

Pride Contested

Geopolitics of Liberation at the Buffer Periphery of Europe

ABSTRACT

This article explores Pride politics in post-Maidan Ukraine from queer feminist and decolonial perspectives. It aims to understand how the location of Ukraine on the fringes of two imperial formations, namely the global West and Russian imperialism, shapes Pride and its consequences for LGBT communities and broader society. The authors introduce the concept of buffer periphery as an analytic lens that focuses critically on both imperial formations simultaneously, while tracing naturalized colonial discourses. The first part of the article analyzes the material-symbolic framing of Kyiv Pride marches in the context of the NGO-ization of LGBT activism, police reform, the war in Donbas, and the corresponding militarization of Ukrainian society and the region at large. The analysis is focused on how West-centered geopolitics of liberation and the Euro-oriented aspirations of the Ukrainian government work together to animate Pride politics and instrumentalize them. The second part closely examines the case of the Queer Anarcho-Feminist Block at the 2017 Kyiv Pride, considering it an attempt at decolonial resistance to neoliberalization and militarization of Pride and LGBT politics in Ukraine. The article suggests that the resulting outcome of Kyiv Pride marches with respect to broader LGBT communities in Ukraine is rather ambiguous. While acknowledging its influence on public opinion and media discourse as well as its personal significance for many community members, the authors offer a critical perspective on Kyiv Pride as a vehicle and an effect of the colonial geopolitics of liberation. It remains unclear to what extent Kyiv Pride challenged homophobia and transphobia, let alone capitalist and racist regimes of power, or if it perhaps just converted the idea of LGBT liberation into a homocapitalist project of producing loyal sexual citizens.

Keywords: Pride, coloniality, queer feminism, buffer periphery, geopolitics of liberation, Ukraine

ACCORDING TO ILGA-EUROPE'S “Rainbow Europe” project, which annually estimates “LGBTI equality and social climate for LGBTI people,” Ukraine outscored such EU members as Poland, Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria in 2020.¹ In the survey, Ukraine appeared among the “most progressive” countries in Eastern Europe. One of the assessment criteria that contributed to Ukraine’s relatively high ranking focused on opportunities for holding public LGBT² events exercising freedom of assembly without state obstruction. In this paper, we provide a different take on this conclusion (as well as the criterion as such) and offer an alternative view on the meanings produced by Kyiv Pride through the perspective of buffer periphery, which places critical analytic focus on the colonial power of global capitalism, police brutality, and militarization.

Positioning ourselves as queer feminist scholars/activists, we have participated in a variety of feminist and leftist street actions in Kyiv, Lviv and Kharkiv since 2010. We believe in the efficiency and value of public protest. However, when long-awaited Pride marches appeared in Ukraine in the 2010s, we found ourselves in a dubious situation: the marches did not seem to be a “dream come true” story. Observing the political agenda and positionality that shaped events under the Kyiv Pride banner, we did not see ourselves as belonging there. We participated in the Kyiv Pride march only once, in 2017, joining the Queer Anarcho-Feminist Block (QAFB) – a grassroots initiative and independent block at the rally.³ We found the anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-homonationalist agenda of QAFB most appealing because it opposed the mainstream neoliberal ethos of Kyiv Pride. At the same time, we have placed Kyiv Pride in the focus of our study, which seeks to understand how the location of Ukraine on the fringes of two imperial formations⁴ shapes Pride and its consequences for LGBT communities and broader society. This paper presents our critical discourse analysis of the politics of Kyiv Pride which aims to expose the workings of global power in LGBT activism in post-Maidan⁵ Ukraine. In the paper we also consider the case of the Queer Anarcho-Feminist Block (QAFB) as a way of exercising resistance to the mainstream Pride discourse – a way of challenging the neoliberal and militarized Kyiv Pride from within and pointing to an alternative LGBT political agenda.

Thinking from the buffer periphery

The point of departure in our study is a queer feminist decolonial framework where coloniality is conceived as a set of power domains that have multiple implications at the “receiving end of global designs” (Mignolo 2011, 45): the coloniality of epistemologies (knowledge production), the coloniality of subjectivities (including gender and sexuality), the coloniality of authority (government and enforcement institutions), and the coloniality of economy (Quijano 2008, 545). Inspired by the growing decolonial scholarship on Eastern Europe (Boatcă 2016; Gržinić, Kancler & Rexhepi 2020; Kancler 2021), we introduce the concept of *buffer periphery* to capture the experiences of territories that constitute a periphery of not only the West-centered world (as in “the West and the rest” postcolonial framework), but a periphery in relation to two empire formations, namely the global West and Russian imperialism. This is the case for Ukraine, which “fell victim to the relentless spread of the empire of capital where Russian and Western capitalist geopolitical imperialisms collided” (Yurchenko 2020, n.p.). While acknowledging that there are many “Wests,” we follow Edouard Glissant’s view of the West as “a project, not a place” (1989). With respect to sexual politics in Ukraine, the hegemonic Western attitudes are quite identical and rather unified. They are grounded in the neoliberal model of sexual citizenship, visibility and advocacy of LGBT rights. While our study is focused on the domains of sexuality and subjectivity, the theoretical framework of buffer periphery can be relevant in many other contexts where communities find themselves at the intersection of imperial interests of two or more globally dominating forces.

To exert decolonial resistance in the buffer periphery is particularly challenging. The two empire formations’ ceaseless competition for control of knowledge, governmentality, economy, and subjectivities prompts a need for constant analytical vigilance in order to avoid the trap of being seized by one or the other colonial discourse. We need the lens of buffer periphery to avoid this trap and focus critically on *both* imperial formations simultaneously while tracing naturalized colonial discourses in Pride politics. The case of Kyiv Pride illuminates how the

mainstream LGBT agenda in Ukraine is being informed by the interplay of Russian imperialist discourse and Eurocentric hegemony. Looking at the material-symbolic framing of Kyiv Pride marches through the lens of buffer periphery, we ask: How are Pride politics in Ukraine animated and instrumentalized by what we call *geopolitics of liberation*? How can colonial sexual politics be potentially resisted by local LGBT communities through alternative modes of affinities and solidarities?

Before Euromaidan (2013–2014), Ukrainian state politics, including those related to LGBT issues, were largely informed by Russian influence. In 2011–2013, three bills aimed at prohibiting “homosexual propaganda” were introduced in Parliament: two were designed to outlaw any positive mention of homosexuality to minors in public (bills No 8711 and No 10290) and one was designed to outlaw homosexuality in the public sphere in general (bill No 10729). All of them mimicked similar legislation adopted in the Russian Federation at regional and federal levels (Pagulich 2012). Although these bills did not pass in Parliament, their coming into being and the following public discussions revealed the complex anti-LGBT strategies being formed and mobilized not only by right-wing political groups and churches but also by some civil initiatives. The terms “gayropa” (gay + Europe) and “Euro-Sodom” enriched the anti-LGBT slang vocabulary in Ukraine, referring to the idea that homosexuality is promoted by the “West” and has the capacity to destroy the “naturally heterosexual” Slavic nations, Ukrainian and Russian alike.

After the Euromaidan protests, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula (February–March 2014) and began military intervention in eastern parts of Donbas (April 2014).⁶ This Russian imperial intervention has changed the political dynamics in Ukraine and generated a new imaginary of Ukrainianness reoriented towards Europe and in opposition to Russia. In this situation, the risk of anti-LGBT legislative initiatives diminished for a while. Even though homophobic and transphobic violence in Ukraine has not decreased, let alone disappeared, the new political vector has placed LGBT issues at the center of strategic EU–Ukraine relations with sexual rights as an integral part

and a marker of “Europeanization” (Bilić 2016; Ayoub & Paternotte 2014; Kahlina 2014; Gressgård & Husakouskaya 2020).

European LGBT politics – especially when viewed in contrast to Russia’s brutal state homophobia – sometimes appear as the progressive development of LGBT rights which Ukraine has yet to achieve. In the mainstream LGBT discourse, the European model is typically unquestioned and considered an ultimate goal. While fighting homophobia and transphobia ourselves, we, however, strive to avoid the pitfalls of Eurocentric epistemological frameworks and trace the malicious workings of colonial power behind the Western model of LGBT politics. We examine how these politics – imposed from above as an ultimatum – might induce violence, policing, and militarization in the region as well prompt punitive legislation and neoliberalization of activism. We call this phenomenon and its effects the geopolitics of liberation. Given the specific situatedness of Ukraine on the buffer periphery, we ought to keep in critical focus not only the conservative discourse of “traditional values” (Edenborg 2021) but also the seemingly “progressive” design of Western liberation. In order to do so, we must cease to follow the dictated lines and start practicing what Quijano called epistemological “delinking” (Quijano 2007), or what Mignolo suggested as “epistemic disobedience” – an action that “takes us to a different place, to a different ‘beginning’” (2011, 45). For us, practicing epistemic disobedience means interrupting a vicious circle of catching up with “progressive” Western sexual politics as the only way of getting away from homophobia and transphobia. In doing so, we hope to open possibilities for many new and unique liberatory projects.

Delinking Pride history

In 2016, an NGO named “Kyiv Pride” was registered as an institution focused on organizing Pride marches and related activities. Though other Pride marches in Ukraine were also typically organized by NGOs (i.e., not grassroots initiatives), the purposeful institutionalization of the organization under the name “Kyiv Pride” has boosted the process of Pride monopolization by “professional activists.” Among other things,

the “Kyiv Pride” NGO has legitimized itself via “official” history of Pride marches in Ukraine. In this section, we “delink” this historical narrative to mark alternative genealogies of Pride as a public LGBT protest in Ukraine.

The “official” history presented on the NGO’s website⁷ and proliferated via mainstream and LGBT media,⁸ traces Pride marches in Kyiv back to 2012, when “the first Kyiv Pride,” in the organization’s own wording, was organized but canceled at a last minute due to far-right threats. The story of the organizing of the 2012 Kyiv Pride and the public debates around it is described at length in a book dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the LGBT movement in Ukraine (Naumenko, Karasiychuk & Kasianchuk 2015, 146–148). The publication emphasizes the instrumental role of several gay male activists in pushing the issue. The same activists also organized the 2013 Kyiv Pride march, which was carried out in the remote fenced area of the Dovzhenko Film Studio and later considered “the first real” Pride march. The 2013 rally was attended by a delegation from Munich, including the German city’s mayor. Since then, ambassadors and politicians from countries like Canada, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US have been honored guests at the event, typically marching in the front rows of the Pride rallies. The assumption was that the presence of Western diplomats would guarantee that Pride would be properly protected by the Ukrainian authorities. As will be shown later, this assumption has resulted in complicated outcomes.

While the “official” history of Pride does refer to some public LGBT events before 2012, these are deemed as, far less significant than the “first” Pride marches outlined above. We want to draw attention to some of these allegedly insignificant events. For example, in September 2003, the lesbian feminist group “Women’s Network” organized the LGBT rally “Run for Life” within the frame of the UN campaign raising HIV/AIDS awareness. For the rally, the organizers prepared a huge rainbow flag that covered Khreshchatyk street – the main street of the Ukrainian capital and the rally venue – from sidewalk to sidewalk. Notwithstanding threats from skinheads and disparagements from the Kyiv city gov-

ernment, the rally took place and was referred to by “Women’s network” members as the first *Parad Hordosti* (Ukr. Pride parade) in Ukraine.⁹ However, the “Run for Life” rally does not mark the beginning of “official” Pride history. Furthermore, as recent studies show, the entirety of the decade-lasting “Women’s Network” activism (2000–2010) has been erased from mainstream Ukrainian LGBT history (Torbenko 2019, 45–47).

The “official” narrative of Pride history has also been cleansed of the “impurities” of other LGBT or LGBT-related public rallies organized by or associated with leftist and feminist groups. For example, a rainbow flag served as a front banner at the *Anty-Yolka* march along Khreshchatyk Street in December 2010¹⁰ (figure 1).



Figure 1. *Anty-Yolka* march, December 2010. Photo published by permission of Dossier media.¹¹

Anty-Yolka was a public protest in defense of political, social, and economic human rights, organized by leftist initiatives. It was triggered by the Kyiv government’s violent disruption of a peaceful camp protest of small business entrepreneurs. Then president Viktor Yanukovich had justified the camp’s demolition with the necessity of installing the country’s main Christmas tree. The name *Anty-Yolka* (meaning “Anti-Christmas

Tree”) ridiculed the President who, during his public speech on TV, had forgotten the Ukrainian word for Christmas tree (*Yalynka*) and, after an uncomfortable pause, used the Russian word, *Yolka*, instead.¹²

Another example of how the LGBT agenda has been present in public protests is the feminist street marches in Kyiv on March 8, organized 2011–2013 by the *Feminist Ofenzyva* grassroots initiative.¹³ Representing a particularly vibrant phenomenon in the history of Ukrainian feminism (Dmytryk 2016; Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik 2019; Zychowicz 2020), the marches are memorable for their abundance of rainbow-colored signs, anti-homophobic slogans, and anti-transphobic agenda (figure 2). But again, they are not a part of the “official” Pride history.



Figure 2. Feminist march on March 8, 2011, organized by Feminist Ofenzyva. Photo published by permission of Roman Yeremenko.

It is not by accident that Kyiv Pride does not include the legacy of the “Run for Life,” *Anty-Yolka* or *Feminist Ofenzyva* marches in “official” Pride history. One reason for the omission may be the fact that the mentioned rallies placed LGBT rights within broader leftist and

feminist frameworks. Today, the political positionality of mainstream LGBT activism in Ukraine is more complex, even paradoxical. On the one hand, in the right-wing public discourse, LGBT communities collapse under the label of “leftist” together with feminist, anarchist, environmental, and other activist groups because they are all perceived as “enemies of the nation.” On the other hand, the mainstream LGBT discourse in Ukraine is gravitating away from the “leftist” pole, sometimes explicitly:

In every country, the LGBT community mirrors local society. Where the leftist ideology is strong, there are many leftists amongst LGBT, and vice versa. The majority of Ukrainian LGBT – and I personally know many Ukrainian LGBT activists as well as ordinary gays, lesbians, and transgender people – are the same as the majority in the Ukrainian society, i.e., they support the right-wing ideology. (Andriy Kravchuk, LGBT leader, Radio Svoboda interview, August 2018)¹⁴

In this quote, “supporting right-wing ideology” is seen as non-problematic for LGBT communities, even trendy. Later in the same interview, the leader continues: “We have six active LGBT organizations in Ukraine, and only one of them is left-leaning; the rest don’t have any ideology. I would define them as center-right, let’s say. The leftists are not popular among us.” Kravchuk further explains that in the past, LGBT rights were globally supported by leftist groups, and this is a disadvantage for the Ukrainian LGBT movement. However, in the leader’s words, the situation is changing in a favorable way, because more and more Western conservative political forces include LGBT rights in their agenda (Andriy Kravchuk, LGBT leader, Radio Svoboda interview, August 2018).¹⁵

Whether they acknowledge it openly (like in the statement above) or not, mainstream LGBT NGOs in Ukraine often lean toward homonationalist politics (von Klein 2017; chushak, Serdyukova & Tantsiura 2022). This means that organizations navigate their positionality taking into account both local political processes and the condition of access

to (typically, international) resources. The increasing NGO-ization and professionalization of civic society in the region is fueled by the economy of Western donor agencies (Bagić 2002; Lang 2014; Husakouskaya 2018). Amplified in Ukraine by post-Maidan Europeanization (and, more broadly, Westernization), the geopolitics of liberation facilitates the total dependence of mainstream LGBT activism on donor funding. In so doing, it contributes to the ideology of homocapitalism that promotes upward mobility “interpellating queers as model capitalist subjects” (Rao 2020, 175), notwithstanding their legal liminality.¹⁶

As an NGO that is firmly integrated into the Western grant economy, Kyiv Pride appears to be a product and a vehicle of global homocapitalism. Problems produced by capitalism, like poverty and socio-economic inequalities, are absent in the single-issue Pride agenda. Such political positionality of Kyiv Pride contributes to the further naturalization of capitalist and neoliberal ideology in public discourse. In this context, the “epistemic disobedience” of QAFB, presented later in this article, has been especially valuable, in our opinion, because it has unveiled these workings of power.

“Theatre” of Pride

From the very outset, the Kyiv Pride rallies differed from the *Feminist Ofenzyva* and *Anty-Yolka* marches. As Kyiv Pride’s director stressed in a public discussion:

[We] have chosen this format not by accident. We wanted to do exactly this, that is Pride. And from the very founding of the Kyiv Pride [NGO], the idea was to do Pride like in Europe and the US. If we had intended something else, it would have been something else. (Anna Sharyhina, in a TV discussion between the 2017 Kyiv Pride organizers and queer activists on *UkrLife* TV, June 2017)¹⁷

In mentioning the US, the director was hardly referring to subversive protests, like Stonewall, led by Black transgender people protesting against police brutality in 1969, or the Black queer and transgender peo-

ple who blocked the Pride parade in Columbus, Ohio, in 2017 (Pagulich 2019). Instead, Kyiv Pride aligned with the power of Western hegemony and local police. The effect of this prioritization can be exemplified by the 2015 Kyiv Pride. When the rally was fiercely attacked by armed ultra-right groups, all police resources were thrown at the prompt evacuation of embassy representatives and other Western VIPs, while non-cisgender and non-heterosexual Ukrainian participants were abandoned and left to their fate. They were chased by ultra-right thugs for hours, beaten and humiliated, a line of events that has come to be referred to as “Safari”. After this catastrophe, the main efforts of the Pride organizers were directed toward collecting donations to help the injured police officer!

By recalling this case, we argue that the Pride committee cannot be accused of poor protection (for which they profusely apologized).¹⁸ The organizers, however, may rightly be criticized for their actions, that projected LGBT people as unworthy, merely part of the crowd scene in the Pride drama, or second-class ticket-holders in comparison with Western embassy officials and police. Understanding Kyiv Pride as an effect of the geopolitics of liberation helps us to see the tragedy of “Safari” not as an accident but as a systemic consequence of Europeanization.

Unlike other leftist, feminist, or (later) trans* marches in Ukraine, Kyiv Pride rallies have always been ostentatiously heavily guarded. For example, the 2016 Kyiv Pride march comprised 1,500 participants and was guarded by 5,500 police officers and 1,200 National Guard soldiers. So, the Pride participants were outnumbered by those “protecting” them by more than 5:1. In 2017, the number of guards at the Kyiv Pride march, which drew around 2,500 participants, was reported to be “no lower than it was in 2016.”¹⁹ Pride security measures included thousands of police officers and National Guardspersons, fully equipped and armed, called in from different regions of the country; the center of the Ukrainian capital being closed off to pedestrians and vehicles from the day before the rally; and the closing of several metro stations during the rally. To get to the Kyiv Pride venue, people had to undergo police body searches and pass through metal detector door frames – previously unheard of at street protests in Ukraine.

This is not to say that all other leftist, feminist, anarchist, and trans* marches in Kyiv were any less dangerous. Neither do we wish to downplay the threat of violent disruption at Kyiv Pride. We do however wish to emphasize that spectacular security measures may be seen as an intrinsic, constitutive part of the Kyiv Pride performance orchestrated by the geopolitics of liberation. In keeping with the common trend of measuring the development of LGBT rights by means of Pride parades (Ayoub & Paternotte 2014; Baker 2017; Renkin 2015), Kyiv Pride was meant to serve as the main indicator of “LGBT progress” in Ukraine. When the EU demanded that the post-Maidan Ukrainian government ensured the protection of LGBT rights in return for a visa-free regime with the EU, Kyiv Pride provided a handy bargaining chip and way of demonstrating “LGBT progress.” Though the disciplining demands of the EU are aimed at ensuring LGBT rights, they are rooted in Western self-superiority and interests in sustaining it. From a decolonial perspective, the EU-driven geopolitics of liberation instrumentalizes LGBT rights to maintain power relations between the core and periphery, and Kyiv Pride has therefore become a tool for strengthening the Western colonial power, not for challenging it.

The government of Ukraine also instrumentalized LGBT rights for its own benefit by providing thousands of guards at Pride marches in Kyiv while doing nothing else to protect LGBT communities from homophobia and transphobia. In fact, the state continued to generously sponsor far-right organizations which subsequently attacked Kyiv Pride as well as Roma settlements, and feminist and environmentalist initiatives (Coynash 2018; Gorbach 2018). By “a theater of Pride”, we mean that state needs and, in a sense, ensures far-right violence in order to secure opportunities to demonstrate excessive work on defending LGBT people for the satisfaction of the EU. Meanwhile, LGBT-phobia continues to flourish in the government’s legislative body. In January 2020, after several successful Kyiv Pride marches, 307 members of the 424-seat Ukrainian parliament (typically stuck in disagreement) formed a cross-party group and signed up for an inter-fractional association called “Values. Dignity. Family”, aimed at promoting conservative family values.²⁰

Pride, police, and military: a political hierarchy

In addition to demonstrating “LGBT progress” and government loyalty to EU policies, Kyiv Pride also proved the “success” of the police reform that started after Euromaidan, when the old *militsiya* (militia) was exposed as a corrupt and violent institution. The reform aimed to replace *militsiya* with the newly hired and innovatively trained *politsiya* (police) – a renaming that resulted in the institution being commonly known as the “new police.” Very soon, however, the new police faced criticism for being sympathetic to or even collaborating with ultra-right groups. In this context, the spectacular police performance at Kyiv Pride was intended to rehabilitate the new police and veil a long list of police “failures” – other LGBT events disrupted by far-right attacks ending in violence and injuries. The “Equality Festival” in Lviv (March 2016),²¹ the feminist street action by Queer Home Uzhgorod (March 2017),²² and the “Day Against Homophobia” performance in Kharkiv (May 2017)²³ are a few of the many examples. The police often sabotage investigations into homophobic and transphobic hate crimes and sometimes themselves conduct homophobic actions, such as the brutal police raid in a gay club in Dnipro (April 2019)²⁴ and the disruption of a Pride party in Kyiv (June 2020).²⁵

Despite ample evidence of many blatant cases of police brutality, the appreciative voices commending the police for protecting Kyiv Pride once a year are much more vocal in the mainstream LGBT discourse than those voicing critique. In a previous study, one of us has shown that the discourse of trust and gratitude with respect to the police dominates the narratives of community members (Plakhotnik 2019). At the end of the Pride marches, there has usually been a large group of participants shouting “Thanks to the police!” Likewise, the Kyiv Pride NGO reports typically start with a thanking of the police and a tagging of them on social media. This seemingly paradoxical situation can be unpacked using Cynthia Enloe’s insight:

If you’re protected, you are domesticated. And you’re in the private sphere, and you’re definitely in the local, domestic sphere – and you’re grateful. [...] That just sets up the whole political hierarchy. (Enloe 2012, 7)

Instead of opposing the violent masculinized culture of the police, today, Kyiv Pride further submits to this culture by privileging LGBT military veterans in relation to non-military Pride participants. In 2019, the military column of several dozen Ukrainian veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas walked in a Pride march and immediately received a central place in media reports.²⁶ Two years later, in anticipation of the 2021 Kyiv Pride, the organizers announced an even larger military and veteran presence in the rally and made them central figures in the Pride media promotion. This evolution of Pride's positionality vis-à-vis police and military demonstrates how geopolitics of liberation underlies NGO-based activism and channels the LGBT struggle into the normative mode of citizenship that is loyal to all state institutions, including enforcement agencies.

In this context, how can Pride be imagined as a subversive protest? The buffer peripheral position of Ukraine places Kyiv Pride at the center of the symbolic battlefield where Western-looking "LGBT progress" opposes Russian state homophobia. This makes resistance against police brutality, violence, and militarization difficult, but, we argue, not impossible. For example, shortly before the 2018 Kyiv Pride, a Roma settlement was set on fire by the far-right group C14 in Kyiv.²⁷ The police arrived upon call but did nothing; no further investigation into the crime was opened (Bondar 2018). The incident received much attention in Ukrainian media; Amnesty International has also added Roma to their platform of target issues in Ukraine.²⁸ In this situation, instead of praising the police for their protection of Pride, the Kyiv Pride NGO could have announced a cancellation of Pride in protest of police indifference to Romophobic crimes. Stating out loud that we do not accept protection from people perpetuating racist violence would mean a break with state institutionalization of Pride and complicity in imperial white supremacy. Given the extensive media coverage of Kyiv Pride, such a gesture could have become a powerful public LGBT protest and an unprecedented act of solidarity.

Contesting Pride from within

In March 2021, Sergej Sumlenny, director of the Ukrainian office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation – a German political organization closely affiliated with the Green Party – wrote on Facebook:²⁹

This aggressive leftist movement [in Ukraine] is very harmful.³⁰ I recall how [Ukrainian] anarcho-leftists tried to seize Kyiv Pride three years ago by means of anti-Ukrainian slogans. (Sergej Sumlenny, Facebook online discussion)³¹

Some of the slogans that perturbed Sumlenny are discussed further in this section; others are analyzed in a separate publication (Mayerchik & Plakhotnik 2021). At this point, we just want to underline that the German citizen and representative of the Western democratic institution used the rhetoric of *seizure* (!) with respect to the Queer Anarcho-Feminist Block (QAFB), a minoritarian grassroots initiative which undertook a one-time critical intervention at the 2017 Kyiv Pride. This anecdote exemplifies how geopolitics of liberation, manifested through policies of Western donors, further reinforces NGO-ization of LGBT activism, not only by funding preferences but also by means of marginalization (or even demonization, as in the quotation above) of local grassroots initiatives.

By 2017, more and more critical voices from LGBT communities in Ukraine were pointing to the domination of neoliberalism, militarization, and justification of police brutality in Kyiv Pride's design.³² Some activists attempted to bring "disobedience" into Pride's agenda by becoming a part of the Kyiv Pride organizing committee and offering a more situated knowledge in order to resist militarization and neoliberalization. It did not work well. Eventually, critically oriented individuals and groups decided to join forces and take part in the 2017 Kyiv Pride as a separate column, to make their point visible. QAFB joined the rally, deliberately as a rear column, signaling its opposition to the front columns of Western celebrities and NGO leaders. Seeking to show that "there are LGBT communities that disagree with both state politics and

Kyiv Pride politics” (QAFB manifesto),³³ the QAFB column comprised about one hundred people from different feminist, leftist and anarchist groups and organizations. The column was led by the ROR Kyiv samba band – famous for its “feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-militarist and anti-nationalist agenda”³⁴ – playing drums and managing slogans. The ROR Kyiv had used to play in the front rows of Kyiv Pride marches, but in 2017, the band joined the rear QAFB column. It turned out to be the last time that ROR participated in Kyiv Pride.

The QAFB slogans and signs have elaborated on the initiative’s political message, sometimes ironically referring to the 2017 Kyiv Pride official agenda. For example, the slogan *Kraina dlia vsikh, a bezpeka lyshe dlia vybranykh* (Ukr. “The country for all but safety only for the chosen”) ridiculed the 2017 Pride tagline “The country for all.” In light of the preceding pogroms of the Roma settlements, the motto of Kyiv Pride, flanked by thousands of armed guards, appeared especially cynical. Criticizing the neoliberal politics of Kyiv Pride, the QAFB sarcastically rephrased another popular slogan *Prava ne daiut’, prava berut’* (Ukr. “Rights are not given, rights should be taken”) as *Derzhava prava ne daie, derzhava prava prodaie* (Ukr. “The state does not give rights, it sells rights”). Other QAFB slogans referred to such pressing issues as racism and transphobic violence, poverty and capitalist exploitation, misogyny inside LGBT communities, and militarization. Among other slogans, QAFB participants chanted:

Ni boha, ni natsii, ni LGBT neoliberalizatsii (Ukr. “No to god, no to nation, no to LGBT neoliberalization!”)

Bidnist’ tezh riznomanittia? (Ukr. “Is poverty also a diversity?”)

Kvir emansipatsiya, a ne rayduzhna asymilyatsiia (Ukr. “Queer emancipation, not rainbow assimilation”)

Shanuymo kvir-sim’i, a ne til’ky odnostatevi shliuby (Ukr. “Respect queer families, not just same-sex marriage”)

Tak Romam, ni pogromam! (Ukr. “Yes to Roma, no to pogroms!”)

Nerivni! Rizni! Rozlyucheni! (Ukr. “Unequal! Different! Angry!” confronting the mainstream slogan “Different but equal”)³⁵

The QAFB front banner *Kokhaisya! Kviruisya! Denaturalizuisya!* (Ukr. “Make love! Queer yourself! Denaturalize yourself!”) was remarkable. It was made by the *ReSew* craftivist cooperative³⁶ using the slogan authored by activist group *FRAU*.³⁷ Feminist art scholar Olena Dmytryk noticed that it was

distinctively different (‘denaturalised’) from the usual banners carried in the demonstration. The fragile and flowery transparent fabric of the banner made visible the demonstrators behind it, thus symbolically ‘merging’ the statement and people carrying it. The multi-coloured slogan letters were not limited to the ‘rainbow palette’, which could be read as an attempt to move beyond the ‘naturalised’ meaning of ‘LGBT rights’. (Dmytryk 2021, 139)

Notably, the banner was made by means of patchwork on a recycled curtain – all in accordance with *ReSew*’s environmental policy (figure 3).



Figure 3. “Make love! Queer yourself! Denaturalize yourself!”: the front banner of the Queer Anarcho-Feminist block. Photo: Olga Plakhotnik.

Together with another rhyming chant, *Vasbi dieti budut vsie kak my, Vasbi dieti budut vsie kvirny!* (Rus. “All your kids will be like us; all your kids will be queered!”), the QAFB front banner ironically contested the essentialism of the unanimous “born this way” rhetorical strategy of mainstream LGBT activism in Ukraine (Beketova & Plakhotnik 2022).

Protest against police brutality and violence was at the core of the QAFB agenda. Challenging the common gratitude toward the police for their protection of Pride, the QAFB Manifesto stated:

We make a stand against a police state. The homophobic, lesbophobic, transphobic, racist, and xenophobic crimes are covered by new police in the same way as the old police [...] The same police, who must protect us from pogroms and violence, conduct pogroms and violence themselves. (QAFB manifesto)³⁸

Raising the sign *Svoboda deystviy pod kontrolem politzii* (Rus. “A freedom of actions under police control”; figure 4), a QAFB participant ironically addressed the spectacular protection of Kyiv Pride by emphasizing the self-evident paradox of the situation.



Figure 4. “A freedom of actions under police control” (in Russian): a placard at the 2017 Kyiv Pride march. Photos: Olga Plakhotnik.

Shortly after the 2017 Kyiv Pride rally, QAFB found itself at the center of a tremendous scandal, playing out predominantly on social media. Two of the QAFB placards sparked a storm of debates in LGBT communities and beyond, namely the placards bearing the slogans *Smert' natsii, kvir voroham* (Ukr. “Death to nation, queer to enemies”) and *K chertu vash patriotism, nash vybor kvir-anarcho feminism* (Rus. “Let your patriotism go to hell, our choice is queer anarcho-feminism”).³⁹ Kyiv Pride and other leading LGBT NGOs strived to publicly dissociate themselves from the placards saying that they were “unofficial.” The QAFB collective was fiercely attacked, condemned for national treachery, and by some denied status as belonging to the “LGBT community.” Some LGBT leaders went as far as to calling the National Security Agency (the Ukrainian intelligence service) to inform them about the QAFB “treason.” The QAFB reacted by publishing the following statement:

We are outraged by the attempt of Kyiv Pride organizers to other and marginalize the anti-nationalist agenda of our block and other initiatives via differentiation between “official” and “non-official” slogans. Such an attempt proves the conservative and right-liberal position of Kyiv Pride. Most of our block’s members claim their belonging to LGBT communities and share queer anarcho-feminist views. Our position is clear and open. Hence, Kyiv Pride is not a voice of “all LGBT people.”⁴⁰

One cannot help but wonder whether this one-time QAFB intervention at Kyiv Pride made any difference. On the one hand, despite the active and long-lasting discussions of the QAFB agenda on many LGBT and feminist public platforms, national and international media – TV, journals, and newspapers alike – in their coverage of the 2017 Kyiv Pride, remained ignorant of the rebellion coming from inside of the LGBT movement. The media focused predominantly on such easily recognizable Pride images as Western ambassadors, LGBT leaders and the platform of drag queens. While the ROR Kyiv samba band attracted some media attention, the QAFB’s political claims remained unnoticed and

unrepresented. The image of growing “tolerance” and “progressiveness” dominated the media discourse around the 2017 Kyiv Pride.

On the other hand, our further observation of the dynamic of the Ukrainian LGBT and feminist discourses has allowed us to see a significant influence of the QAFB on Pride and broader LGBT politics. Though the QAFB intervened in Kyiv Pride only once, the same or congenial slogans have continued to pop up here and there in public spaces, signaling the urgency and relevance of the critique. The QAFB front banner, “Make love! Queer yourself! Denaturalize yourself!”, could be seen leading one or two rallies within “Queer Forum” events in Kherson, a medium-sized city in southern Ukraine. The annual marches in Kherson, that started in 2017 under the name “For Diversity, Against Discrimination”, were quite different from Kyiv Pride in terms of political positionality. Along with rainbow and transgender symbols, the marches in Kherson critically targeted global capitalism and criticized local authorities for poor socio-economic politics.⁴¹ Another instance of the continuing QAFB legacy was detected in Kharkiv, one of the biggest cities in the eastern part of Ukraine. The Kharkiv Pride marches, that started in 2019, are known for their alignment with Kyiv Pride positionality. When one of the most “scandalous” QAFB placards – “Death to nation, queer to enemies” – was seen in the 2019 Kharkiv Pride march, it thus appeared rather a radical intervention into the otherwise mainstream Pride. Two years later, in 2021, a dozen people wearing black outfits and face-covering masks appeared in the front lines of the Kharkiv Pride march with signs criticizing the police as well as Pride’s expressions of gratitude towards them: “So many police but so little safety,” “Our guards are our offenders,” and so on. The sign “Safety for the chosen?” most likely referred to one of the QAFB slogans, revealing solidarity with and a continuation of the queer feminist struggle.

Another consequence of the QAFB intervention was that after the 2017 Kyiv Pride, no feminist and LGBT rally passed without a revival of the discussion on public statements and whether signs and slogans should be censored. These debates activated the question of power and

authority in LGBT communities: Who “owns” Pride and makes the corresponding decisions? We may conclude that queer feminist “epistemic disobedience” continues to produce an alternative imaginary of activism and solidarity in LGBT protest. Keeping a critical focus on the domination of homophobia and transphobia in the region, the hypocritical sexual politics of local governments, the ever increasing policing and militarization, the homonationalism of mainstream LGBT activism and coloniality of the West-centered LGBT agenda, this alternative imaginary disrupts the logic of the geopolitics of liberation and opposes its violence. It is important to remember, however, that the QAFB’s statements were articulated from the location of the buffer periphery, which makes them different from many Pride interventions in Western countries challenging neoliberal homonormativity, pinkwashing and racism (Brown 2007; McCready 2019; Pagulich 2019).

Conclusion

We do acknowledge the merits of Kyiv Pride and its influence on the transformation of public opinion and media discourse. We are well aware that many LGBT people in Ukraine are inspired and empowered by Pride marches, and these affects and affinities cannot entirely be seized or limited by the Kyiv Pride neoliberal agenda and its power-oriented positionality. Moreover, the aim and meanings of Pride are constantly redefined by Pride participants who bring their own vision, energy, and passion. At the same time, the colonial power of the geopolitics of liberation, which Kyiv Pride appears to be an effect of and a vehicle for, must not be downplayed. Such a disposition challenges the entire imaginary of Pride as a political protest aimed at fighting homophobia and transphobia. We must conclude that the outcome of Pride, with respect to broader LGBT communities in Ukraine, is rather ambiguous. The buffer-peripheral status of Ukraine makes the progress of militarization and production of “unworthy citizens” too easy. So far, Kyiv Pride has not challenged the system of oppression. Rather, it has converted the idea of LGBT liberation into a homocapitalist project of producing model citizens that are loyal to the existing power structures.

When Pride politics collide with specific interests of global capitalism at the buffer periphery, they enhance existing hegemonies and do not serve subjugated people or communities.

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NOTES

1. Source: <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>.
2. We use LGBT as a conventional term and self-designation of a majority of the corresponding organizations, and refrain from adding additional letters and "+" because of our critical perspective on the instrumentalization of identity politics by neoliberal inclusivity.

3. Against the backdrop of the frequent conflation of grassroots with NGOs in the rhetoric of Western agencies and scholars, we distinguish between NGOs and grassroots activism. While NGOs are institutionalized as legal entities in the state register and function as non-profit institutions, grassroots organizations are those autonomous non-institutionalized groups that typically remain invisible to state agencies and less visible to Western donors. As in the other post-socialist regions (Dilanyan, Beraia & Yavuz 2018), NGO-based activism in Ukraine is significantly privileged over grassroots initiatives in terms of resources and media representation. From a queer feminist perspective, and together with other scholars, we claim that the major NGOs conduct their activity *at the expense* of grassroots activism (Butterfield 2016).
4. By imperial formation (or empire formation) we are referring to what Timothy Snyder calls “imperial management” with respect to the EU: “European Union is imperial management. That is what the EU is” (Snyder 2019a). Snyder points out that when the big European empires lost their maritime possessions, the EU became the place for the former maritime empires to land. “It wasn’t nation-states that kicked off the process of European integration. It was fading empires, exhausted by their colonial efforts” (Snyder 2019b). Therefore, the purpose of the European Union is “to shore up the statehood of imperial fragments” (Snyder 2019c). While an increasing number of contemporary scholars consider the Soviet Union and its successor state the Russian Federation as forms of empires, these imperialisms remain undertheorized. At the same time, Russia’s ongoing war on Ukraine makes this imperialism more evident than ever.
5. Maidan (also known as #*Euromaidan*) is a Ukrainian revolutionary event that took place in the winter of 2013–2014 and lasted for more than three months, comprising peaceful and violent phases. The Maidan protest, subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia, and Russia-induced military conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine, entailed a sweeping political transformation across the region. Notably, more and more scholars are using the term “post-Maidan Ukraine” to underline these changes.
6. Between April 2014 and February 2022, the warfare continued only on the territories of eastern parts of Ukraine (Donbas region). On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation started the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.
7. Source: <https://kyivpride.org/>.
8. See, for example, https://www.lgbt.org.ua/en/materials/show_4230/.
9. Source: <http://www.myshared.ru/slide/50340/?fbclid=IwAR2TUwifWZW5F1jUN9QsEvJkahrkKZgE1pMxzII6iBMPy7MyshPKrCHrBPA/>.
10. Sources: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVE-k9_32-U; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6crQfF_Kww.
11. Source: <https://www.dosye.com.ua/photo/2010-12-11/antiilka-v-kieve/4681/>.
12. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLUVDSWcBOM>.

13. Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_Ofenzyva; <https://ofenzyva.wordpress.com/>.
14. Source: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29404627.html>.
15. Ibid.
16. As we have argued elsewhere (Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik 2021), the complicity of NGOs in the global grant economy is not total. There is evidence that some LGBT NGOs in Ukraine have used donor funding to support the subversive anti-capitalist and anti-militarist agenda or help the most vulnerable community members on the ground (Alliance Queer Emergency Ukraine 2022).
17. Source: <http://www.ukrlife.tv/video/suspilstvo/kievpraid-2017-za-i-protiv-diskus-siia-organizatorov-i-kvir-feministok>.
18. See Mayerchuk 2015.
19. Janjevic 2017.
20. Source: <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ukrainian-lawmakers-form-300-strong-conservative-pro-family-pro-life-group.html>.
21. Coynash 2016.
22. Pechonchuk & Yankina 2017, 25.
23. Nash Mir Center 2018, 9.
24. Nash Mir Center 2020, 37.
25. Vynohradova et al. 2020, 19.
26. Source: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/war-veterans-join-biggest-gay-pride-march-in-ukraine/>.
27. Source: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/ukraine-a-year-after-attack-on-roma-camp-in-kyiv-no-justice-for-victims/>.
28. See, for example, <https://khpg.org/en/1524441220>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/8708/2018/en/>. We thank the anonymous reviewer for this remark.
29. We use open-access (public) data from Facebook, with certain ethical precautions driven by current debates on the ethical aspects of internet-mediated research (Coughlan & Perryman 2014). The practical ethical decisions regarding each case have been informed by such a basic ethical norm of sociological study as the safety of study participants and minimization of the risk of harm (BSA 2002).
30. The author used the word *шкодливий*. It is not clear whether Sumlenny misspelled the Ukrainian word *шкідливий*, meaning “harmful,” or used a dialect word meaning “playing dirty tricks.” Both meanings comply with the blaming tone of the narrative, though.
31. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2452657025008527/permalink/2791042907836602>.
32. In addition to numerous posts and discussions on social media, there were several publications in the *Spil'ne* (Commons) journal of social criticism (for example

- von Klein 2017; Anonymous 2018). See also a TV discussion between Kyiv Pride organizers and queer anarcho-feminists: <http://www.ukrlife.tv/video/suspilstvo/kievpraid-2017-za-i-protiv-diskusiiia-organizatorov-i-kvir-feministok>.
33. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1349154525133716/>.
 34. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/KyivROR/>.
 35. QAFB slogans: https://www.facebook.com/events/1349154525133716/?post_id=1357537090962126&view=permalink.
 36. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/ReSewKyiv>.
 37. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/fraugroup/posts/1085794844828744>.
 38. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1349154525133716/>.
 39. We have analyzed these placards in our previous publications (Plakhotnik 2019; Mayerchyk & Plakhotnik 2021).
 40. After-Pride statement of the QAFB on the matter of so-called “provocative placards”: <https://www.facebook.com/queeranarchofem/photos/a.237780856692507/287585411712051/?type=3>.
 41. See, for example, an interview with an organizer of marches in Kherson, Alliance Queer Emergency Ukraine 2022.