

LGBT Rights, Standards of 'Civilisation' and the Multipolar World Order

Written by Katja Kahlina and Dušica Ristivojević

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At the end of June, the U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS) made the ruling that stated that the U.S. Constitution grants same-sex couples a right to marry. A few weeks earlier, the people of Ireland decided in favour of a sex-neutral definition of marriage in the same-sex marriage referendum. These two events increased the number of states that redefined marriage to include same-sex couples to twenty-one. Although this does not mean that full and genuine sexual equality has been achieved, as there are many issues relating to discrimination on the grounds of sexuality still to be addressed, it does signal important changes that are taking place on a global scale when it comes to public perceptions and the legal security of people involved in same-sex relationships. The Irish referendum, SCOTUS decision and the activities of the LGBT movements across the globe are certainly a reason for optimism in the predictions about the global improvements of LGBT rights. Yet, there is another dimension of the global promotion of the rights of sexual minorities that we want to point out here. We want to discuss how LGBT rights, which are increasingly becoming a part of the Western standards of 'civilisation', were turned into a site of proclaimed resistance to Western supremacy, and how these processes create uncertainty when it comes to the prospects of further promoting sexual equality in the emerging multipolar world.

The practice of using the standards of 'civilisation' to reinforce global hierarchies and strengthen Western influence across the globe dates back to the colonial era (Gong, 1984). Joined beliefs in the superiority of Western 'civilisation' and in the moral duty of the Western states to spread the blessings of 'civilisation' brought about a decidedly coercive and expansionist treatment of the 'barbarous' non-Western polities (Keene, 2002; Suzuki, 2009). This logic of using particular cultural standards to differentiate, categorise and rank the countries remains largely intact (Stivachtis, 2015), with human rights, democracy, liberalism, and the rule of law becoming prominent markers of 'civility', 'modernity', and 'development' in the post-Cold War world (Donnelly, 1998; Simpson, 2004; Stivachtis, 2006). Hillary Clinton's 2011 'gay rights are human rights' speech – in which she stated that the current American administration defends the human rights of LGBT people as part of their 'comprehensive human rights policy and as a priority of our foreign policy' – signals that LGBT rights are increasingly becoming an important part of the human rights standards that other countries should adopt.

One of the ways in which Western governments support the diffusion of Western-style LGBT equality across the globe has been through 'gay conditionality' (Rao, 2012), which denotes the conditioning of aid and donations with ending bans on homosexuality. A telling example is the case of Uganda, where many Western donors suspended or redirected aid after the infamous Anti-Homosexuality Act was adopted in the country. In a similar fashion, gay conditionality has also become a part and parcel of the European Union enlargement process, whereby membership in the EU has been conditioned by the mandatory introduction of selected LGBT-protective measures (Kahlina, 2015). This structural shift towards incorporating LGBT tolerance in the realm of Western-promoted standards of civility both reflects and reinforces the hierarchy between the West and 'the rest' in that it creates a spatial and temporal boundary which places the 'homophobic others' on the historical path of progress towards Western-style 'modernity' (Puar, 2007; 2013).

Not surprisingly then, calls for the improvement of the social and legal status of sexual minorities have been joined by more articulate political homophobia – often underpinned by anti-Western sentiments (Weiss and Bosia, 2013). To

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return to the previously mentioned case of Uganda, the suspension of aid has been viewed by the ruling elites as social imperialism acting against local traditions, and has led to a further crackdown on homosexuality (Nagarajan, 2014). Caught between local homophobic violence and Western gay conditionality, human rights and LGBT activists in Africa asked for a more nuanced form of support that would not reinforce the old colonial relations of power. Resistance to gay conditionality has also been taking place in Europe. A good example is Serbia, where the explicit link made by EU representatives between securing gay-pride marches and Serbia's path to the EU fueled Eurosceptic and anti-Western sentiments, and contributed to further politicisation of homophobia (Kahlina, 2015).

The case of a recent crackdown on homosexuality in Russia could also be read as part of the same story of bringing together anti-Western and homophobic discourses and activities, but with its own particular aims and logic. In 2012 and 2013, Russia promulgated two laws which severely harm the prospects of improving the position of sexual minorities: the notorious 2013 'anti-gay' law which prohibits the popularisation of 'non-traditional sexual relations' amongst minors, and the 2012 'foreign agent' bill which requires that all NGOs that receive donations from abroad register as foreign agents. Evoking Cold War imagery, the 'foreign agent' law, in practice, particularly targets LGBT organisations that are mostly dependent on foreign donations and which are now marked both as traitors and a foreign threat to the Russian national 'self.' The link between anti-Western and homophobic discourses in Russia is perhaps most visible in the widespread use of the term 'Gayropa', a word for Europe popular in nationalist pro-Putin circles.[1] As Tatiana Raibova and Oleg Raibov (2014) point out, 'Gayropa' is used to construct Europe as a space of sexual deviance that has brought about the loss of its power and global prestige, while at the same time it supports the constitution of Russian national and civilisational identity as morally superior to the West. The discourse of 'Gayropa', thus, not only participates in the processes of the (re)construction of Russian national identity and cultural specificity, but, more importantly for our thinking here, it should be regarded as an attempt to assert Russian power in order to resist the adoption of the LGBT rights that are perceived as a Western standard of 'civilisation'.

In the larger context of on-going destabilisations of the post-Cold War world order and the increasing multipolarity of geopolitical power, the Russian case should be regarded not (only) as a resistance to gay conditionality, but as a strategy of the global re-positioning of a rising power in the emerging multipolar world. That is, while insisting on the right of nation-states to define their culture in line with their own proclaimed hetero-normative traditions, Russian politics threatens to undermine the notions of civilizational standards promoted by the West, and, in extension, to remove the West from the position of exclusive power to map and order the emerging multipolar world. The problem is that processes, which may be read as efforts to defy Western supremacy in the realm of norms and values, contribute to the emergence of a new logic of global power rebalancing at the same time. While positioning non-Western political homophobia and hetero-normativity as markers of non-Western resistance, this logic uses the exclusionary mechanisms of symbolic power-distribution to further stigmatize sexual and gender minorities and reinforces the romanticized idea of nationalism as anti-imperialism.

An example of the deployment of hetero-normativity to assert the imagined Russian role as a saviour of the non-Western world from the perils of Western decadency – epitomized in same-sex marriages – is the 'Protection of the Family' resolution initiated by Russia, among others, and adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2014. This resolution calls for the wider discussion on the protection of *the* family. Since it refers to 'family' in the singular with definite article, it has been widely interpreted as an attempt to prevent further discussions on different types of family life and to set up foundations for opposing LGBT rights in the future.

Our brief discussion of the interplay between LGBT rights and geopolitics implies that LGBT rights have been turned into an important site where the on-going restructuring of symbolic and geopolitical hierarchies at the global level has been played out. On one hand, Western government have used LGBT equality to maintain the image of Western civilisational advancement and cultural superiority. On the other hand, homophobic, hetero-normative politics of sexuality have been eulogized and mobilised as a means of claiming power, sovereignty, and decentralisation of the West. It is hard to predict how these developments will affect the future of sexual equality across the globe. Nevertheless, it is clear that sexual politics that are utilized by political elites for national and international positioning will have critical influence on the future developments of LGBT rights, particularly within the context of increasing world multipolarity.

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Notes

[1] Russian reactions to the winning performance of the Austrian drag artist Conchita Wurst in 2014 Eurovision Song Contest represent perhaps one of the most notable uses of 'Gayropa' discourse, and certainly the one that has made this discourse more visible to the rest of the Europe and the world.

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