration process and democratic institutions in general.

---

<sup>147</sup> Smith, Neil. 2005. *The New Urban Frontier*. London: Routledge.

<sup>148</sup> Georgia Today, Ultra-Nationalist Group Georgian March Names Their Presidential Candidate, April 2018, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/9925/Ultra-Nationalist-Group-Georgian-March-Names-Their-Presidential-Candidate>

## Rise of the illiberal civil society in Georgia and its organisation

Mariam Ubari<sup>149</sup>

Aggression and violence towards liberal groups have risen significantly in Georgia since 2017. The rise of Neo-Nazi groups has been partly consolidated as a protest in response to the government's migration policies and as a need to protect national identity from emerging 'threats'. Noting the emergence of some of these groups and their likely backing from the Russian Federation, local politicians and business people are possible in some instances. However the identification of many of these group is not easy as they often belong to informal entities, which makes it equally difficult to trace their source of funding.

The Georgian authorities have officially identified Russian propaganda as a threat and committed to tackle it through number of ways. The Orthodox church has officially asserted their support to Georgia's aspiration to join the EU-Atlantic family, however, there are number of cases, when preaching of some radical clergymen support the aggressive narrative against 'foreign settlers'<sup>150</sup> or seek to justify Russian aggression.<sup>151</sup> Research lists a number of the most prominent ultra-right groups, their objectives, whether they have tacit backing from the Church, or whether state authorities are effective in counteracting Russian soft power, threats and identify possible ways out.

### Georgian March

Georgian March is an informal union that comprises several ultra- right groups. The organisation came into public view in 2017 under the name of Georgian March as they galvanised a protest against the incident related to an Iranian national. Whilst a foreign national faced criminal charges, their demands were grossly political, demanding to curb immigration, expel illegal immigrants and implement a more restrictive immigration law, as well as introducing a ban on foreign funding of civil society organisations.<sup>152</sup> Under the aegis of Georgian March, its members launched number of offensive rallies and protests, ranging from burning down the LGBTI flag, ambushing a TV journalist for insulting religious sentiments to making rape comments and organising rallies in front of the offices of the Open Society Foundation Georgia.<sup>153</sup>

In their bid to identify unlawful activity by foreigners, Georgian March announced completion of citizen patrols alongside with the units of the Ministry of Interior. The purpose of the patrol was to create an alternative citizen unit, an idea that did not come to fruition as it was ignored by the authorities.<sup>154</sup> After the incident with the TV journalist for insulting religious feelings of followers of the Orthodox Church and refusing to apologize, some members of the Georgian March ambushed his car but were later arrested. However, the current members of the Georgian Parliament, from the pro- Russian Party Alliance of Patriots acted as bail guarantors. Prominent members of the Georgian March include members of the government office and the parliament, with the most recognisable members being Sandro Bregadze, a former Deputy Minister of Diaspora Affairs known for his homophobic statements and Dimitri Lortkipanidze, a former MP and former Head of the Human Rights Committee at the Georgian Parliament. It also includes members of another pro- Russian political party,

---

<sup>149</sup> Mariam has worked as a researcher with Democracy Reporting International on polarization and populism in Georgia. Prior to this she researched issues related to ill treatment and discrimination in prisons and health care settings taking cases before regional human rights courts. During her work as a strategic litigation lawyer in Georgia, she reviewed cases related to violations occurring during and after the Georgian-Russian armed conflict. Mariam holds an LLM in international Human Rights Law from University of Essex and an MA in Political Science from Central European University. She was greatly assisted by Mamuka Andguladze from Transparency International Georgia.

<sup>150</sup> Father Theodore explaining why it is not 'good' to have foreign settlers in Georgia. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4ZZYd7xYVM>.

<sup>151</sup> As an example, The Kremlin influence index 2017 cited a newspaper article in one of church editions in which Ruis Urbnisi metropolitan, episcopo Iobi assessed Russian bombs during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war as punishment sent from heaven. Experts noted that "separate religious servant are distinguished for their aggressive obedience to narratives of the Russian Orthodox Church."

<sup>152</sup> Imedi News, Who are members of the protest and what are their demands?. <https://imedinews.ge/ge/theme/12/marshi-vin-arian-da-ra-undat-aqtsiis-organizatorebs>. July 2017. See also, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. International Religious Freedom Report for 2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/k/./religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=|2017&dlid=280908#wrapper>

<sup>153</sup> Transparency International, Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism, May 2018. <http://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>, May 2018.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

Nino Burjanaze's Democratic Movement,<sup>155</sup> Guram Palavandishvili<sup>156</sup> a host of the 'With Palavandishvili' show on Palitra TV News and Zviad Tomaradze an author of controversial draft laws proposing punishment for insulting religious feelings, the prohibition of activities of civil society organisations and banning abortion.<sup>157</sup> A number of NGOs launched a complaint against this particular host with a demand to investigate the violation of the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters on hate speech and discrimination.<sup>158</sup> Some members of ultra-right groups are also heads of other NGOs, created with the purpose of safeguarding national religious institutes, demographic society, national values and other related issues. These organisations that are chaired by Z. Tomaradze include the National Religious Institute, Georgia's Demographic Society 21 and Nation and State. The chairperson of the board is Tamar Chiburadnize-Lomtadze, who at the same time is the chairperson of the board of 'Georgian Demographic Revival Fund'. This fund, in turn, is under the patronage of businessman Levan Vasadze, a close associate of the Patriarch and critic of liberal European values.

According to the report by Transparency International supporters of the Georgian Demographic State are Shio Mujiri (Patriarch's co-regent), businessmen Lasha Papashvili, Mamuka Khazaradze, Badri Japaridze, Zaza Nishniadze, a member of the ruling Georgian Dream party Dimitri Khundadze, alongside former chairman of the Parliament's Healthcare and Social Issues Committee and one of the founders of Palitra Media Goga Tevdorashvili. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the former Prime-Minister, is believed to have provided support to the Fund.<sup>159</sup>

### **Other movements linked to the Georgian March**

There are other movements that are either founded by the leaders of the Georgian March or are united under more or less similar values of protecting Georgian traditions, nationalism and religion. A 'Civil Solidarity Movement' is registered at the home address of one of the leaders of the Georgian March. Its board members include a businessman and a former prosecutor, freed from prison as a political prisoner. The purpose of the movement is to restore 'justice' and monitor whether promises made by Bidzina Ivanishvili's team had been met. Its members are largely businessmen and political prisoners who suffered damages during the United National Movement rule. Another socio-political movement known as Georgian Mission called for the respect to citizens of all ethnic backgrounds and called upon everyone to work together towards united and strong state. One of the individuals who showed up and gave speech at a Georgian Mission rally in 2016 is a current member of the board of the Public Broadcaster.<sup>160</sup> The "Georgian Idea" is another unit, who actively participated in promoting a protest of organised by Georgian March in July 2017. In 2015 it was registered as a political party that organised a press conference in international press centre of Russian news agency RIA Novosti in Tbilisi. The political party ran for the 2016 Parliamentary elections. The party list submitted to the Central Electoral Committee listed Sandro (Aleksandre) Bregadze as a candidate for the majoritarian election.

### **The Georgian National Unity**

Georgian National Unity was established in 2016 with a view to carry out 'peaceful and united policy, and protect Georgian mentality and its values'.<sup>161</sup> According to the Public Registry, they have a Chairman and a Royal Chancellor. Georgian National Unity vowed to protect Georgian traditions and respect foreign nationals, as long as, they do not insult the Georgian worldview. He does not explain what the Georgian worldview means but it is mainly related to Georgian traditional values and conservatism. It also falls short of the European liberal views. The leader of National Unity in an interview with the press spoke with pride about being called a 'Nazi', organisation members wear arm bands similar to the Nazi swastika, and they greet each other with

---

<sup>155</sup> A former member of the Party: Burjanadze-Democrats.

<sup>156</sup> His narratives contained included homophobic and xenophobic expressions. Non-governmental organizations addressed self-regulation body of the Palitra News with a complaint. The Georgian National Communications Commission ruled that there was a violation of the independence principle, use of hate speech and discrimination.

<sup>157</sup> Transparency International (2018)

<sup>158</sup> No to Phobia. <http://notophobia.ge/eng/view-resources/self-regulation-practice/14>

<sup>159</sup> Transparency International (2018)

<sup>160</sup> Transparency International (2018)

<sup>161</sup> Tbiliselebi. How females are accepted as members in the fascist organizations and who they are allowed to fall in love with, June 2018, <http://tbiliselebi.ge/index.php?newsid=268453070>

Nazi salutes. The organisation rules its members have to adhere to, including tough physical test and a ban on marrying anyone non-white. The leader also claimed that its members have a license to carry weapons. He admitted that during protests, they rely on the help of their 'striker squads' to ensure order during protests.<sup>162</sup>The leader of the party studied towards his master degree in International relations in Belarus and was later refused an internship at the Ministry of Foreign affairs.<sup>163</sup> It has to be noted that a similar Russia-based organisation called the Russian National Unity had been an active supporter of the Russian government and took part in armed conflict in Chechnya in 1994 and then in Donetsk in the Ukraine.<sup>164</sup>

## May 2018

On 11-13 May of 2018 Georgian special forces and law enforcement agents raided Tbilisi night clubs on the stated grounds of tackling drug dealing, resorting to excessive use of force. This sparked protests of clubbers and other young people, adding a demand for a more humane drug policy in Georgia. At least two ultra-right groups, Georgian National Unity and Georgian Idea, staged a counter demonstration with a demand to stop 'LGBTI propaganda' and a protest against 'drug dealers'.<sup>165</sup>The Georgian National Unity members marched towards the protesters some wearing masks and arm bands in burgundy similar to the Nazi swastika. Its leader also threatened that they will be very "brutal" against any mistakes protestors can make-as they held church candles and announced the creation of a "national guard army to protect [the] motherland."<sup>166</sup>In another bid to avoid confrontation between the protesters, the police prevented these groups from approaching the Parliament building and arrested another leader who threatened the demonstrators and attempted to breach the cordon. Some cases of violence and assault have been reported as members of the groups called for breaking up the rally, whilst some managed to break through and physically assault the pro-night club protesters. According to the Public Defender's' office the police cordon between the protesters and the neo-Nazi groups had significantly decreased the risk of escalation. Nevertheless the Minister of Interior told the peaceful protesters to disperse, since they could not guarantee their safety. In another attempt to gear up against LGBT propaganda and a so-called 'drug dealers', Georgian March created the 'Agreement of National Powers' that called for the protest rallies on 14 and 17 May. These rallies were later postponed.<sup>167</sup>

## Funding

The existence of links between Russia and the funding of ultra-right groups are highly possible. One of the leaders of Georgian March, Dimitri Lortkipanidze had left the party, only to be appointed as the head of the Y.M.Primakov Georgian Russian Public Center two months later. The Center was founded in 2013 by the International Relations Institute and Gorchakov Diplomacy Support Fund in Russia. The Fund, which was established in 2012 by the order of the then President of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev is believed to be one of the ways Russia is able to channel its soft power.<sup>168</sup>The Primakov Centre finances-free Russian language courses in Georgia and supports the development of economic, charitable, social and cultural ties. Under the aegis of Gorchakov Fund, Russian business people and journalists met with Georgian wine makers,<sup>169</sup>organised sports tournaments with the participation of Russian and Georgian tennis players and hosted Russian art academy students in Georgia. It also aims to create a favourable public opinion on Russia abroad. In its recent statements, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned that the Georgian-Russian relationship has increased significantly, air-plane flights have been resumed and restrictions on visas had been removed. The spokesperson also mentioned improved contact in the sphere of public, cultural and scientific ties. Moreover the appointment of one of the leaders of the Georgian March as

---

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup>Studio 'Obiseqtivi'. Announcement of the leader of the Georgian National Unity, Zaza Chelidze, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2NXIbnl>

<sup>164</sup>Antikor„Священной войны за Новороссию (Holy war for New Russia), August 2017, <https://antikor.com.ua/articles/12173-natsisty-iz-russkogo-natsionaljnogo-edinstva-vojujut-za-dnr>

<sup>165</sup>Radio Free Liberty, Tbilisi rally continues after protestors dismantle camps, May 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-tbilisi-rally-after-police-dismantle-protest-camp/29224058.html>

<sup>166</sup>Ibid.

<sup>167</sup>Transparency International (2018)

<sup>168</sup>Transparency International (2018).

<sup>169</sup>Russian Journalists and Businessmen are meeting Georgian Wine Makers.<https://sputnik-georgia.com/economy/20170427/235770365/rusi-biznesmenebi-da-jurnalistebi-megvineebshexvdebian.html>.

a head of the Primakov Fund suggested that the increase of Neo-Nazi activities may fall within the interests of Russia.<sup>170</sup>

### **Role of the Orthodox Church**

Georgian Orthodox church enjoyed great trust from public and has unequivocal support from the Georgian state authorities too. It has a constitutional recognition of the “Special role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia”<sup>171</sup> and its relationship with the state is governed by the 2002 Concordat marking a separation between the Church and the State. According to the 2017 survey of the Public Opinion, the church enjoys 84% of approval from the population.<sup>172</sup> However, as suggested by the Kremlin Influence index 2017<sup>173</sup> that measures Russia’s influence of the information on the state, propaganda is often channelled through Georgian Orthodox Church and is evident in cases of anti-western propaganda.<sup>174</sup> The Patriarch of Orthodox Church Ilia II repeatedly confirmed its support for Georgia’s integration into the European Union and NATO. The Church however, leads isolationist policies towards the Western Christian organisations where in separate cases, its anti-Western statements of its clergy suggested indirect influence of the Russian Church.<sup>175</sup> In addition, the ‘traditionalism, conservatism, national values and the idea of unity’ greatly valued by the ultra-right groups are largely propagated by the Church.<sup>176</sup> In the most recent move, the Georgian Orthodox Church decided to dispatch a priest from the Russian church with a view to serve the Russian parish in Georgia. This information had been agreed by the Russian synod with the Georgian Church.

In an apparent bid to step up the response against anti-western propaganda, the EU and NATO information centre organised a high level meeting of the Orthodox Church representatives in Brussels in 2017.<sup>177</sup> The Global European Meeting marked the event to be successful and thought it to be a good example that helped a shift towards more positive public attitudes about the EU and its values.<sup>178</sup> On the ground, however, it did not necessarily stop other clergymen from delivering messages in support of the aggressive Russian narratives. On 13 May 2018, in an ill formed attempt to de-escalate tense confrontation between two groups of protesters, the Patriarchate claimed that youth protesters had brought a “negative vibe” which had in turn provided the grounds for the counter-protest.<sup>179</sup> Through this statement, the Patriarchate had chosen to take sides and justify the violence perpetrated by right wing groups.

### **Recognition of Russian soft power and its responses.**

In 2016 Georgia had reaffirmed its aspiration towards joining the Euro-Atlantic family through a unanimously adopted resolution by the Georgian Parliament. It further stated that it will continue a rational and principled policy towards Russia, to mitigate the foreign policy threat with a view to maintain ‘stability in the region’.<sup>180</sup> The Georgian authorities first mentioned Russian propaganda in political documents in the beginning of 2017. As a result of long lobbying on the part of civil society, the Georgian government approved a document naming the propaganda as a threat to Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration and the strengthening

---

<sup>170</sup>Transparency International (2018)

<sup>171</sup>Article 9. Constitution of Georgia.

<sup>172</sup>Georgia Today: IRI Survey: Dissatisfaction with National Institutions Increases in Georgia, May 2018, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/10551/IRI-Survey%3A-Dissatisfaction-with-National-Institutions-Increases-in-Georgia>

<sup>173</sup>Via Tabula, Kremlin Influence index-measures the ability of the Russian government to influence the information of other countries, 2017, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/121067-mdf-publishes-new-report-kremlin-influence-index-2017.p.20>

<sup>174</sup>Ibid.

<sup>175</sup>Ibid

<sup>176</sup>Ibid.

<sup>177</sup>The visit of the representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Brussels. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btES1DiotG8&feature=youtu.be>. 2017.

<sup>178</sup> EU Global strategy Report: A year of action to address ‘predictable unpredictability’, (p.16) [https://www.google.com/url?hl=en&q=https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/47277/eu-global-strategy-report-year-action-address-predictable-unpredictability\\_en&source=gmail&ust=1530890020217000&usg=AFQjCNGu3zggALbSeO9Eu0jgH-otBuTqcv](https://www.google.com/url?hl=en&q=https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/47277/eu-global-strategy-report-year-action-address-predictable-unpredictability_en&source=gmail&ust=1530890020217000&usg=AFQjCNGu3zggALbSeO9Eu0jgH-otBuTqcv)

<sup>179</sup>The Statement of the Patriarchate of Georgia, May 2018, <http://patriarchate.ge/geo/saqartvelos-sapatriarqos-gancxadeba-13-05/>

<sup>180</sup>Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Foreign Policy of Georgia Georgian Parliament. Para 7. , 2016, <http://www.parliament.ge/en/ajax/downloadFile/53452/Resolution>.



pro-Russian and anti-Western forces.<sup>181</sup>It also mentioned that ‘soft power’ aimed at weakening state institutions including the Ministry of Defence. In relation to EU and NATO integration policy, the document aimed to adopt messages after a detailed review of opinion polls analysis of target groups, principle misperceptions and information gaps in society. Its annual report on activities produced to address these objectives. However, it was criticised by the coalition for Euro- Atlantic Partnership on issues of strategic communication around Georgia’s aspirations for membership of the EU and NATO. The coalition found the action plan failed to respond to ‘hybrid challenges, including the information warfare’ and found it be incoherent. It also dubbed the activities conducted ranging from ‘waste management training’ to ‘tree planting events’ and ‘hour of garden birds’ to be missing the main target. It then offered its readiness to cooperate with the authorities and highlighted the need to establish mechanisms for strategic communication and enhancing the political will to make it work.<sup>182</sup>

The National Cyber Security Strategy of Georgia for 2017-2018 named cyberattacks and cyber-crimes organised by the Russian Federation as a major threat. The documents also stated that Russia’s actions aimed to hinder Georgia’s integration into Euro-Atlantic structure and identified a need for further legislative changes and enhanced international cooperation to tackle Russian cyber-attacks.<sup>183</sup> Yet, another report from the State Security services, for the first time, cited threats stemming from the foreign intelligence services-as they attempted to stir up anti-Western sentiment in the Georgian society and damaging Georgia’s image as a reliable partner.<sup>184</sup>Alongside this document, in 2014 Georgia supported the Council of Europe Resolution on counteracting neo-Nazism and right wing extremism. It recognised a sophisticated nature of the past symbols and structures ‘including party logos reminiscent of swastika’ and highlighted a need of an early intervention including manifestation of neo- Nazism, disrespectful of their violent or nonviolent nature.<sup>185</sup> Prior to this Georgia adopted a Freedom Charter law banning totalitarian and Nazi symbols and propaganda. The law, however, does not specifically define these symbols, lacked an effective enforcement mechanism, and has an inefficient commission responsible for identifying these symbols, making it cumbersome. Nevertheless, the authorities have not been prompt in mitigating threats by the Neo-Nazi march using hate speech in central Tbilisi. The Prime Minister later mentioned that the law is not effective in fighting against neo-Nazi groups but according to the Minister of Interior, it did not hinder authorities to react on the breaches perpetrated by the members of the counter rally.<sup>186</sup>The National Ombudsman identified number of alleged criminal law violations committed by the counter protestors and urged the authorities to conduct an effective investigation into these violations.

The members of the counter-protest were charged under the Code of Administrative Offences on hooliganism and disobedience to the police and were subsequently fined.<sup>187</sup>There has been no information on criminal charges, except for one charge officially stated on the site of the Ministry of Interior.<sup>188</sup> The Ministry of Interior stated that that there were criminal investigations underway on members of the counter-rally. Finally, the removal by bus of peaceful protesters to protect them from the counter rally by the Georgian authorities was

---

<sup>181</sup>Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. Communication Strategy on Georgia’s Membership to the EU and NATO for 2017-2020, April 2017, <http://bit.ly/2o8R4t6>

<sup>182</sup>Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia offers partnership to government on issues of strategic communication about Georgia’s membership to the EU and NATO, 2018, <https://gyla.ge/en/post/koalicia-evro-atlantikuri-saqartvelostvis-natosa-da-evrokavshirshi-saqartvelos-gatsevrianebis-shesakheb-strategiuli-komunikaciis-sakitkhebe-khelisuflebas-tanamshromlobas-stavazobs#sthash.izQbeeHY.dpbs>

<sup>183</sup> Government of Georgia, National Cyber Security Strategy of Georgia for 2017-2018, January 2017, <https://bit.ly/2LnZyly>

<sup>184</sup>The Security Service of Georgia. 2018. The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia., 2017, <https://ssg.gov.ge/uploads/%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%A8%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98/SSSG%20Report%202017.pdf>

<sup>185</sup> Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly: Counteraction to manifestations of neo-Nazism and right-wing extremism. <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=21219&lang=en>. 2014. The European Convention on Human Rights in Vrona versus Hungary, it stated that participants of the political party that worn armbands quite similar to those of offers of the Arrow cross (responsible for the reign of terror in Hungary in 1944/45). It took the view that marches with participants that were dressed in this way were objectively capable of wounding “historical sensitivities” and also the according to the court, the verbal and visual demonstration of power alone amounted to an infringement of then Hungarian law, in the light of historical experience.

<sup>186</sup>Netgazeti: Gakhali The law to fight against neo-Nazi groups are not at all effective, May 2018, <http://netgazeti.gnews/278310/>

<sup>187</sup>Netgazeti: Members of the counter rally were fined by 400 to 500 lari, May 2018, <http://netgazeti.ge/news/277013/>

<sup>188</sup>The Ministry of Interior started an investigation into the alleged threat charges made by a member of the Georgian National Unity, May 2018, <http://police.ge/ge/shinagan-saqmeta-saministrom-/11661>



met with some discontent. A leader of the civil society organisation<sup>189</sup> and a political party-agreed on the opinion that the authorities gave similar responses to both groups. This was previously echoed by the European Court of Human Rights in its 2015 decision against Georgia, where it stated that the right to counter-demonstrate cannot “extend to inhibiting the exercise of the right to demonstrate.” The whole situation has echoes of a similar incident of 2012, where Georgian authorities removed the members of the flash mob on the International Day against Homophobia to protect them against the threats from the counter rally. On this occasion, the ECtHR held that members had a right to hold a demonstration without having to “fear that they will be subjected to physical violence by their opponents” or facing repercussions for holding opinions on ‘highly controversial issues affecting the community’.<sup>190</sup>

Finally, Georgia in 2014 signed a European Association Agreement with the European Union and took a commitment to enhance rule of law and good governance. In its 2017 joint communique initiated by Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova on rethinking Eastern Partnership. It highlighted a need to increase efforts for stronger resilience towards Russian hybrid challenges and threats. The joint Communique then thought to hold special hearing in EU Parliament on hybrid challenges and acts of aggression by Russia and increase individual resilience through more robust democratic reforms and vibrant societies and credible state institutions.<sup>191</sup>

### **Ways forward**

This essay shows that Georgia has been effective in identifying threats posed by the Russian propaganda. Its responses, however, have not been effective or proficient. Georgia needs to make the communication strategy and its activities under its action plan more consistent and well-coordinated between cross sectoral agencies. It also showed that some strategies contained a more detailed vision on how to address these challenges including improved legislative framework and a better international co-operation. Further analysis showed that Russian meddling can be seen within some ultra-right groups, whilst there is no direct link with others. To this end, it is important for the State to identify these organisations, inform the general public about its threats and tackle the myths on ‘threats to identity and a statehood’ through clearly communicated counter narratives.

As shown, civil society in Georgia has been active in advising a government on strategic communication. Establishment of a Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia by leading NGOs is thought to be a good example. The Georgian authorities, however, need to show more openness towards cooperation and making its interaction more substantial and consistent. This essay further identified a need to amend the law for it to tackle the challenges of neo Nazi groups.

On a more general level, Georgia needs to follow its obligations under the PACE resolution on raising awareness through education at an early age. It needs to provide cross- sectoral strategies to prevent and combat neo-Nazi ideology with a view to reduce breeding grounds for its ideology.

---

<sup>189</sup> Interview with Giorgi Mshvenieradze, Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI) and Tamar Kordzaia, former MP and a Political Secretary of the Republican Party July 2018.

<sup>190</sup> Identoba and Others v. Georgia (application no. 73235/12), <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-154400 paras>

<sup>191</sup> Joint Communiqué Strategic Rethinking of the Eastern Partnership, 2017, <http://parliament.ge/uploads/other/73/73963.pdf>

## The unique extra-parliamentary power of Ukrainian radical nationalists is a threat to the political regime and minorities

Volodymyr Ishchenko<sup>192</sup>

### The Ukrainian far right and Euromaidan

Electorally Ukrainian far-right parties have not been successful in comparison with their Western European counterparts. Before 2012 only a few MPs from any Ukrainian radical nationalist parties succeeded in entering the Parliament.<sup>193</sup> A major reason for this was the split Ukrainian national identity leading to polarized political attitudes on history, language, geopolitical issues in western-central and south-eastern regions.<sup>194</sup> Support for Ukrainian radical nationalists was the strongest in three Galician (Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil) regions and used to be negligible outside of western Ukraine. Nevertheless, the *Svoboda* ('Freedom') party was gradually increasing its support after successfully 'moderating' and re-branding itself from the Social-National Party of Ukraine in 2004. In the 2009-10 local elections the party made a breakthrough winning majorities in three Galician regions and the mayor's office in Ternopil. In 2012 *Svoboda* for the first time entered the Parliament with 10.4 per cent of votes.

In 2013-14 Ukrainian radical nationalists played a crucial and indispensable role in the Maidan uprising that was triggered by President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to postpone signing an Association Agreement with the EU, which violently escalated in response to inefficient repression and ended in a change of government. Nevertheless, *Svoboda* supported less the idea of European integration but rather an opportunity for Ukraine to break away from Russia.<sup>195</sup> In the case of The Right Sector's (*Pravyi Sektor*) – an umbrella coalition of even more extreme radical nationalist and fringe neo-Nazi groups – their spokesmen have been always quite open that they did not support the EU but exploited the opportunity of the mass anti-governmental mobilization to push forward their own agenda of the 'national revolution'.<sup>196</sup>

Since the start of massive violence in January 2014, the far right's role in the Maidan protests has been systematically downplayed and distorted for the sake of the information warfare against Russian propaganda.<sup>197</sup> The far right was indeed a minority amongst the Maidan protesters, however, according to systematic protest event data *Svoboda* was the most active collective agent in Maidan protest events, while the Right Sector was the most active collective agent in violent protest events.<sup>198</sup> The far right possessed a unique combination of resources that allowed them to play such a prominent role in Maidan's mobilization, coordination, radicalization processes and eventual transfer of power. Unlike any other opposition party, *Svoboda* combined thousands of ideologically committed activists, resources of a parliamentary party, and control over local councils in the western regions with the highest support for Maidan. The Right Sector combined violent skills, a revolutionary ideology, and political organization making its violent actions more strategic and efficient compared to other groups with experience of violence like football ultras and Soviet Afghanistan war veterans.<sup>199</sup>

---

<sup>192</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko is a Kiev sociologist who authored a number of articles and interviews on radical right and radical left participation in Ukrainian Maidan uprising and the following war in 2013-14. He is currently working on analysis of the Maidan uprising from the perspective of sociology of social movements and revolutions theories.

<sup>193</sup> Melanie Mierzejewski-Voznyak, The Radical Right in Post-Soviet Ukraine. The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 30 in The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right (ed. Jens Rydgren), Oxford University Press. 2018.

<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190274559-e-30>

<sup>194</sup> Ivan Katchanovski, Cleft Countries: Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2006.

<sup>195</sup> Andrii Mokhnyk: Nastupna khvyliya revoliutsii, v yakii i 'Svoboda' bratyme uchast, bude antyoliharkhichnoi, MIR, February 2018,

<https://iamir.info/52105-andrii-mohnik-nastupna-hvilja-revolucii-v-jakij-i-svoboda-bratime-aktivnu-uchast-bude-antioligarhic>

<sup>196</sup> Viacheslav Likhachev, The 'Right Sector' and others: The behavior and role of radical nationalists in the Ukrainian political crisis of late 2013 - Early 2014. Communist and Post-Communist Studies 48(2-3): 263. 2015.

<sup>197</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Ukrainian protesters must make a decisive break with the far right, The Guardian, February 2014,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/07/ukrainian-protesters-break-with-far-right>

<sup>198</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Far right participation in the Ukrainian Maidan protests: an attempt of systematic estimation, European Politics and Society 17(4): 453-472, 2016.

<sup>199</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Denial of the Obvious: Far Right in Maidan Protests and Their Danger Today, Vox Ukraine, April 2018,

<https://voxukraine.org/en/denial-of-the-obvious-far-right-in-maidan-protests-and-their-danger-today>

Their critical contribution to the uprising's success had important consequences: they mainstreamed radical nationalist symbols and slogans amongst the protesters, in this way pushing the sceptical majorities in south-eastern regions further away from supporting Maidan;<sup>200</sup> the far right escalated violence with Anti-Maidan protesters, contributing to the war in Donbass;<sup>201</sup> the formation of autonomous armed paramilitary groups challenged the state monopoly on violence and contributed to the weakening of Ukrainian state capacity.<sup>202</sup>

### **Extra-parliamentary power of Ukrainian radical nationalists**

In 2014 *Svoboda* and Right Sector leaders scored low at the presidential elections and later the parties failed to get into Parliament, although a dozen far-right MPs were elected in the single-member districts and on the lists of the 'centrist' parties.<sup>203</sup> References to their electoral defeat became a popular argument 'proving' supposed 'irrelevance' of the far right in Ukraine continuing the propaganda line taken in defence of the Maidan uprising.

However, the extra-parliamentary power of the Ukrainian far right is uniquely strong in the whole of Europe. In no other European country do radical nationalists control large politically loyal armed units relatively autonomous from the official military and law enforcement structures. The most notorious of them is the 'Azov' regiment formed in 2014 by activists of neo-Nazi 'Patriot of Ukraine' and 'Social-National Assembly' organizations. In 2016 Azov formed its own party the National Corps (*Natsionalnyi Korpus*) and in 2018 presented a paramilitary wing the National Militia (*Natsionalni druzhyny*). *Svoboda*-affiliated armed units had been disbanded by 2016 and their combatants integrated individually into official military and law-enforcement units, however, *Svoboda* united all the party members with combat experience into 'Svoboda's Legion' association. Despite pressure from the government, the Right Sector has not even integrated its 'Voluntary Ukrainian Corps' (*Dobrovolchyi Ukrainskyi Korpus*) into official enforcement structures.

There is no reliable estimate of the total number of the combatants in the far right-affiliated military and paramilitary units; five thousand men under arms could be an approximate count. This does not mean that they are all ideologically extreme right, however, the ideological party activists usually form the core of such units and they control the commanding heights. Moreover, even demobilized combatants usually retain their connections with former commanders on whose patronage networks and finances they often continue to depend.<sup>204</sup>

The result is tightly interpenetrating networks of veterans, volunteers, and radical nationalists active in the local politics. There have been several cases of the far right paramilitary interference in the voting of local councils and intimidation of judges forcing them to issue decisions in favour of the radical nationalists.<sup>205</sup> Another problem is the successful cooperation of the far right with the law enforcement in patrolling the streets in a number of regions<sup>206</sup> and penetration of the law enforcement structures at the highest positions. For example, the deputy Minister of Interior and the former acting Chief of the National Police is Vadym Troian, a former activist of the 'Patriot of Ukraine' organization and a deputy commander of Azov.

---

<sup>200</sup> Andreas Umland, How spread of Banderite slogans and symbols undermines Ukrainian nation-building, Kyiv Post, December 2013, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/how-spread-of-banderite-slogans-and-symbols-undermines-ukrainian-nation-building-334389.html>

<sup>201</sup> Serhiy Kudelia, Domestic Sources of Donbass Insurgency, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 351, September 2014. <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/domestic-sources-donbas-insurgency>

<sup>202</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Denial of the Obvious: Far Right in Maidan Protests and Their Danger Today, Vox Ukraine, April 2018, <https://voxukraine.org/en/denial-of-the-obvious-far-right-in-maidan-protests-and-their-danger-today>

<sup>203</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Ukraine has ignored the far right for too long – it must wake up to the danger, The Guardian, November 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/13/ukraine-far-right-fascism-mps>

<sup>204</sup> Kimberley Marten and Olga Oliker, Ukraine's volunteer militia may have saved the country, but now they threaten it, The War on the Rocks, September 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/ukraines-volunteer-militias-may-have-saved-the-country-but-now-they-threaten-it>

<sup>205</sup> See, for example, Marc Bennets, Ukraine's National Militia: 'We're not neo-Nazis, we just want to make our country better, The Guardian, March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/13/ukraine-far-right-national-militia-takes-law-into-own-hands-neo-nazi-links>; See also: Kirill Malyshev, Vitalii Gubin, Delo Kokhanivskogo. Radikaly spravili pominki po reforme pravosudiva v Sviatoshinskom sude, Strana.ua, October, 2017, <https://strana.ua/articles/analysis/100755-natsionalisty-razhromili-sud-v-ukraine-spljasav-na-eho-ostankakh.html>

<sup>206</sup> See Joint Letter to Ukraine's Minister of Interior Affairs and Prosecutor General Concerning Radical Groups signed by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Frontline Defenders, and Freedom House, June 2018 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/14/joint-letter-ukraines-minister-interior-affairs-and-prosecutor-general-concerning>

The extra-parliamentary power of Ukrainian far right is aggravated by the overall weakness of Ukraine's liberal civil society. The far right performed poorly at the recent elections, however, they lost to oligarchic electoral machines with no commitment to any specific ideology but with far greater media and financial resources that opportunistically exploited nationalist and Euro-liberal rhetoric. The ideological liberal parties – like Democratic Alliance or *Syla liudei* ('People's power') – are much weaker than the far right and are usually not even included in the polls now. In comparison to other Ukrainian political parties, NGOs and civic initiatives, the radical nationalists have the strongest street mobilization potential.<sup>207</sup> Moreover, the ideological tradition of Ukrainian liberalism is underdeveloped and many of self-declared Ukrainian liberals are simply moderate nationalists in the crucial historical and language questions of Ukrainian national identity. The lack of institutionalized political and ideological boundary between the far right and liberal segments of Ukrainian civil society combined with the overall 'fortress under siege' atmosphere of the country at war contributes to the legitimacy for the far right and impunity of their radical stance and violent actions.

### **The political impact of the far right**

The extra-parliamentary strength of Ukrainian far right, the political weakness of liberal civil society within the framework of the unreformed political regime of competing 'oligarchic' patronage pyramids results in significant impact of the far right on historical and language politics, and on contraction of political freedoms after 2014.

Nationalist and anti-Communist policies usually lacked the majority public support<sup>208</sup> within Ukraine, even when limited to the governmental-controlled territories. Moreover, they deteriorated relations with strategically important neighbours like Poland and Hungary. However, they were the easiest way for the ruling oligarchic pyramids to simulate changes after the 'Revolution of Dignity' and split the opposition sustaining intense patriotic hysteria, while resisting socio-economic and political reforms that would threaten their own material interests. At the same time the radical nationalists were exploiting their legitimacy within society and overlapping interests with the ruling elite, and have been raising the bar of nationalist demands.<sup>209</sup>

For example, issues which used to be the hobbyhorse of the far right, like banning the Communist Party of Ukraine became state policies in 2015. They were also combined with criminalizing 'propaganda of the criminal totalitarian (Soviet) regime', comprehensive dismantling of all Soviet monuments<sup>210</sup> and renaming geographical places that sometimes had only a slight relationship to Soviet ideology. The national-patriotic education penetrating the education system on all levels – from kindergartens to higher education institutions – is based on the nationalist historical narrative glorifying the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)<sup>211</sup> – the tradition which almost all Ukrainian radical nationalists build on but majorities in Ukraine's south-eastern regions still are opposed to.<sup>212</sup> In 2015 together with criminalizing 'propaganda of the Communist regime' the Ukrainian Parliament recognized OUN and UPA as 'fighters for Ukrainian independence' and a public display of disrespectful attitude against them is punished under the law. The mythical day of the UPA foundation October 14 – previously a holiday only for the radical nationalists – became a national holiday. OUN's greetings and symbolism that were

---

<sup>207</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Nationalist Radicalization Trends in post-Euromaidan Ukraine, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 529, May 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/nationalist-radicalization-trends-post-euromaidan-ukraine>

<sup>208</sup> With exception of Ukrainianization policies primarily aimed at limiting or eliminating completely the use of Russian language in the governmental, education and media institutions. See Volodymyr Kulyk, Ukrainians are ready to shed the legacy of Soviet Russification, Kyiv Post, October 2017, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/volodymyr-kulyk-ukrainians-ready-shed-legacy-soviet-russification.html>

<sup>209</sup> Volodymyr Ishchenko, Nationalist Radicalization Trends in post-Euromaidan Ukraine, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 529, May 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/nationalist-radicalization-trends-post-euromaidan-ukraine>

<sup>210</sup> Initiated precisely by the far right during and right after the Maidan uprising, see Haidai, Oleksandra. 2018. Kamiany hist. Lenin u Tsentralnii Ukraini. Kiev: K.I.S., pp. 172-90.

<sup>211</sup> See Stanislav Serhiienko, Choho chekaty vid vrpovadzhennia natsional-patriotichnoho vykhovannia?, Commons: Journal of Social Criticism, July 2015, <https://commons.com.ua/uk/chogo-chekati/>

<sup>212</sup> Pidtrymka vyznannia OUN-UPA uchasnykamy borotby za dershavnu nezalezhnist Ukrainy, Kiev International Institute of Sociology, October 2017, <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=718&page=2>

mainstreamed by the radical nationalists during the Maidan uprising became semi-official in post-Maidan Ukraine. Although admiration of OUN and UPA among the general public does not necessarily mean xenophobic attitudes towards Poles or Jews, it is usually based on ignorance and denialism about their mass murders and collaborationism with the Nazis.<sup>213</sup>

The far right has also been the harshest critics of the Minsk Accords with Russia and Donbass separatists. They also strongly opposed any reconciliatory dialogue or even tolerance to the voices sceptical about or hostile to the official pro-Maidan narrative about 2013-14 events, which comprise a significant proportion of the public even in the governmental-controlled territories.<sup>214</sup> On August 31, 2015 the rally against the parliamentary vote for a special status for the separatist-controlled Donbass ended in a bloodshed when a *Svoboda* activist threw a hand-grenade killing four and injuring over 150 policemen and National Guard soldiers. There have been multiple cases of the far right mobilization, intimidation, and violent attacks against media, journalists, and public figures dissenting from the official narrative about Maidan and the war.<sup>215</sup> They typically went unpunished, while the Government is itself pressing against the opposition media and employs selective political repression.<sup>216</sup>

### Radical nationalists and liberal values

As mentioned above, Ukrainian far-right support for pro-EU protests in 2013-14 was largely strategic. The radical nationalists retained Eurosceptic position. The 'National Manifesto' presenting strategic program of Ukrainian radical nationalists and signed in 2017 by *Svoboda*, the National Corps, Right Sector and several minor far-right organizations called for a 'new vector of Ukrainian geopolitics' against both Eastern and Western orientations – for a union of nations in the Baltic-Black Sea region.<sup>217</sup> However, Euroscepticism is not a primary issue of Ukrainian far right mobilizations as in the polarized geopolitics exacerbated by the war this position can be easily criticized as 'pro-Russian'. Besides, sometimes radical nationalists try to exploit pro-European attitudes appealing to the 'true' 'traditional' Europe eroded by contemporary liberal values.<sup>218</sup>

The latter has become recently the target of escalated violence by the far right who benefit from their legitimacy within civil society, interpenetration with the law-enforcement, and enjoy impunity for their violent actions. Amnesty International Ukraine listed over 20 violent attacks on feminist, LGBT or human rights discussions and rallies committed by the radical nationalists during the recent year and criticized the Government's connivance in these actions.<sup>219</sup> Since April the far right pogromed at least four Roma camps; in one incident several people got serious injuries and one Romani man was killed.<sup>220</sup> These pogroms were openly publicized and in some cases policemen, and journalists even joined the radical nationalists. The left movement is forced into a semi-underground situation. For example, despite the Communist party appealed against its ban in 2015 and is not technically banned at the moment of writing, it reduced all public activities

---

<sup>213</sup> OUN was pretty close both politically and ideologically to fascist movements of the interbellum Europe. UPA was formed by OUN in 1943 after the Stalingrad battle in order to fight for the independent Ukrainian state in anticipation of the Nazi retreat. Ukrainian nationalists collaborated with the Nazis in the beginning of the WWII participating in the Holocaust and counter-insurgency activities against Soviet partisans, organized the ethnic cleansing of the Polish population in Volhynia and terrorized Soviet citizens in Western Ukraine after the WWII.

<sup>214</sup> Survey of Russian Propaganda Influence on Public Opinion in Ukraine Findings, Media Sapiens, February 2017, [http://ms.detector.media/detector\\_media\\_en/reports\\_eng/survey\\_of\\_russian\\_propaganda\\_influence\\_on\\_public\\_opinion\\_in\\_ukraine\\_findings](http://ms.detector.media/detector_media_en/reports_eng/survey_of_russian_propaganda_influence_on_public_opinion_in_ukraine_findings).

<sup>215</sup> The level of public ignorance and indifference towards the violent actions of the far right is well illustrated by the fact that a neo-Nazi group C14 receives state grants on 'national patriotic education'. The group is well known for their beatings, attacks, and intimidation of dissident journalists, bloggers, and activists, they openly boast about in popular media. C14 initiated a recent wave of anti-Roma pogroms. Two of their members are under trial suspected in the murder of a pro-Russian journalist Oles Buzyna in 2015. See Christopher Miller, Ukrainian Militia Behind Brutal Romany Attacks Getting State Funds, RFE/RL, June 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-militia-behind-brutal-romany-attacks-getting-state-funds/29290844.html>

<sup>216</sup> Maryna Stavniichuk, Freedom of Speech: Between Power and Truth in Ukraine, Kennan Institute Focus Ukraine, February 2018, <http://www.kennan-focusukraine.org/freedom-of-speech-between-power-and-truth-in-ukraine>.

<sup>217</sup> Natsionalisty pidpysaly ta predstavlyly Natsionalnyi manifest, Svoboda, March 2017, <http://svoboda.org.ua/news/events/00114270>.

<sup>218</sup> Pravyi Sektor: 'My rasskazhem Yevrope, kuda yei idti', LSM, February 2014, <https://rus.lsm.lv/statija/novosti/mir/praviy-sektor-mi-rasskazhem-evrope-kuda-ey-idi.a78435>.

<sup>219</sup> Ukraina: vlada poturaie eskalatsii nasyilstva z boku radykalnykh uhrupovan, Amnesty International Ukraine, May 2018 <http://amnesty.org.ua/nws/ukrayina-vlada-poturaye-eskalatsiyi-nasyilstva-z-boku-radikalnih-ugrupovan>.

<sup>220</sup> Chris Scott, Roma's murder by far right reveals deep wounds in Ukraine, Al Jazeera, June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/attack-roma-killed-laid-rest-180629175419541.html>

to the minimum, rightfully expecting the violent attacks. Victory Day rallies on May 9, 2017 ended in massive clashes with the nationalists with multiple arrests for public demonstration of Soviet symbols.

These attacks against the marginalized left, ethnic and gender minorities maintain the militant tone of the groups of young nationalists giving them an ersatz of radical activity against 'internal enemies' while there is no major escalation on the frontline in Donbass. At the same time, these victims are the easiest targets who are usually unable to defend themselves physically and are stigmatized by large anti-Communist and conservative publics. The far right is also able to present their victims as foreign agents pointing to sometimes real, sometimes alleged support from Western liberal or left foundations and NGOs. Despite a significant segment of Ukrainian feminist and LGBT communities being loyal to the patriotic consensus,<sup>221</sup> often espousing a kind of 'progressive' legitimization of the war with the conservative Russian government and Donbass separatists and 'pink-washing' the post-Maidan regime,<sup>222</sup> it does not stop the far right violence against them.

### Policy implications

1. Recognize the problem that is neither a fiction of Russian propaganda, nor it can be reduced to the inevitable but temporary effects of the war. Ukrainian radical nationalists' unique extra-parliamentary power, which is aggravated by their interpenetration with the law-enforcement and weak liberal civil society, present a real danger to human rights and political liberties in Ukraine. The far right contribute to self-destructive nationalist radicalization dynamics destabilizing the political regime in Ukraine which is especially dangerous on the eve of Ukrainian presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019 with unpredictable results.
2. As a *minimum* the Ukrainian government must:
  - a. disband all armed units affiliated with political organizations;
  - b. use all efforts to prevent, prosecute and punish all violence and intimidation against political, ethnic, and gender minorities;
  - c. thoroughly investigate and consistently punish law enforcement's support for radical nationalist violence and its failure to enforce the law against such groups;
  - d. abstain from any further nationalist policies in history, language, and education alienating large segments of the population in a culturally diverse country and cancel at least some of the most criticized (including by international human rights institutions) and discriminatory laws.
3. Considering the weakness of local opposition to the nationalist radicalization, Western powers should put these demands on the table in any future negotiations about support for the Ukrainian government.
4. Ukrainian gender and ethnic minority communities, the political left and cosmopolitan liberals should form a broad front of solidarity of all those endangered by far right violence and nationalist policies in Ukraine.

---

<sup>221</sup> A good example would be the 'Invisible battalion' initiative (<http://uacrisis.org/57284-nevidimij-batalion>) that started with a sociological survey of social problems and gender discrimination of the women fighting on Ukrainian side in Donbass and developed into a well-received documentary based on six cases of female combatants including a known Right Sector activist. The initiative is challenging traditional gender stereotypes while reproducing the nationalist narrative about the war.

<sup>222</sup> See more detailed criticism of these tendencies in Mariia Maierchuk, *Deshcho pro praid ta pravyykh*, Krytyka, 2015 <https://krytyka.com/ua/community/blogs/deshcho-pro-prayd-ta-pravykh> and Popova, Dariia. 2016. Viina, natsionalizm ta zhinoche pytannia: poshuk shliakhiv feministychnoho aktyvizmu v Ukraini. *Commons: Journal of Social Criticism* 10: 72-90, <https://commons.com.ua/uk/vijna-nacionalizm-ta-zhinoche-pitannya>.



## Moldova: How can we get back to the future?

Mihaela Ajder<sup>223</sup>

The evolution of the illiberal/conservative discourse in the former-USSR is similar to what is happening in the rest of Europe: a rise of xenophobia, nationalism, radical groups and political parties becoming popular and winning seats in parliaments. One perspective on these trends is that these form part of a natural historical dynamic, when after a massive advancement or progress in any area there comes a time of 'reaction'. The illiberal backlash can be seen as a general reaction in Europe to advancement of human rights and democratic values, the liberal agenda at large. Any society at any time has a diversity of opinions and attitudes, either openly expressed or supported tacitly but the key question in a time of an illiberal backlash is "Why these groups, parties, politicians are getting popular? Why do citizens support them?" Having radical opinions or attitudes is nothing new or rare, and spreading them in democratic society is also acceptable. The danger emerges when these radical, and sometimes unacceptable opinions, become a criminal behaviour supported by a large part of the population, often in the context of weak rule of law, poor legislation and where the state or factions within it support such activities.

### Background

The Republic of Moldova is emerging from centuries of political dependence and dominance first from the Turkish Empire, Russian Empire and Soviet Union, historically being part of Romanian state for centuries. Given this longstanding domination, it is understandable that independence and self-determination are two very important concepts in the process of re-establishing Moldovan national identity. An identity rooted in part in by language and religion the 'lost old days ways of living'. In this context there is clearly a risk that all the 'new ways', alongside external pressure for international standards in human rights, democracy, or EU accession requirements – when framed as "western" concepts & values - could be perceived as another attempt to be conquered and assimilated, which of course feels like a threat to quite a number of people who are thinking in terms of a re-emerging nation.

### Civilizational crash

The situation in Moldova today is deeply polarized. High levels of emigration among working -age Moldovans leaves a permanent population skewed towards both the young and old, with a challenging relationship to a more progressive diaspora. Trust in the Government and Judiciary is undermined by corruption, with the idea of European values compromised by the actions of the current 'pro-European' Alliance Government. The Media is highly politicized and dependent on political patrons. The Moldovan Orthodox Church is deeply intertwined with state institutions and is authoritarian in outlook. Sexism<sup>224</sup> and homophobia are rampant across society, with the latter in particular used by politicians such as President Dodon and former President Voronin to win support. While the nation is still dealing with social division caused by the Transnistria conflict. Human Rights Defenders and independent journalists may still be persecuted. In all a challenging time for the promotion of liberal values and an encouraging one for the conservative reaction.

---

<sup>223</sup> Mihaela Ajder is an independent expert working for defending human rights of people in R. Moldova for more than 10 years now. Specialization in non-discrimination and social justice. Born in Moldova in 1975 she graduated from State University of Moldova in 1999, with a degree from the Journalism and Communication Science Department. She has been involved in Moldovan civil society since 2000 working with human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Winrock International, Human Rights Information Center (CIDO), HomoDiversus. In her activity held positions as volunteer, program coordinator, consultant and expert in Diversity and Non-Discrimination, including as Executive Director.

<sup>224</sup> As part of Moldova's UN Universal Period Review on Human Rights in 2016 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reiterated its concern about the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society and the persistent stereotyping of older women and women with disabilities. The Committee was concerned that, although the Republic of Moldova was a secular State, religious institutions often perpetuated traditional gender roles in the family and in society and influenced State policies with an impact on human rights. It urged the State to ensure that local authorities promoted policies based on gender equality principles, without interference from religious institutions. It also urged the Republic of Moldova to develop a comprehensive strategy across all sectors, targeted at women and men, girls and boys, to overcome patriarchal and gender-based stereotypical attitudes. See: <https://www.crin.org/en/library/publications/republic-moldova-childrens-rights-references-universal-periodic-review>

## Illiberal civil society in the Republic of Moldova: identifying the groups

The resistance to liberalism in Moldova is not homogenous in form. So it is important to examine some of the key players and contributors. This research divides them into three notable categories: the far right, conservative groups and the Church.

### Far right and ‘ultras’ groups

- Noua Dreapta (the New Right) - a radical group operating in Moldova.<sup>225</sup> It has been inspired, supported and led by a similar organisation in Romania.<sup>226</sup> The group is pro-Romanian Christian nationalistic in outlook, a ‘unionist’ group supporting a political union between Moldova and Romania. It is xenophobic and homophobic and actively promotes concepts of the ‘traditional family’ and ‘normality’.
- Occupy Paedophilia - a radical group of vigilantes operating in Moldova, inspired by a group based in Russia and with similar copycat groups in Ukraine and Kazakhstan.<sup>227</sup> In Moldova the group it is led by Stanislav Ghibadulin, the main suspect in several administrative and criminal investigations regarding the Occupy Paedophilia gang’s homophobic activity, as reported by GENDERDOC-M and other human rights groups.<sup>228</sup> The members of his groups are often teenagers or underage persons, operating in a small gang of around 8-10 people that allegedly go after ‘paedophiles’, in reality, a gay bashing group with a homophobic agenda. ‘Occupy’ members pose as gay or bisexual men who wish to meet their peers. The groups set up meetings with their future victims to entrap them, and humiliate, beat, sexually assault or torture them before posting a video of the encounter online. At least seven videos of this kind were posted in Moldova. At least three criminal investigations were initiated following victims’ complaints but despite years of their extremist activity in Moldova no one has been successfully jailed for their crimes. Emboldened by their own impunity these extremists have continued and escalated their attacks against Moldovan LGBT rights activists and gay men, moving from verbal threats and insults to physical assaults.

It is worth noting that these two groups hold significantly different geo-political outlooks, one looking to Romania and the other to Russia, however they share a common narrative around the ‘traditional’ (male dominated, heterosexual) family and hatred of LGBTI rights.

### Conservative pressure groups

- Stop Ham – an informal group operating in the Republic of Moldova, playing the role of societal police and acting in situations where the ‘police is missing or not taking action’. Led by a couple of people, one of them Alexander Ciolac.<sup>229</sup> This group has been inspired and supported by a similar ‘Stop Ham’ group in Russia.<sup>230</sup> Their agenda in Moldova has ranged from combating bad or illegal parking and other similar social nuisance focused campaigns to protesting against the advertisement of certain products for women, such as stockings, on the grounds of ‘immorality’. They have been active in promoting a Conservative vision around issues of gender and sexuality. They have undertaken a lawsuit against a local human rights NGO and its managers, for displaying pictures on homosexual relationships within a public photo exhibition (a picture of a Swedish author with 2 homosexuals in their bedroom, provided by Civil Rights Defenders, Swedish NGO operating in Moldova). Their Facebook page is liked by 79,600 people.

---

<sup>225</sup> Website of the New Right group <https://nouadreapta.md/>

<sup>226</sup> Website of the Romanian New Right <https://www.nouadreapta.org/>

<sup>227</sup> Information about Tesak, a Russian neo-Nazi activist, white power skinhead and the leader of the far-right youth group Format 18 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxim\\_Martsinkevich](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxim_Martsinkevich)

<sup>228</sup> EuropaLibera, Moldova in the ILGA-Europe report on respect for the rights of sexual minorities, May 2016 <https://www.europalibera.org/a/27728603.html>

<sup>229</sup> About Alexander Ciolac, StopHam Moldova Coordinator, <https://www.facebook.com/alecsandr.ce>, StopHam Moldova and StopHam Bukharest Facebook pages [https://www.facebook.com/stopham.md/?ref=br\\_rs](https://www.facebook.com/stopham.md/?ref=br_rs) and <https://www.facebook.com/stopbadbucuresti/>

<sup>230</sup> Russian Stopham (StopXam) Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/StopXamTv/>,

- Moldova Crestina – a fundamentalist Christian protestant group,<sup>231</sup> whose agenda involves ‘pro-life’ campaigning and opposition to comprehensive sex education, instead advocating in favour of abstinence and against contraception, as well as supporting gay ‘conversion therapy’.<sup>232</sup> They also questioned and opposed laws preventing domestic violence against children and opposed the anti-discrimination law. They invited Scott Lively, President of US Christian Conservative organisation the Abiding Truth Ministries and founder of International evangelical campaign group Watchmen on the Walls, to speak about “the danger” of an AD legislation, addressing the Parliament, Government and larger audience.<sup>233</sup> Similarly they invited anti-gay psychologist Paul Cameron to speak about the ‘danger’ of homosexuality.<sup>234</sup> Their Facebook page has gathered 39,000 likes despite Protestants only forming a small section of the Moldovan population.
- ProFamilia - an NGO affiliated to Moldova Crestina and headed by Pastor Vasile Filat. They also invited the UK based lawyer Alex Spak and Miss Ukraine 2007 Lika Roman, now an expert in diplomacy and international relations, to speak about “New European policies on Diversity and Equality and their consequences for society and culture”.<sup>235</sup> They also called on the Mayor of Chisinau to ban Gay Pride Parades in the city.<sup>236</sup> Vitalie Marian, who is both a member of Moldova Crestina and Deputy President of the Pro Familia published on his website in 2011 a list containing the names of eight public figures (the Moldova’s Ombudsman, six members of the Council of the National Radio-TV Institution and a law lecturer at a law university in Moldova), along with their photo and quotations of their public previous declarations on LGBT issues. He did this to publicise who had ever publically expressed opinions favourable to the LGBT community and their rights, exposing them as ‘the gay supporters’. Taking into account the general outcry against the LGBT community and their rights in the context of the Anti-Defamation Law ADL adoption, this was an attempt to create a blacklist. After being sued and losing the case nationally, Vitalie Marian filed a complaint to the ECtHR with support from the Christian Conservative legal group the European Centre for Law and Justice, claiming a freedom of speech violation.<sup>237</sup>
- Anti-abortion Initiative-founded by Valery Ghiletchi, a Moldovan Politician, Baptist priest and member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,<sup>238</sup> where he chairs the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights and sits on the Equality and Non-Discrimination Committee. This group cooperates closely with Vasile Filat from Moldova Crestina.
- Veterans of the (1979-89) Afghanistan War- a paramilitary group. This group has been involved in mass protests on a range of different topics, such as the anti-discrimination law and other issues on LGBT rights. They were involved in a 2008 attack on a bus of LGBT protestors, where the police failed to intervene to protect the LGBT group.
- The Moldovan Orthodox Lawyers Movement - a group with 21,000 likes on Facebook and an active website hosting a mix of conspiracy theories and extreme headlines such as ‘Blasphemy: Unity in

<sup>231</sup> Website of Moldova Crestina group, <https://moldovacrestina.md/>

<sup>232</sup> Pastor Vasile Filat, LGBT Rescue Strategy, Moldova Crestina, July 2018, <https://moldovacrestina.md/strategia-de-salvare-a-oamenilor-lgbt-pastor-vasile-filat/>

<sup>233</sup> **Gay Rights at Center Stage in Battle over Moldova Antidiscrimination Bill**, RFE/RL, March 2014 [https://www.rferl.org/a/gay\\_rights\\_take\\_center\\_stage\\_in\\_moldova/2337579.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/gay_rights_take_center_stage_in_moldova/2337579.html). Also see: Cathy Kristofferson, **First Pride ever in Moldova- Huge Scott Lively Fail**, Oblogdee, May 2013, <https://oblogdee.blog/2013/05/19/first-pride-ever-in-moldova-huge-scott-lively-fail/>

<sup>234</sup> Paul Cameron in Moldova, October 2011 <https://paper-bird.net/2011/10/25/paul-cameron-in-moldova/>

Also see: Sociologist Paul Cameron says in a press conference: Promoting homosexual rights leads to increased acceptance of homosexuality among young people. Empirical evidence, October 2011, <https://bit.ly/2mjkKEu>

<sup>235</sup> Invitation to the conference, April 2010, [http://comunicate.md/index.php?task=articles&action=view&article\\_id=3047](http://comunicate.md/index.php?task=articles&action=view&article_id=3047)

<sup>236</sup> Pro-Family, Open Letter to the Mayor of Chisinau regarding the prohibition of the parade of homosexuals in Chişinău, April 2010 [http://comunicate.md/index.php?task=articles&action=view&article\\_id=3021](http://comunicate.md/index.php?task=articles&action=view&article_id=3021)

<sup>237</sup> Marian Vitalie, Marian Vitalie Case: A Violation Of Freedom Of Expression In Moldova, ECLI, July 2014 <https://ecli.org/free-speech/echr/the-case-of-marian-vitalie-a-violation-of-freedom-of-expression-in-moldova>

<sup>238</sup> Information about Valeriu GHILETCHI on PACE website: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/AssemblyList/MP-Details-EN.asp?MemberID=4055> See also Parliament in Chişinău could restrict abortion. Will there be EU and US conditions?, March 2012 <http://www.teologie.net/2012/03/06/parlamentul-restrictii-avort/> and The Moldovan Political Church <https://www.zdg.md/editia-print/politic/biserica-politica-din-moldova-2>

Satan' lambasting a June meeting between Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (spiritual leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church) and the Pope.<sup>239</sup>

### **Moldovan Orthodox Church**

The Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC- the Metropolis of Chişinău and All Moldova), a self-governing part of the Russian Orthodox Church, is the dominant religious institution in the country with huge influence. As institution it has used its influence to crack down on rival religious groups, challenge the advance of LGBT rights and secular sex education/pushed life skills course out of school curricula and been seen to support political figures that back its agenda.

### **Religious intolerance towards other cults**

There are a number of examples of the Moldovan Orthodox Church using its influence to restrict the rights of minority religions. In the early days of Moldovan independence the Metropolis of Bessarabia, an Orthodox Church under Romanian Patriarchate, had its registration process denied by state institutions, as the result of influence and opposition of the dominant Moldovan Orthodox Church, a case resolved only after a ECtHR decision in favour of the Bessarabian church after a decade of delays. Similarly, in 2005 the Spiritual Organisation of Muslims, led by Talgat Masaev had its official registration denied due to pressure from the Church and again this situation required intervention from the European Court in 2009 to force the authorities to facilitate registration.<sup>240</sup> In a high profile incident in 2009 a protest led by Protoiereu (senior priest) Anatolie Cibric, the Moldovan Christians' Orthodox Association Fericita Maică Matrona and other protesters from Sfânta Paraschiva church, pulled down a publically displayed Hannukah candle and replaced it with a wooden cross.<sup>241</sup> When the protestant Seventh-Day Adventist Church attempted to have its own public action dedicated to Bible study a number of Orthodox priests prevented them from unfolding the event by occupying the designated space and urging local authorities to prevent Protestant displays in Central Square of an Orthodox country.<sup>242</sup>

### **Opposition to the Anti-Discrimination Law**

During the contentious debates over the passage of the EU backed Anti-Discrimination Law (ADL) in 2013 the leader of the Moldovan church Metropolitan Vladimir spoke in the Moldovan Parliament and referred to the sexual orientation criteria as unacceptable in the law, claiming the Christian population in RM is 98 % and cannot be equated with the 2% of homosexuals.<sup>243</sup> He also issued a public address to the state authorities and then President, demanding the modification of the law and withdrawal of the homosexuality criteria.<sup>244</sup> Similarly, Bishop Marchel spoke against the ADL in a press conference and threatened the MPs who voted for it with excommunication from the church if they failed to take sexual orientation out of the text of the law.<sup>245</sup>

---

<sup>239</sup> Moldovan Orthodox Lawyers Movement, People are often unconscious of the psychological, emotional, and spiritual dangers of the sects, July 2018 <https://www.aparatorul.md/oamenii-deseori-sunt-inconstienti-de-pericolele-psihologice/>

<sup>240</sup> European Court of Human Rights - Case of Masaev v. Moldova, 12 May 2009.

<http://www.legislationline.org/documents/id/15778>

<sup>241</sup> Moldovan Orthodox Church: Jews to blame for menorah incident, December 2009 <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3824287,00.html> and Orthodox Believers To Not Impede Hanukah Celebration, If Menorah Is Installed Not In Center Of Chisinau, November 2010,

<http://www.infotag.md/reports-en/767265/> and [The strategic activity program of the Association](#), Toaca.

<http://toaca.md/?&page=AsociatiaFericitaMaicaMatrona>

<sup>242</sup> Image: Anti-Adventist protest in Moldova, Europe, August 2009 <https://www.dreamstime.com/stock-photography-anti-adventist-protest-moldova-europe-image10563972>

<sup>243</sup> HE Metropolitan Vladimir, against the Anti-Discrimination Act: "The Metropolitan does not want, but our whole society, April 2016,

<http://ortodox.md/ips-mitropolit-vladimir-impotriva-legii-antidiscriminare-nu-doreste-mitropolitul-dar-intreaga-noastra-societate/>

<sup>244</sup> Addressing the Synod of the Moldovan Orthodox Church to the top authorities of the country, amending the Anti-Discrimination Act, May 2013,

<http://ortodox.md/adresarea-sinodului-bisericii-ortodoxe-din-moldova-catre-autoritatile-de-varf-ale-tarii-pentru-modificarea-legii-anti-discriminare/>

<sup>245</sup> Bishop Marchel: Politicians who voted anti-discrimination law risk being excluded from the Church, May 2013, <http://ortodox.md/episcop-marchel-politicienii-care-au-votat-legea-antidiscriminare-risca-sa-fie-exclusi-din-biserica/>

After the adoption of the ADL, further pressure was organised by regular church goers speaking in a press conference and handing Metropolitan Vladimir a signed petition urging him to take action on the matter,<sup>246</sup> and threatened Vladimir with protests. On May 19 2013, at the Great National Assembly Square in Chisinau Metropolitan, Vladimir read the Church Synod declaration, which demanded the annulment of the ADL in within a month, otherwise threatening that the Church would continue to protest. This was the decision that Synod of the church agreed earlier.

An interesting evolution is the coalition of the Orthodox and some Protestant Churches against the ADL and Pride events, given that the Orthodox Church does not otherwise normally recognise these churches, calling them 'sects' and putting them under continued pressure. Hate became the perfect glue for old enemies. Also, the anti-Pride protests gathered together Christians, neo-Nazis, and far- right groups.<sup>247</sup> All these groups have found a common enemy in the LGBT community and are militating against their rights. This is, in fact, the best illustration of the de facto values and principles that these apparently different groups share.

### **School curricula influenced by the Church**

The life skills course was pulled out of school curricula under the huge pressure of the church because of a chapter on homosexual couples. Sexual education is still missing in schools thanks to the opposition of the Orthodox Church, while information about the Holocaust is also still missing in the schools' curricula, an issue often suppressed by the Moldovan state thanks to hostile attitudes of the church. Gender stereotyping in textbooks and school occupational practices continues. Christian Orthodox Religion is taught in schools and most of the time by priests. Making religion a Mandatory course in school has been used as a tool for re-entering the political arena by Valeriu Pasat, ex-director of the Moldovan Secret Service, who proposed an attempted referendum on this issue.<sup>248</sup>

### **Bodies and individuals active within the church illiberal agenda**

While Moldova's major churches are deeply institutionally conservative in their approach and doctrine there are a number of groups and individuals associated with the church that is active in pushing it to be more proactive on these social issues. These include the Moldovan Christians' Orthodox association Fericită Maică Matrona<sup>249</sup> and the ASCOR Chisinau- Association of Romanian Christian Orthodox Students in Moldova whose leading member Octavian Racu has built a public profile,<sup>250</sup> both groups which have mobilised on LGBT, anti-abortion and other reproductive rights issues. There is also Pro-Ortodoxia, whose President Ghenadie Valuta is a vocal orthodox priest who has directly challenged Metropolitan Vladimir to take a tougher line on LGBT rights issues.<sup>251</sup> His spat with the church leadership that includes allegations he was involved in a leak of photos linking Metropolitan Vladimir, who is supposed to be celibate, to holidaying with Nelli Tcaciuc,<sup>252</sup> has led to Valuta facing a ban from preaching within the church.<sup>253</sup> Despite official church

---

<sup>246</sup> Certain explanations from the Metropolitan, September 2013

<http://ortodox.md/cer-explicatii-de-la-mitropolit/>

<sup>247</sup> The gay parade was stopped, May 2008, <http://logos.md/2008/05/13/parada-gay-lor-a-fost-oprita/>

<sup>248</sup> The Secular State Initiative Group seeks the annulment of the decision on the registration of the initiative group for the Republican referendum <http://www.civic.md/stiri-ong/9454-grupului-de-iniatiiv-pentru-promovarea-statului-secular-solicita-anularea-hotrarii-cu-privire-la-inregistrarea-grupului-de-iniatiiv-pentru-desfurarea-referendumului-republican.html>

<sup>249</sup> The strategic activity program of The Association of Moldovan Orthodox Christians "Blessed Mother Matron" <http://toaca.md/?&page=AsociatiaFericităMaicăMatrona> See also: <http://toaca.md/?&page=aboutus>

<sup>250</sup> National Appeal for Teaching Religion at schools, November 2009. <https://octavianracu.wordpress.com/2009/11/04/apel-national-pentru-predarea-religiei-in-scoala/>

<sup>251</sup> Ghenadie Valuta is publicly apologizing to Metropolitan Vladimir, July 2014, [http://www.realitatea.md/ghenadie-valuta-duce-scuze-publice-mitropolitului-vladimir-ce-pacate-a-facut\\_6720.html](http://www.realitatea.md/ghenadie-valuta-duce-scuze-publice-mitropolitului-vladimir-ce-pacate-a-facut_6720.html)

Priest Ghenadie Valuta: We were shocked and traumatized by the actions of the LGBT march, May 2018, [https://adevarul.ro/moldova/social/preotul-ghenadie-valuta-ramas-socati-traumatizati-actiunile-fortelor-ordine-marsul-lgbt-1\\_5b055ee2df52022f7552f72a/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/moldova/social/preotul-ghenadie-valuta-ramas-socati-traumatizati-actiunile-fortelor-ordine-marsul-lgbt-1_5b055ee2df52022f7552f72a/index.html)

<sup>252</sup> Robert Coalson Moldovan Newspaper Threatened Over Orthodox Metropolitan's Vacation Pics, RFE/RL, September 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldovan-newspaper-threatened-metropolitan-vladimir/26581497.html>

<sup>253</sup> After being banned from office, priest Ghenadie Valuta says the decision is revenge for the appearance of some pictures in the press, with the metropolitan in the company of a woman at sea – VIDEO, Pro TV, September 2015, <http://protv.md/stiri/actualitate/dupa-ce-i-a-fost-interzis-sa-oficieze-slujbe-preotul-ghenadie---1119481.html>



rules preventing priest from explicit political campaigning Valuta has openly backed President Dodon's election campaign by donating 50,000 lei.<sup>254</sup>

## Conclusions

Small, underdeveloped countries such as Moldova with little or no tradition in democracy have become the stage for the battle over the liberal agenda, a platform for fringe and extreme figures from larger countries such as Americans Paul Cameron and Scott Lively. This year a host of such figures will be attending the World Congress of Families in Chisinau that will be held on 14-16<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, under the patronage of the President of Moldova. To support the event President Dodon has met with the president of the International Fund for Orthodox Nations Unity, Valeri Alexeev, with financial support coming from a range of donors, including the Moldovan First Lady's Fund.

The Congress is focused on protection of the "traditional family" and Christian values. Unfortunately, most of the time, the pursuers of these goals understand achieving them by attacking everything else that falls outside of this definition. So liberal perspective and attitudes continue to be under a great threat in Moldova, especially with this 'heavy duty' artillery being involved, such as conservative, traditionalist church and struggling with democracy state actors or institutions.<sup>255</sup>

In his announcement of the event, the President has made a number of comments regarding the LGBT community and Pride Parades, stating his condemnation of the latest pride parade, criticising state authorities and the police for protecting the LGBT protestors, and restricting and arresting the counter-demonstrators. The President stated his major objective is the preservation of the traditional family and has accused the Government and the Parliamentary majority of "promoting draft laws and values that do not belong to us".<sup>256</sup> He mentioned that not only would Patriarch Kyrill of the Russian Orthodox Church be present at the event on his personal invitation, but also a high Vatican representative. So this event, an export of American fundamentalism, is providing a platform the local Orthodox Church and its Russian colleagues to further project their fundamentalist message to the Moldovan population.

The main actors of the illiberal society are the sections of the state and Moldovan Orthodox Church under the Russian Patriarchate, plus some vocal fundamentalist protestant churches. Many of the other groups without such affiliations are smaller and have little political influence-. Politicians abusing their Parliamentary mandates for personal gain, using scapegoating and 'divide and rule' strategies within Moldovan society, supported by a high level of corruption, the lack of efficient and independent justice system and almost no free media. This of course includes the current notionally pro-European Governing coalition, the alliance of Liberal, Democratic and Liberal-Democratic Parties. While declaratively promoting the standards and values of liberalism, mostly driven by external political demand such as from the EU, the main target is financial support that comes with such agreements. A most notorious example of the government's attitude was the 2014 corruption scandal of one billion dollars (equivalent to 12% of Moldovan GDP) that was stolen from three Moldovan banks, where there was seen to be close ties between members of the government and led to the eventual imprisonment of former Prime Minister Vlad Filat.<sup>257</sup>

The church is the greatest ally or even counterpart of the state where there is no clear separation of the state and church institutions in Moldova. For example, the Orthodox doctrine is taught in public schools

---

<sup>254</sup> Priest Ghenadie Valuța sponsored the socialist leader's campaign with nearly 50,000 lei: Personal money, from three couples, wedding, November 2016, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/preotul-ghenadie-valuta-a-sponsorizat-campania-liderului-socialistilor-cu-aproape-50-000-de-lei-sunt-bani-personali--de-la-trei-cumatrii--nunta-123858.html>

<sup>255</sup> The 2018 World Congress of Families will be held in Chisinau under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Moldova , November 2017, <http://www.presedinte.md/rom/presa/congresul-mondial-al-familiiilor-din-anul-2018-se-va-desfasura-la-chisinau-sub-egida-presedintelui-republicii-moldova>

<sup>256</sup> VIDEO. Dodon Announces World Family Congress in Chisinau: There will be participants from over 50 countries, May 2018, <http://agora.md/stiri/45721/video--dodon-anunta-un-congres-mondial-al-familiei-la-chisinau-vor-fi-participanti-din- peste-50-de-tari>

<sup>257</sup>Tim Whewell, The great Moldovan bank robbery, BBC News, June 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33166383>



during the 'optional course' on Religion, have turned out to be largely mandatory, with massive enrolment being largely done at the schools' authority's initiative and participation.

Following the collapse of the Soviet system the bubble burst and all the censored and tabooed issues broke in, while accurate, scientific and up to date information and education is missing. So the issues are associated with something foreign to our societies, which only appeared to be here after the fall of the wall, so had to be "imported" artificially. As a result – the denial of acknowledgment of the state of affairs in the country on a number of issues and resistance in accepting the new models and patterns is generally the reaction of the population. It includes aggressive and violent attempts to defend the outlook that used to be the pillar and guideline in the past. This is true too for some of the liberal civil society actors and individuals that struggle with their own homophobic, nationalistic, xenophobic or other illiberal attitudes.

Illiberal messages, and in some cases the groups supporting them, are thriving in Moldova thanks to a context created by corrupted authorities of different sorts, that are discrediting the idea of democracy/liberalism in attempt to hold on to their power. They have managed to achieve this by playing on people's fears and anxieties, and some post-totalitarian submissive mentality or on hopes and dreams of ancient rules and order.

The current players in the Moldovan political landscape are:

- State authorities – seen as corrupt
- Church – traditionally controlling and holding the power to heavily influence both state and people
- People – traditionally heavily oppressed and struggling to survive
- Human Rights defenders and liberal civil society – 'watch dogs' and agents of change, following the democratic and human rights based model
- Illiberal groups and civil society – pursuers of the 'old good times' idea, who are impeding the social evolution to modernity and are dragging it back to a 'middle ages' societal model
- International bodies/structures willing to impact RM evolution in democratic/liberal direction
- International bodies/structures willing to impact RM evolution into the conservative direction

After the collapse of USSR, the Republic of Moldova exited one totalitarian regime and has not truly established a new one, torn between east and west, conservative and liberal. Taking into the account the long -established conservative and totalitarian tradition in this territory, huge pressure from a number of highly influential actors, such as Orthodox Church, Russia's political interest in the country, the traditionalist mentality of the general public, the chances for the instalment of a liberal society in the near future is very small, even with the efforts of the international community and local supporters.

On the other hand, the Diaspora is becoming more and more of a voice, especially in the context of election procedures, whose active involvement was triggered by the manipulations of votes during last Parliamentary elections and the annulment of the last Mayoral election in Chisinau. Also, there is a part of the local population who is fed up with government corruption and financial scandals, a difficult financial existence and separation from family members working abroad to make a living. The last decade has been tough on the population: the 8 years of harsh communist government during the 2000s has been followed by a pro-European government famous for its corruption and deepening economic crises. The situation has all the signs of a revolution, but requires a lot of strength and resistance from the citizens, and substantial support from international partners to address the situation.

## **Recommendations**

### **The role of Diasporas and migrant workers in influencing social attitudes**

There is scope to build on the influence of those who have travelled, studied (especially the social sciences) or who have worked abroad, who are more receptive to liberal values after having witnessed and experienced the benefits of it while overseas. Similarly, young people who speak English/other foreign

language and are curious to learn about other cultures and societies, developing their own personal experiences. Part of a strategy for improving understanding of more liberal approaches should include more cultural and education opportunities abroad, and not only for intellectual elites.

### **Working with liberal civil society**

Local civil society: only a part of it is concerned with the liberal agenda, is divided upon particular topics; in competition for resources from international donors, and which somewhat reinforce the perception of liberalism as a foreign import.

There is a further need for the:

- Education of general society and state officials on democracy and liberalism
- Sharing best practices and how best to cope with challenges
- Creation of a robust democratic system with check and balances that doesn't allow easy misuse/abuse of this system
- Exploration of opportunities for dialog with illiberal groups through well-regulated UN and EU forums, with religious or cultural groups willing to do so - a grouping that does not include many organisations identified in this essay.
- International support to be bottom up, both financial and capacity building: money and expertise should go straight to the people, local organisations and public administration who have demonstrated that they are implementing the democratic and Human Rights based approach.
- Ending of any partnerships with the corrupted and compromised government and support new generations of leaders and initiatives committed to the country and the people's benefit, with proven formation and supporters of democracy and a human rights based approach.

## The rise of illiberal civil society in Moldova

Dumitru Sliusarenco and Ion Foltea<sup>258</sup>

The Republic of Moldova is a former Soviet country, caught in internal and external conflicts, powered by geopolitics and with a strong division of society. Different social groups are divided by moral and religious values (such as 'traditional family' or 'tolerance'), in a strong connection with their geopolitical grounds. Two of the major geopolitical sides are split between Pro-Russian and Pro-European (or Pro-Western) values.<sup>259</sup>

A case study to analyze in this context is the annual gay march (Pride). Representatives of the United Nations in Moldova, Embassies from western countries (such as Sweden, USA, Great Britain and the Netherlands) and some NGOs participated in Pride 2018. Counter-demonstrations organized by civil society groups linked to the Moldovan Orthodox Church and the Moldovan Socialist Party. They demanded stopping the alleged 'homosexual propaganda' in the country. The same requests had been made a week before, during the 'March for Families' organized by the President of the Moldovan Republic and former Socialist Party leader, Igor Dodon.<sup>260</sup>

These events emphasize the strong divisions that characterize Moldovan society. Civil society, supported by Western governments, the EU and international NGOs are asking for respect of the rule of law and liberal reforms. They have to compete with groups pursuing illiberal and conservative values. As we will show, in many cases these groups are directly linked to the Socialist Party and the Orthodox Church and, for this reason, have an indirect connection with Russia. In fact, Moldovan Orthodox Church is part of the Russian Church, alternatively legally known as the Moscow Patriarchate. In addition, the Moldovan Socialist Party is backed by Russian government and it doesn't deny its strong affiliation to Russian Federation. Moreover, the activities of these 'illiberal civil society groups' are echoed by the Russia-controlled mass media in Moldova such as Sputnik.md.<sup>261</sup>

### The Moldovan legal framework

The legal framework for ensuring equality and non-discrimination of civil society actors is based on a number of constitutional clauses. The equality of the citizens before the law and public authorities is stipulated in Article 16, which also sets the main criteria for equality and non-discrimination:

(2) All citizens of the Republic of Moldova shall be equal before the law and public authorities, regardless of the race, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion, sex, opinion, political affiliation, property or social origin.

The norms established in the articles of the Constitution mentioned above have been further developed by the following special laws:

- Law no. 5 on the equality of opportunities for women and men of 09/02/2006<sup>262</sup>,
- Law no. 60 on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities of 30/03/2012<sup>263</sup>,

---

<sup>258</sup> Dumitru Sliusarenco, is a Human Rights lawyer and attorney at Promo-LEX Association, practicing since 2011 in Moldova. He is specialized on issues on equality and non-discrimination. Since 2017 Mr. Sliusarenco is the leading national expert at Promo-LEX Association within the project "Strengthening a platform for the development of human rights activism and education in order to reduce the social tensions generated by ignorance, manipulation, and the use of hate speech and discrimination

Ion Foltea, is a Promo-LEX intern and an International Relations student at University of Trento, Italy. He is currently engaged in the monitoring and analysing the issues of hate speech, within Promo-LEX research on the public discourse and hate speech in Republic of Moldova.

The Promo-LEX Association is a civil society organization with special consultative status with the UN (ECOSOC) based in Chisinau, whose purpose is to advance democracy in the Republic of Moldova through promoting and defending human rights, and monitoring democratic processes and strengthening civil society through a strategic mix of legal action, advocacy, research and capacity building.

<sup>259</sup> Eugene Rumer, Moldova Between Russia and the West: A Delicate Balance, May 2017

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/23/moldova-between-russia-and-west-delicate-balance-pub-70056>

<sup>260</sup> Cristi Vlas, President Igor Dodon opposes LGBT March in Moldova, plans march for supporting traditional family, May 2017

<http://www.moldova.org/en/president-igor-dodon-opposes-lgbt-march-moldova-plans-march-supporting-traditional-family/>

<sup>261</sup> Sputnik Moldova - Russia's Moldova & Romanian language news agency, website, and radio broadcast service <https://sputnik.md/>

<sup>262</sup> Republic of Moldova, Parliament, Law no. 5 (available in Moldovan and Russian languages) <http://lex.justice.md/viewdoc.php?id=315674&lang=1>

<sup>263</sup> Republic of Moldova, Parliament, Law no. 6 (available in Moldovan and Russian languages) <http://lex.justice.md/md/344149/>

- Law no. 64 on freedom of speech of 23/04/2010<sup>264</sup>,
- Law no. 121 on ensuring equality of 25/05/2012<sup>265</sup>,
- Law no. 298 on the activity of the Council on Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality of 21/12/2012.<sup>266</sup>

Law no. 121 on ensuring equality, which was adopted on 25.12.2012 after period of controversial debates during which the initial draft has been modified (but not necessarily improved) and came into force on 1st of January 2013, is the only special normative framework regulating the prevention and elimination of discrimination and ensuring of equality. The law defines the basic concepts (discrimination, types of discrimination), sets the protected criteria, the worst forms of discrimination and the fields of discrimination. In addition, the Law also sets the institutional framework for resolving the cases of discrimination, the procedures and the task of evidence collection, as well as a list of remedies. This law works in conjunction with a number of other special laws as Law no. 5 on the equality of opportunities for women and men. It regulates the discrimination on the basis of sex and gender criteria. Law no. 60 on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities defines the concepts of “disability” and disability-based discrimination. Also the Law no. 64 on the freedom of expression defines the concept of hate speech.

These laws are in turn supplemented by explanatory decisions, consultative notifications and recommendations issued by the Supreme Court of Justice. The Decisions of the Council on Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality (CPEDEE) are becoming another important source of law in the field of discrimination, as the only public institution empowered with responsibilities in this area.<sup>267</sup>

---

<sup>264</sup>Republic of Moldova, Parliament, Law no. 7 ((available in Moldovan and Russian languages)

<http://lex.justice.md/viewdoc.php?action=view&view=doc&id=335145&lang=1>

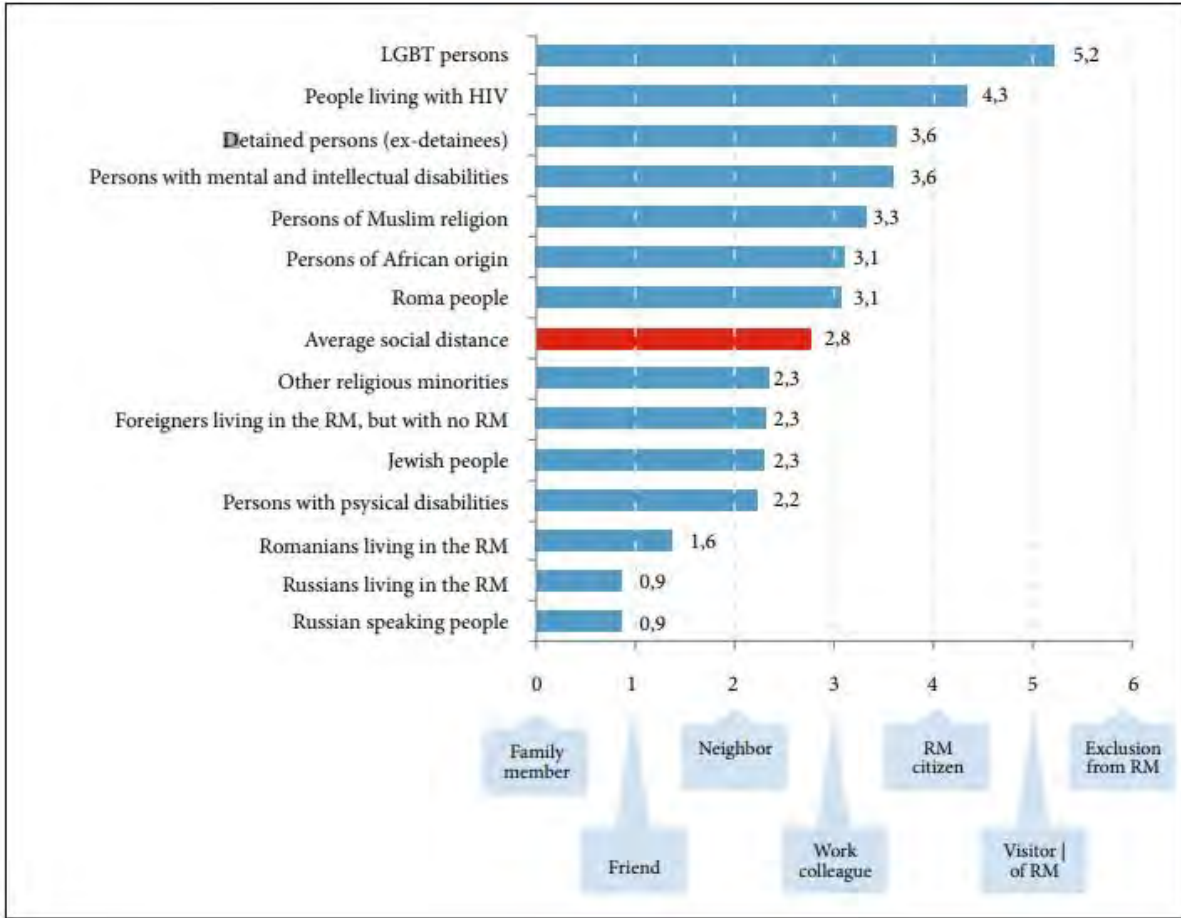
<sup>265</sup>Republic of Moldova, Parliament, Law no. 8 (available in Moldovan and Russian languages) <http://lex.justice.md/md/343361/>

<sup>266</sup>Republic of Moldova, Parliament, Law no. 9 (available in Moldovan and Russian languages) <http://lex.justice.md/md/346943/>

<sup>267</sup> According to Article 12 of Law no. 121, the Council’s responsibilities are focused on the following important dimensions:

- Analysis and drafting of public policies
- Raising the society’s level of awareness about discrimination issues
- International collaboration
- Direct activities of protection of discrimination victims;

## MOST DISCRIMINATED



A 2016 study prepared by the CPEDEE and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), on equality perceptions and attitudes<sup>268</sup> emphasizes that Moldova's population is still prone to intolerance with regard to different vulnerable groups. The study showed that Moldovans most trust the Church (over 81%) and have the least trust in the justice system (14%), the President (11%), Parliament (11%) and Political parties (10%). According to the study, the most discriminated group in Moldova is the LGBT group. It is followed by persons living with HIV, detainees and persons with mental disabilities. Thus, the study shows that while church is the most trusted institution in Moldova, LGBT people are most discriminated.

### Threats to equality

The legal framework regarding equality and non-discrimination is not seen as a positive step by some actors of Moldovan society. The most vocal opponents of the laws on equality are The Orthodox Church under the Metropolis of Chisinau and All Moldova (Moldovan Orthodox Church) and the Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM). On numerous occasions, they criticized the law on ensuring equality and those that support it. While the Orthodox Church uses this rhetoric based on doctrinal reasons, the Socialist Party of Moldova uses it to gain political capital and as one of the main arguments against European integration.

### The position of the Church

The Moldovan Orthodox Church has constantly criticized the law on ensuring equality, both before and since its adoption. The most contentious provision appears to be the one that outlaws discrimination on the basis

<sup>268</sup> Study on Equality Perceptions and Attitudes in the Republic of Moldova, Chişinău, 2015  
[http://md.one.un.org/content/dam/unct/moldova/docs/pub/ENG-Studiu%20Perceptii%202015\\_FINAL\\_2016\\_Imprimat.pdf](http://md.one.un.org/content/dam/unct/moldova/docs/pub/ENG-Studiu%20Perceptii%202015_FINAL_2016_Imprimat.pdf)



of sexual orientation. The Church condemned the provision, declaring that it “legalizes harlotry through enabling gay parades and propaganda of the gay life style”.<sup>269</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church, of which the Moldovan Orthodox Church is part, also expressed its dissatisfaction with the Law. As mentioned in a statement of the Sacred Synod (the highest authority) of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Church “protests against the legalization of evil and the declaration of sinful behaviour as ordinary activity.” It calls on Moldovan authorities to resist “attempts of propaganda of sexual perversion” and to take steps to amend the law in order to comply with the will of the majority of Moldovan citizens.<sup>270</sup>

In 2013, in a statement issued after Orthodox leaders met in Chisinau, the church said that it would call for nationwide protests unless the government amended a law protecting homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender people from discrimination. The church also expressed its will for new laws against what it calls “immoral propaganda” and a ban on “homosexual, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual, paedophilic, zoophilic, incestuous, and perverse behaviour.”<sup>271</sup> Moreover, the Church constantly stands against Gay Prides organized in Chisinau by Genderdoc-M<sup>272</sup> asking for these parades to be banned because of in their view the “absence of any legal, moral and rational reason of such a type of absurd manifestation.”<sup>273</sup>

The above-mentioned positions of the Church encourage and legitimize intolerance, discrimination and hate speech in Moldovan society. That is reflected in the high levels of social conservatism<sup>274</sup> that characterize Moldovan civil society but also in the increasing number of cases of violence against LGBT community. For instance, in 2013 the participants at the Pride couldn’t march more than 10 minutes because of the violence and danger to the public security. Indeed, the “counter-manifestation” organized by different Orthodox groups and associations forced the police to stop the march and to evacuate the participants.<sup>275</sup>

With the aim of spreading its conservative position, the Moldovan Orthodox Church founded or sustains a number of different organizations and groups such as: ‘Tineretul orthodox’ (Orthodox Youth)<sup>276</sup>, ‘Asociație Moldova pentru viață’ (the Association Moldova for Life)<sup>277</sup> and the ‘Asociația Fericita Maică Matrona’.<sup>278</sup>

The first one ‘Tineretul orthodox’ - is the youth movement of the Moldovan Orthodox Church and includes sub-groups such as the ‘Asociația Studenților Creștini Ortodocși din Republica Moldova’ (Republic of

---

<sup>269</sup> Rosbalt, The Moldovan parliament passed a law on the protection of gay rights caused a scandal (available in Russian language) May, 2012, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2012/05/25/985061.html>. Also Moldova: Various Forms of Discrimination Are Banned by Law, November 2012, <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/moldova-various-forms-of-discrimination-are-banned-by-law/>. See also Rosbalt, The Moldovan parliament passed a law on the protection of gay rights caused a scandal (available in Russian language) May, 2012, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2012/05/25/985061.html>

<sup>270</sup>Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in connection with the adoption of the "Law on Ensuring Equality" in the Republic of Moldova, June 2012, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2270817.html>

<sup>271</sup>Church Pressures Moldova’s Government To Repeal Antidiscrimination Laws, June 2013, [RFE/RL’s Moldovan Service https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-gay-church-rights-discrimination-laws/25024061.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-gay-church-rights-discrimination-laws/25024061.html)

<sup>272</sup> Genderdoc-M is a Moldovan non-governmental organization (<https://gdm.md/en/>), which aims to create a legislative, legal and social framework for lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender people in society, by developing LGBT community, by informing, promoting rights and providing services, and expanding organizational capacities.

<sup>273</sup> From an open letter sent by Mitropol Vladimir, Moldovan Orthodox Church’s head, to Chișinău municipality (in Moldovan language) May 2018 <http://mitropolia.md/biserica-ortodoxa-din-moldova-se-opune-categoric-la-organizarea-din-acest-an-al-marsului-solidaritatii-fara-frica/>

<sup>274</sup>Defined as “a cluster of values that emphasize the importance of family, tradition, religious teachings and traditional gender roles”. Voicu O., Cash J. and Cojocar V.; (2017); Church and State in the Republic of Moldova. (p. 18) <https://www.soros.md/publication/studiu-biserica-stat-republica-moldova>

<sup>275</sup> Homosexuals were cursed by priests but supported by diplomats, Mary Gay from Chisinau (available in Moldovan language) May 2013, [https://adevarul.ro/moldova/social/marSul-gay-chiSinAu-homosexualii-fost-blestemat-preoti-sustinut-diplomati-galerie-foto-1\\_5199a755053c7dd83fb23cbd/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/moldova/social/marSul-gay-chiSinAu-homosexualii-fost-blestemat-preoti-sustinut-diplomati-galerie-foto-1_5199a755053c7dd83fb23cbd/index.html)

<sup>276</sup> Information about ‘Movement of the Orthodox Youth’ (in Moldovan language) <http://tineretulortodox.md/miscarea-tineretului-ortodox/>

<sup>277</sup> Website of the ‘Association Moldova for Life’ <http://moldovapentruviata.md/>

<sup>278</sup> Information about the ‘Association of Orthodox Christians of Moldova “Happy Mother Matrona”’ The Toaca newspaper (in Moldovan language) <http://www.toaca.md/?page=AsociațiaFericitaMaicăMatrona>

Moldova Christian Orthodox Students Association)<sup>279</sup>, a student union that has its headquarters in Moldova State University church.

The Orthodox Youth holds a number of conferences and workshops, as well as organizing the 'March for life' in collaboration with the Association 'Moldova for Life' and 'Asociația Fericita Maică Matrona' – an event supporting traditional family values.

Another religious event – 'March for Families' was organized by the Moldovan Orthodox Church and its supporters and took place in 2016 to mark the importance of 'traditional family values'. Its third edition, called the 'March of Silence', was de jure a public action for traditional family values, but de facto it was an event organized in collaboration with socialist-linked groups and sustained by President of Moldova Igor Dodon. It was designed as a public manifestation against homosexuality and Gay Pride, took place one week after.

On that occasion, as in many others, the association 'Asociația Fericita Maică Matrona' had a central role in spreading intolerance based on the idea that it is necessary to fight against the current status quo, called by them the 'atheist-Satanist system'.<sup>280</sup> In May 2018 this group organized another public demonstration against 'homosexual propaganda in the Republic of Moldova' and against a bill that aimed to introduce sexual education courses in schools. The participants marched displaying signs with messages such as 'Moldova needs normal children' or 'Our children should grow up as normal ones, not as abominations.'<sup>281</sup>

As a result, civil society organizations and groups, directly linked and supported by the Orthodox Church promote prejudices and stereotypes, perpetuate intolerance and incite to discrimination among Moldovan society.

### **Position of the political parties and politicians**

The Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM) is the main political power to stand against equality and non-discrimination laws. PSRM repeatedly expressed its position as a pro-Russian party, which aims to protect traditional family values and fight, so called "gay propaganda", which, according to them is also promoted by the Laws on ensuring and protecting equality.

In 2012, after the adoption of the Laws, the leader at that time of the PSRM, Igor Dodon challenged the legitimacy of the Laws at the Constitutional Court of Republic of Moldova.<sup>282</sup> The Court rejected his claims as unfounded.<sup>283</sup>

In 2016, the PSRM tried one more time to repeal the laws on equality by introducing an amendment to the Parliament on this issue. Parliament rejected the bill, but the PSRM continues to use the anti-equality law rhetoric, especially in political campaigns.<sup>284</sup>

---

<sup>279</sup> Information about the Christian Orthodox Christian Students Association of the Republic of Moldova (ASCOR) (in Moldovan language) <http://ong.md/index.php/companies/42/15/Asocitia-Studentilor-Crestini-Ortodocsi-Romani-din-Republica-Moldova-ASCOR>

<sup>280</sup> An expression used in 'Association of Orthodox Christians of Moldova "Happy Mother Matrona"', The Toaca newspaper ( in Moldovan language) <http://www.toaca.md/?page=AsociațiaFericitaMaicăMatrona>

<sup>281</sup> Prayer protest. Hundreds of parishioners and several priests have asked the Legislature to ban the propaganda of homosexuality in the Republic of Moldova (in Moldovan language), canal2.md, May 2018, [http://www.canal2.md/news/protest-cu-rugaciuni-sute-de-enoriasi-impreuna-cu-mai-multi-preoti-au-cerut-legislativului-sa-interzica-propaganda-homosexualitatii-in-republica-moldova\\_87836.html](http://www.canal2.md/news/protest-cu-rugaciuni-sute-de-enoriasi-impreuna-cu-mai-multi-preoti-au-cerut-legislativului-sa-interzica-propaganda-homosexualitatii-in-republica-moldova_87836.html)

<sup>282</sup> Dodon sticks to the word. Appealed to the Constitutional Court the Equality Law (in Moldovan language) May, 2012, Publika.md, [https://www.publika.md/dodon-se-tine-de-cu-vant-a-contestat-la-curtea-constitucionala-legea-egalitatii\\_872301.html](https://www.publika.md/dodon-se-tine-de-cu-vant-a-contestat-la-curtea-constitucionala-legea-egalitatii_872301.html)

<sup>283</sup> Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova, (in Moldovan language), October 2013 [http://www.constcourt.md/public/files/file/Actele%20Curtii/acte\\_2013/d\\_14.2013.ro.pdf](http://www.constcourt.md/public/files/file/Actele%20Curtii/acte_2013/d_14.2013.ro.pdf)

<sup>284</sup> PSRM calls for the repeal of the law on equal opportunities; Ignored by the parliamentary majority, the Socialists left Parliament (in Moldovan language) Jurnal.md, April 2016 <http://jurnal.md/ro/politic/2016/4/27/psrm-cere-anularea-legii-cu-privire-la-egalitatea-de-sanse-ignorati-de-majoritatea-parlamentara-socialistii-au-parasit-sedinta-parlamentului/>

In spring 2016, the PSRM raised in the Parliament a draft law on 'gay propaganda'.<sup>285</sup> The draft pending in Parliament aimed to amend two national laws. It would add a paragraph to Article 21 of the Law on the Rights of a Child that reads: "The state ensures protection of a child from the propaganda of homosexuality for any purpose and under any form." It aimed also to amend Article 88 of the Code of Administrative Offenses to define "propaganda of homosexuality" as: "Propaganda of homosexual relations among minors by means of assemblies, mass media, Internet, brochures, booklets, images, audio-video clips, films and/or audio-video recordings, via sound recording, amplifiers or other means of sound amplification." The bill was also rejected by the Parliament.

In the 2016 Presidential electoral campaign, Igor Dodon – the candidate from PSRM actively used homophobic and discriminatory speech. It targeted mainly his opponent – Maia Sandu, but also affected 3 major groups: a) refugees/migrants, b) LGBT and c) Unionists (people that advocate for reunion of Republic of Moldova and Romania).

One of the most discussed and controversial events in this regard, related to news that one of the opposition leaders would bring in Moldova 30,000 Syrian refugees if they were to win.<sup>286</sup> This news escalated the prejudice that "aggressive Muslims" will spread all over the country, "rape women and girls and rob locals". The same rhetoric was used in the 2018 elections for the Mayor of Chisinau, against a pro-European candidate Andrei Nastase. A lot of fake news were making claims that Chisinau will be leased out to United Arab Emirates if Nastase wins. This news was reported as hate speech by Promo-LEX Association.<sup>287</sup>

The Socialist Party (similar to the Orthodox Church) finances civil society groups and associations with the aim of strengthening and promoting its illiberal positions. An example is the Garda Tînăra-Молодая Гвардия" (The Young Guard)<sup>288</sup>, the youth branch of Socialist Party, which sustains and pursues traditional and orthodox values as "the only way Moldova has to survive".<sup>289</sup>

Moreover, the Church linked groups often collaborate with the Socialist linked groups in organizing their protests. In fact, the Garda Tînăra participated alongside with the above-mentioned Church organizations and the Foundation Din Suflet Foundation<sup>290</sup> at the March for Families.

All these organizations and social groups nominally promote their own values. However, when analysed from the general perspective, they all share links to the Orthodox Church and/or the Socialist Party and actively promote a Pro-Russian or Anti-European values agenda.

### Conclusions and recommendations

In order to tackle social exclusion and discrimination, it is important to understand the processes by which they vulnerable groups are excluded, e.g. inefficient functioning of institutions, behaviour, and traditions, and the specific features that reproduce the prevailing social attitudes, bias, stereotypes and other values.

The main reason for the frequent violations and threats to equality is the lack of efficient mechanisms and commitment, to implement existing policies and international obligations that Moldova undertook to perform.

---

<sup>285</sup> Moldova: Reject 'Gay Propaganda' Law, Human Rights Watch, June 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/21/moldova-reject-gay-propaganda-law>

<sup>286</sup> Old Fashioned Skulduggery Overshadows the Elections in Moldova, Emerging Europe, November 2016

<http://emerging-europe.com/voices/voices-intl-relations/old-fashioned-skulduggery-overshadows-the-elections-in-moldova/>

<sup>287</sup> Promo Lex: Report no.2 Observation Mission New Local Election of May 20, 2018, See chapter V, May 2018 [https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/RAPORT-nr.2\\_MO-Promo-LEX\\_ALN\\_20.05\\_eng-1.pdf](https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/RAPORT-nr.2_MO-Promo-LEX_ALN_20.05_eng-1.pdf),

<sup>288</sup> Website of The Young Guard (in Moldovan language) <http://gardatinara.md/md/>

<sup>289</sup> From a Declaration released by Victoria Grosu, leader of The Young Guard, (in Moldovan language) October 2016

<http://gardatinara.md/md/top/viktoriya-grosu-vlast-prenebregaet-nravstvennostyu-i-traditsionnymi-tsennostyami/>

<sup>290</sup> The Din Suflet Foundation (<https://www.facebook.com/dinsufletrm/>) is a non-profit organization, headed by Galina Dodon, the First Lady of Republic of Moldovan. Despite the fact that the foundation claims its independence, it openly sustains Socialists illiberal positions, proving the existence of deep relations between them.

For this, the authors and their organization Promo-LEX recommends that:

- The government should allocate adequate funding to national policies and action plans aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against vulnerable civil society actors, ensuring inclusive education and equal opportunities in employment;
- Authorities should intensify the efforts to prevent and combat hate speech at all levels, including in electoral campaigns
- National Audio-Visual Centre should elaborate an efficient monitoring mechanism to identify and sanction discrimination in media; and
- The Government should develop and conduct systematic raising awareness campaigns to promote diversity and tolerance in Moldova.

## The 'Nation-Army' concept: The story of failed national-militaristic propaganda in Armenia

Anna Pambukchyan<sup>291</sup>

In October 2016, the 'nation army' concept was brought onto the agenda of Armenian political life by the then newly appointed Defence Minister Vigen Sargsyan, something that would come to be presented as the core of Armenia's defence strategy from October 2016 to April 2018. Although the concept was named the core of the government program by Sargsyan himself, it is hard even today to define what the "nation-army" ideology is, two years after the introduction of the concept. According to the now former Defence Minister Vigen Sargsyan, "The idea of "nation-army" is that all the governmental bodies, civilians and anybody else must precisely realize their role in the defence of the country."<sup>292</sup> Furthermore, almost two years after the launch of the 'nation-army' concept and the resignation of Vigen Sargsyan from the post of Defence Minister in May 2018 in the aftermath of the so-called 'Velvet Revolution',<sup>293</sup> there are still a number of questions concerning the "nation-army" concept that require answers, in case future governments seek to revive its principles.

Among the many questions concerning the 'nation-army' concept, the most important one refers to its inherent nature. This paper seeks to find an answer to this question. Furthermore, this paper aims to analyse the methods of dissemination of the 'nation-army' concept among the population and the current state of affairs regarding its dissemination.

### Nation-army concept

The idea of the nation-army initiated a wide public debate in the period of October 2016 – May 2018. After that period and despite a large number of discussions on the essence of the 'nation-army' model, today it is hard to properly define this concept. The most important reason for this ambiguity is that the concept was never written on paper. Hence, definitions of the concept are based on the speeches of state officials, and one single document - the 'Seven Year Army Modernization Program' published in March 2018. The document states that the modernization plan of Armenia should be based on the pillars of the 'nation-army' concept. According to the document, the five pillars of "nation-army" are leadership, respect towards law and humanism, progress, innovation and inclusiveness. Among those pillars the first one, leadership, was the most distressing for the civil society. According to it, the Armenian army was supposed to become 'a smithy of leaders'.<sup>294</sup> Furthermore, according to Vigen Sargsyan himself, the aim of the government was "to make the Armenian army a school for the society, shaping a more patriotic generation."<sup>295</sup> The nation-army concept was also aimed at erasing the existing institutional division between the army and the society.<sup>296</sup> As Vigen Sargsyan states, "the society cannot be isolated from the army and vice versa." The ideology was claimed to be about the deep respect and trust for the army, the serious attitude towards the service in the military field, finding each citizen's proper place in the country's defence system.<sup>297</sup> These and other similar statements by the government have led to a conclusion that the aim of the 'nation-army' concept was to increase the influence of the army within the society, hence, further militarize the country. No wonder the

---

<sup>291</sup> Anna Pambukchyan is the Monitoring Programs Coordinator at Union of Informed Citizens NGO. Moreover, as one of the leading experts of UIC she prepares research articles on Armenian foreign policy, EU-Armenia relations and democracy related issues. Ms. Pambukchyan holds an MA degree from College of Europe in European Interdisciplinary Studies and from Central European University in International Relations and European Studies.

<sup>292</sup> Defence Minister of Armenia Elaborated on the "Nation-Army" Principle, Armedia, October 2016, <http://armedia.am/eng/news/40901/defense-minister-of-armenia-elaborated-on-the-nation-army-principle.html>

<sup>293</sup> Country-wide protests in Armenia in April-May 2018 that lead to massive political changes and put end to the two decades long rule of the Republican Party of Armenia in the country.

<sup>294</sup> The Modernization Plan of Armed Forces of Republic of Armenia in 2018-2024. Extension to the decree number NH-103-A of the President of Armenia from February 17, 2018.

<sup>295</sup> Defence Minister of Armenia Elaborated on the "Nation-Army" Principle, Armedia, October 2016, <http://armedia.am/eng/news/40901/defense-minister-of-armenia-elaborated-on-the-nation-army-principle.html>

<sup>296</sup> "Nation-Army" ideology does not lead to the militarization of the state: Vigen Sargsyan, Armenpress, October 2016, <https://armenpress.am/arm/news/865849/azg-banak-gaxaparakhosutyuny-bnav-chi-tanum-petutyun.html>

<sup>297</sup> Nation-Army: A model for development of collective potential, Speech by Armenian Minister of Defence Vigen Sargsyan at "Nation-Army: A model for development of collective potential" session of the Sixth Armenia-Diaspora Forum, Ministry of Defence official website, September 2018, <http://www.mil.am/en/news/4953>

'nation-army' concept was characterized by a number of Armenian civil society organizations as propaganda of an artificial top-to-bottom national-militaristic ideology. Armenia's liberal civil society groups were particularly criticizing the militarization effect of the concept, the dominant role the concept had planned for the army within society,<sup>298</sup> the anti-democratic essence of the concept<sup>299</sup>, the social inequality<sup>300</sup> of the programs offered in the framework of nation-army concept<sup>301</sup> and the silencing of public demands to initiate a fight against the corruption within the army.<sup>302</sup> In sum, civil society, alongside opposition and independent media were claiming that the 'nation-army' was not only is failing to solve problems in the army, but strengthening autocratic tendencies in the country.

### The propaganda of the 'nation-army' ideology

According to the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, propaganda is the 'expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals and groups with reference to predetermined ends'.<sup>303</sup> The Encyclopaedia Britannica, defines propaganda as a systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols (words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, designs on postage stamps, etc.).<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, the concepts spread by propaganda do not occur naturally and would not exist if they were not created and developed artificially.<sup>305</sup> To sum up, the propaganda is a systematic, deliberately designed effort to influence the opinions and actions of others via dissemination of artificial ideology. Hence, the question is whether the 'nation-army' concept can be characterized as propaganda.

The artificial character of the 'nation-army' concept was clear from the moment of its introduction. On May 5<sup>th</sup> 2017 Vigen Sargsyan mentioned that the nation-army is already a reality because there is one soldier per 40 people, i.e. "we are a nation-army, whether you want it or not".<sup>306</sup> Although the Minister of Defence had stated on a number of occasions that Armenians already are a nation-army and the 'nation-army' ideology is a mere institutionalization of objective reality,<sup>307</sup> these claims did not correspond to reality. In fact, the term 'nation-army' itself had appeared in Armenian media only once before October 2016. In October 2014, 'Founding Parliament',<sup>308</sup> an Armenian civil initiative, issued a press release suggesting the creation of a Nation-Army Public Committee.<sup>309</sup> However this suggestion of had never been a topic of public debate prior to the Government's launch of the concept. Moreover, it was unnoticed to such an extent that when Vigen Sargsyan brought the 'nation-army' concept to the core of the Armenian defence agenda in 2016, almost nobody remembered that it had previously been a suggestion of this civic initiative.

<sup>298</sup> The nation-army militarization must not exist in Armenia: it is the guarantee of the Republican Party of Armenia's endurance, 1in.am, November 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5W3titXMOk>

<sup>299</sup> Nation-army: Necessary mobilization against danger or deeper militarization?, Armtimes, June 2017, <http://armtimes.com/hy/article/113891>

<sup>300</sup> One of the two alternative military service programs, offered in the framework of the 'nation-army' concept, was called 'I am' was offering financial reimbursement (around 10 thousand USD) for an additional year of military service to the two years of the compulsory military service. The money would be paid by the state at the end of the contract. The second program was called "I have the honor" and was offering academic deferment for 3 years of military service instead of compulsory two as an officer. In both cases the soldiers would serve on the borderline. CSOs have criticized both programs because they could be attractive only for the soldiers from financially insecure families, hence the soldiers standing on the borderline would be mostly from poor families.

<sup>301</sup> Factor TV, "What issues are solving the new programs of the nation army concept 'I am' and 'I have the honour' programs, May 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mM2vROAaimM>

<sup>302</sup> A1plusnews, Will the nation-army concept increase the fight efficiency of the Armenian army, May 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLx2EYKkCxo>

<sup>303</sup> Institute for Propaganda Analysis, Inc. 1937. Monthly Letter Volume 1: [https://archive.org/stream/IPAVol1/IPA\\_vol1\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/IPAVol1/IPA_vol1_djvu.txt)

<sup>304</sup> Propaganda, Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda>

<sup>305</sup> Black, Jay. How to Understand Propaganda. 2001. Journal of Mass Media Ethics 16: 121-137

<sup>306</sup> Orakarg, Public TV, May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-wmPPiYbm4&feature=youtu.be&t=337%5C>

<sup>307</sup> Nation-Army: A model for development of collective potential, Speech by Armenian Minister of Defence Vigen Sargsyan at "Nation-Army: A model for development of collective potential" session of the Sixth Armenia-Diaspora Forum, RA Ministry of Defence official website, September 2018, <http://www.mil.am/en/news/4953>

<sup>308</sup> Founding parliament is a radical opposition group mostly comprised of Nagorno-Karabakh war (1988-1994) veterans. On July 17 2016, a group of armed men (mostly members of the Founding Parliament) take over a police station in Yerevan, killing a police officer and taking several others hostage. The demands of the gunmen included the release of Jirayr Sefilian, leader of the radical opposition Founding Parliament and Karabakh war veteran, who was arrested one month earlier for allegedly planning an armed insurrection.

<sup>309</sup> Nation-Army Public Committee is being formed, A1+, October 2014, <http://www.a1plus.am/1340975.html>



In this context, it should be noted that the army has always enjoyed wide public respect as one of the most valued state institutions within Armenia. According to the annual Caucasus Barometer survey, in 2015, before the introduction of the 'nation-army' concept, 76% of the respondents in Armenia fully or somewhat trusted the army.<sup>310</sup> Despite the respect towards the army and war veterans, Armenian public never formed a public demand for a national-militaristic agenda. Interestingly, after the intense clashes on the borderline with Azerbaijan in April 2016 was widely characterized as war inside the country, there was a significant increase of patriotic feelings. Simultaneously a public discussion on corruption issues within the army increased to an unprecedented level. Overall public debate in the period between April and October 2016 concentrated on corruption issues in the army. In 2016, military expenditure of Armenia comprised 15.1% of overall government expenditure.<sup>311</sup> Despite the significant amount of funding allocated to the military sphere, the April 2016 fighting showed that there was a significant shortage of weapons and ammunition in the army. The soldiers standing on the frontline had no proper protective equipment; there was also shortage of food and fuel on the frontline. This exposure raised questions concerning the allocation of military expenditure. What particularly sparked the anger of the public was the news and official statements that revealed during the April 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> 2016 fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh the Armenian forces were using weapons and military hardware produced in the 1980s.<sup>312</sup> In April 2016, the opposition and civil society representatives started a public discussion about the multimillion dollar expenses of government officials and agencies on luxury cars and complexes, as well as their offshore businesses.<sup>313</sup> The corruption issues were widely discussed in different platforms before the introduction of the 'nation-army' ideology. After its introduction the public demand to fight the corruption in the army automatically became secondary. The discussion of the concept and its shortcomings suddenly became the main discussion topic for the opposition and civil society. This was natural, as far as the 'nation-army' and its anti-democratic value-system became the most significant problem of the Armenian military sphere in the following one and a half years.

The artificial and top-to-bottom character of this ideology was most visible on social media. Facebook is the main social media platform for public discussions on politics in Armenia. Monitoring of Facebook posts on the topic of the 'nation-army' concept in the period of October 2016 to May 2018 reveals that the ideology was widely promoted on the pages managed by state institutions. For instance, the Yerevan municipality's Facebook page has been the most active in using the #nation\_army hashtag on Facebook. A large number of other state institutions and their employees have made centralized propaganda of the 'nation-army' concept. The Armenian Police, Yerevan State University, a number of public schools and universities, official student unions, official student debate clubs and councils were also active promoters of the concept. Furthermore, several government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) were actively participating in the propaganda of the concept along with the state institutions. The 'For Armenian Soldier' NGO was the most active organization that promoted the concept on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The For Armenian Soldier NGO was founded in late August 2016 and is a youth-oriented NGO working purely on army-related issues. In August 2017 they launched a 'Nation-army' project focused on strengthening ties between the army and society, which was financed by the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs.<sup>314</sup>

A number of other government-backed NGOs participated in similar work. For example, the Youth Foundation of Armenia, which is a state-funded foundation, financed a school poster competition entitled

---

<sup>310</sup> Caucasus Barometer 2015 Results Presented, Caucasus Research Resource Center, April 2016, <http://www.crrc.am/514-Caucasus-Barometer-2015-Results-Presented?lang=en>

<sup>311</sup> SIPRI Military Expenditure Database for 1949-2017, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

<sup>312</sup> Money For Army: Anti-corruption sentiments grow in Armenia amid Karabakh escalation, ArmeniaNow.com, April 2016,

<https://www.armenianow.com/en/society/2016/04/15/armenia-panama-papers-offshore-scandal-mihran-poghosyan-karabakh/1067/>

<sup>313</sup> Ibid

<sup>314</sup> Press release by For Armenian Soldier NGO, banak.info, August 2017, <https://www.banak.info/2017/08/mamuli-haxordagutyun.html>

'Armenian soldier.'<sup>315</sup> The Gevorgyan Martial Art School<sup>316</sup> and VoMa Centre (The Art of Staying Alive Centre)<sup>317</sup> NGOs had special 'nation-army' projects. The financial sources of both organizations are not public, but they were both publicly perceived to be associated with the former government. The main characteristic uniting all of the above-mentioned NGOs and foundations is that the beneficiaries of their projects are mostly, the youth (12-25 age range).

The Armenian Church has also expressed its support for the 'nation-army' concept. The head of the Armenian Apostolic Church Catholicos, Karekin II, announced his support for the concept, going so far as announcing, in a October 2016 meeting with Defence Minister Vigen Sargsyan, that every child of Armenian nation must consider himself a part of Armenian army. The Catholicos promised that the Armenian Church will make efforts and will use every opportunity to form that public consciousness.<sup>318</sup> The need to incorporate the church into the presentation of the 'nation-army' concept was stressed on a number of occasions also by the Minister of Defence. According to the Ministry of Defence (MOD), the 'nation-army' was the "value system that on the firm basis of Armenian Apostolic Holy Church is preparing its soldiers to the service in the domain of morality and principles."<sup>319</sup> The Armenian Apostolic Church has always been active supporter of the Armenian army. The active presence of Apostolic Church priests has long been raising concerns among national-minorities and human rights defenders, but if formerly this involvement was not officially supported by the government, the 'nation-army' concept came to institutionalize the church's involvement in the armed forces.

The youth was the main target group of the 'nation-army' propaganda. From October 2016 to May 2018, the concept was widely promoted by state-owned education institutions. In this period, the cooperation between the MOD and the Ministry of Education had grown extensively. In February 2017, MoD Spokesman, Artsrun Hovhannisyan, announced during a program on the Ararat TV channel that the 'nation-army' concept was also "the work that will be carried out in universities and in schools, through close cooperation with them."<sup>320</sup> At the Nation-Army conference on April 20, 2017 the Minister of Education and Science Levon Mkrtchyan stated: "The main goal of the Armenian education system is to ensure the continuity of the Armenian kind." He emphasized the importance of patriotic ideology and the return of Preliminary Military Training<sup>321</sup> teachers to schools.<sup>322</sup> Deliberate systematic propaganda of the 'nation-army' concept has been implemented in the public educational institutions of the republic. A large number of secondary schools hosted a poster illustration contest called 'Armenian Soldier' run by the Youth Foundation of Armenia. The official aim of the contest was -to strengthen 'nation-army' ties. Schools all over the country had special lessons on such topics as 'The Role and the Importance of the Army' and the 'Nation-Army Concept'. Officers of the Armenian Police Juvenile Affairs Department also participated in these events. In particular, the police officers delivered lectures on such topics as 'Army-Soldier-Homeland', 'A Student, a Police Officer, and a Soldier - Devotees of the Homeland'. The active participation of the police officers in the dissemination of 'nation-army' ideology within schools also proved the concept was deliberately disseminate to the public.

The Armenian Public TV channel and other media outlets which are publicly perceived to be under the control of former government have also participated in the dissemination of the 'nation-army' concept. The case of Armenian Public TV channel is particularly interesting. During its prime-time news and current affairs programs, Armenian Public TV allocated extensive amount of time to the coverage of 'nation-army' concept.

---

315 The posters competition entitled 'Armenian Soldier' was summed up, Armenian Youth Foundation, November 2017, [http://heh.am/?module=article&utility=show\\_article&id\\_article=3415&lang=am](http://heh.am/?module=article&utility=show_article&id_article=3415&lang=am)

316 A comprehensive military training program will help to strengthen the roots of the 'Nation-army' concept, March 2018, <https://168.am/2018/03/10/919379.html>

317 Voma center's website's section on 'nation-army', [http://voma.am/am/army/analytic?url=Azg\\_Banak](http://voma.am/am/army/analytic?url=Azg_Banak)

318 Vigen Sargsyan: Nation and Army should be considered as one, Mediamax, October 2016, <https://mediamax.am/am/news/society/20153/>

319 'Nation-army', Ministry of Defence of RA, <http://www.mil.am/hy/pages/21>

320 Cornerstone, Ararat TV channel, February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcv0JbuawOI>

321 Preliminary Military Training is a mandatory course in the Armenian high school program, where student are thought history and regulations of the Armenian army and practical military skills, such as how to use Kalashnikov

322 Our country does not have a rear or a border, front line or back line. Levon Mkrtchyan, RA Ministry of Education and Science official website, <http://edu.am/index.php/am/news/view/6568>

The coverage of the concept was always positive, and critical content was never broadcast by the channel. Furthermore, while online media and social media platforms had often been used as platforms for criticizing the “nation-army” concept, its shortcomings have never been discussed in the framework of Public TV channel’s programs or news. The taxpayer funded Armenian Public TV channel is a part of the Public Television and Radio Company, which, according to its legal obligations, is supposed to be governed by principles of objectivity, democracy, impartiality, diversity and pluralism.<sup>323</sup> Despite this, Armenian Public TV, due to its reluctance to criticize any initiative of the government, has always been publicly perceived as the official channel of ruling governments.

In the period of October 2016 to May 2018, the Armenian Public TV channel not only refused to provide objective coverage of the “nation-army” concept, but also refused to cover large waves of public criticism of the concept. At least twice, large waves of public criticism of the concept were discussed in the country. The first discussion concerned the introduction of ‘nation-army’ concept and appeared in October 2016, while the second concerned the new military service law in November-December 2017 which deprived students of academic deferment. Both initiatives raised public discord and -described as anti-democratic. Despite the lack of support among wider public circles and within civil society, both initiatives were largely promoted by experts and opinion makers perceived to be pro-governmental. The latter group was trying to justify the initiatives mostly via patriotic claims and attempts to present Vigen Sargsyan as a smart and high-level statesman and a promising strategic thinker. Armenian politics is very much centred on personalities and not ideologies, while Vigen Sargsyan always left an impression of an educated politician. In a country where criminal oligarchs had been dominating the politics for two decades, this was an effective tactic to influence wider public opinion. The Public TV was also protecting the official position. Critical discussions on the ‘nation-army’ concept were reflected exclusively in social media and online media platforms, but was never broadcast on Public TV. Besides exclusively positive coverage of the topic, the Armenian public TV channel satellite version also prepared and broadcast a separate program under the title ‘Nation-army’. The program could be easily classified as a 20- minute bimonthly promo-video of the concept.

The dissemination of the ‘nation-army’ concept was also organized via posters, banners, stamps, exhibitions, debates and public discussions organized within a number of universities by the official student unions and student clubs, and even songs. For example, in August 2017, the boy-band Detq, in collaboration with the MOD, while they were still conducting their military service, released a song titled “One Nation, One Army”.<sup>324</sup> The band had a number of videos which were prepared thanks to the financial support of - ex-president Serzh Sargsyan’s wife and a number of state foundations. Later in January 2018, the band released a video for the same song. The band thanked the Pyunik Foundation and MOD for their support in the preparation of the video. The Pyunik Foundation is a famous GONGO with a large number of privileges and whose executive director is Levon Sargsyan, ex-president Serzh Sargsyan’s brother. Before the ‘Velvet Revolution’ the foundation was receiving significant funding from Yerevan municipality and Yerevan Foundation<sup>325</sup> and since the revolution it has come under investigation for possible tax evasion.<sup>326</sup> Other examples of symbols were posters and banners devoted to the ‘nation-army’ and distributed all over Yerevan by unknown groups.<sup>327</sup>

Another interesting aspect of the concept was its rapid fall into oblivion. After the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan from the post of Prime Minister on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018<sup>328</sup> and following the resignation of Vigen

---

<sup>323</sup> Law on Television and Radio of Republic of Armenia. Chapter 4, Article 26. <http://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=73839>

<sup>324</sup> Detq - One Nation, One Army, August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSHburD0Ekw>

<sup>325</sup> Yerevan Foundation was a daughter foundation of the Yerevan Municipality and is currently also under investigation.

<sup>326</sup> The new revelation of the State Revenue Committee: Damage of 300 million AMD, rummage was performed in Pyunik foundation, News.am, June 2018, <https://news.am/arm/news/458273.html>

<sup>327</sup> Despite a large number of requests to Yerevan Municipality it was not possible to find out who had paid for the banners and posters as the Municipality would not provide the information.

<sup>328</sup> Former President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan initiated constitutional changes in Armenia in 2015 to switch from presidential system to parliamentary. In April 2018, he made an attempt to become the Prime-Minister of the country, but was forced to resign as a result of massive decentralized protests all over Armenia.

Sargsyan from the post of Minister of Defence, it was almost forgotten in two weeks. After the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, the concept is slowly being withdrawn from the political discourse of Armenia. Since mid-May 2018 to mid-June 2018, the 'nation-army' concept has barely been mentioned in local media. In this period, any mentioning of the concept is in the context of corruption in the army and, hence, is solely negative. Meanwhile, state institutions, including Yerevan Municipality,<sup>329</sup> which prior to the change of government were actively using the nation army hashtag on Facebook, have barely mentioned the concept after the change of the government. The quick withdrawal of 'nation-army' concept from the inner political agenda of the country is another proof of its artificial top-to-bottom character.

## Conclusions

The 'nation-army' concept was introduced to the Armenian political agenda by former Defence Minister. Prior to its introduction, despite the high respect towards the Army and high level of patriotism, there has never been any public demand to introduce and accept such a concept as an official ideology. This leads to the conclusion that the concept was driven by artificial top-to-bottom propaganda. After the introduction of the concept, the public debate on corruption cases in the army, which had prevailed inside Armenia after April 2016, was silenced. Hence, the concept had an aim to manipulate public opinion and strengthen the image of the army as an untouchable institution which cannot become - subject of criticism.

In order to promote the concept, a number of methods and symbols were used, starting from open lessons at primary schools to the writing of songs. Moreover, the active participation of state education institutions and Armenian Public TV channel in the promotion of the 'nation-army' concept is a misuse of public funds. A number of GONGOs and the Church have also supported the concept and participated in its promotion among school and university students. Furthermore, the participation of Church was actively welcomed by Vigen Sargsyan.

Luckily for Armenia, the change of government is leading to the gradual oblivion of the concept. The Velvet revolution has frozen, if not put an end to propaganda of this militaristic concept for an indefinite time. Despite the high level of militarization in Armenia, the new government has so far been reluctant to continue the systematic propaganda of the concept. The newly appointed Minister of Defence David Tonoyan in the last two months has made only two public statements concerning the 'nation-army' concept. First of all, in the framework of a meeting with the first participants of the 'I am' program, he mentioned that is an important project for the army.<sup>330</sup> Secondly, in an interview with Mediamax, he was asked if the concept will be continued. His answer to this question was not clear. By stressing the objective reality and the need for national consolidation because of the security threats he stated that for him the most important is the essence, not the name.<sup>331</sup> On the other hand, unlike the previous one and a half years, there is no centralized 'nation-army' propaganda by state institutions. This allows to conclude that the new government of Armenia so far has been reluctant to continue the propaganda of 'nation-army' concept. Moreover, the newly appointed secretary of the Armenian Security Council, Armen Grigoryan in one of his interviews mentioned that he has always had a negative opinion of 'nation-army' concept and that an adequate society does not need such an ideology.<sup>332</sup> The new Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan has avoided using the term, once again proving that the propaganda of 'nation-army' concept is not in the list of his priorities. This does not mean that Armenia will take the road to demilitarization. Demilitarization of the country can be possible only if Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is resolved, but at the moment Armenia is – slowly not becoming a militaristic state based on the 'nation-army' ideology.

---

<sup>329</sup> The Municipality and Mayor of Yerevan did not change in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution.

<sup>330</sup> 'I am' is an important program for the armed forces: David Tonoyan, banak.info, May 2018, <https://www.banak.info/2018/05/Es-em-zinvac-ujeri-hamar-karevor-cragir-e-Davit-Tonoyan.html>

<sup>331</sup> David Tonoyan: Continuity is a very important factor, Mediamax, May 2018, <https://mediamax.am/am/news/interviews/28677/>

<sup>332</sup> Armen Grigoryan, Adequate society does not need a 'nation-army', Tert.am, May 2018, <http://www.tert.am/am/news/2018/05/21/armen-grigoryan/2690730>

## The Changing Landscape of Uncivil Society in Kyrgyzstan

Dr Eric McGlinchey<sup>333</sup>

Kyrgyzstan is correctly regarded as among the most democratic leaning of the post-Soviet states. It is the only country in Central Asia that consistently earns a “partly free” rating in Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World rankings whereas all the other Central Asian countries are rated as “not free.” Kyrgyz citizens, moreover, are themselves inclined toward democratic governance. Seventy-one percent of Kyrgyz surveyed in Gallup's 2016 World Poll agreed with the statement: ‘democracy is important for the development of the country’.<sup>334</sup> How is it, then, that a polity that with both a democratically-oriented population as well as the region's most competitive political institutions is concomitantly a polity home to elements of illiberal civil society?

In recent years Kyrgyzstan has seen growing ethno-nationalism, deadly ethnic riots, and an up-swell in anti-LGBT rhetoric. Kyrgyz citizens, moreover, are more comfortable expressing support for ‘suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets’ in defense of Islam than are people elsewhere in Central Asia.<sup>335</sup> These illiberal movements and sentiments have different wellsprings. Decades of tension between the titular population and the ethnic Uzbek minority in southern Kyrgyzstan has sparked periodic waves of economic ethno-nationalism in the country. Anti-LGBT alarmism, pervasive in the Russian media, offers ready-narratives for political and social entrepreneurs championing ‘traditional’ Kyrgyz values. And frequent images in the press of civilians dying as a result of US and coalition air strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria may be driving public support for violence in defense of Islam.

In addition to these drivers it is necessary, albeit admittedly uncomfortable, to acknowledge one additional reason for why Kyrgyzstan may be witnessing an uptick in illiberal civil society: democracy. Kyrgyz politics, in contrast to more autocratic states elsewhere in Central Asia, is competitive. Illiberalism sells in Kyrgyzstan, just as illiberalism is now popular in Europe and the United States. Illiberal ideas, moreover, find space to circulate in a free press – something Kyrgyzstan has and other Central Asian states do not. This is not to say Kyrgyzstan would do well to abandon competitive politics. Central Asian leaders, most notably Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, have used the specter of militant Islam as well as other potential societal ills as justification for autocratic rule and mass repression. Confronting uncivil society in a competitive political environment is far preferable to autocracy and repression. Indeed, illiberalism in Kyrgyzstan, most notably Kyrgyzstan's flirtations with ethno-nationalism, have proven episodic. As such, there is evidence to suggest deliberative democracy, just as it may facilitate the rise of illiberalism, may also hasten the demise of uncivil social movements.

### **Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism**

Kyrgyzstan has endured two episodes of deadly ethnic conflict. Riots between the titular majority and ethnic Uzbeks in 1990 resulted in over 300 deaths. Ethnic riots in 2010 left nearly 400 people dead. While all sides suffered unspeakable tragedies, the casualties and property loss in both the 1990 and 2010 conflicts were most heavily concentrated among the minority Uzbek population in southern Kyrgyzstan.

---

<sup>333</sup> Eric McGlinchey is an Associate Professor of Politics and Government in George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government. Dr. McGlinchey is the author of *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (2011). He is the Principal Investigator for the study, *Russian, Chinese, Militant, and Ideologically Extremist Messaging Effects on United States Favorability Perceptions in Central Asia* (Minerva Research Initiative, January 2017 – December 2019). Grants from the National Science Foundation, the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, the International Research & Exchanges Board, the Social Science Research Council, and the U.S. Department of State have also funded his research. Dr. McGlinchey has published widely in academic journals and the press. He has contributed to U.S. government studies, including the 2007 USAID-funded Study of Political Party Assistance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia as well as three 2013 USAID-funded risk assessments on Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia. Dr. McGlinchey received his Doctorate from Princeton University. This essay partly draws on research undertaken as part of the project *Russian, Chinese, Militant, and Ideologically Extremist Messaging Effects on United States Favorability Perceptions in Central Asia*, funded by the US Department of Defense and the US Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory under the Minerva Research Initiative, award W911-NF-17-1-0028. The views expressed here are those of the author and should not be attributed to the US Department of Defense or the US Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory.

<sup>334</sup> Gallup Inc, The Gallup World Poll, Gallup.com, <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/232838/world-poll.aspx>.

<sup>335</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, Pew Research Center, April 2013, [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Muslim/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf).



Although both the 1990 and 2010 riots were preceded by specific ‘sparks’—a land dispute arising out of Gorbachev's economic reforms in 1990 and a fight between an ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek at a casino in 2010—the enduring economic and political disparities produced an environment that have been conducive to episodic conflict. In southern Kyrgyzstan's largest city, Osh, for example, the 1989 census placed the ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek populations at near parity—32.2 percent Kyrgyz and 32.6 percent Uzbek.<sup>336</sup> The Kyrgyz, however, held the lion-share of the city's political offices whereas Uzbeks controlled a disproportionate share of the city's lucrative industries – retail, restaurants, and taxis. Further straining relations was the reality that ethnic Kyrgyz were relative newcomers to Osh and other major southern cities such as Jalal-Abad and Uzgen. Housing stock in these cities was predominantly in Uzbek hands, a reality that the 1990 land dispute and the 2010 destruction of Uzbek property demonstrates the anger at this amongst ethnic Kyrgyz.

Kyrgyz politicians have repeatedly sought to capitalize on this ethnic-based political and economic disconnect. Osh's Mayor in the early 1980s, Mukhit Dzhambekov, promised to bulldoze single family homes and, in their place, build high-rise apartments.<sup>337</sup> And Osh's Mayor in 2010, Melis Myrzakmatov, suggested that a third of Osh's population had to be removed from ‘seismically active zones’ and resettled in high-rise apartments.<sup>338</sup> Veiled in the language of modernity and safety, both the Soviet and post-Soviet mayors' proposals were designed to appeal to a titular (Kyrgyz) population that feels economically dispossessed in their home country.

Although the 1990 and 2010 ethnic riots shared the same enduring structural cause, the political aftermaths of the two events were noticeably different. Kyrgyzstan's new leader (more precisely, the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic's new leader) in 1990, Askar Aakaev, appealed for ethnic unity and the slogan, ‘Kyrgyzstan, our Shared Home’, could be found on billboards in all major towns and cities. In 2010 the message was not unity, but rather, ethno-nationalist one-upmanship. The Kyrgyz parliament rejected the OSCE's report on the June 2010 riots, arguing that the investigation wrongly concluded that “only one ethnic group has committed crimes, ignoring the victims and deaths of this group.... and unfairly portrayed ethnic Uzbeks as ‘defenseless victims.’”<sup>339</sup> President Otunbaeva's spokesman, Azimbek Beknazarov, declared the Osh Mayor, Myrzakmatov, not an instigator but, rather, a “hero of the events.”<sup>340</sup> And, as a final punctuation to the deadly episode, in May 2011 the Kyrgyz parliament declared the author of the OSCE report, Kimmo Kiljunen, *persona non grata*.

The critical difference between 1990 and 2010 and the reason why ethno-nationalism saw a marked upswing following the second episode of deadly riots and not the first is that Kyrgyz politics in the 2010s had become mass-based and competitive. Stressing one's nationalist bona fides, even for someone like President Otunbaeva—perceived both in Kyrgyzstan and abroad as a strong supporter of democracy—was essential for any politician who wanted to win or remain in office. Not to appear sufficiently pro-Kyrgyz would have resulted in reformers like Otunbaeva being outflanked by virulent nationalists in Kyrgyzstan's newly popular Ata-Jurt party.

Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism has waned in recent years. Ata-Jurt, the leading vote winner in the October 2010 Kyrgyz parliamentary elections, fell to second place behind the Social Democratic Party in the 2015 vote. The decline in Ata-Jurt's influence and the attraction of ethno-nationalism more broadly can be attributed to several factors. Although difficult to affix firm numbers, the razing of Uzbek neighborhoods and destruction of Uzbek commercial property in Osh and Jalal-Abad shifted the economic balance toward ethnic Kyrgyz in

---

<sup>336</sup> Eric McGlinchey, *Fast Forwarding the Brezhnev Years*, *Russian History* 41, no. 3 (July 21, 2014): 373–91 <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763316-04103005>.

<sup>337</sup> Nicholas Daniloff, *A Soviet Fiefdom Where Two Worlds Clash*, *U.S. News & World Report*, July 1982.

<sup>338</sup> Uchkun Tashpaev: *Bolee Treti Zhitelei Goroda Osha Prozhivaet v Zone Tektonicheskikh Razlomov*, *24.Kg*, March 2010.

<sup>339</sup> Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, *Head Of Commission On Kyrgyz Violence Declared ‘Persona Non Grata*, May 2011, [https://www.rferl.org/a/head\\_of\\_commission\\_on\\_kyrgyz\\_violence\\_declared\\_persona\\_non\\_grata/24205930.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/head_of_commission_on_kyrgyz_violence_declared_persona_non_grata/24205930.html).

<sup>340</sup> *Kyrgyz President's Envoy Slams NGOs over Ethnic Riots, Calls Osh Mayor Hero*, *Kyrgyz Telegraph Agency (KyrTAG)*, June 2011.



these southern cities. Relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, moreover, have improved under the new Uzbek presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev since 2016. As a result, rumors of ethnic Uzbek secession, widespread in 2010, are not credible today. Ethnic Uzbek political leaders, moreover, are far less visible than they were in 2010. Businessman and former MP, Kadyrjan Batyrov, perhaps the most prominent ethnic Uzbek in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, was tried in absentia and found guilty of instigating the 2010 riots. Batyrov now lives in exile in Sweden. A final factor driving the decline in Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism is the identification of new threats, for example the perceived threat the LGBT community poses to traditional values, around which Kyrgyz social and political entrepreneurs can mobilize.

### **An LGBT community under attack**

As with ethno-nationalism, so too do anti-LGBT movements in Kyrgyzstan draw on deep-rooted societal sentiments. Asked in Gallup's 2013 World if 'openly demonstrating a homosexual relationship' was morally acceptable or morally wrong, only 1.7 percent of Kyrgyz respondents agreed that open homosexuality was morally acceptable. Similarly, in a 2012 survey Pew conducted, only three percent of Kyrgyz agreed homosexuality is morally acceptable.<sup>341</sup> The 2012 Pew survey, moreover, revealed that attitudes toward homosexuality were invariant across demographics. In contrast to public opinion in the United States and Europe, where younger people are more accepting of homosexuality than are older cohorts, in Kyrgyzstan 2.8 percent of respondents under the age of 30 viewed homosexuality as morally acceptable whereas 3.2 percent of respondents 30 and over approved of homosexuality.

Despite widespread anti-LGBT sentiments in Kyrgyzstan, the LGBT community only recently became a target of political entrepreneurs. In January 2011 the Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice refused to register the LGBT Rights NGO called Pathfinder because the NGO's full name, the 'Alliance and Social Services of Gays and Lesbians—Pathfinder', references homosexuality. Such language, the Ministry of Justice concluded, can lead to the 'disintegration of moral and ethical norms and national traditions of the people of Kyrgyzstan'.<sup>342</sup> In May 2012 a Bishkek city court ruled a film entitled I Am Gay and Muslim, could not be shown at a human rights festival. In March 2014 150 protesters from the Kalys nationalist youth movement took to Bishkek's streets to demand parliament pass a law 'banning gay propaganda in Kyrgyzstan'.<sup>343</sup> A few weeks after the Kalys march, a group of Kyrgyz MPs introduced a bill that would punish 'calls to unconventional sexual relations'. The bill would make punishable by imprisonment the dissemination of information about 'non-traditional sexual orientations in the media' and severely restrict 'gatherings' that promote LGBT rights.<sup>344</sup> While Kyrgyzstan's anti-LGBT law remains under consideration, the question of same sex-marriage has been resolved. In 2016 Kyrgyz voters passed an amendment to the constitution defining marriage as a "union between a man and a woman."<sup>345</sup>

This 2011-2016 uptick in anti-LGBT activism can be attributed to two developments: (1) the European Union and the US. government's emphasis on LGBT rights in foreign policy and (2) Russia's effective politicization of LGBT rights as a political wedge to mobilize not only Russian society, but also post-communist societies more broadly against the EU and the US. In order to become an EU member or, moreover, in order to receive visa free travel to the EU and other closer agreements with it, countries must accept EU Directive 2000/78, a directive which prohibits 'discrimination based on religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation'.<sup>346</sup> While the prospect of US aid may be considerably less enticing than EU membership, the Obama

---

<sup>341</sup> The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society.

<sup>342</sup> Bektur Iskender, "Minyust otkazalsya registrirovat' organizatsiyu za «geyev i lesbiyanok» v nazvanii," *KLOOP.KG - Novosti Kyrgyzstana* (blog), January 2011, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2011/01/21/minyust-otkazalsya-registrirovat-organizatsiyu-za-geev-i-lesbiyanok-v-nazvanii/>.

<sup>343</sup> Khloya Geine, "Video: Miting protiv NPO i 'gey-propagandy' v Bishkeke," *KLOOP.KG - Novosti Kyrgyzstana* (blog), March 2014, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2014/03/12/video-miting-protiv-npo-i-gej-propagandy-v-bishkeke/>.

<sup>344</sup> Khloya Geine, "Deputaty predlagayut sazhat' za 'prizvyv k netraditsionnym seksual'nym otnosheniyam,'" *KLOOP.KG - Novosti Kyrgyzstana* (blog), March 2014, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2014/03/26/deputaty-predlagayut-sazhat-za-prizvy-vy-k-netraditsionny-m-seksual-ny-m-otnosheniyam/>.

<sup>345</sup> "Kyrgyz Voters Back Amendments On Same-Sex Marriage, Presidential Power," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-constitutional-referendum-voting/28168872.html>.

<sup>346</sup> "Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 Establishing a General Framework for Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation," <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2000/78/oj>.

administration also hinted at conditionality in a December 2011 Presidential Memorandum directing ‘all agencies engaged abroad to ensure that U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance promote and protect the human rights of LGBT persons.’<sup>347</sup>

Moscow has gone to extensive lengths to distinguish traditional values from what it portrays as deviant EU and US western values. Dmitri Kiselyov, a Russian television personality widely followed by Russians as well as Russian-speakers across the post-Soviet expanse, opined on Rossiya 1 in 2012 that not only is it appropriate to “fine gays for propagandizing homosexuality”, but also, “they should be prohibited from donating blood or sperm... and their hearts, in the case of a car accident, should be buried, or burned, as unfit for extending anyone’s life.”<sup>348</sup> Notably, a few months after making this statement, Putin elevated Kiselyov to director of the Russian State News Agency. The Russian parliament, for its part, passed a law in June 2013 making the promotion of ‘non-traditional relations’ punishable by a fine of 100,000 Rubles.

The Russian law is an inspiration for Kyrgyzstan’s ‘traditionalists.’ Kyrgyz MP Kurmanbek Dykanbaev, for example, explains that just like the Russian law, so too with the Kyrgyz law “it’s about promoting these forms of orientation in the media... especially among children.”<sup>349</sup> The Kyrgyz anti-LGBT law, again it is worth noting, has yet to be passed. Dykanbaev explained in 2014 that the Kyrgyz law was necessary because the “European mentality” on sexual orientation is at odds with the Kyrgyz mentality: “What is allowed in Holland contradicts Christianity and Islam. ... Both the Russian-speaking population and the Kyrgyz-speaking population do not support such Western standards. We must defend our children.”<sup>350</sup> The rise of the political right both in Europe and in the US may ease Kyrgyz MP concerns. If nothing else, the rise of the right in the US and the EU makes sloganeering against purportedly immoral and non-traditional western acceptance of diverse sexual orientations less politically effective. Paradoxically then, growing illiberalism in the west may prompt a decline of anti-LGBT activism in Kyrgyzstan.

### **Support for militant Islam**

Whereas the rise of the political right may point to a decline in the emphasis on LGBT rights in western diplomacy, there is little to suggest that the US or EU countries will curtail efforts to limit the spread of Islamist militancy. Kyrgyzstan, for more than a decade, was a partner to this effort. The Manas Transit Center was, until its closure in 2014, a central staging point for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) effort in Afghanistan. Kyrgyz politicians eventually soured on the ISAF’s presence at the country’s main international airport, and demanded western forces depart the Center. This turn in opinion was due in part to Moscow’s pressure, but also to growing suspicion of western tactics in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

The vast majority of Kyrgyz, like the majority of other Central Asian populations, self-identify as Muslim. Kyrgyz, however, are an outlier when it comes to expressed support for forms of militant Islam. In its 2012 poll of predominantly Muslim countries, Pew found only 66 percent of Kyrgyz respondents rejected ‘suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets’ in defense of Islam whereas 93 percent of Kazakh respondents and 76 percent of Tajik respondents rejected violence in defense of Islam. That Kyrgyz appear markedly more tolerant of violence in defense of Islam is likely attributable to two factors: (1) Kyrgyzstan’s comparatively open information space and (2) a considerably less oppressive political environment in which self-censorship is unnecessary. Engaged Central Asians know about the vast civilian casualties first hinted at in the Snowden and Manning leaks. Moreover, western journalists’ documentation of civilian casualties at the hands of coalition airstrikes—the findings of reports such as the New York Times ‘The Uncounted’—have circulated widely in the Central Asian press.<sup>351</sup> While these civilian casualties are

---

<sup>347</sup> “Presidential Memorandum -- International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons,” whitehouse.gov, December 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/06/presidential-memorandum-international-initiatives-advance-human-rights-l>.

<sup>348</sup> David Remnick, “Gay Rights and Putin’s Olympics,” *The New Yorker*, December 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/gay-rights-and-putins-olympics>.

<sup>349</sup> Geine, “Deputaty predlagayut sazhat’ za ‘prizvyv k netraditsionnym seksual’nym otnosheniyam.”

<sup>350</sup> Geine.

<sup>351</sup> , <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes.html>

widely known, they are not widely discussed across Central Asia. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, all other Central Asian states are secular autocracies. Voicing Islamist sentiments can land citizens in prison in these countries. In Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, citizens are free on-line and in person to express support of militancy when confronted with reports of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

Critically, there is little to suggest that outward expressions of militancy have translated into substantive Islamist mobilization within Kyrgyzstan. This makes sense in the environs of a competitive political system like Kyrgyzstan's. In both the case of Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism and anti-LGBT activism, local targets—ethnic Uzbeks and LGBT NGOs—can readily be identified against which to mobilize political support. Frustration at the mounting Muslim civilian casualties in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, while real, has no local target and, as such, limited political utility. There is some evidence that Kyrgyzstanis—approximately 600 according to the Kyrgyz government—have gone abroad to join militant Islamist groups.<sup>352</sup> Cases of domestic Islamist militancy within Kyrgyzstan, however, are rare and Islamist platforms are all but non-existent in Kyrgyz politics.

### **Kyrgyzstan in comparative context**

Viewed in the global context, Kyrgyzstan's periodic bouts with uncivil society are neither unusual nor puzzling. Ethno-nationalism and anti-LGBT sentiments wax and wane in western polities just as these sentiments come and go in Kyrgyzstan. Competitive politics, as the Weimar Germany case so poignantly illustrates, is no defense against illiberalism; just the opposite, competitive politics may time-to-time, prove the genesis of uncivil society.

This reality presents a dilemma for civil society advocates: democracy promotion, long the mantra of western government and international organization outreach efforts in Central Asia, offers no guarantee civil society will always flourish. Democracy promotion advances civil society only when paired with sustained local human rights and civil liberties advocacy. This is no small task. Constitutional design is easy; we know how to design institutions that give rise to competitive politics. Less well understood is how to effect cultures of enduring civil society. Increasingly this is not just a challenge for post-Soviet Central Asia, but also for western democracies, those same countries which, in an earlier, optimistic 'wave of transition', were much more enthusiastic and self-confident champions of political reform.

---

<sup>352</sup> Bruce Panier, Analysis: Are Central Asia's Militants Already Coming Home From The Middle East?, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, May 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovoza-kyrgyzstan-militants-coming-home-central-asia-middle-east-/29251178.html>

## Illiberal forces put women's rights under strain in Kyrgyzstan

Ryskeldi Satke<sup>353</sup>

Central Asia is commonly known in the international community as a landlocked and autocratic region of post-Soviet Asia that is sandwiched between the competing geopolitical interests of two world superpowers. Perhaps, rightly so on the surface. More than seventy years under Soviet rule and evident authoritarianism following the collapse of USSR in 1991 are shaping the politics of the countries, to this day. The Kyrgyz Republic in Central Asia is a special case, despite setbacks in recent years. The country has been known for its continuing efforts to adopt democratic norms of governance since the 1990s. This is the only nation in the entire region where power is shared between the Parliament and President whereas the rest of the regional states are governed by authoritarian regimes.

And yet, even in the Kyrgyz Republic, the rights of women remain a subject of concern regardless of the country's wider record. In spite of having the domestic laws to protect women's rights and maintain gender equality, the Kyrgyz state does not seem to have the capacity to sufficiently implement and enforce the legal norms on women's rights nationwide. More so, it is becoming evident in the last several years that the women's rights groups and feminist-activists are being targeted by the nationalist and conservative factions; and religious groups increasingly in favour of raising the issues of polygamy, discrimination against women and reproductive rights in the country. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study on combating gender inequality in political participation in the Kyrgyz Republic indicated that conservatives have significantly intensified their activity in the Central Asian nation after 2010. According to the UNDP 'When discussing the new version of the Constitution, religious groups attempted to remove the definition of Kyrgyz Republic as a secular state. The secular status was maintained thanks to public campaigns organized by women activists'.<sup>354</sup>

In retrospect, conservatives and religious groups in Kyrgyzstan have taken more proactive steps to influence country's politics in the years following the second regime change in April 2010, which led to an outburst of mass violence in the North and South of Kyrgyz Republic. Among the most politically active nationalist groups, the Kyrk Choro (Forty Knights) movement is the most aggressive of those whose political activity has become known during and after 2010. Their leader Zamir Kochorbayev claimed Kyrk Choro was part of the 'April Revolution' during which movement members protected the Kyrgyz government administration building in Bishkek from looting. He told the local newspaper that the Kyrgyz state agencies collectively financed and supported the Kyrk Choro office in the Kyrgyz capital since 2013.<sup>355</sup>

This question of murky links between nationalist groups such as Kyrk Choro and the government have been raised in the Kyrgyz Republic's media. It was reported in 2015 that Kyrk Choro had signed a memorandum of cooperation with seven government agencies, including Ministry of Interior, State Committee on National Security and Prosecutor General's Office on helping the local population in emergency situations and assisting state border service near the frontier.<sup>356</sup> The spokesman for Bishkek city police even told RFE/RL's Kyrgyz language service that the law enforcement agency supported Kyrk Choro activists because they "prevent the spread of abnormalities in the society that are not inherent to the [Kyrgyz] people and not consistent with the national mentality".<sup>357</sup> Kyrk Choro activists have reportedly attacked and physically

---

<sup>353</sup> Ryskeldi Satke is a journalist and independent researcher based in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic. He wrote and published reports from Central Asia and Mongolia with international research institutions and global news organizations. His most recent policy-briefs on the regional topics include - "Between East and West: Kazakhstan and China's new Silk Road"; Barcelona Centre for International Affairs; 2015; "Kyrgyz Republic's experience with investment treaties and arbitration cases"; Transnational Institute; 2017.

<sup>354</sup> UNDP, Case Study on combating gender inequality in political participation in Kyrgyzstan, October 2016  
[http://www.kg.undp.org/content/dam/kyrgyzstan/Publications/gender/Case%20study\\_Eng10Oct2016.pdf](http://www.kg.undp.org/content/dam/kyrgyzstan/Publications/gender/Case%20study_Eng10Oct2016.pdf)

<sup>355</sup> "Precedent Partner Group": How can 'Kyrk Choro' grow? (in Russian) *The Evening Bishkek*, February 2015  
[https://www.vb.kg/doc/301989\\_precedent: vo chto moiet pererasti kyrk choro.html](https://www.vb.kg/doc/301989_precedent: vo chto moiet pererasti kyrk choro.html)

<sup>356</sup> Kyrk Choro - pro-government project? RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service (*Azattyk*), July 2015  
<https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27133965.html>

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

assaulted Kyrgyz women for dating or socializing with non-Kyrgyz men<sup>358</sup> and have staged protests against legislation on reproductive rights<sup>359</sup> supported by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

There are also individual politicians, parliamentarians and religious figures that consistently promote conservative ideas. Former lawmaker and leader of the conservative political party 'Erkin Kyrgyzstan' (Free Kyrgyzstan) Tursunbay Bakir Uulu is the brightest example among those who have publicly defended polygamy and called for the introduction of religious education in schools as well as removal of sex education literature from the education system throughout the nation.<sup>360</sup> Similarly, Kamchybek Joldosbayev MP from the 'Onuguu-Progress' (Development-Progress) political faction in the Kyrgyz Parliament supported the legalization of polygamy and suggested a modification to the Constitution to allow the practice of having more than one spouse in the country.<sup>361</sup> Seemingly, some preachers within the muftiate of Kyrgyzstan are cautious to openly back the proposal while arguing that it is permitted to practice polygamy in Islam if certain conditions are met. According to Ergazy Nurmatov, a representative of the muftiate in Osh province, "in the Koran it is allowed to have 2 or 3 wives. But it also says: 'If you cannot cope with responsibility, then it is better to live with one wife.' If we, theologians, say: 'Sharia admits polygamy', go for it, then we, it turns out, will infringe the rights of women. If the head of the family is able to treat both wives fairly, then he is entitled to a second marriage. We must not forget about the first wife, marrying the second."<sup>362</sup>

In some specific cases, women activists are reluctant to speak out in public due to concerns for their safety. In one reported incident, young women activists were physically attacked in daylight in the country's capital Bishkek leaving two female campaigners injured.<sup>363</sup> A female activist based in the southern province of Osh, who was interviewed for this essay and requested the concealment of her name, said there have been numerous attempts by the religious establishment and nationalist movements in the Kyrgyz Republic to exert control over women's rights in their public speeches and campaigns. To prove her argument she said there's a case of a former grand mufti Chubak Jalilov who called for polygamy in the country last year, openly defying the constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic that prohibits such acts in the nation.<sup>364</sup> Jalilov's controversial opinion was backed by religious preacher Ozubek Chotonov who said that "wealthy men should have up to four wives".<sup>365</sup> Surprisingly, legalization of polygamy was also supported by a few Kyrgyz women. Journalist Nazira Begim published her letter to the President Sooronbay Jeenbekov expressing her personal approval of polygamy and urged the government to decriminalize it in the Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>366</sup> However, a survey in 2017 showed that more than 67% of the population decisively reject the legalization of polygamy in the Central Asian nation.<sup>367</sup>

---

<sup>358</sup> Understanding Illiberal Sentiments of Kyrgyz Youth; Gulzhigit Ermatov; Central Asia Program, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Elliott School of International Affairs The George Washington University; 2017, [http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Kyrgyzstan .pdf](http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Kyrgyzstan.pdf)

<sup>359</sup> *Astra Youth*, Law on reproductive rights in Kyrgyzstan signed, August 2015 <http://www.astra.org.pl/youth/news/289-law-on-reproductive-rights-in-kyrgyzstan-signed.html>

<sup>360</sup> - Tursunbay Bakir Uulu is planning to run for President ( in Russian) *Kloop*, June 2017 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/06/24/tursunbaj-bakir-uulu-planiruet-ballotirovatsya-v-prezidenty/>

<sup>361</sup> A member of the Parliament suggests the legalization of polygamy,(in Russian) *Knews*, September 2016 <http://knews.kg/2016/09/08/parlamentarij-vnov-predlagaet-uzakonit-mnogozhenstvo/>

<sup>362</sup> *Law Journalist.kg* ,Who is allowed to have a second wife?(in Russian), September 2016 <http://law.journalist.kg/2016/09/27/komu-dozvoleno-brat-vtoruyu-zheny/>

<sup>363</sup> *CACI Analyst*, Feminist Activist Attacked in Osh, Kyrgyzstan; March 2014; <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/12938-feminist-activist-attacked-in-osh-kyrgyzstan.html>

<sup>364</sup> My first wife is upset a little' - Kyrgyz scholar on polygamy; Sherie Ryder and Maruf Siddikov; *BBC Social News and BBC Monitoring*; November 2017; <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-42150072>

<sup>365</sup> A Muslim Cleric brings 'polygamy' onto the agenda once again , *RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service (Azattyk)*, June 2017 <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28542667.html>

<sup>366</sup> Kyrgyzstan: female journalist asks president to legalize polygamy, *The Times of Central Asia*, February 2018 <https://www.timesca.com/index.php/news/19300-kyrgyzstan-female-journalist-asks-president-to-legalize-polygamy>

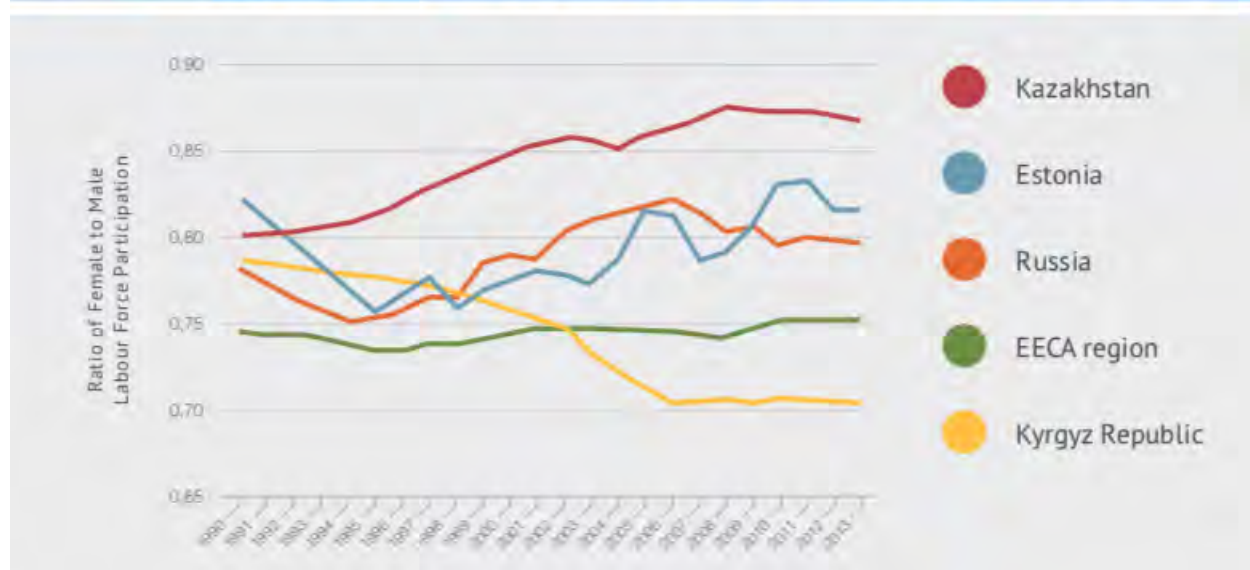
<sup>367</sup> Most of population of Kyrgyzstan against polygamy, *24KG*, July 2017 [https://24.kg/english/58356\\_Most\\_of\\_population\\_of\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_against\\_polygamy/](https://24.kg/english/58356_Most_of_population_of_Kyrgyzstan_against_polygamy/)



The latest example of discrimination against women has come to light in recent months when a conservative-leaning group of Kyrgyz migrant men campaigned<sup>368</sup> for introducing legislation in the Kyrgyz Parliament that would ban young women under 26 from traveling abroad. Previously, parliamentarians had adopted a similar travel ban for women up to 22 years of age<sup>369</sup> to discourage young Kyrgyz women “from traveling to foreign countries and becoming prostitutes”, according to MP who initiated the bill. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan remains one of the least developed countries with high unemployment and widespread poverty in the region. According to a study compiled by the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights, a non-governmental federation for human rights organizations ‘Kyrgyz migrants make up today some 650 thousand to 1 million out of a total population of 5.8 million in Kyrgyzstan. Although migratory flows are mainly comprised of young males, feminization has increased. Currently, nearly 40 percent of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia are women’.<sup>370</sup>

In addition to potential constraints, the Kyrgyz Republic has put legal barriers for country's women to participate freely in the labour force. Women are excluded from 400 occupations and tasks that had been traditionally reserved for men only under the existing Labour Code. The disparity is observed in the mining industry, energy and gas sectors, construction, transport and the storage of goods. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development determined that there is a "growing gap between men and women's participation in the workforce in the Kyrgyz Republic. Today women comprise only 40 percent of the Kyrgyz workforce, compared with 44 percent in 1990. Women's participation in the workforce decreased particularly sharply between 2002 and 2006, a period of economic decline".<sup>371</sup>

Figure 1: Trend in gender equality in employment in selected economies in EECA and regional average



372

Aida Kasymaliyeva, a female MP in the Kyrgyz Parliament is strongly convinced that politicians and political factions do not see the problem of discrimination of women and gender inequality in the country as a concern and they de-facto oppose real progress with women's rights.<sup>373</sup> She insists more women in local

<sup>368</sup> Prohibition for girls under 26 to work abroad proposed in Kyrgyzstan; *Current Time*; April 2018;

<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/29187588.html>

<sup>369</sup> Girl Travel Ban Passed in Kyrgyzstan; Aigul Kasymova; *CACI*; 27 August 2013; <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/12795-girl-travel-ban-passed-in-kyrgyzstan.html>

<sup>370</sup> Women and children from Kyrgyzstan affected by migration, An exacerbated vulnerability; *FIDH*; September 2016;

[https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport\\_kyrgyzstan\\_uk-2-web2.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_kyrgyzstan_uk-2-web2.pdf)

<sup>371</sup> Legal barriers to women's participation in the economy in the Kyrgyz Republic; *EBRD*; October 2015;

<https://www.ebrd.com/documents/admin/legal-barriers-gender.pdf>

<sup>372</sup> EBRD (2015)

<sup>373</sup> Aida Kasymaliyeva MP was interviewed for the purpose of informing this essay.



councils, Parliament and Government will ultimately bring badly-needed change and draw attention to procedural changes that may assist women's participation in Parliament.

Female lawmaker said: "From 2020, the law will work, when instead of the woman who left the party list, a woman comes on the list, and instead of the next placed candidate if they were - men. This bill was drafted because women came to the parliament on a 30 percent quota, but they were easier to "expel" from the Jogorku Kenesh [parliament] because of the lack of clan and financial support. Let's see how the law works. And now in the parliament, a group of women are working on the reservation of 30 percent of seats in ayil keyesh [local council]. From year to year, there are fewer and fewer women in local councils, the statistics are depressing. Our goal - 50/50, not a thirty percent quota. But if we talk about reality, it will be extremely difficult to achieve it."

Kasymaliyeva stressed that religious and conservative groups play a role in formulating negative public opinions regarding the rights of women. "They [both groups] strongly influence young people, values and the formation of negative stereotypes about the activity of women" she said.

Steve Swerdlow, Central Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch, believes women activists in Kyrgyzstan and the greater post-Soviet region face difficult tasks in the process of defending their rights. "Truly confronting the serious violations of women's rights in Central Asia - severe domestic violence, sexual harassment and sex discrimination in the workplace, rampant sexism and economic inequality, the lack of proportionate political representation - requires challenging the very structures of Central Asian society and the most powerful entrenched systems of patriarchy that form their foundation" he replied in comments for this essay. "This is why women's rights activists in the region have a truly revolutionary task at hand. They face resistance from many corners, including political bureaucracies, religious authorities, but also sometimes even from other women and people who have not been exposed to an understanding of feminism".



374

---

<sup>374</sup> From Bhakti Patel, A Troubling Tradition: Kidnapping Women For Marriage In Kyrgyzstan! Bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, image d.haberay.net <http://womenpla.net/troubling-tradition-kidnapping-women-marriage-kyrgyzstan/>

Kyrgyzstan has also been known in the international community for its controversial and widely-accepted practice of abducting and forcing women into marriage, known in popular culture as 'bride-kidnapping'. The scale of it can be beyond conventional wisdom and comprehension to many observers outside the Kyrgyz Republic. "Between 16 and 23 percent of women in Kyrgyzstan are abducted for marriage, but the rate is much higher among ethnic Kyrgyz where a third of all marriages are due to kidnapping." concluded a 2017 Duke University study.<sup>375</sup> The Women Support Centre in Kyrgyzstan reported that number of kidnapped women reaches nearly twelve thousand annually.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the body that oversees implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in its 2015 report on Kyrgyzstan urged the Central Asian nation's government to do more to stop the "persistent abduction of women and girls for forced marriages".<sup>376</sup> The UN Committee was especially alarmed by the high number of forced marriages and bride-kidnapping cases in Kyrgyzstan.

International organizations slammed the government of Kyrgyzstan in recent weeks for doing little to stop bride-kidnapping following the latest incidents in May-June. 20-year-old medical student Burulai Turdaliyeva was murdered by her abductor in a failed attempt of bride-kidnapping.<sup>377</sup> Within weeks after the deadly kidnapping, 18-year-old woman was abducted in the country's capital and raped by her kidnapper.<sup>378</sup> "The Kyrgyzstani authorities must take action to promptly bring all alleged perpetrators of these violent and abhorrent crimes to justice, and send a strong message that gender-based violence will not be tolerated," said in a statement by Amnesty International when it reacted to violence against women in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Subsequently, the kidnapping and forcing women into marriage is a crime in the Central Asian nation that can carry prison sentences of up to 7 and 10 years for bride-kidnapping. "But in reality, it goes unpunished, there is a kind of impunity for this crime in the country." in its report stated The Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>379</sup> Indeed, only one out of 700 abduction cases is investigated and only one out of 1500 bride-kidnapping crimes leads to sentencing in courts of law for the entire country according to a UN Women assessment.<sup>380</sup> The Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan believes that the main factors of bride kidnapping are "patriarchal acceptance", deeply-entrenched "social stereotypes", "poverty and low social status of victims."<sup>381</sup> A UNFPA survey in 2016 showed that widespread abduction of young women for forced marriage persist due to the existing "customs and traditions" in Kyrgyz Republic. UNFPA polling indicated that the "vast majority of women (81%) and men (78%) in Kyrgyzstan are negative about bride abduction. At the same time, approximately similar number of women and men (4-5%) are positive about women abducting for marriage and nearly 11% of women and more than 14% of the men are neutral."<sup>382</sup>

Strikingly, the dysfunctional judiciary of the Kyrgyz Republic is only exacerbating the issue. Amnesty International report indicated that '64% of police officers in the southern city of Osh consider 'bride

---

<sup>375</sup> One in five girls and women kidnapped for marriage in Kyrgyzstan: study, *Reuters*, August 2017; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-women-bride-kidnapping/one-in-five-girls-and-women-kidnapped-for-marriage-in-kyrgyzstan-study-idUSKBN1AH5GI>

<sup>376</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Kyrgyzstan, March 2015, [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/791384/files/CEDAW\\_C\\_KGZ\\_CO\\_4-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/791384/files/CEDAW_C_KGZ_CO_4-EN.pdf)

<sup>377</sup> Young Woman's Murder in Kyrgyzstan Shows Cost of 'Tradition' *Human Right Watch*, May 2018 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/31/young-womans-murder-kyrgyzstan-shows-cost-tradition>

<sup>378</sup> Kyrgyzstan: New rape case highlights need for immediate action to end appalling "bride kidnapping" practice, *Amnesty International*, June 2018 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/kyrgyzstan-new-rape-case-highlights-need-for-immediate-action-to-end-appalling-bride-kidnapping-practice/>

<sup>379</sup> Access to justice for victims of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, *Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan*, 2011 [https://www.karat.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Access\\_to\\_justice\\_Report\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_en.pdf](https://www.karat.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Access_to_justice_Report_Kyrgyzstan_en.pdf)

<sup>380</sup> New law in Kyrgyzstan toughens penalties for bride kidnapping, *UN Women*, February 2013 <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/2/new-law-in-kyrgyzstan-toughens-penalties-for-bride-kidnapping#edn1>

<sup>381</sup> Access to justice for victims of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, *Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan*, 2011 [https://www.karat.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Access\\_to\\_justice\\_Report\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_en.pdf](https://www.karat.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Access_to_justice_Report_Kyrgyzstan_en.pdf)

<sup>382</sup> Gender in Society Perception Study, *National Survey Results 2016* [https://kyrgyzstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/GSPS\\_english.pdf](https://kyrgyzstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/GSPS_english.pdf)

kidnapping' to be 'normal' and 82% of them believe that the abduction is 'provoked' by the women themselves'.<sup>383</sup> Women's rights groups are strongly convinced that despite the ratification of international conventions on women's rights including CEDAW and criminalizing the act of bride-kidnapping, access to justice for victims of bride-kidnapping has not improved. Kyrgyz women's rights non-governmental organizations believe deterioration of the situation with women's rights is part of Kyrgyzstan's challenging transition process after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Forum of Women's NGOs argues the combined effect of the loss of communist ideology and an increasing impact of the religion in the Kyrgyz Republic resulted in a tendency that is designed to "narrow down women's roles into positions limited to the role of only mother and wife, thus limiting educational, economic and political rights and opportunities for women in the society". This assessment highlights the rise of anti-women's rights conservative politicians and nationalist movements; and growing influence of religious figures that are promoting travel bans for young Kyrgyz women, calling for approval of polygamy nationwide and engaging in political campaigning against the law on reproductive rights in Kyrgyzstan.

The ultimate question then, is what can be done to reverse the trend and sustain efforts to make real progress with women's rights in the Kyrgyz Republic? The country's donors and global organizations must concentrate their efforts on the transparency of aid distribution at all levels of the Kyrgyz state which is the beneficiary of foreign aid assistance programs that are tied to supporting women's rights initiatives as well. Kyrgyzstan has a vibrant civil society, including women's rights NGOs that can effectively contribute to the successful delivery of assistance programs on the ground. It is crucial that international organizations should proactively engage in a long-term cooperation and continuous dialogue with the women's rights groups.

International development banks, such as European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), World Bank, Asian Development Bank and many other financial institutions that are operating in this Central Asian country could play a positive role through their projects that must include gender equality as part of the required procedure. There are good examples of gender mainstreaming in Kyrgyzstan such as EBRD financed gender inclusion project in the municipal services of the second largest city of Osh.<sup>384</sup> However, the local women's rights activists and NGOs have been critical of 'financing gender equality commitments' in Kyrgyzstan due to 'methodological difficulties on differentiation and integration of financial resources allocated for gender development. The analysis of foreign aid strategies in terms of gender integration showed weak coordination of donor policies and the absence of mandatory accounting and transparency of aid flows in support of gender equality'.<sup>385</sup> Kyrgyzstan has received more than \$9 billion in foreign loans (72%) and grants (28%) for social-economic development over the period of two decades.<sup>386</sup>

Human rights observers say western states and many other governments who traditionally have supported women's rights in the region need to increase their commitment to programs for early childhood education for girls and women's empowerment in Central Asia. Steve Swerdlow argued that "they should contribute funds to supporting domestic violence and gender-sensitive training for police. Tajikistan is a good example, where a 2013 law to combat domestic violence on its face is relatively forward-looking and the OSCE has provided gender-sensitive training to staff several police stations with female police officers trained in handling domestic violence complaints. We should see more international support for such initiatives, including further support for shelters and service providers."

---

<sup>383</sup> Kyrgyzstan: New rape case highlights need for immediate action to end appalling "bride kidnapping" practice, *Amnesty International*, June 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/kyrgyzstan-new-rape-case-highlights-need-for-immediate-action-to-end-appalling-bride-kidnapping-practice/>

<sup>384</sup> First EBRD-financed buses arrive in Osh, Kyrgyz Republic; *EBRD*; December 2016; <http://www.ebrd.com/news/2016/first-ebrdfinanced-buses-arrive-in-osh-kyrgyz-republic.html>

<sup>385</sup> Strengthening foreign aid effectiveness in Kyrgyzstan; *24KG*; March 2014; <https://24.kg/archive/en/bigtiraj/169423-news24.html/>

<sup>386</sup> The Downside of Foreign Aid in Kyrgyzstan; *The Diplomat*; June 2017; <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/the-downside-of-foreign-aid-in-kyrgyzstan/>

Essentially, it is important for the international community to determine whether the previous decades of insufficient attention to the rights of women in Central Asia may have had a negative impact on the social and political development of the landlocked region. And as the global women's rights movement is gaining momentum around the world, there is an opportunity for the international organizations to increase support and assistance to the women's rights groups and organizations in the politically unstable region to promote gender-friendly policies in the state branches and protect the rights of women from an aggressive nationalist-conservative agenda and religious fundamentalism.

## Transnational norm mobilization: The World Congress of Families in Georgia and Moldova

Prof. Kristina Stoeckl<sup>387</sup>

The focus of civil society research in the social and political sciences has, for the most part, been on progressive and liberal groups and movements who defend the cause of equal human rights against an unjust state or against oppressive majorities. Progressive norm entrepreneurs trigger debates in the course of which general principles of human rights, such as equality, justice and non-discrimination, become framed as concrete values and demands. A classic example of this is the expansion of the principle of equality from male citizens to all adult citizens through women's suffrage. The norm entrepreneurs, in this case, were women's movements. Another example for norm entrepreneurship are gay and lesbian movements, who have become increasingly successful in seeing their demands of equality and non-discrimination written into the law of most Western democracies. Both stories exemplify how a general principle becomes framed in terms of concrete values and demands and how the issues raised eventually translate into new policies. 'Norm cascade' is the term which the political scientists Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink have used to describe this dynamic.<sup>388</sup> Human rights principles need active, discursive and legal implementation, which is always rooted in the choices and actions of concrete actors.

Today we have to concede that the focus on progressive, liberal civil society in the literature on norm entrepreneurship has been one-sided. Besides liberal NGOs actors on the right also mobilize. The concerns of these groups vary from anti-immigration to gun-promotion, from anti-abortion to religious exemptions. Illiberal civil society uses the very same mechanisms and strategies as a progressive civil society: actors create NGOs and transnational platforms, they employ lawyers and lobby politicians, as well as using the internet and media to attract new followers. In this contribution, I pick out one such illiberal civil society organization – the World Congress of Families (WCF) – and look at its role in two of the countries that are the focus of this compilation: Georgia and Moldova.

The WCF organizes international and regional congresses in support of the 'natural family' across Europe, the United States, and the former Soviet Union. It was founded in 1997 by American and Russian partners, with the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society from Rockford, Illinois being the main driving force for the first ten years. The Russian engagement in the WCF coordination became prominent only after 2010. In that year, the late Larry Jacobs, at the time the WCF's managing director, traveled to Russia on an official visit to speak at an event organized by the Russian pro-life organization Sanctity of Motherhood. "We were delighted by the support we found there", Jacobs was quoted in the media after this trip. "Russian pro-life/pro-family forces are eager to cooperate with their counterparts in the West. Given its traditional support for faith and family, Russia will play an increasingly important part in the international struggle to preserve the natural family".<sup>389</sup> The WCF so far has organized two international congresses in the former Soviet Union; one summit in 2014 in Moscow, the other 2016 in Tbilisi. The 2018 Congress will take place in the capital of Moldova, Chisinau, in September.

The World Congress of Families is the American Christian Right going international. Since 2016 the WCF has become a chapter of the International Organization for the Family (IOF). The organization does not self-identify explicitly as Christian, but the religious character is evident. Congresses are attended by Christians of all denominations, including Mormons, and occasionally also Muslims are invited. The IOF mission statement includes a plea to 'protect freedom, faith, and family'.<sup>390</sup> Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe are newcomers in this circle, and they are setting their own agenda.

---

<sup>387</sup> Kristina Stoeckl is Associate professor and leader of the ERC funded research project Postsecular Conflicts (<https://www.uibk.ac.at/projects/postsecular-conflicts/>) at the University of Innsbruck and writes about the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in transnational norm mobilization.

<sup>388</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998).

<sup>389</sup> Christian NewsWire, "Jacobs Finds Support for International Pro-Family and Pro-Life Movement in Moscow," *Christian News Wire* 13 December 2010: <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/4302615709.html>.

<sup>390</sup> International Organization for the Family website: <https://www.profam.org/mission/>



The local partners for the Moscow and Tbilisi summits were wealthy businessmen, Konstantin Malofeev from Russia and Levan Vasadze from Georgia. The Moscow Summit was also co-sponsored by the organization Sanctity of Motherhood, which is headed by the wife of the Russian oligarch, and former head of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin. Malofeev and Yakunin are on the international sanctions list imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The three businessmen present themselves as committed Orthodox Christians: Malofeev runs the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, which sponsors, among other things, an Orthodox private school and a TV-station that promotes Russian Orthodox statehood (tsargrad.tv)<sup>391</sup>; Yakunin is the head of St. Andrew the First Called Endowment Fund, which finances several programs, among them the Russki Mir Foundation and the Sanctity of Motherhood pro-life network<sup>392</sup>; Vasadze likewise founded an Orthodox private school in Tbilisi<sup>393</sup>. Both Vasadze and the Russian WCF representative Alexey Komov have studied in the United States, they know Western languages, culture and politics, and they have adopted the habitus of American Christian conservatives. Now they are importing the American culture wars into their home countries.

WCF congresses are networking events for social conservative activists, professionals and politicians from across the US, Europe and other parts of the world. Liberalism is the declared opponent. For American participants, the enemies are progressive liberals in their own country. The enemy for the Eastern Europeans is the European Union. The few Western European participants, almost all from the far-right spectrum of the Catholic Church, feature in the WCF congresses as token victims of the EU. A French participant at the Tbilisi Congress went on record in front of a Georgian TV station saying: "Do not join the EU, the EU will destroy your families", and a notorious German anti-gender activist, Gabriele Kubly, frightened the Georgian audience with the (false) statement that the EU would impose a school curriculum that teaches masturbation.<sup>394</sup> One politician present in Tbilisi in 2016 was Igor Dodon, now the pro-Russian president of Moldova and the host of this year's congress.

For the Eastern European sponsors of the WCF events in Georgia and Moldova the ideological battle clearly goes beyond family questions. The larger context is the question whether their countries should orient their political and economic development westwards or eastwards, towards the EU or towards Russia. The way westwards is depicted as capitalist, immoral, anti-religious and anti-family, the way eastwards as path of salvation, complete with state-regulated (and not global capitalist) economies, morality, Orthodox religious education and demographic growth. A recent speech by Vasadze in Moldova published by Visegrad Post outlines the economic and political side of the program.<sup>395</sup> What makes this agenda new with regard to the anti-Westernism of the traditional Orthodox, Russian or Soviet kind is that this anti-liberalism identifies allies in the West. It is not the West as such that is rejected, but the 'liberal West'. Social conservatives of all denominations from the West are welcome partners.

This alliance with the Western Christian right constitutes a real innovation in the context of rampant Orthodox anti-ecumenism. The strong message of political support that is sent out by church leaders who attend the WCF cannot be underestimated: just consider that Patriarch Ilia of Georgia, who merely conceded an airport meeting to Pope Francis on his visit to Georgia in 2016, made a personal appearance at the WCF summit in Tbilisi, and that Patriarch Kirill of Moscow announced that he would attend the congress in Chisinau in September 2018. If he will make true on this promise, he will also send a message to the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate of Bucharest, which competes with Moscow over canonical jurisdiction in Moldova.

---

<sup>391</sup> St Basil the Great Foundation website: <http://fondsvv.ru/about/>

<sup>392</sup> St Andrew Foundation website: <http://www.st-andrew-foundation.org/about-found/>

<sup>393</sup> Iakob Gogebashvili School website <http://www.kiketischool.ge/?lan=en&p=Nig>. For a good background article about Levan Vasadze that is still relevant today, see: Davit Batashvili, "A Political Project," Tabula, December 2013: <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/78568-a-political-project>

<sup>394</sup> For a good report of the Tbilisi event, see: Masha Gessen, "Family Values. Mapping the Spread of Antigay Ideology," Harper's Magazine, March-issue (2017): <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/03/family-values-3/>

<sup>395</sup> Levan Vasadze, "About Post-Communist Economies," Visegrad Post, no. 7 January 2018: <https://visegradpost.com/en/2018/01/07/about-post-communist-economies-by-levan-vasadze-georgian-entrepreneur/>



The WCF is a social conservative caravan of always the same people and topics that tours different cities: Prague 1997, Geneva 1999, Mexico City 2004, Warsaw 2007, Amsterdam 2009, Madrid 2012, Sydney 2013, Moscow 2014, Salt Lake City 2015, Tbilisi 2016, Budapest 2017, and Chisinau 2018. The congresses in Eastern Europe, at least those I have followed more closely, have always served a dual purpose of launching a political message and of boosting local civil society activism. Pro-life groups from all over the former Soviet Union had been invited to Tbilisi in 2016, some of them visibly at their first experience of presenting their work in English in front of an international audience. The Budapest WCF featured a family street festival. To local activists, WCF offers a global narrative for concrete grievances (for example high abortion rates) and a promise of influence. It is the ideological alternative to the progressive and liberal civil society that already exists in their countries and that is faced with increasing pressure (the campaign against George Soros in Hungary or restrictive NGO-legislation in Russia). The illiberal civil society promoted by the WCF and its local sponsors retains some of the attractive features of the progressive program – internationality, predominance of English language, the opportunity to access funds and obtain travel grants – but at the same time is it politically conformist, ideologically ‘safe’ in an illiberal, repressive political environment and it appeals to people’s religious feelings.

The WCF acts as transnational norm entrepreneur, much of the same kind as norm protagonists described in the beginning of this paper, only that it is illiberal and conservative, not liberal and progressive. It contributes to the rise of illiberal civil society in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It also makes its influence felt in Western Europe, with actors from the Christian Right, who are a minority in their home countries, finding large audiences. It is an open question whether this development will lead to a European scenario of protracted but ultimately stable liberal-conservative culture wars as we know them from the United States, or whether this development has the potential to become fundamentally destructive for EU integration and liberal democracy on the long run.

### **Recommendations for action<sup>396</sup>**

In light of the challenge posed by the WCF and the rise of illiberal organizations across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union there are two recommendations that may be helpful for the international community to explore. These are:

- The creation of fora where representatives of liberal and illiberal civil society may engage in dialogue. This will represent a departure from the current situation where liberal and illiberal civil society exists in entirely autonomous conditions. Increased dialogue may help to stem the increasing polarization that has affected democracies in both East and West with the rise of populism.
- Improving communication on EU non-discrimination policies that are perceived in many Eastern European countries as a threat to traditional values held by the majority of the Eastern populations.

---

<sup>396</sup> The author wishes to thank Caroline Hill for input on the recommendations.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Adam Hug

The contributions to this collection make a number of important observations about the social and political landscape in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan. With the partial exception of Ukraine, illiberal social attitudes remain stubbornly high and entrenched across the societies of the region, particularly in relation to LGBTI rights. This is despite some attempts to introduce important legislation to improve women's and LGBTI rights, which, while necessary, have provided a focal point for mobilisation in support of less tolerant views by socially conservative forces. This includes in particular both politicians and religious institutions, with the support of conservative or pro-Russian media outlets.<sup>397</sup> While the attractiveness of such ideologies may be boosted by wider global trends, particularly within the post-Soviet space, they are often playing to longstanding national sentiments, which make them attractive for those looking to promote themselves within the local power politics of these countries.

What the findings of this collection suggest is that political and social forces challenging liberal ideas have been emboldened in these five countries, they still predominately utilise traditional mechanisms of institutional power (such as the church or mosque or existing political elites) rather than fully mimicking the form and function of liberal civil society. At this stage many of the attempts to create illiberal NGOs or think tanks remain comparatively marginal in the political debates on socially conservative causes, or act as window dressing for politicians and priests rather than being the driving force of campaigns.

That campaign groups or think tanks have a strong relationship with individual political figures or major donors is common practice across the world. The somewhat dependent nature of these organisations in the five countries highlights their institutional fragility and that the politicians, priests and oligarchs involved are the driving forces for the promotion of illiberal values. Other groups are very much 'one-man bands' (it still usually is men) providing a platform for a particularly vocal academic or activist to gain media attention, often lacking even a basic web presence or formal registration, and prone to dissolving and reforming. A number of the same faces appear again and again in different groups. While it can be tempting to dismiss some of the more garish and vocal illiberal activists as marginal figures, they are acting to promote messages that unfortunately have a wider resonance, and around the world we live in times where the fringe positions can quite quickly become mainstream.

What this publication shows that the illiberal energy is on the street rather than in the conference hall. This is an 'uncivil rights movement' of overlapping far-right, radical nationalist and anti-LGBTI groups, rather than a simple cut and paste from the technocratic liberal NGO playbook. That the rise of the far and radical right has been most noticeable in the countries that have moved closest to the West – Ukraine and Georgia – is of relevance not only as a reaction to liberalising efforts in those societies but because these are countries with deeply strained relations with Russia. Indeed the active conflict with Russia has been one of the main drivers of far-right support in Ukraine.

The Russian dimension in this debate can sometimes be amplified to unhelpful levels. The overall findings of this publication make the case that Russian influence is absolutely real, particularly indirectly in terms of 'norm diffusion' (promoting and spreading illiberal ideas) and in certain cases media penetration. Moscow does directly support some groups on the ground, with varying degrees of intensity and success (as of course their Western opponents do); however their engagement, both real and perceived, can often be seen to undermine local conservative causes, particularly in the conflict contexts of Georgia and Ukraine. It also leaves these groups open to the same accusation nationalists and others level at Western-backed liberal

---

<sup>397</sup> For the most part discussion of local and regional media influences is not the focus of this publication. For a more detailed analysis please see the contributions to: Adam Hug (ed.), *The information battle: How governments in the former Soviet Union promote their agendas & attack their opponents abroad*, March 2017, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/infobattle/>

groups that they are being controlled by outside forces. Overall Russia may help set the tone of debate, but it is not the puppet master of all that Western liberals and their local allies might decry in the region.

Expecting harmonious collaboration and dialogue between liberal and illiberal civil society in these countries is in many cases unrealistic given the levels of political polarisation, where neither side believes anything could be gained from such dialogue. In truth, liberal and conservative or left and right leaning NGOs, academics and activists in more established democracies often (and increasingly) remain in their own silos, talking to their own audiences for much of the time. However the spaces for interaction are perhaps even more limited in these post-Soviet societies. Changing this will require long-term engagement, identifying well-structured opportunities either through international institutions or respected academic institutions, to bring more emollient liberal and conservative groups together on less controversial topics to attempt to find areas of common ground. As part of this the EU and other international actors should continue to increase their direct engagement with the Orthodox Church and other institutions to reduce the opportunity for accidental misunderstanding of their intentions, while accepting a probably permanent divergence of priorities in relation to social policy and human rights.<sup>398</sup>

As this publication shows, many governments have been unwilling or slow in reacting to the challenges posed by illiberal street and extremist movements. For example, when faced with pressure from religious or far-right counter-protestors, the Moldovan and Georgian governments have chosen to remove the liberal protestors on the grounds of protecting their safety rather than ensuring their right to free speech by adequate policing of the nationalist counter-demonstrators. It is vitally important to end the culture of impunity where attacks by radical groups are not effectively investigated or prosecuted, due to either nationalist patrons in government or incompetence and lack of interest by the police.<sup>399</sup> These governments must protect liberal civil society campaign groups from the increasing intimidation and in some cases attacks they face from these far-right groups. Furthermore the international community must insist as a condition of continued support that the governments of the region prohibit the state funding of or collaboration with extremist groups, such as the relationships of the Ukrainian state with Azov and C14. More robust measures to tackle corruption must be undertaken to avoid growing cynicism in society, particular in relation to corruption by governments and politicians who claim to be liberal and pro-European.

We know that evidence-based rebuttals and myth-busting only go so far, and there is a clear need to build a case for equal rights that wins hearts as well as minds. While illiberal social attitudes are widespread within these societies, there remains a clear need to identify how best to build arguments in favour of LGBTI and women's rights and liberal values of equality that resonate outside elite circles. There is scope for further data-driven research to identify the sections of society who may be described as 'the moveable middle';<sup>400</sup> those who may well hold conservative social views but who do not prioritise them or who may be open to changing their opinions over time with the right message and evidence. There is clearly further scope for comparative work on the situation in Eastern Europe,<sup>401</sup> notably in Poland and Hungary, where the slide towards illiberalism has been dramatic.

The findings of this project make clear that illiberalism is on the rise as a political and social force in these five post-Soviet countries, and that this situation is influenced by the wider trends across the region and the world, but is rooted in the local environments of each country. It identifies that there is a rise of illiberal civil society, but while there has been some growth in illiberal NGOs and think-tanks they have yet to mirror their liberal counterparts. Where there has been a significant growth has been in nationalist, far-right and anti-gay

---

<sup>398</sup> Adam Hug (ed.) Traditional religion and political power: Examining the role of the church in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova, October 2015, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/orthodox/>

<sup>399</sup> <https://eurasianet.org/s/georgian-fascists-step-into-the-spotlight>

<sup>400</sup> A concept used by a number of experts at a private roundtable that the editor coordinated.

<sup>401</sup> See Human Rights House, Resisting Ill Democracies in Europe, December 2017, <https://humanrightshouse.org/articles/launch-resisting-ill-democracies-in-europe/>

street movements ,whose growing size and self confidence in their agenda has a significant knock-on effect across society. Russian influence on the development of illiberal civil society in the region is an important factor but a far from all-encompassing one, while US evangelicals continue to expand their influence. The research is clear that by far the most influential organisations in the respective societies in relation to the rise of illiberalism are religious institutions – the Orthodox Church and major Islamic bodies – which can collaborate with illiberal or opportunist politicians to pose a major threat to equality and human rights in the region.

While individual authors make recommendations relevant to each country, the publication makes a series of recommendations for action:

The Governments of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan should:

- Take urgent measures to tackle corruption and improve transparency ;
- Ensure that attacks on minorities are properly investigated and scrap any formal or informal partnership with nationalist groups that have conducted them;
- Protect the ability of liberal civil society groups to operate freely without intimidation;
- Disband any armed militias affiliated to political parties or extremist groups.

The international community should:

- Increase political pressure and be willing to sanction the activities of ostensibly ‘pro-European’ or ‘liberal’ allies when their corruption or malpractice brings such principles into disrepute;
- Insist on action to tackle hate crimes and offer greater support and resources to do so if political willingness to act can be ensured;
- Look for opportunities for diplomatic dialogue with the dominant religious institutions to reduce the opportunity for unnecessary misunderstanding about respective priorities;
- Continue to refine and improve ‘myth-busting’ and anti-propaganda responses, while recognising the limits to such an approach;
- Support efforts to improve survey and research data about illiberal civil society attitudes;
- Work with liberal-minded NGOs to find new ways to engage the ‘movable middle’ sections of public opinion.

## Acknowledgements

The editor would like to thank all of the authors who have kindly contributed to this collection and provided invaluable support in developing the project. In addition the editor is very grateful for the advice and guidance of a number of different experts who assisted with the research. These included: Andrii Gladun, Chris Stroop, Larisa Minasyan, Gayane Abrahamyan, Mamuka Andguladze, Emil Nasritdinov, Allan Gillam, Alexandru Postica, Anastasia Danilova, Halya Coynash, Ion Manole, Shahida Yakub, Maksym Butkevych, Richard Giragosian, Oksana Pokalchuk, Renata Skardziute-Kereselidze and Natalia Camburian.

He is very grateful for the support of Michael Hall and his colleagues at the Open Society Foundations for their assistance with this publication. It would not have been possible without the research and administrative support provided by his colleague Gunel Khoo.

First published in July 2018 by  
The Foreign Policy Centre (FPC Think Tank Ltd)

[www.fpc.org.uk](http://www.fpc.org.uk)  
[info@fpc.org.uk](mailto:info@fpc.org.uk)

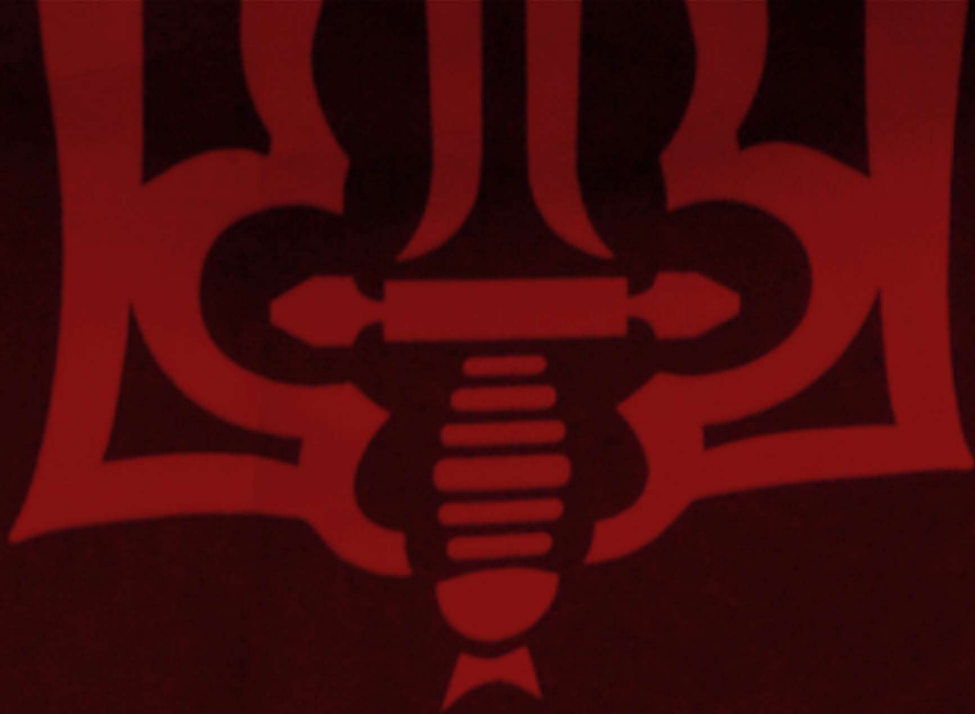
© FPC Think Tank Ltd 2018  
All rights reserved

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone and do not represent the views of The Foreign Policy Centre or the Open Society Foundations.

Cover art by Clear Honest Design

This project is kindly supported by the Open Society Foundations





 The  
**Foreign Policy  
Centre**

**[www.fpc.org.uk](http://www.fpc.org.uk)**

©FPC Think Tank LTD 2018