# On The Limits of Speakability: Debates on Homonationalism and Sexual Citizenship in Post-Maidan Ukraine

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*This article examines the debates on homonationalism in Ukrainian LGBTQ communities: how the concept has been used to voice different perspectives on the LGBTQ political agenda. Tracing the rhetoric of homonationalism employed by different activist groups, the study investigates which meanings of homonationalism appeared debatable and what fell beyond the "limits of speakability." Offering a queer feminist reading of Pride in Kyiv, the paper also explores how the entanglement of national, European, and global modes of homonationalism operate on a local level—how this operation is produced by and productive of the specific imaginaries of sexual citizenship in Ukraine.*

The story of this paper began in November 2015 with a comic series "Homonationalism is …" created by the FRAU[1] collective and popularised via Facebook. The series consisting of four caricatures offered examples of what homonationalism looked like in the Ukrainian context at that time (Figure 1). Being widely proliferated, the comic series evoked an explosion of debates that hit a nerve in LGBTQ communities because of being connected to one of the most pressing political issues in contemporary Ukraine—belonging to the nation and patriotism in relation to LGBTQ rights and activism.
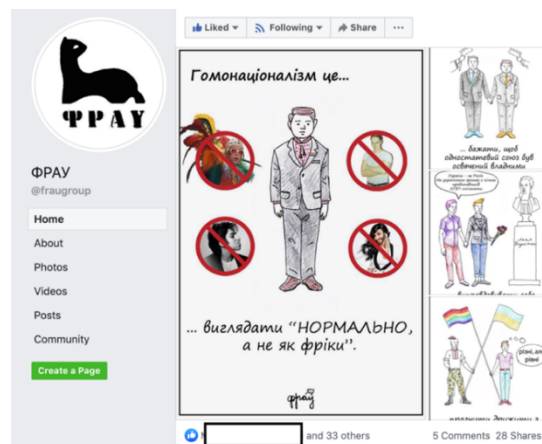


Figure 1. A screenshot of the FRAU Facebook page with comic series "Homonationalism is …" (Posted on November 1, 2015). The post featuring four original drawings had been subsequently liked by 34 users, commented on by 5 users, and shared 28 times.

In this paper, I examine debates on homonationalism in activist communities to trace their impact on broader discussions about sexual citizenship and strategies of LGBTQ activism in post-Maidan Ukraine. How was the rhetoric of homonationalism used by different activist

groups? Which meanings of homonationalism appeared debatable and what fell beyond the "limits of speakability" (Butler 1997)? What do these discussions say about the regime of sexual citizenship that is being formed in contemporary Ukraine? To answer these questions, my particular focus is Kyiv Pride—a central annual LGBTQ event in the capital of Ukraine which epitomizes how relations between LGBTQ communities, the nation-state, and the global world are imagined and negotiated. I collected public narratives and images issued by the institution of Kyiv Pride and gathered online-based data from social media discussions (Facebook);[2] I also attended the 2017 Kyiv Pride rally and undertook participant observation: taking photographs and making field notes.

After providing some context about what happened in Ukraine within the studied period and explaining how my study is theoretically framed, I offer a critical discourse analysis of the public discussions triggered by the "Homonationalism is …" comic. Firstly, I examine how different segments of LGBTQ communities understood the meaning of homonationalism and navigated their positionality and activist strategies accordingly. The second part of the paper offers my queer feminist reading of Kyiv Pride events to unpack how entangled national, European, and global homonationalism operate on a local level, and how this operation is produced by and productive of the specific imaginaries of sexual citizenship: who we are, what our aim is, and how a better future for us, LGBTQ people, can be achieved.

## LGBTQ Activism Before and After Euromaidan

Euromaidan (or, just Maidan) was a series of civil protests that took place in Kyiv and across Ukraine. It started in November 2013 with demands for closer European integration and within three months gradually transformed into a protest against President Yanukovych's regime. Followed closely by the opportunistic annexation of Crimea by Russia and Russia-induced military conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine, Euromaidan signifies the beginning of dramatic political transformations in Ukrainian society, including in LGBTQ communities.

Before Euromaidan, the Ukrainian government exhibited significant anti-LGBTQ attitudes through corresponding legislative initiatives. Between 2011 and 2013, several bills aimed at prohibiting the so-called "propaganda of homosexuality" were introduced in the Parliament; all of them mimicked similar legislation adopted in the Russian Federation. Although these anti-LGBTQ bills did not pass in Parliament, heated public discussions around them revealed the complex strategies, developed by churches and right-wing civil initiatives, that were being formed and mobilized against LGBTQ rights. The victory of Euromaidan changed the situation. On the one hand, in the dominant LGBTQ discourse, the post-Maidan period is typically evaluated in terms of "progress," instantiated, first of all, by the "successful" (meaning not violently disrupted) Kyiv Pride marches in 2016–2019. On the other hand, LGBTQ people in Ukraine continue to experience hatred and violence on a large scale. The longitudinal study by Nash Mir Center (2018b, 52) concludes: "The situation of violence and discrimination against LGBT people in Ukraine over the past three years did not evidence any signs of improvement." Today, participants in public LGBTQ events in Ukraine are invariably under threat of being viciously attacked, tear-gassed, or stoned by far-right militants (OHCHR 2019).

To investigate how the structural aspects of the "domain of the sayable" shape discourses, hierarchies inside and between LGBTQ groups must be taken into account. The analysis of materials from mainstream and LGBTQ media shows that a voice aimed at representing "the community" is the voice of NGOs and their leaders. Within the context of the

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domination of NGO-based activism, the "authorized language" of NGOs enables mechanisms of performativity in the discursive field and produces a specific "regime of truth." As Óscar García Agustín (2015) put it, "the performative magic" occurs when somebody becomes the representative of the group. The prerequisites for this occurrence are recognition of the authority of the speaker and acceptability of the speech with regard to the institutional framework (Agustín 2015, 77–78).

Against the backdrop of the frequent conflation of "grassroots" organizations with NGOs in the rhetoric of Western agencies and scholars, in my study, I distinguish between NGOs and grassroots activism in Ukraine. While NGOs are institutionalised as legal entities in the state register and function as non-profit institutions fueled by the Western grant economy, grassroots organizations are those autonomous groups that are not institutionalised, and therefore typically remain invisible to state agencies and Western donors. Representing "paid activism," in Jin Haritaworn's (2011, 131) words, LGBTQ NGOs in Ukraine are significantly more privileged than grassroots initiatives in terms of resources and public recognition. This disposition has played a significant role in the discussions on homonationalism, as will be shown in the next sections.

Kyiv Pride is also an NGO; correspondingly, the annual Pride weeks and marches in Kyiv are its projects. Even though at least five Ukrainian cities have hosted Pride marches by the end of 2019, infinitely massive media coverage of Kyiv Pride makes it a major political LGBTQ event that produces dominant discourse and sets the tendencies. Comparing the narratives of Pride organizers in 2013 and 2015, Maria Teteriuk (2016) noted a new tendency that appeared in 2015 (i.e., after Euromaidan): the "framing of the LGBT community as part of newly-emerged Ukrainian political nation." Teteriuk provides evidence as to how the rhetoric of our belonging to the Ukrainian nation, extensively employed by Pride organizers, produced a powerful patriotic discourse. Similarly, in their study of rhetorical strategies of Kyiv Pride in 2015 and 2016, Lesia Pagulich (2016) concludes that Pride is aimed at inscribing LGBTQ communities into nationalist discourse. My analysis (Plakhotnik 2019) of Kyiv Pride in 2016–2019 shows that the tendency noticed by Teteriuk and Pagulich has not changed but rather intensified: Kyiv Pride remains a central public manifestation of what I call homopatriotism, borrowing the term from Adi Kuntsman's (2008) work. Such a manifestation, I argued, serves as a pre-requisite for achieving rights and protection from the state. As Ann Pellegrini (2002) ironically put it, we have "to show what good citizens we are, and can't we have our rights too?" (137).

## Talking about Homonationalism in Ukraine: A Conceptual Framework

In the past, scholarship on the relationship between sexuality and the nation showed that "despite the imperatives of globalization and trans-nationalism, citizenship continues to be anchored in the nation, and the nation remains heterosexualized" (Bell and Binnie 2000, 26). In the contemporary world, however, the relationship between the nation and its sexual "others" is more ambivalent: the incorporation of homosexuality into the symbolic body of the nation is not only possible but also an increasingly prevalent process (Haritaworn 2015; Haritaworn, Tauqir & Erdem 2008; Kuntsman 2009). A growing body of literature focused on the ways in which contemporary forms of sexuality and nationalism intersect explores the issue through the trope of homonationalism. This term was coined in the post-9/11 United States by Jasbir Puar (2007) as a useful category of analysis for distinguishing practices between patriotic national sexual subjects (worthy of protection by the nation-state) and "others" (who differ by race, legal citizenship, gender performance, etc.). This division produces "good" and "bad" sexual subjects

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and maintains power relations and privilege (typically related to race, class, gender expression/ identity, etc.), simultaneously signifying the contribution of certain sexual subjects to a nation-state.

The concept of homonationalism works somewhat differently in the Central and East European (CEE) region. In the Croatia-based study by Katja Kahlina (2014), the concept of homonationalism is employed to signify a hegemonic EU politic of implementing LGBTQ rights in national states—a politic that often produces contradictory outcomes on the local level. The recent studies of sexual politics in CEE regions use the analytic lens of "European homonationalism" (Ammaturo 2015; Colpani and Habed 2014) and show how the discourses surrounding local LGBTQ politics are informed by the EU model of sexual citizenship which reproduces racism and white privilege (Rexhepi 2016; Pagulich 2019). Other scholars offer alternative terminology: for example, analyzing sexual politics in Poland, Robert Kulpa (2014) uses the term "leveraged pedagogy" to point to the subaltern position of CEE as "the European (homophobic) Other in the emerging discourses of 'homoinclusive EUropean Nationhood'" (431). In my study of sexual citizenship in Ukraine (Plakhotnik 2019), I use "homopatriotism" as a concept that points towards the specific configuration of sexual citizenship in the state-at-war: how, in Adi Kuntsman's (2008) words, "fantasies" of militarized and eroticized warfare inform LGBTQ claims to national belonging. While the war in Israel/Palestine (where Kuntsman coined the term) and the war in Ukraine are different in many respects, the factors of war and militarization seem critical to understanding how discourses of sexual citizenship have been framed and negotiated in Ukraine.

At the same time, some scholars argue against the application of the concept of homonationalism in CEE, reasoning, for example that a "critique of homonationalism seems at best completely irrelevant for much of Eastern Europe, where good old-fashioned 'heteronationalism' continues to flourish" (Moss 2014, 216). Furthermore, Kevin Moss (2014) insists that discussing homonationalism in the CEE context unavoidably produces "neocolonialism and Orientalizing projection" onto local LGBTQ people (216–17). While admitting the importance of discussions on "neocolonialism" in knowledge production, my study develops a counter-argument. It is exactly the colonizing gesture, I argue, that has been produced by measuring "heteronationalism" through comparison with the ostensibly universalist model of sexual citizenship that is, in fact, "the mere imposition of a Euro-North Atlantic sexual paradigm onto other worlds" (Sabsay 2014, 99). This model typically includes achieving marriage rights for same-sex couples, the state protection from hate crimes and speech, and LGBTQ visibility (including Pride parades).[3] As for the statement about the irrelevance of the concept of homonationalism in Eastern Europe, it makes sense only if the concept is taken in its sole and a priori irrelevant meaning. Finally, the refusal to critically interrogate homonationalism in CEE has an important political/ethical aspect: who would benefit from such a standpoint and whose privileges does it protect? While elaborating on this issue further in this paper, I would like to stress that in the Ukrainian context, the critique of homonationalism was expressed from inside LGBTQ communities by less privileged grassroots groups towards more privileged LGBTQ NGOs and has eventually been co-opted by the latter and silenced, as will be shown later. Whose side, then, do the academics arguing about the irrelevance of the critique of homonationalism in Ukraine take?

In my study, homonationalism is conceived as a floating signifier (Laclau 2007)—one that can be linked with different projects and obtain a variety of contextual meanings in Ukraine or elsewhere. Investigating the dynamics of power within and around debates on homonationalism in Ukraine, I am most interested in the work of discourses: how the rhetoric of

homonationalism has been used and what did it do for sexual citizenship formation? The framework of my study draws upon Puar's (2013) conceptualization of homonationalism as an analytic of power that grasps the process of "fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality" (337) when some homosexual bodies are deemed worthy of protection by nation-states. In this sense, homonationalism is a global regime: "Like modernity, homonationalism can be resisted and re-signified, but not opted out of: we are all conditioned by it and through it" (Puar 2013, 336). I build my framework on this understanding of homonationalism as a globally relevant analytic lens.

My study is structured following Paolo Bacchetta's (2011) insight to distinguish between three dimensions of homonationalism (homonationalism perpetuated by the state, maintained by LGBTQ subjects within a nation, and a transnationally circulating homonationalism) while recognizing the deep entanglement and contextual variability of their manifestations (Bacchetta and Haritaworn 2011). Politically, my study draws upon the argument of critical transgender studies that a research project concerned with power relations must be guided by "a desire to center those living under the most severe forms of coercive violence as a guide for prioritization" (Spade 2012, 193). Differently put, if homonationalism aims "to accord some populations access to citizenship—cultural and legal—at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations" (Puar 2013, 337), my focus is on those who "pay the price."

## "Homonationalism is …"

The comic series "Homonationalism is …" appeared in 2015, several months after the first public Pride in Kyiv.[4] In the process of Pride preparation, the leading NGOs developed a particular vision of Pride and broader political strategy of LGBTQ activism. Exactly this vision and strategy were called "homonationalism" in the discussed comic series. The explosive reaction to the "Homonationalism is …" comic was unprecedented: apparently, the comic got dragged into already ongoing debates on the political positionality of LGBTQ communities and activism.

Consisting of four caricatures, "Homonationalism is …" interpreted homonationalism in Ukraine through four examples (Figure 2; reproduced with permission from the FRAU group). The first picture quotes the call of the 2015 Kyiv Pride organizers for wearing casual attire to "look normal, not like freaks" at Pride rally. It points to how the intention to produce a public image of LGBTQ "normalcy" through the detachment from "freaks" sets the norm (of what sexual citizens should look like). The second picture critiques the claim for marriage equality that was (and still is) at the core of the mainstream LGBTQ agenda in Ukraine. The two "blessing" hands on the picture belong to a priest and a government authority, pointing to marriage as one of the pillars within the institutions of power. The third picture portrays two dyke-looking persons that brought flowers to the Lesya Ukrainka[5] monument. It ridicules the pursuit of "LGBTQ history" as a way of legitimizing homosexuality by means of its de-historicizing ("homosexuals always existed") and inscribing it into the master narrative of the Ukrainian national history. In the fourth picture, homonationalism is interpreted as the complicity of mainstream LGBTQ politics with right-wing ideologies. The image depicts two male-looking figures—a far-right nationalist and a LGBTQ leader—who cross the national and LGBTQ flags. The text in the speech bubble reflects the leader's thought: "Different but equal." This is one of the most popular slogans in mainstream LGBTQ rhetoric in Ukraine, signifying the desire of LGBTQ people to achieve equality. In the caricature, however, the slogan is ridiculed as a desire of LGBTQ leaders for equality (meaning commonality) with far-right nationalists.

Figure 2a. "Homonationalism is … 'looking NORMAL, not like freaks'." The image portrays a male-looking person at the center wearing a grey suit and white-and-red vyshyvanka (the embroidered shirt in Ukrainian ethnic costumes). The caption uses inverted commas to show that the phrase 'NORMAL, not like freaks" is a quotation. The central figure is surrounded by four crossed images, apparently exemplifying "freaks." These are Elton John, Jo Calderone (drag alter-ego of Lady Gaga), an image of the cover of the "Female Masculinity" book by Halberstam and Conchita Wurst.

Figure 2b. "Homonationalism is … a desire for one's union to be blessed by the power institutions." The image portrays two male-looking persons holding hands. They wear grey suits with rainbow pins; their ties and shoes are blue and yellow. Two somebody's hands hold crowns over the couple's heads, symbolizing a marriage ceremony. The hand on the left wears prayer beads with a crucifix; the hand on the right is dressed in a formal suit.

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Figure 2c. "Homonationalism is ...to legitimize ourselves by national celebrities." The image shows two masculine female-looking figures holding hands. Their short hair is pink and yellow; their attire is colorful. They brought a bouquet of flowers to a bust monument Lesya Ukrainka. Text in a bubble reflects their speech: "Ukraine is not Russia. There are several representatives of the LGBT community on the Ukrainian banknotes."



Figure 2d. "Homonationalism is ... a desire to be friends with 'far-right' [nationalists]." The image portrays two male-looking figures. A person on the left wears military boots, camouflage trousers, white-and-red vyshyvanka, and a traditional Ukrainian cossacks' hairstyle (so-called oseledets'). This figure holds the Ukrainian national flag. A person on the right wears a pink shirt, blue trousers and red shoes, and holds a rainbow flag. The facial expression of this person is cheerful while the person in vyshyvanka looks angry. Both figures stay near, and their flags are crossed. The text in the speech bubble reflects a thought of the person with the rainbow flag: "Different but equal."

The positionality of the comic's author has been reflected in their self-description: "FRAU is an artivist (activist+art), all-volunteer anonymous collective that shares intersectional queer feminist (anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-nationalist, anti-colonial, anti-militarist) agenda."[6] Like several other anonymous grassroots collectives that also called themselves "queer feminist" within the studied period, FRAU took a critical stance towards nationalist and neoliberal tendencies in Ukrainian feminist and LGBTQ activism.[7]

Although the comic received an abundance of approving reactions via "likes" and "shares" on Facebook, the analysis of the comments provides an insight into the various motivations behind the appreciation. A portion of the online audience did not get the ironic criticism, and so perceived the statements of the pictures as an earnest call—and approved it.

Literally: "yes, we should be like that." Perhaps, all the criticized tendencies look so commonsensical for many people from LGBTQ communities that the satirical point could be missed. Another segment of the readership understood the caricatures in line with the Russian propaganda cliché—as a political critique of both Euromaidan (as a coup d'état and a "Nazi upheaval") and LGBTQ communities (as "perverts").[8] This interpretation is particularly indicative of the unavoidable problem with activism in cyber-space where "any posting can be appropriated, misconstrued, or go viral for all the wrong reasons" (Smith-Prei and Stehle 2017, 1118).

It is no wonder that the most heated discussions took place inside LGBTQ communities among the readers who understood the satirical point of the comic and (dis)agreed with it. In response to the requests to clarify the little-known term, FRAU referred to Puar's (2007) foundational work and added an explanation as follows (translation mine):

> Homonationalism is not only about…the state, which justifies its xenophobia and racism with "progressive attitudes" towards gays. This concept could be expanded to LGBTQ politics supporting the state and nationalism in return for the promise of new or already existing privileges at the price of detachment from "bad" LGBTQ people. Jasbir Puar introduced the concept seeking to study intersections, coalescences, and differentiation between homosexuality and nation, national identity, and nationalism; how "non-normative" sexuality could be complicit with nation.[9]

This statement makes clear that the FRAU collective has extended Puar's arguments by adopting the term in the Ukrainian context as a tool of internal LGBTQ critique. While disapproving comments blamed the comic for being Ukrainophobic and harmful (because it allegedly sows discord within LGBTQ communities and offends LGBTQ patriots), the supportive part of the Ukrainian LGBTQ audience shared a critical point and further elaborated on it in activist spaces.[10] For example, a queer-trans* activist Fritz von Klein unpacked homonationalism quoting typical statements from mainstream LGBTQ rhetoric:

> Homonationalism means "gays are also patriots," "gays fight in the ATO [Anti-Terrorist Operation],"[11] "don't show up for Pride with leftist slogans when the country is at war," and also bullying [the authors of] placards that point to the danger of the rising right-wing discourse (von Klein 2017; translation mine).

Referring to the later debates on the LGBTQ participation in the military defence of our country and the issue of policing/censoring signs on Pride marches,[12] von Klein added new examples to further instantiate FRAU's critical point. Simultaneously, the statement revealed the vagueness and complexity of the notion of "nationalism" that in post-Maidan Ukraine might mean belonging to the nation-state, ethnic Ukraineness (as language and culture), civic mobilization, and "patriotism." This complexity is also reflected in FRAU's images because each of them refers to a different meaning of (homo)nationalism. At the same time, what unites all the caricatures into a whole comic (and, in doing so, produces a substance of homonationalism in FRAU's interpretation) is pinpointing the discourses and practices of exclusion resulting from the political positionality of the Kyiv Pride NGO. In this sense, the caricatures define homonationalism as a specific political practice of doing sexual citizenship at the price of detachment from its "constitutive outside" (Mouffe 1992; Sabsay 2016)—those who are constructed as "improper" LGBTQ people, not being deserving to become sexual citizens. In

FRAU's interpretation, the latter includes those who challenge the institution of marriage and homonormative "respectability," contest the dominant script of LGBTQ history and, most importantly, oppose the right-wing political turn and militarization in post-Maidan Ukraine.

### Negotiating Homonationalism in LGBTQ Communities

Since Kyiv Pride plays a crucial role in producing a public image of LGBTQ communities and communicating our claims to broader society, it appeared to be the primary target of the "Homonationalism is …" caricatures. Shortly after the comic series started circulating online, Kyiv Pride publicized their response in a form of essay written by Tamara Zlobina. It argued that since the majority of the "lay public" is right-wing oriented, LGBTQ activists should not avoid nationalist rhetoric. Instead, a wise strategy in the current situation is to reclaim the meaning of nationalism from "ethnic" to "political" and promote the latter within our struggle for human rights:

> I have heard many times that the task of the left-wing activists, feminist and queer alike, is to articulate their position steadily and never settle for ideological compromises. This is not true. *The real task is to transform our claims into reality.  The sooner the better* (Zlobina 2016; italics and translation mine).

The essay employs the "practical reasoning" method (Fairclough and Fairclough 2011) against the charge of homonationalism to present it as a useful strategy for achieving societal changes. Simultaneously, another response to the critique of homonationalism appeared in mainstream LGBTQ discourse. A leader of an LGBTQ NGO stated with respect to the FRAU comic:

> Homonationalism is not a directive but a part of the LGBT political spectrum that could be *useful for everyone* (Facebook comment, November 2015; italics and translation mine).

While employing the same practical reasoning through the rhetoric of "usefulness," in my reading, the statement produces a noteworthy discursive shift: it moves from the interpretation of homonationalism as a "strategy" (that is instrumental, therefore temporary) to a "political view" (that is personal, close to identity) of some people and groups. Simultaneously, it discards the queer feminist critique arguing that it is exactly homonationalism that entails the "greater good" for all and everyone in LGBTQ communities. The interpretation of homonationalism as a political position has been further substantiated in a new narrative offered by the director of Kyiv Pride. First presented as a public lecture entitled "The LGBTQ Movement in Ukraine: from Homonationalism to Queer Anarchism," the narrative depicts LGBTQ communities as consisting of diverse political groups, situated along a political spectrum with "homonationalism" and "queer anarchism" as extreme points.[13] Notably enough, during the Q&A part of the lecture, another Kyiv Pride organizer declared "I am a homonationalist!" out loud to illustrate the lecturer's point.

The interpretation of homonationalism as a political position seems to have serious consequences for the dynamics of discussion: it has enabled an instrumentalization of the queer feminist critique by the mainstream LGBTQ discourse to prove the success of LGBTQ activism (predominantly represented by NGOs). For example, the announcement of the public lecture described earlier stated: "Ukrainian LGBTQ activism is, likely, *the most advanced* activist

movement in the country." (Italics and translation mine). In a similar vein, authors of the annual report prepared by the Nash Mir NGO (2018a) concluded that the emergence of queer feminist critique signals "the growth and complexity of the Ukrainian LGBT movement: the beginning of a political and ideological differentiation within it." They evaluate this process as follows:

> As an integral part of Ukrainian society, the national LGBT community started to demonstrate a diversity of ideological preferences and approaches to solving their problems; this *evolution* generally corresponds to similar processes that are taking place now in our country. (Nash Mir Center 2018a, 30; italics mine)

Notably, while the critical output of grassroots activism has been transformed into an asset of "the movement," the grassroots' radical statements were policed and silenced. This case of instrumentalization can exemplify how mainstream NGOs conduct their activity "at the expense of grassroots activism," in Nicole Butterfield's (2016, 24) words. Though "homonationalism" and "queer anarchism" were presented in the Kyiv Pride organizers' narrative as ostensibly equal political positions, the dynamic of discursive power relations proved the opposite—queer anarchism meant being assimilated, or "swallowed" by the dominant discourse of diversity and "LGBTQ progress." An activist critique of homonationalism seems to be disarmed by the dominant discourse and pushed beyond the limits of acceptable speech. At the same time, despite apparent calming down, the queer feminist critique of homonationalism did not end, as I will show later.

## Pride, State and Homonationalism

If homonationalism, in Puar's words (2006, 68), could be "generated both by national rhetoric of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves," the debates analyzed above exemplify the second part of this argument: how homonationalism has been produced by mainstream LGBTQ activism for the sake of being "included" into the nation-state building project. In this section, the analysis is focused on the homonationalist discourse that is constituted through governmental politics. Although the attitudes of the Ukrainian state towards LGBTQ communities are too far from being "inclusive," as shown in the introductory section of this article, the way in which the Kyiv Pride marches are organized seems beneficial for the state government in multiple ways. Unpacking these benefits might give an insight into the logic and mechanisms of how state politics produce homonationalism in Ukraine. Focusing on discourses rather than rhetoric, I examine how homonationalism is being established through narratives of progress and Europeanness produced by both mainstream LGBTQ activism (in particular, Kyiv Pride) and the state government of Ukraine.

Since Pride as such signals the access of LGBTQ communities to public space and the politicization of this space through political claims, the very existence of Pride marches in Kyiv produces a powerful discourse of "LGBTQ progress" locally and internationally. According to the "Rainbow Europe" project of ILGA-Europe[14] that measures "LGBTI equality and social climate for LGBTI people," in 2020, Ukraine outscored such EU-members as Poland, Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria, and appeared among the "most progressive" countries in Eastern Europe with respect to LGBTQ rights.[15] The key criteria that contributed to Ukraine's relatively high ranking were that public LGBTQ events are allowed to be held and that freedom of assembly can be exercised without the state's obstruction.

The position of the state government regarding Pride can best be summarized through a broadly publicized statement from Petro Poroshenko, the President of Ukraine. In June 2015, answering a journalist's question about their attitudes to the planned Kyiv Pride, the President stated:

> I am looking at it as a Christian and as a President of a European country. Being a Christian, I will not participate in it, but I don't see any reason to ban this march because it's a constitutional right of every citizen of Ukraine (National LGBT Portal of Ukraine 2015; translation mine).

In LGBTQ communities, as well as within public discourse, this was interpreted as a statement of the President's support for Pride—for the first time in Ukrainian history. So, for four years (2016–2019), Kyiv Pride marches were "successful" (i.e., they were not disrupted because of the police and military units' protection). Considering that in the same time period the state government did not demonstrate any other signs of LGBTQ support at any level, and that the police often failed to protect LGBTQ events other than Pride from violent attacks, it is important to ask: why then does the state protect the Kyiv Pride? Could the word "European" in the President's quotation above be a key to this conundrum? If Pride is considered to be the main indicator of "LGBTQ progress" and, more broadly, of pro-European "progress" in Ukraine, what does it show and, correspondingly, what does it conceal?

To answer these questions, it would help to keep in focus the current political situation in post-Maidan Ukraine, which is pro-European/pro-NATO but is also in the middle of a military conflict with Russia. The fact that Ambassadors of "strategically important" countries like Canada, Sweden, the UK, and the USA usually participate in the Kyiv Pride rally is also a factor. In this context, the state that otherwise fails to support LGBTQ communities but provides protection for Pride in Kyiv once a year is the large beneficiary of the "successful" Pride marches as this demonstrates its "Europeanness" and adherence to human rights protection. In addition, the state government demonstrates the "success" of the police reform that started in Ukraine after Euromaidan and continues up to now.[16] This "proof" became particularly important in the context of growing criticism of the police for often being sympathetic or even collaborating with ultra-right groups—the main attackers of LGBTQ and other human rights events (Bondar 2018).

## European Homonationalism and Its "Others"

Another occasion for the Ukrainian state to demonstrate its Europeanness was the Eurovision Song Contest that took place in Kyiv just a couple of weeks before the 2017 Kyiv Pride. Although Eurovision was organized and conducted as a separate event, the international reputation of the song contest as "an emerging site of gay and trans visibility" (Baker 2017, 97) determined its significance in Ukrainian LGBTQ discourse. Kyiv Pride seized this opportunity and expressed its affinity with Eurovision (and the image of "progressive Europeanness") in many ways. The slogan of the 2017 Eurovision contest—"Celebrate diversity!"—was concordant with the Pride motto "The country is for all." The Kyiv Pride website referred to Eurovision as a congenial and kindred event (Figure 3), and for more than a year presented Pride and Eurovision as "twin" projects.

![feral feminisms — Transnationalizing Homonationalism. issue 11 · summer 2022](image)



Figure 3. The homepage of the Kyiv Pride official website, 2017.[17] The image features two touching hands against a rainbow background. At the center of the page, a choice between two buttons, "EUROVISION-2017" or "KYIVPRIDE-2017," has been offered.

Pride organizers and other LGBTQ NGOs considered Eurovision to be a unique opportunity to promote the LGBTQ agenda. On the one hand, they used the extensive media coverage of Eurovision to draw attention to the insufficient protection of LGBTQ rights and the multiple cases of homophobic and transphobic violence in Ukraine. On the other hand, the tone of such publications was often balanced so that it did not prevent a potential international audience from visiting Ukraine. To assure guests that Kyiv is a "safe" city, Kyiv Pride published a map of LGBTQ-friendly places. Simultaneously, "We are friendly" rainbow stickers were distributed in bars, shops, and clubs that were indicated on the map (typically, expensive high-street enterprises). Notably, both the map and the stickers were in English only. These details are telling with respect to which LGBTQ-subjects were "included" in the category of consumers: rich English-speaking tourists. Through this discourse, the specific positioning of Ukraine in the global geography of "LGBTQ progress"—developed enough to visit and yet in need of international aid—was reaffirmed.

The queer feminist segment of LGBTQ communities had a more critical view on how the opportunity of Eurovision was used by mainstream NGOs to express their loyalty to capitalist show-business. Opposing the glossy media picture of "celebrated diversity," the activists drew attention to the numerous cases of violence and exclusion that took place in the course of preparations for Eurovision in Kyiv:

Homophobia, trans*phobia, lesbophobia, racism, militarisation, ableism, ageism and violence against animals are the only "diversity" that we observe both in everyday Ukrainian realities and during the preparations for Eurovision. Racist and homophobic cases that are not investigated become even more significant during Eurovision in Ukraine, contrasting with the postulated highly inclusive agenda of the contest. In the situation of economic crisis, militarization and the right-wing turn, any desire to present Ukraine as a multicultural and

*feral feminisms*

**Transnationalizing Homonationalism**

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*On The Limits of Speakability: Debates on Homonationalism and Sexual Citizenship in Post-Maidan Ukraine*
Olga Plakhotnik

inclusive country is an obvious profanation. We do not feel safe during this "celebration of diversity"—neither economically nor physically ("Poverty. War. Eurovision" manifesto, May 2017).

"Poverty. War. Eurovision" was a project of an anonymous grassroots activist group, which carefully documented and publicized online such cases of violence as burning down the Roma settlements, the displacement of homeless people, and the mass extermination of stray animals.[18] Concluding that "Eurovision is a try-out for the least protected segments of the population," the activists point out how the rhetoric of diversity has been instrumentalized to veil poverty, racism, and multiple social and economic exclusions. When the call for "celebrating diversity" is produced by mainstream LGBTQ discourse without paying attention to issues of poverty[19] and gender- and race-based violence (that appear to be the "price" of holding Eurovision in Ukraine), it contributes to the invincibility of capitalism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

The issue of racism (and Romaphobia, in particular) was stressed by the "Poverty. War. Eurovision" and other queer feminist grassroots initiatives but appeared strikingly unspeakable in the mainstream LGBTQ discourse. It is well-documented that the Roma population in Ukraine is subjected to racism, discrimination, poverty and inadequate housing conditions, difficulties accessing quality education and employment, and misconduct by the police (OSCE 2014). After Euromaidan, there were several attacks on Roma settlements across Ukraine, conducted by ultra-right paramilitary units and typically ignored or covered up by the police (Bondar 2018). The latter circumstance, however, did not prevent Pride organizers from collaboration with the police and gratitude to them. It turned out that the police that protected the 2018 Kyiv Pride rally was the same police that covered and possibly participated in burning down the Roma settlement near Kyiv just one week before. It seems that the idea of connecting Pride and pogroms appeared unthinkable for organizers. Similarly, a few prompts for discussing racism in online LGBTQ communities were declared "off-topic" and closed. As a result, the limit of speakability in mainstream LGBTQ discourse appears to be drawn along the contours of the dominant (Western-centered) model of sexual citizenship. The focus on LGBTQ recognition through the discourse of Europeanization and "LGBTQ progress" produces an imaginary of citizenship "by isolating the struggles of sexual rights communities from the struggles of other marginalized groups" (Rexhepi 2016, 180). While more privileged representatives of LGBTQ communities are produced as "good citizens" through the discourse of universal humanity and liberal rights, massively produced by Pride, such "others" as Roma populations "remain ineligible to (national or European white) liberal subjecthood" (Pagulich 2019, 144).

Conclusion

The concept of homonationalism started circulating in Ukrainian LGBTQ communities concurrently (and in connection) with the emergence of Pride marches in Kyiv. The rhetoric of homonationalism was used by queer feminist grassroots activists to point to the complicity of mainstream LGBTQ politics (produced by Kyiv Pride and other NGOs) with the assimilationist model of sexual citizenship. In the process of debates, homonationalism initially stood for a deliberate strategy of Kyiv Pride organizers but was soon reframed to signify a legitimate "political position" inside LGBTQ communities. In response to this co-optation, the activist critique of homonationalism was further developed under "any other name" through queer

feminist engagement with issues of poverty, racism, militarization, and neoliberal NGO-ization of activism. These topics, however, have never become central in broader LGBTQ communities: typically discarded as irrelevant or distracting to the main agenda of sexual citizenship, they revealed the limit of speakability in mainstream discourse.

At the same time, I believe that the activist debates on homonationalism analyzed in this article have had a significant impact on the further refining of political positionality in different segments of LGBTQ communities. They have saturated the discourse, facilitated further discussions in activist and academic circles, and extended the limits of speakability on the matter. My study is in debt to this debate too. I am convinced that the localized concept of homonationalism ensures keeping in a critical focus both hetero- and homonationalism of the Ukrainian state, the European (Western-centered) model of sexual citizenship, and LGBTQ politics of complicity with these regimes of power.

## Notes

1. FRAU (an acronym in Ukrainian) is a grassroots artivist (activist+art) collective that actively published queer feminist satire online at the time of my study. See https://www.facebook.com/fraugroup.

2. To protect the participants' confidentiality, I anonymized materials obtained from Facebook.

3. See more critical scholarship on sexual citizenship: Bell & Binnie (2000); Cossman (2007); Sabsay (2016); Weber (2016).

4. In 2012 and 2013, Kyiv Pride took place as a series of public events, but the planned march was cancelled by the organizers due to numerous threats from ultra-right groups (2012) or took place in the fenced area of the Dovzhenko Film Studio (2013). There was no Kyiv Pride in 2014.

5. Lesya Ukrainka (1871–1913) is one of Ukrainian modern literature's foremost poets and playwrigths, who is particularly praised in LGBTQ communities because her mail correspondence with another Ukrainian writer, Olha Kobylyanska, could be interpreted as homoerotic. Ukrainka's portrait is featured on the 200 hryvnia banknote.

6. See https://www.facebook.com/fraugroup/. The group uses the "queer feminist" self-designation to mark a political position, not a type of identity. This positionality is close to what Leticia Sabsay (2013) called "politically queer."

7. See more on queer feminist grassroots activism in post-Maidan Ukraine (Plakhotnik 2019; Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik 2021).

8. Even today, reprints of the "Homonationalism is ..." comic on Russian ultra-nationalist websites can be easily found on Google.

9. This statement was first proposed by a sympathetic commenter @Lesia Pagulich, then copied by FRAU and included in the body of post.

10. Being acutely aware of the blurred boundaries between academia, arts, and activism, and the "scholar-activist" positionality shared by many, including myself, in this paper, I am particularly focused on debates in non-academic LGBTQ spaces.

11. By the time of von Klein's essay publication, the "ATO" (Anti-Terrorist Operation) acronym was an official name of the military conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine.

12. See more on the "provocative placards" in (Plakhotnik 2019; Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik 2021).

13. The lecture was delivered in Kharkiv and Kyiv. A video recording of the lecture is available online at https://www.facebook.com/IZOLYATSIA/videos/1850029535030390/ (accessed December 17, 2020).

14. ILGA-Europe is the European branch of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

15. https://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking

16. Ukraine's post-2014 reforms of the police force aimed to replace the inefficient and corrupt old institution of miliziya (militia) by renaming it poliziya (police), staffing it with new personnel, and providing innovative training.

17. The screenshot was taken by me in April 2018.

18. https://www.facebook.com/poverty.war.eurovision

19. According to the World Bank, the percentage of the population of Ukraine living below the poverty line increased from 15% in 2014 to 25% in 2018 (https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/2500940-more-poor-people-in-ukraine-now-than-five-years-ago-world-bank.html).

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