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# Resisting “Liberal Values” The Intersection of Gender, Religion, and Sexuality in Ukrainian Heteroactivism

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# Resisting “Liberal Values”: The Intersection of Gender, Religion, and Sexuality in Ukrainian Heteroactivism

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## Abstract

During the previous decade (2012–2021), in Ukraine, political pressure from the European Union combined with the efforts of the local civil society resulted in the adoption of legislation to prevent and eliminate discrimination, protect women from domestic violence, and promote LGBT people’s rights. Nevertheless, these changes were met by the opposition from various conservative and religious groups that have, over time, become more sophisticated in their resistance strategies. The present article applies the concept of heteroactivism to examine the role of women within such groups in Ukraine. It argues that Ukrainian heteroactivism is a product of the “clash of values” largely influenced by the geopolitical position of Ukraine and its historical and cultural context. Studying the cases of the Sisterhood of St. Olga, the Association of Sexologists and Sexual Therapists of Ukraine (ASSU), and several prominent scholarly figures, the article identifies the mobilization frames these activists use, specifically, Women as Wives and Mothers, Protection of Family and Minors, and Religion (heteroactivism as martyrdom). This study shows that in attempts to influence national policymaking, Ukrainian women heteroactivists set rigid standards of “proper” Ukrainian femininity and the role of women (that of a mother and wife staying outside of politics) within a “proper” Ukrainian family, which must be heterosexual, Christian, and monogamous.

## Keywords

Ukraine, LGBT rights, heteronormativity, right-wing movement, traditional family values

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## Introduction

In the previous two decades, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans (LGBT) people's rights norms entered the political discourses of Central and Eastern European (CEE) states (O'Dwyer 2012; Ayoub 2014; Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Shevtsova 2018a; 2018b). As a part of the democratic transition, approximation with the European Union, and, to some extent, as a response to the European politics of conditionality, CEE countries had to introduce corresponding legal changes as LGBT issues acquired more visibility across the region (Kollman 2007; O'Dwyer 2010; Kuhar 2011). Ukraine has not been an exception. Due to external political pressure combined with the efforts of the Ukrainian civil society, the years 2011–2019 were marked by a drastic increase in the discussion of LGBT rights in the public sphere and changes that could be seen as some progress for LGBT people in the country. The changes included anti-discrimination legislation meant to guarantee equal rights for LGBT individuals in employment and LGBT rights marches protected by the state in several major cities (Shevtsova 2020). However, resistance to sexual and gender equalities emerged with these changes, ostensibly halting the progression of implementing existing and adopting new LGBT rights-related policies (Leksikov and Rachok 2019).

An extensive scholarship has emerged around the importance of disseminating international norms and transnational activism for LGBT rights promotion (Ayoub 2013; Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Sloomaeckers et al. 2016). At the same time, different parts of Europe and the rest of the world have been facing waves of organized opposition to LGBT rights and the so-called "gender ideology." A substantial body of literature deals with various resistances against (potential) progress with LGBT rights in EU member states (e.g., Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Literature on the EU neighborhood mainly gives a detailed account of LGBT activism (Buyantueva and Shevtsova 2019) or the gender politics of post-Soviet states (Tarkhanova 2021). Much less is known about organized resistance against gender and sexual equality throughout Europe (Luciani 2021; Shevtsova 2022). This article uses the concept of heteroactivism (Browne and Nash 2017) to explore such resistance in the complex historical and cultural context of Ukraine.

As a case study, this article focuses on two conservative Ukrainian groups, the Sisterhood of St. Olga and the Association of Sexologists and Sexual Therapists of Ukraine (ASSU), whose work fits into the definition of heteroactivism. These groups, comprised exclusively or predominantly of women, have been active in Ukraine from 2015 to 2022, opposing LGBT rights and gender equality. The analysis is built around three core frames identified in their written and oral narratives found in official open sources: Women as Wives and Mothers, Protection of Family and Minors, and Religion (heteroactivism as martyrdom). The article argues that Ukrainian heteroactivism is largely influenced by the country's

geopolitical situation and historical past, meaning its location and development between and under the influence of the European Union and Russia. At the same time, women heteroactivists' practices in Ukraine are inevitably gendered, shaped by certain societal expectations and ideas of "masculinity" and "femininity" that Ukrainian opponents of sexual and gender equality present as healthy and "normal."

This article is structured as follows. First, I discuss recent literature on global resistance to sexual and gender equality, introduce the concept of heteroactivism and reflect on its relevance in the Ukrainian context. This is followed by a presentation of data collection and analysis methods. I then move to the empirical part of the article and conclude by discussing the forms of heteronormative femininities promoted by this new kind of social movement. Next, I argue that the Ukrainian case is important to increase our understanding of the growing resistance to sexual and gender rights in CEE countries. Furthermore, its geopolitical location between the EU, presenting itself as a pioneer of the international promotion of LGBT rights and gender equality, and Russia, a global protector of traditional family values, offers insights into how heteroactivism travels and changes in the region. Finally, this article sheds light on one of the aspects of Ukrainian heteroactivism, focusing on the role of women heteroactivists inside the movement and the frames they use to mobilize their supporters.

### **Heteroactivism as a Theoretical Framework**

There has been a growing body of scholarly literature on the instrumentalization of homophobic rhetoric, policies, and practices with strategic political purposes (McKay and Angotti 2016). However, using the concept of homophobia has been widely criticized (Kitzinger 1987; Herek 2004) as it reduces the levels of oppression and overlooks numerous manifestations it may take apart from individual fears. Such manifestations can include cultural, social, and structural influences and specific actions, from individual physical violence to policies and actions of international organizations, governments, political parties, or corporations (Herek 2004; McKay and Angotti 2016). Nevertheless, though one could argue that any homophobia carries political implications, the concept of "political homophobia" becomes useful when defining who has the means to decide who can be a part of the nation and who cannot (Boellstorff 2004).

Meredith Weiss and Michael Bosia (2013) conceptualize political homophobia as a "state strategy, social movement, and transnational phenomenon" that consists in "the scapegoating of an 'other' that drives processes of state-building and reduction; as the product of transnational influence peddling and alliances" and a "part of the legitimation of political and economic power" (p. 2–3). The instrumentalization of homophobia does not necessarily draw on conservative or anti-homosexual attitudes within society. Instead, individual states often use political homophobia to distract citizens' attention from government misconduct (Slepcev 2018; Shevtsova 2020). Tara McKay and Nicole Angotti (2016) define political homophobia as a tool used occasionally by politicians and other elites to promote social cohesion and national identities, especially under external political pressure or an

international conflict (2016; see also Puar 2007). The usage of this tool is increasingly globalized.

To refer to the organized pushback against LGBT rights, gender mainstreaming, comprehensive sexuality education, and the so-called "gender ideology," scholars of social movements use the term "anti-gender movements" (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Since the early 2010s, the so-called "anti-gender campaigns" resisting the incorporation of "gender" in national legislation and policies increased their visibility across Europe, led by conservative and religious groups (Sosa 2021). Nevertheless, as Browne and Nash (2017) convincingly prove in their piece in this journal, the approaches mentioned above have certain limitations. They argue that anti-gender movements' specific and narrow focus "does not capture the expansive, multiple and diverse resistances to sexual and gender equalities that are gathering momentum transnationally" (Browne and Nash 2017, 645).

Instead, they suggest the term "heteroactivism," or "the coordinated ideological response to sexual and gendered equalities rooted in an unwavering belief in the centrality of heteronormativity [...] as foundational to a healthy and sustainable society" (Browne and Nash 2017, 645). An essential feature of heteroactivism is that it is "inherently geographical" and should be analytically approached as a part of the geopolitical landscape. In other words, to grasp the nature of these resistances, one must understand the cultural and historical contexts in which they are rooted and see how they are linked to the values and contestations of a particular location (Browne and Nash 2018).

Furthermore, heteroactivism is also more informed than traditional religious or conservative opposition to sexual and gender equality used to be. Heteroactivists shifted to more modern claims and arguments regarding protecting minors, freedom of speech, parental rights, and religious freedom (Nash and Browne 2021). They build on an ideological foundation, resulting in a wide range of activities and tactics of protest, such as marches, conferences, media campaigns, and academic publications (Browne and Nash 2017). The following section demonstrates that this also has been the case in Ukraine, where anti-gender groups have advanced in developing new forms and methods of resistance. Finally, heteroactivism encompasses opposition to non-normative genders and the promotion of heterosexuality, forms of the family, and biological essentialism as an ideological response to social changes related to (potential) gains by LGBT people (Nash and Browne 2021).

This article uses empirical data from Ukraine to demonstrate how groups, organizations, and initiatives that can be defined as heteroactivist moved from reactive to proactive positions. They have shifted from merely protesting to broadly promoting heteronormative families and certain "gendered, classed, and racialized norms" (Browne and Nash 2017, 645) in various spheres of public life, including education, where heteroactivism becomes an alternative source of knowledge production.

The present article examines the development of heteroactivism in the context from which it emerges as part of the power competition presented as a clash of values: liberal/LGBT-

friendly European ones vs. Christian Orthodox tradition promoted by Russia. Influencing Ukrainian domestic policies, heteroactivism here is a part of the complex regional geopolitical context. It focuses on one aspect of Ukrainian heteroactivism following several women's or predominantly women's groups that actively oppose gender and sexual equality in Ukraine. The article addresses the mobilization frames used by these women, and studies the concepts of "femininity" and "masculinity" promoted through these frames. In other words, the goal is to explore how, within Ukrainian opposition to gender and sexual equality, certain sexualities, religions, forms of families, femininities, and masculinities are set forward and used politically.

### **Context: Resistances to Sexual and Gender Equalities in the After Euromaidan Ukraine**

Organized opposition to gender and sexual equality in Ukraine started as early as the early 2000s with the small group *Love against Homosexuality (LAH)* (*Lyubov' protiv gomoseksualisma*), founded by Ukrainian Protestant minister Ruslan Kukharchuk. Their first street action took place in Kyiv in September 2003. The protesters, with posters such as "There is no such thing as same-sex love," "Ukraine is a Christian country," "Homosexuality = AIDS," and the like, spent about three hours at the main square of the Ukrainian capital. Since then, LAH's protests, allegedly supported financially by American Evangelicals, have been regularly held in Kyiv and other cities. However, their activities did not bring together more than 50–60 people, and the organization never attracted much attention from the media or broader society until 2011–2012.

LAH became more visible and active after the notorious "gay propaganda" law was adopted in Russia. Unexpectedly, following Russian legal changes, in 2011–2012, six bills were submitted to Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament). While some were roughly drafted, others were well-developed and signed by representatives of most of the factions in the parliament (Human Rights Watch 2013). Kukharchuk, LAH's leader, was one of the authors and an active supporter of one of such bills (UNIAN 2012). Luckily, most of these documents were so poorly prepared that they did not make it even through the first reading. The rest faced severe criticism from civil society and international organizations and, after the change of the government in 2014, were not discussed by the new convocation of Verkhovna Rada (Nash Svit 2018). However, this discussion turned out to be a pivotal moment in the history of LGBT rights in independent Ukraine. Since then, the topic of LGBT rights has moved to the level of political and public debates. It is worth noting that before 2010–2011, there was very little political or media discussion of the situation of LGBT people in the country (Shevtsova 2018a).

Nevertheless, the situation changed when, in 2012–2013, Ukraine found itself in a tough position of choosing between signing the Association Agreement with the EU or entering the Customs Union with Russia and other former Soviet republics. In 2013, the Ukrainian government declared its intentions to close the deal with the EU, which neither Kremlin nor pro-Russian groups in Ukraine could accept. To prevent losing control over Ukraine, pro-Russian groups introduced a myth about the attempts of the EU to impose same-sex marriages and homosexuality in third countries (Shevtsova 2020; 2021).

Indeed, the EU declared LGBT rights among the values its member states were to promote and protect, also beyond the Union's borders. That meant, among others, more political, technical, and financial support for the European Neighborhood (Shevtsova 2020). This fact was distorted by pro-Russian politicians and civic organizations in Ukraine (mostly by the group "Ukrainian Choice" of Viktor Medvedchuk). One example of these manipulations is the posters stating that "Association with Ukraine means same-sex marriages" in big Ukrainian cities. Even the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Mykola Azarov, claimed that the EU demanded the legalization of same-sex marriages. Though this fact was denied by the EU representative to Ukraine the same day, the belief about the "European values" as those focusing on homosexuality was there to stay (Shevtsova 2020).

In 2013, the competition between pro-Russian and pro-EU political forces in Ukraine resulted in the so-called Euromaidan and the following anti-government protests (Yekelchuk 2015). Later in 2014, overthrown President Yanukovich fled to Russia, the Russian Federation annexed the Crimean Peninsula, and a hybrid war started in the eastern part of Ukraine. It lasted eight years and escalated with the full-scale invasion in February 2022. A pro-European government came to power in Ukraine, declaring approximation with the European Union and potential NATO membership among foreign policy priorities.

In these circumstances, the LGBT community in Ukraine hoped for substantial progress in attitudes to LGBT rights among political activists. They believed that homophobic rhetoric was usually associated with Putin's politics. However, the same rhetoric was quickly picked up and used by Ukrainian nationalist groups who gained momentum as they were particularly active during the Euromaidan protests (Shevtsova 2020). These groups position themselves as neither pro-EU nor pro-Russian. Nevertheless, they do not deny that their arguments are remarkably similar to those of conservative groups in Russia. During one of the interviews with a spokesperson for *Pravyy Sector*, one of the major Ukrainian right-wing groups, for another research project in the summer of 2015, my respondent said, "If Putin says that two plus two equals four, *Pravyy Sector* will not deny it either" (personal interview, July 2015, Kyiv).

Right-wing groups present only part of the heteroactivist movement in Ukraine. Nevertheless, due to their activities, the resistance to sexual and gender equality in the country grew more vigorous, becoming more visible and even threatening the lives of civil society activists working with women and LGBT Rights. In 2019, far-right organizations in Ukraine carried out more than twenty attacks on women's groups and LGBT activists in different cities with almost no reaction from the government and major political parties (Weir 2019). The next major opponent is an NGO, the Council of Churches, bringing representatives of all major confessions. Unlike right-wing groups, the Council of Churches, dominated by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, uses political lobbying rather than public actions to prevent the promotion of LGBT rights and gender equality in the country. For example, the Council of Churches is the major force behind vetoing the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, that Ukraine signed in 2011 but failed to ratify until July 2022. The document

does not discuss LGBT rights and only mentions "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" as grounds protected from discrimination.

Nevertheless, the Council of Churches claimed that ratifying the convention could lead to legalizing same-sex marriages and normalizing homosexuality for minors. They insisted, therefore, on deleting the words "gender," "sexual orientation," and "gender identity" from the document (UOJ 2017). Finally, groups such as LAH, All together (*Vsi razom*), and other initiatives supported by the Western evangelical movement are active in Ukraine. From 2015 to 2022, there has been a visible increase in the number of people these groups could mobilize for public protests, actions, and peaceful gatherings (like the festival for a traditional family held annually in Kyiv). Mobilizing participants via digital and printed media proved effective against the persisting belief that the European Union and Western partners push Ukraine towards equality for LGBT people, affecting the Ukrainian nation, its families, and minors.

One could argue that organized heteroactivism in Ukraine is predominantly male, as right-wing groups and the Council of Churches are composed mostly of men. Women attend family festivals organized by evangelical groups but are a minority at counter-protests. Still, women are present, making it essential to examine female activities within these groups, particularly women's groups operating within the heteroactivist framework. Before introducing such groups and analyzing their mobilization frames, the next section will briefly explain the data collection and analysis methods.

### Women in Ukrainian Heteroactivism

The Sisterhood of Saint Olga<sup>1</sup> was founded on the eve of March 8, 2018, and its first activity was a protest against a women's rights march in Kyiv. Formally, the organization is not that large. It has only twenty female members who call themselves "anti-feminists."<sup>2</sup> The group explicitly opposes gender equality and LGBT rights. From 2018, a group of "sisters" attended most counter-protests against LGBT and women's rights.

Their leader, Oleksandra Sklyar, is active on social media and gives multiple interviews for online newspapers and TV (see, for example, The Babel 2019). The goal of the Sisterhood proclaimed by Sklyar is to stop liberals' "attacks" in Ukraine. In her interpretation, this means to counter liberalism and feminism. Sklyar and her colleagues from the Sisterhood do not precisely define any of these concepts. Nevertheless, one could gather from their posts (some examples will follow) that the group rejects the idea of women being equal to men since women are weaker than men and we live in a "men's world" (The Babel 2019). They refer to

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<sup>1</sup> By the end of 2021, the Sisterhood halted their activities due to ideological conflicts among its members. Instead, another organization, Silver of the Rose (*Sriblo Troyandy*), with very similar messages and ideology emerged.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/sisterhood\\_of\\_st.olga/](https://www.instagram.com/sisterhood_of_st.olga/) In 2020, the Sisterhood switched from Instagram to the Telegram channel [https://t.me/s/radical\\_feminine](https://t.me/s/radical_feminine)



women's- and LGBT- rights NGOs as liberal elites and foreign agents that should be ejected from the country.

Another group of women resisting gender and sexual equality is women working in education, usually psychologists and social scientists. Scholarly heteroactivism in Ukraine has developed significantly in recent years and gained several public figures and female academics who sound well-informed and are equipped with the corresponding terminology. They refer to the so-called "gender theory" as an ideology, not a scientific or academic concept. According to these heteroactivist scholars, this ideology aims to promote the feminist movement and destroy traditional patriarchal society and does not have any solid scientific foundation. Gender theory stigmatizes "healthy ideas" about how society should function and deprives children of educational orienteers. In other words, rather than talking about homosexuality as a sin as their predecessors used to, this new cohort of scholars talk of "threat to children's psychology" and "healthy personality building" (see interview with Olesya Gorgota, VsiRazom.ua 2020b). "Contradiction to the Constitutional norms and rights to the freedom of speech and religious beliefs" have also become a part of the discourse (see, for example, Daily L'viv 2020). As in other countries, Ukrainian heteroactivist scholars place their argument within Christian Orthodox and Ukrainian nationalist rhetoric appealing to such notions as "Slavic or Ukrainian cultural/historical tradition." Their discourse is primarily based on the claim that historically, culturally, and, more importantly, morally, a family is only possible as the union of a man and a woman aimed for procreation. Therefore, children should be educated accordingly, in order to avoid being tempted into a "wrong" kind of intimate relationship.

Heteroactivists in Ukraine also started using digital tools, creating educational YouTube videos discussing homosexuality, transgender identity, and so-called "gender ideology," contesting the information from Western academic literature.<sup>3</sup> Unlike their conservative predecessors, Ukrainian heteroactivists are much better informed and prepared for discussions, though they often manipulate facts and figures. For example, in one of her recent articles, *Five myths about transgenders*, Daryna Rebro, one of the female authors and interpreters of several Christian educational portals, wrote about suicide attempts among trans people. The number was not supported by any source. Nevertheless, the article's main argument was that depression among trans people was not caused by bullying, unacceptance, or discrimination, but by their having made a "wrong choice" and so they feel terrible about it (Rebro 2019).

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<sup>3</sup> A rich example of such rhetoric and attempts to provide academic justification of resistance to LGBT rights is one of the videos prepared by Vsi Razom (All together) coalition that shows interviews with several Ukrainian scholars, men and women, who refer to "gender" as to "pseudo-scientific" concept. Video "Bytva za pryrodu. Pro teoriyu genderu" (Battle for the nature. On the gender theory) can be found at <https://youtu.be/QrTdSIO7EAW>, last accessed on June 23, 2022.

In what follows, I analyze the mobilization frames used by women heteroactivists in Ukraine. I argue here that these initiatives fit well into the definition of heteroactivists: they are united around heteronormativity. Moreover, they are considerably better informed and prepared than their conservative predecessors were, equipped with a broader range of tactics and activities. Finally, they promote heterosexuality and the idea of a “healthy family” as the nation’s only legitimate foundation and national security guarantee.

## Data and Methods

To explore the gendered nature of Ukrainian heteroactivism, I have chosen two groups of women activists that fit into the definition of heteroactivism. The first group, Sisterhood of Saint Olga, composed of exclusively female participants, claims to be authentic and nationalist, inspired by Ukrainian historical female figures. The other case focuses on women heteroactivists in academia. In the following analytical part, I analyze these two groups separately when differences that are important for the present study appear. The overall analysis is structured around three mobilization frames/themes used by the activists to mobilize supporters. The selected frames are:

- Women as Wives and Mothers;
- Protection of Family and Minors;
- Religion (heteroactivism as martyrdom).

To analyze the data, I use the frame analysis, which is an approach developed explicitly for social movement studies to focus on the causal questions behind movement participation and mobilization (Björnehed and Erikson 2018). The advantage of frame analysis is that it allows focusing on how specific ideas or ideologies are instrumentalized to mobilize supporters and counter the opponents vis-à-vis particular goals (Snow and Benford 1988; Lindekilde 2014). The project’s methodology draws on the idea that framing is a deliberate and conscious work by social movement activists. In other words, collective action frames are “symbols” crafted intentionally to activate broader discourses and to place a particular social phenomenon (for example, the promotion of gender equality or LGBT rights advocacy) in a particular light (Lindekilde 2014).

The collected data included 48 written texts and six video recordings in Russian and Ukrainian downloaded online from open sources. Among the texts and interviews that I found, I chose the ones where the topics of feminism, LGBT rights, gender theory, sexuality, and gender identity were discussed. For the selection, I first read them through and then went through the texts using the text search function using the words *feminism*, *LGBT*, *sex*, *sexuality*, *rights*, *homosexuality*, *family*, and *values*.

Direct quotes included in the article have been translated by myself (I have bilingual proficiency in Ukrainian and Russian). The materials date to 2016–2020, starting when the first women’s groups emerged and became visible among the opposition to gender and sexual equality. The materials include posts from online media, social media, Facebook, Instagram,

and Twitter. They also include several printed brochures and leaflets distributed during the counter-protests against Kyiv's March of Equality and Family Festival. I also support the analysis by describing and discussing some visual content, such as photos and images used by the activists to support their messages, to refine the findings of frame analysis used as the primary method (Doerr and Milman 2014).

### **Women as Wives and Mothers**

Much has been written on the core importance of women's reproductive role in nationalist discourses (Yuval-Davis 1996). Motherhood is presented as a woman's life purpose. A woman is expected to raise children – and the nation. Portraying women as responsible for raising the future of the Ukrainian nation is one of the central themes throughout the narratives of the members of the Sisterhood of Saint Olga. This can be illustrated by the following quotes from their official Instagram account: "Giving birth to children, we multiply our small state" (June 3, 2019); "Motherhood is the main purpose of a woman. It is our mission and our essence" (May 12, 2019).

The Sisterhood follows the typical nationalist narrative in which women's role is reduced to reproduction and child-rearing (McClintock 1993; Norocel 2015; Browne et al. 2018). There is no place for men in this story of women raising children. A woman's heterosexual reproductive sexuality is there to culminate in motherhood that "must be manifested within a legally sanctioned monogamous union with a man belonging to the ethnic nation" (Norocel 2015, 249). Neither is there a place for anything else in a woman's life apart from serving her family and, in such a way, her nation. However, this is a crucial role as, according to the Sisterhood members, "[T]he future of the state is created not by voting papers but by a child in mother's hands" (Instagram of the Sisterhood, July 3, 2019). The Instagram account uses colorful photos of some sisters with children in their hands, accompanied by quotes like those above. Women in this narrative are important for the nation to survive and grow, yet they are wives and mothers, not equal partners. This leads to their other narrative on the importance of heterosexual families and resistance to feminism.

In their public statements and during the protests against LGBT-related events, Ukrainian male-dominated right-wing groups often recur to the war argument to oppose LGBT rights. They use using claims like "It is not a good time for gay parades when there is a war in the country,"<sup>4</sup> "Homosexuals should be sent to the army," and "We did not stand at Maidan [place where the protest camps were located] to let those perverts now march in the center of Kyiv" (Shevtsova 2018b).

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<sup>4</sup> While it is common to refer to Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, as the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the position of the Ukrainian government and most political activists is also to refer to the military conflict with the separatist units unofficially backed up by Russian military forces in the eastern part of the country as to the war or hybrid war.

Such an explicitly different attitude exemplifies how heteroactivism has become gendered in Ukraine. Male groups take a political stand and define themselves as protectors of the nation, militant, if necessary. In contrast, the Sisterhood avoids references to Maidan or military actions, demonstrating that their position is outside the political debate. Though they also draw on Ukrainian nationalist ideas, they focus more on the idea of a Ukrainian family, Christian and heterosexual, and a woman – a mother and a wife – as its core.

The Sisterhood's rhetoric on the family emphasizes the woman's place in the "natural" hierarchy (below men), and the evil of feminism that pushes women to believe that they are equal to men instead of obeying their husbands. They stress that equality between genders is a "threat" to a healthy order of things: "Evil is unwilling to keep a due place in the hierarchy" (Instagram post, June 11, 2019); "Such a seemingly 'innocent' desire of a woman to be equal to a man (which, in reality, means to be higher than a man, because real equality is only to be with Christ), instead, destroys the foundation of Love, Family, and a healthy society as such" (April 17, 2019).

Even the way in which women heteroactivists participate in protests against feminism or LGBTI rights events is explicitly gendered. For example, for a protest action against the LGBT rights festival in Chernivtsi, several women from St. Olga's Sisterhood came dressed like nurses from the First World War. They were sitting aside from the protesters, their hair covered with the white scarf with the image of St. Olga. As they explained, they thought about how women should be presented at such events. Finally, they decided that there was no sense in "jumping in front of the police forces" since it only created additional trouble for men who "sincerely care about and want to protect" them (Oleksandra Sklyar, Facebook post on personal page, June 25, 2019). Instead, the activists presented themselves as those behind the battlefield, waiting for their men, ready to "heal" them if needed.

In this rhetoric, women heteroactivists claim that women are subordinate, supportive, and caring; they seek protection and subordination – for the good of men and the nation. Nevertheless, the state is not considered responsible for protecting women from violence. Together with the opposition to LGBT-related events, the Sisterhood was highly active in protesting the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence by the Ukrainian government. However, unlike anti-gender movements that want the word "gender" deleted from the document, women heteroactivists protested the role this document gave to the state. Below is the quote from Sklyar's interview regarding this document:

Now feminists demand that the authorities and police protect them for thousands of years. We were under the protection of our fathers, boyfriends, and husbands. I saw one video where a father shot down a guy who raped his daughter [in Latin America]. This is horrible, and I do not call for murders, but a single case like this can prevent more in the future than the whole feminist movement (from the interview for *The Babel*, 2019).

The Sisterhood refers to feminism as an ideology pushing women to go against their nature and purpose, choose career and education over family, child-rearing, and serve their husbands. The Sisterhood sees the organizations and activists promoting women's rights or LGBT people's rights as the same group acting against healthy families and the Ukrainian nation.

It is worth noting that the organization presents itself as a Ukrainian Christian nationalist one. All the texts on their social media pages are in the Ukrainian language. They often participate in protest activities with such right-wing groups as *Svoboda*, *Katechon*, and Right Sector (*Praviy sektor*). Nevertheless, the Sisterhood has long ignored the widely used topic of war conflict in Ukraine by other right-wing organizations and presented itself as mostly apolitical. They claim that while women must always be next to their husbands, supporting and helping them, they should not have an opinion on politics or participate in politics. Women's task is to inspire and support men, not to rule the country (The Babel 2019).

Women heteroactivists in Ukraine overlook the issue of the human rights of LGBTI people or women who go out for peaceful protests against domestic violence or to celebrate International Women's Day. Instead, they stress the need to protect those with a "correct" understanding of morality and family values, protect women from being "brain-washed" by feminists, and protect minors from bad influences. The state should select carefully whom to protect from what and what values to legitimize.

### **Protecting the Family, Protecting Minors**

Another widely exploited frame is preserving the family, family values, and protection of minors. One of the most visible figures in the academic movement against gender and sexual equality is Lyudmyla Grydkovets, the head of the Kyiv Business and Technology Institute's psychology department. She has published several scholarly articles in Ukrainian academic journals and online. Among those is a publication titled "Gender extremism as a factor of family destruction" (Grydkovets 2015). Her main argument is that gender equality is a "dangerous myth" that leads to destructive societal consequences, such as the depreciation of the family as an institution, lower fertility rates, and manipulation of the topic of domestic violence. According to the article, 97% of men in Ukraine are psychologically abused by their wives. The author suggests that this situation results from women's reluctance to take up traditional gender roles and reject their natural femininity (Ibid). She also claims that homosexuality is a by-product of raising a son in a family without a father or treating teenage boys too gently (p.103, p.108).

The protection of minors is needed in "dysfunctional" families and schools, where children are separated from their parents and vulnerable to multiple possible influences. Another predominantly women's heteroactivist group, the Association of Sexologists and Sexual therapists of Ukraine (ASSU), fights against comprehensive sex education (CSE) at schools. The ASSU sees CSE as "experiments over children" to promote "gender ideology"

in schools beyond their families' control. Moreover, CSE gives children the "wrong" ideas about what sexuality is supposed to mean in their lives, what sexualities are society-approved and state-sanctioned, and what is deviant and unacceptable. The children, therefore, must be protected against such harmful influences, and schools must become a "safe space that makes impossible imposing on children the idea of 'normalcy' of homosexuality and other sexual deviations" (ASSU 2021, my translation from Ukrainian).

Another recurring argument concerns protecting children against those who "think" they might be a part of the LGBTI community. Since heteroactivists reject the idea of LGBTI children themselves, they claim that such children, first, often wish for things that may not be the best for them. According to the articles published by ASSU as scientific materials, children that consider themselves trans, if left alone and not treated by psychiatrists to embrace their "natural" gender identity, are more likely to have risky sexual behavior, depression, and even autism; this is explained by the fact that these children do not see "healthy" gender role models, start sexual life too early or watch porn or erotic movies. The titles of the articles published by these authors are self-explanatory: "Transgenderers are likely to have autism," "From transsexuality to gender inadequacy: how to choose treatment," "Problems of Ukrainian schools nobody talks about," "Eastern Europe chooses traditional family," and "History of feminism: is there still a place for women?"

All this is incorporated into a larger discourse on the importance of the traditional Christian family to Ukrainian society, that conceives gender ideology, "hidden" within comprehensive sexual education, as aimed at ruining the "family foundations" and imposing foreign liberal ideology on children/future citizens.

For heteroactivists in Ukraine, school is supposed to be a safe space for children where the "natural" dominance of heterosexuality and cisgenderism should be conveyed to the children with no chance of "indoctrination" with foreign values and "propagation" of homosexuality or "alternative forms of sexuality" (VsiRazom 2020; ASSU 2021). The danger of normalization of non-heterosexual relations and sexualities for minors is at the core of most heteroactivist claims. The "neutral" and "objective" knowledge that the school is expected to offer children is inherently heteronormative, prioritizing abstinence as a method for contraception and protection against STIs. There is no assumption that heteronormativity can be/is imposed on children; it is presented as the only "healthy" norm that should be taught to children. No other forms of sexual orientation and gender identity are supposed to be mentioned in such classes. While LGBT people can be mentioned during other courses (as a part of those curricula), their "lifestyle" should not be presented as normal or discussed in detail to avoid confusing minors.

### **Religion: Heteroactivism as Martyrdom**

With as many as three official Christian Orthodox churches in Ukraine, Orthodox Christianity has been a vital part of most Ukrainians' national and political identity (Shevtsova 2022). Across the Western world, religious groups have been among the main opponents of

sexual and gender equality. Ukrainian heteroactivist groups have made no exception in turning to Orthodox Christianity; they build their rhetoric opposing LGBT rights and the development of feminism in Ukraine around the history of Kyiv Rus and national myth figures.

A telling illustration is the choice of the name for the Sisterhood of Saint Olga. Duchess Olga (Olha or Helga) was a regent for Svyatoslav, her son, of Kyiv Rus at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. She used to stand out among female characters in Ukraine's history as a powerful figure, mostly thanks to her obliteration of a tribe that killed her husband, Igor. Olga was also among the first nobles in Kyiv Rus to convert to Christianity (later, her grandson Vladimir converted the entire nation), which resulted in Olga's veneration as a saint. While many Ukrainian historians portray Olga as a progressive personality for her time, a strong country leader, and a strategic thinker, St. Olga's Sisterhood members claimed it was a significant mistake to consider Olga someone who longed for power. According to them, Olga only took the regent position as there was no other option, and the saint was turned into a symbol of opposition to women's rights groups in Ukraine.

On one occasion, on March 8, 2019, a march for women's rights was scheduled to start next to St. Olga's monument at Mykhailivska Square in the center of Kyiv. Before the march started, the space in front of the memorial was occupied by right-wing groups, including the Sisterhood. The women had large banners with the words "Feminism destroys Ukrainian families" and "God, Fatherhood, Patriarchy." Even though the organizers defined the protest as a protest against feminism, they also mentioned homosexuality and LGBT rights. Similarly, during Pride week in Kyiv, LGBT rights and feminism were discussed at the counter-protests; both were regarded as unnatural and threatening to the Ukrainian family. Here is how one of the members of the Sisterhood speaks about the women's rights march in her interview:

If earlier LGBT organizations were hiding their Ukraine-phobia, now they took *vatnyyu* [a dismissive euphemism used for pro-Russian groups and their rhetoric] position. Their march is not for women's rights but for abortions, antimilitarism, and nationalist organizations' ban. We have no right to keep silent. (personal interview, 2019)

The notion of "martyrdom" (a reference to Christian martyrs) is another salient theme regularly mentioned by female activists. They speak of their readiness to suffer for the nation's survival and bring sinful people (feminists and LGBT people) to the "right" belief. One of the prominent "martyrs" for the Christianity and health of the nation in Ukraine is a female evangelical activist who calls herself Rita Sakhalinskaya on Facebook (or Margarita Korotkih). In 2019, with other evangelicals (mostly men), they gathered during the nights before the marches of equality (marches for the rights of LGBT people in Ukraine) for a joint prayer "for the souls of LGBT people". As the marches would begin the next morning, in order to stop them Rita Sakhalinskaya would lie down on the street in front of the people about to march, and a police officer had to pick her up and carry her away. On her Facebook page, the woman posted the following message about the event in Odesa (a similar one in Kharkiv followed in a month):

When our groups [those of the march participants and protesters] faced each other, I had to fall and lose consciousness to stop the parade. I did not expect to be carried away. The police officer took me in his strong hands; he carried me from the battlefield to the ambulance. There I had to regain consciousness. I thanked everyone for helping me (Sakhalinskaya, post on her personal Facebook page on August 31, 2019).

The post was accompanied by a photo of the woman carried by a police officer. The next month she repeatedly fell in front of the march participants in Kharkiv and was again carried away. Before that, she and several other protesters were kneeling with posters calling LGBT people to “reject their sin” and “come back to God” next to the protected territory where the march was supposed to occur. Similarly, in the summer of 2018, Oleksandra Sklyar’s pictures were posted online. On them, she was standing among the protesters against the LGBT rights march in Kyiv, her hair covered, large tears on her cheeks, as she was making a sign of Cross on herself from time to time. On such occasions, these women talk of love and acceptance. They claim to care about all those people who lost their right pass. This is the reason for their tears and suffering.

Like martyrs, women representatives of heteroactivist groups regularly speak out, as they define it, to protect Orthodox Christianity and religious values. In 2020, when President Zelensky signed the decree to give the status of official holidays to several Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic holidays as the holidays of national minorities in Ukraine, the Sisterhood of St. Olga wrote an official statement criticizing such a step. They accused the government of favoring Western religions and tolerance over Orthodox Christianity. According to them, the government should have listened to the national Orthodox Church with “specific comments to the government, such as regarding abortions, the Istanbul Convention, or surrogacy” rather than adopting questionable measures to please the West and ignore the rights of the religious population (VsiRazom.ua 2020a).

In other words, the religious part of Ukrainian identity (which, according to women heteroactivists, can be only Orthodox Christian) is used by women heteroactivists similarly to submissive femininity and motherhood. These frames seem to legitimize their right to take a stand against LGBTI rights, sex education at schools, or the adoption of laws ensuring gender equality. Their actions are presented as a forced choice they have to make in the current circumstances to protect minors and the rights of believers (again, Orthodox Christians) against the state that is trying to please the West and overlooking what is truly important. The only kind of relationship in line with these values is the Christian, white, heterosexual family, which has to be promoted and protected by the state to ensure the nation’s survival.

## Conclusion

Professional LGBT rights activism has been developing throughout the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and so has the organized resistance against sexual and gender equality in Ukraine. From traditional religious and moral arguments used in response to the partial



recognition of LGBT rights in Europe and beyond its borders, the opponents moved to more informed strategies taking advantage of political claims and tools that earlier had enabled progress with LGBT equalities. This new local ideological response based on the fundamental belief in the centrality of heteronormativity for a healthy society fits into the definition of heteroactivism proposed by Browne and Nash (2017). In the case of Ukraine, the heteroactivist movement has been shaped by the country's complex historical and cultural past: specifically, the presence and political and later military interference of Russia, presenting itself as a defendant of family values and Orthodox Christian tradition in the region as opposed to the growing dependence of Ukraine on the European Union with its liberal, LGBT-friendly agenda.

Expanding the research on heteroactivism as a traveling concept to the case of Ukraine has been important for several reasons. First, unlike in the Western scenario, heteroactivism in Ukraine cannot be described solely as a response to the fast progress with gender and sexual equality in the country. Instead, heteroactivism in Ukraine developed parallel to some advancements regarding LGBT rights and gender equality. Second, unlike in other states, heteroactivism in Ukraine has been influenced by the geopolitical value conflict and militarization of the Ukrainian society, a factor that needs to be studied further to see its effect on women's and LGBT rights in Ukraine. Finally, as a part of this special issue, the case of Ukraine complements our understanding of the transnational character of this phenomenon by showing how the strategies and tactics of heteroactivists are traveling internationally and are transformed to be adjusted to the local context.

This article has focused on women active within the Ukrainian groups opposing LGBT rights and gender equality. It has argued that the actions of these groups could be defined as heteroactivism, even if this is not how they refer to themselves. The article has explored the mobilization frames used by these women within the organized movements, focusing on the intersection of gender, sexuality, religion, and nationalism. In doing so, it has addressed questions on the kind of femininity that has come out of these frames as superior or acceptable, and what roles have been assigned to women within the movement and beyond it.

Similar to the cases of heteroactivism in Western countries described by other authors (Browne and Nash 2014; Browne, Nash, and Gorman-Murray 2018), Ukrainian opponents to LGBT rights and gender equality base their actions on the idea of the superiority of a Christian heterosexual nuclear family over other forms of families and sexualities. The three mobilization frames analyzed in the article (Women as Wives and Mothers, Protection of Family and Minors, and Religion) all point to the importance of preserving such families as a foundation of a "healthy" and sustainable nation. These frames define what femininity can be acceptable in the Ukrainian context; "proper" Ukrainian women are mothers and wives in "healthy," (i.e., heterosexual) Christian families.

Understanding the role of women in Ukrainian heteroactivism is crucial because their presence gives local opposition to sexual and gender equality additional legitimization. First, being mothers and putting motherhood at the center of their argument, they frame their

protest action as a concern about the rights of minors rather than homophobia and rejection of the human rights of LGBT people. Being responsible for educating the future generation of Ukrainians, they frame their objections as worries about the nation's future, the nuclear heterosexual family, and vaguely defined Ukrainian cultural tradition. Second, being women, they can stand against feminist actions in the country, claiming that they understand, not worse than feminists, the situation with women's rights in the country and that they do not need "protection" in the way that women's rights movements in Ukraine define those. Third, women-heteroactivists in academia can add to the "scientific" knowledge that serves as an additional justification for their arguments, wrapping it into the rhetoric of the rights of minors and freedom of religion.

Finally, as Ukrainian heteroactivism is embedded into the local cultural and historical context, so are the practices of women within the heteroactivist movement. Even though heteroactivists in Ukraine claim that women should stay outside of politics, leaving this to their husbands and fathers, the value clashes around sexual and gender equality are closely tied to the country's geopolitical situation. As this article has shown, stuck between the European Union, which is largely associated with more liberal human rights and freedoms, and Russia, which promotes traditional family values, Ukrainian women within heteroactivist groups are carving their particular niche in the political system of the country, safely using the same rhetoric as Kremlin while separating themselves from Russia with their nationalist claims.

As the opposition to gender and sexual equality in Ukraine evolves, a further much-needed direction for future research is education. Recent developments in the global West demonstrate that even in the countries such as the UK, Canada, and the US, where substantial progress has been achieved in turning schools into safer and more inclusive spaces, there is growing heteroactivist opposition to LGBT equality in schools (Nash and Browne 2021). In Central-Eastern European countries, including Ukraine, where national policies are much less LGBT-inclusive, the competition for the power to shape school curricula will likely be even more appealing for heteroactivist groups. There is already extensive research on the gender dimension of social policy in Ukraine and the familialist and traditionalist values promoted by some Ukrainian political leaders (e.g., Zhurzhenko 2017; Tarkhanova 2021). With the growing civil society mobilization to support these values and narratives, Ukraine's school space and curriculum are slowly turning into a battleground between the attempts to promote the so-called "European" vs. "traditional family" values. Regulated by the State, education is a direct channel allowing the authorities to communicate the standards for "good citizenship." With increased professionalism of social movements opposing gender and sexual equality, exploring how heteroactivism penetrates this sector can help us better understand what conditions are being created to train a new generation of "responsible citizens" who are expected to participate in the processes of nation-building and cultural preservation.

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