

# THE CULTURE WAR AND THE ACTUAL WAR

by **Hansalbin Sältenberg**

## Introduction

At a time where many public debates are informed by the ongoing full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, we thought it would be important to further explore the relation between controversies of gender, sexuality, reproduction – what can be labelled the “culture war” – and the actual military war. Four scholars on feminist and anti-gender politics were invited to discuss this topic from various angles on the roundtable “Exploring the links between the culture war and the actual war” at CBEES Annual Conference 2023 on the war and its effects. Participating researchers were Maryna Shevtsova, Emil Edenborg, Jenny Gunnarsson-Payne, and Elżbieta Korolczuk. The roundtable was connected to the project CCINDLE Horizon, that Korolczuk and the roundtable’s moderator Hansalbin Sältenberg are part of.

The discussions shed light on important aspects not only of the political and discursive landscape in Russia and Ukraine, but also in Western Europe and Sweden. In doing so, some of the connections between “West” and “East”, as well as between the “cultural” and the “material”, became more obvious to us present at the discussion.

To share the insights, two questions were sent to all the panelists to briefly follow-up the roundtable discussions. ✕

**Hansalbin Sältenberg holds a PhD in Gender Studies, Södertörn University**

**From the perspective of your research expertise, what is your take on the relation between the cultural war and the actual war in Ukraine?**

**MARYNA SHEVTSOVA**,  
Postdoctoral Fellow at  
KU Leuven, Belgium:



“Since its start in 2014, Russia’s war on Ukraine has evolved into a discursive battleground between Russia and the imaginary West, increasingly seen not simply as a geopolitical power struggle in the region but as a clash of fundamental values. The Western perspective champions liberal ideals, emphasizing LGBTQ rights and gender equality. In contrast, Russia positions itself as a guardian of what it terms ‘traditional family values’ and Orthodox Christian morals.

It is noteworthy that this discourse, initially crafted and propagated by Russia, has now permeated both sides. There are clearly certain gains from this shared adoption of the narrative; for example, it created windows of political opportunities for LGBTQ and women rights activists in Ukraine (as well as in Moldova and Georgia) to push for more liberal legislation for sexual and gender equality. At the same time, I believe that there is a risk of putting too much emphasis on this specific discourse and ignoring or not paying enough attention to the complex dynamics at play.

When countries are seen as either modern and progressive or conservative

and backward, with progress evaluated through an external lens of perceived LGBTQ-friendliness that is measured by law and policy adoption only, such an oversimplified portrayal not only reinforces divisions but also obscures the nuanced realities within each nation, be it Ukraine and Georgia or Hungary and Poland. Consequently, this discourse becomes a tool for fostering animosity and reinforcing preconceived notions, hindering the potential for understanding and possibly dialogue.”

**EMIL EDENBORG**, Associate Professor in Gender Studies at Stockholm University:



“Russian leaders use a gendered geopolitical discourse, justifying the war as a fight for ‘traditional values’ against Western ‘pseudo-values’. LGBTQ rights are portrayed as a threat to Russia’s national security. My research looks into what consequences this has for activism and queer people in Russia. I have conducted interviews with Russian LGBTQ activists, some in exile, some remaining in Russia. The interviewees describe a significantly more aggressive political climate from 2021 onwards, where queer and trans people are represented as ‘national traitors’. New laws such as the 2022 expanded ‘gay propaganda’ ban, and the decision in late 2023 to declare ‘the international LGBT movement’ as extremist, in practice makes LGBTQ activism illegal. Moreover, economic sanctions on Russia makes it dif-



Kyiv Pride 2019.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

difficult for activists to access Western funding, which has been crucial to developing LGBTIQ organizing in Russia. Many activists and non-affiliated queer and trans people have left the country, while others are staying due to family circumstances, lack of resources or other reasons. The activists who continue working in Russia emphasized the need to preserve what is possible of the community infrastructure that has been developed in the last decades (e.g., safe meeting spaces) and strengthen horizontal forms of solidarity.”

**JENNY GUNNARSSON-PAYNE,**

Professor in Ethnology at Södertörn University:

“I think most of us can agree that the politics of so-called ‘traditional values’ is used to frame and justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, by framing it in terms of ‘security’ and ‘protection’ against a degenerated West. Emil Edenborg has written insightfully on how Russia weaponizes anti-lgbtq-politics. I warmly recommend his accessible text in *Boston Review* (see: <https://www.boston-review.net/articles/putins-anti-gay-war-on-ukraine/>).

What interests me in particular is just how potent ‘the Culture War’ has proven to be not only for drawing political fron-



**“RUSSIA POSITIONS ITSELF AS A GUARDIAN OF WHAT IT TERMS ‘TRADITIONAL FAMILY VALUES’ AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN MORALS.”**

tiers in so many different countries, but also to form geopolitical alliances. Antigender politics is a central component to this. The dividing line between the two geopolitical camps is astutely discussed by Laurie Essig and Alexander Kondakov in terms of ‘the Sexual Cold War’, in which, what they have named Homosexuality and Heterosexuality (conceptual cousins to homonationalism and anti-gender politics) represent the two sides. Importantly, although they may come across as each other’s opposites, they have in common that they are both: first, central for the creation of national and regional identity (generally manifested in the figure of ‘the people’); second, that they *both* view same-sex desires as an *exception* either to

be ‘tolerated’ (Homosexuality) or to be ‘repressed’ or even extinguished (Heterosexuality). Acknowledging the latter is important, as shall serve as a reminder to avoid romanticising ‘the West’.”

**ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK,**

Associate Professor in Sociology at Södertörn University and the American Studies Center at Warsaw University:



“The outbreak of a war is usually understood and explained by experts as the result of political developments, geopolitical tensions, or economic shifts. Rarely it is interpreted through the lens of socio-cultural change, such as the change in gender norms and identities. My claim is that Russia’s aggression on Ukraine shows the key role that struggles over norms and values play in contemporary politics. And it shows that the struggles around gender – identity, family, and reproduction – are one of focal points in today’s global politics. In Russia the attack on Ukraine has been framed as a legitimate response to colonial aggression by the West and its allies in the region, a form of self-defense. This position was voiced by both political and religious leaders, including Putin himself and Patriarch Kirill who ex-



Catholic anti-gay protesters during a 2018 equality march in Rzeszów, Poland.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

plained the necessity of the Putinist ‘special operation’ by the need to defend the people of Donbas from the ‘gay parades’. This ideological framework posits that the post-1989 transformation in the region is a consequence of the liberal West’s dominance, resulting in a series of humiliations for the East. This rhetoric – the narrative of ‘rising from our knees’, defending sovereignty, resisting globalism, and refusing to be mere imitators – is not specific to Russia. In Russia’s context, however, this narrative is further tinged with imperial nostalgia and megalomania, as the country refuses to face its own colonial politics and seeks to be seen as the savior of the people in the East.

The narrative promoted in Russia portrays the West as a colonial power, which aims to conquer post-Soviet spaces through imposing a set of values and lifestyles that are false and empty: individualism, consumerism, and sexual freedom. While the West is a corrupt and degenerate entity, it remains a mighty power, able to lure and subdue the ordinary people on the East who fall prey to the ‘colonization by gender’. Russia on the other hand is a source of moral renewal and order, and as such it has a great civilization mission to fulfill: the task is to protect the people from Western influence, and in a

**“WHILE OPEN ANTI-SEMITISM IS NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE WITHIN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE BROADER SOCIETY, ‘GENDER’ HAS BECOME IT’S EQUIVALENT.”**

longer run to save the West its own moral collapse. As shown by Emil Edenborg, Russia envisions itself as the repository of values and norms that are key to European Christian tradition, including patriarchy, natural sexual order, and dominance of religion. Thus, she is obliged to promote them on its own territory and beyond. Opposition to ‘gender ideology’ peddled by the West and its false prophets including Marx and Freud, as well as feminist, and LGBT movements becomes the civilization mission of Putin’s Russia. This narrative establishes a connection between the communist era’s distrust and disdain for the West and the post-1989

trauma that coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union, imbuing it with a significant emotional dimension.”

**What further topics or perspectives in relation to the above would you say are relevant to be explored by researchers?**

**MARYNA SHEVTSOVA:**

“Unfortunately, it is too early to speak about the end of the war; nevertheless, the process of rebuilding Ukraine is ongoing, and the question remains: who guides this process, and who is at the table when the rebuilding is discussed, and priorities are set? While the responsibility lies with international organizations and governments to ensure the representation and inclusion of all societal factions, it is equally imperative for researchers to scrutinize the contributions of various groups, including women, LGBTQ individuals, Roma people, and others, to the reconstruction efforts. Examining the experiences of these groups and amplifying their voices becomes crucial in shedding light on their distinct perspectives, understanding this war, and dealing with its consequences.”

**EMIL EDENBORG:**

“It is crucial to continue researching what forms LGBTIQ activism takes as Russia has entered a new phase of authoritarianism and repression, both in exile and in the country. Of course, this research must be conducted in ways that are safe for the research participants, and ultimately aim to benefit these communities. Beyond that case, I find it fascinating how shifting geopolitical realities and discourses impact the politics of gender and sexuality, as shown for example in growing support for LGBTIQ rights in Ukraine in the wake of Russia’s invasion. But what are the long-term consequences of such politicization?”

**JENNY GUNNARSSON-PAYNE:**

“As Essig and Kondakov have argued, Homosexuality and Heterosexuality are best understood as ‘imaginary sexual economies’ insofar as that they both communicate what makes a society ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

I agree but want to add that to properly understand their potential to 'grip' subjects (and thus gain broad political support) they must be understood as fantasies in the psychoanalytic sense. Put in the words of Slovene psychoanalytic philosopher Slavoj Žižek's they provide the 'coordinates of our desire' and are central for processes of identification. Only thus we can understand why they are so powerful, and how they both have the potential to justify violent acts. Against this background, we need to explore further not merely the violence conducted by our most obvious political opponents, but also closer to home."

#### EL ŹBIETA KOROLCZUK:

"The global anti-gender movement is entangled with global politics and while its representatives usually employ non-violent methods to fight against women's reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, sex education and gender studies, its discursive strategies and campaigns should be further analyzed as possible conveyor belt to engagement in violence. Thus, we need to explore the links between anti-gender ideology and authoritarian militarism, having in mind the ultimate outcomes of such discourses.

We should also explore further the links between the anti-gender worldview and fascism. Fascist legacy is clearly visible in the ways in which the anti-gender actors seek to re-establish a binary hierarchical gender order as the basis of a healthy nation. It is much more obvious in countries such as Russia where gay people are prosecuted or in Poland where local municipalities established 'LGBT-free zones', but the obsession with the dangers of sexual decadence and moral purity can be discern also in other contexts. Secondly, as shown by Agnieszka Graff, there are also clear elements of anti-Semitism in anti-gender discourses. It can be argued that especially for fundamentalist groups within the Catholic Church gender functions as a stand-in for Jews: a malevolent force sexualizing the innocents, corrupting the nation from inside. While open anti-Semitism is no longer acceptable within the Catholic Church and the broader society, 'gender' has become its equivalent." ❌

# HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN TIMES OF WAR AND REPRESSION

**THE ROUNDTABLE** "Universities at War", held in Vienna on September 27, 2023, provided a panorama of case studies analyzing how universities have been implicated and affected by wars and conflicts. The speakers reflected on the

way academic communities have been affected and the role of European academic institutions as sites, agents, collaborators, resisters, and victims of military conflicts from the Second World War to Russia's war against Ukraine.

## Introduction

**PHILIPP CHRISTOPH SCHMÄDEKE** is Political Scientist at the Federal Agency for Civic Education, Berlin, director of the Science at Risk Emergency Office.



"Hello everyone, really happy to have you here. Very shortly regarding myself, I'm also director of the Science at Risk Emergency Office. We are helping scholars at risk from Ukraine, but also Belarus and Russia. The full-scale Russian invasion into Ukraine also affects scientists there. We can help 100 Ukrainian scholars and students at risk. But the situation is, in many ways, really, really horrible. Students and academics are at war. Many are fighting at the front, and some are even dying in the war. We see a brain drain of women academics from Ukraine. They are moving all over the place, but mostly Europe. We do not know if they're coming back and when it would be possible. The present situation in Ukraine for academia is alarming. It's quite impossible to have normal teaching, researching, and learning. The efforts to hold online courses are admirable but when there is no electricity it isn't really possible.

And at the same time we are experi-

encing repression, on a scale we haven't seen since the Soviet Union. The repression is not only in Russia, but also in Belarus where the number of political prisoners is 189 per one million habitants. We are facing an extreme situation that we need to deal with and understand how best to tackle together.

The good thing is that there is a big wave of solidarity aiming to help scholars at risk. We are thus doing what we can together with other European academics who are helping with their own means, with few resources. But the official structures are helping less than 1% of scholars at risk from the region, less than 1%. And we are facing the problem that there's not enough help for 99% of scholars at risk

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