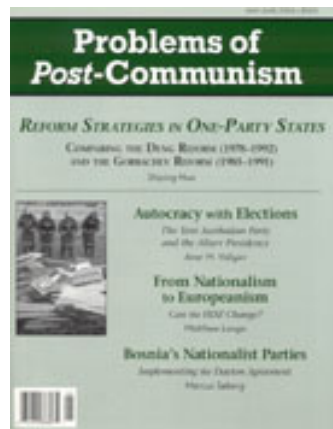


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### The State of the LGBT Community and Homophobia in Ukraine

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# The State of the LGBT Community and Homophobia in Ukraine

Tamara Martsenyuk

Although Ukraine was the first of the former Soviet republics to repeal criminal sanctions for consensual homosexual intercourse between adults, many Ukrainians still regard homosexuality as deviant behavior, and public tolerance has even decreased in recent years.

UKRAINE decriminalized homosexuality after gaining independence in December 1991.<sup>1</sup> But homophobia remains a challenge for Ukrainian society.<sup>2</sup> The results of public opinion surveys demonstrate that the population is not ready to accept lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people as citizens of Ukraine with human and civil rights, even though Ukraine—in transition to democracy, an open society, and equality—officially declares that all people have human rights. Integration with Europe demands the recognition of rights for LGBT people. Sooner or later, the Ukrainian authorities will face major conflicts of opinion over the LGBT community and the recognition of that community, the homophobic attitudes and even hate crimes of Ukrainian society, church and moral/family values issues, media and hate speech, the international community, and human rights.

In 2006, a group of international human rights experts met in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, to outline a set of international principles related to sexual orientation and gender identity. The result was “The Yogyakarta Principles: Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.” The introduction to the Yogyakarta Principles states: “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. All human rights are universal, interdependent, indivisible, and interrelated. Sexual orientation and gender identity are integral to every person’s dignity and humanity and must not be the basis for discrimination or abuse” (Yogyakarta Principles 2007, p. 6). The Yogyakarta Principles were again discussed in October 2008 at the international conference “Gay and Lesbian Rights Are Human Rights.” The development of LGBT human rights

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legal doctrine can be categorized as: (1) nondiscrimination; (2) protection of privacy rights; and (3) ensurance of general human rights protection to all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (O'Flaherty and Fisher 2008).

Amnesty International believes that all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, should be able to enjoy the full range of human rights (Amnesty International USA 2011). Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not explicitly mention sexual orientation or gender identity, evolving concepts of international human rights law in a broader interpretation include the rights and the protection of the rights of LGBTI (lesbian gay bisexual transgender intersex) people around the world. Amnesty International is calling on states to take all necessary legislative, administrative, and other measures to prohibit and eliminate prejudicial treatment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity at every stage of the administration of justice; it also seeks to end discrimination in civil marriage laws on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and to recognize families of choice, across borders where necessary (Amnesty International 2009).

## Terminology and Methods

In this article, I focus on the gay and lesbian communities. The LGBT community is both marginal to Ukrainian society and internally structured. Transgender and bisexual people (on whom we have the least information and the fewest sociological data) are the marginal group within the LGBT community, since they are mostly invisible among so-called "sexual minorities" in Ukrainian society in the public sphere as well as inside the LGBT community. In public opinion surveys, Ukrainian sociologists predominantly use the words "homosexuals" and "homosexuality" (not LGBT people), because Ukrainians hardly identify the full variety of gender identities and sexual orientations.

In Ukraine, a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) represent the LGBT community, which is in the midst of institutionalization. On the whole, LGBT NGOs are the only groups conducting or commissioning research on homosexual issues, discrimination, and human rights violations (Martsenyuk 2009). In this article, I present and discuss the results of this small number of studies.

One sociological method used here is primary and secondary quantitative data analysis (which depends on database accessibility). The data are mainly public opinion surveys on attitudes toward homosexuals in Ukraine

(conducted by such sociological institutions as the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology [KIIS]) and on attitudes toward discrimination based on sexual orientation in the European Union. Moreover, I analyze data from national (e.g., Nash Mir 2010) and international reports (provided by Amnesty International, ILGA Europe, and other organizations).

In addition, in April–May 2010, I conducted nine in-depth interviews with LGBT activists from Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv, Donetsk, and Cherkasy. The data I gathered reveal Ukraine's regional diversity. I used "snowball" sampling in conjunction with a "key informant" strategy. Respondents had differing levels of experience in the Ukrainian LGBT movement: four experts had more than ten years (they were involved in activism in the 1990s), four had approximately five years (their formal engagement dated, as a rule, from early in 2000), and one had less than five years (Martsenyuk 2010).

Since 2005, I have also participated in academic events hosted by the LGBT community in Kyiv, Ukraine. Such events have included national and international conferences, discussions, Queer Week, and film festivals. My involvement has let me "observe" the community and the attitudes expressed toward it by journalists, human rights activists, and others. For the last five years, I have taught university-level courses in which I discuss LGBT issues with my students. These courses have helped me reflect and broaden my perspective on the issue of sexual identity.

In brief, I address several major questions in this article. First, it is evident that, in general, Ukrainian society is homophobic. But Ukrainian society is also diverse in terms of gender, region, age, education, and other factors that influence public opinion. It is important to know whether Ukrainian society has become less or more homophobic and which social groups are the most (in)tolerant. So I examine how attitudes toward homosexual people have changed in Ukrainian society during the years of independence and try to determine which sociodemographic characteristics influence attitudes toward homosexuals in Ukrainian society today.

Second, I evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary LGBT community in Ukraine and consider its possible impact on the perception of homosexuality in Ukrainian society. Third, I discuss the issue of homophobia in Ukrainian society and the support it garners from some state officials, politicians, NGOs, media, and the church. This part of the discussion draws on qualitative case studies of "key" examples (mentioned by my respondents in our interviews). Finally, I consider the limitations of my research while presenting my conclusions.



## Ukrainian Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

In its 2010 “Overview of the LGBT Human Rights Situation in Ukraine,” the Nash Mir Gay and Lesbian Center concludes, “Ukrainian society has become more homophobic. . . . Throughout 2010, the situation substantially worsened” (Nash Mir 2010). An analysis of public opinion surveys on attitudes toward homosexuality demonstrates that Ukrainian society in 2007 was less tolerant than it had been five years earlier. The 2007 findings showed that the number of people opposed to granting homosexual people the same rights as the heterosexual majority increased from 34 percent to 47 percent.<sup>3</sup> In general, one-third of the Ukrainian population supports equal rights for homosexual citizens (Nash Mir 2007, p. 67). In 2007, only 16 percent of respondents supported the idea that the state should formally recognize homosexual relationships, whereas the proportion of those opposed to this idea rose from 40 percent to 52 percent (Table 1).

As the survey results show, the question of whether homosexuals have the right to raise children was the most sensitive measure of tolerance (Table 2). The proportion of Ukrainians opposed to granting this right increased from 49 percent in 2002 to 60 percent in 2007 (Nash Mir 2007, p. 67).

According to KIIS, the level of tolerance toward homosexuals has not changed significantly in the fifteen years of Ukrainian independence.<sup>4</sup> But results show that homosexuals as a group are still stigmatized. When respondents were asked, “Do you agree or disagree that ‘Society should treat homosexuals the same as other people’?” the proportion of those who disagreed decreased slightly, from 34.9 percent in 1991 to 28.5 percent in 2006, while the proportion of those who agreed remained the same—33.7 percent in 1991 and 33.3 percent in 2006.

More recent surveys prove that Ukrainian society remains rather homophobic. A public opinion poll conducted by the Sotsis Sociological Center in September 2010 showed that about 66.5 percent of Kyiv residents consider homosexuality a perversion or a mental illness (*Vse novosti* 2010).

We may, however, criticize the choice of survey questions as stereotypical, even homophobic. The survey included three questions presenting negative perceptions of homosexuality (“Do you view homosexuality as a perversion / evidence of dissolute character / a mental illness?”) and, as expected, the respondents mostly said yes. A telephone poll, “Morals in Ukraine,” conducted by the Gorshenin Institute in December 2010, showed that

Table 1

### Registered Same-Sex Partnerships for Homosexuals in Ukraine (%)

| Should homosexual citizens have the same right to register their relationships as heterosexual couples do? | March 2002 | March 2007 |
|--|------------|------------|
| Yes, they should   | 18.8       | 15.8       |
| No, they should never have such a right  | 40.2       | 52.3       |
| There should be exceptions (on a case-by-case basis)   | 13.6       | 11.4       |
| Not sure   | 27.4       | 20.5       |

Table 2

### Homosexuals’ Right to Raise Children in Ukraine (%)

| Should homosexual citizens have the right to raise children? | March 2002 | March 2007 |
|--|------------|------------|
| Yes  | 21.5       | 17.1       |
| No   | 49.2       | 60.2       |
| Not sure   | 29.3       | 22.7       |

72 percent of Ukrainians feel negatively about sexual minorities (Unian Information Agency 2010).

According to the February 2011 data in “Human Rights in Ukraine, Levels of Xenophobia, Attitudes Toward Different Social Groups, and Regional Tolerance,” more than one-third (39 percent) of respondents support (and about one-third disagree with) the statement that “homosexuals should be ostracized” (KIIS 2011). The same survey asked a question designed to measure extreme views among the Ukrainian public regarding specific social groups, including homosexual people. Twenty-one percent of respondents agreed that homosexuals “pose a threat to human existence and development, and it would be better to get rid of them.” The report’s authors note that these data measure cognitive but not behavioral intolerance (KIIS 2011).

In general, Ukrainian women favor equality for homosexual people more than men do. People with a higher education showed greater tolerance of homosexuals, with twice as many affirmative answers coming from people with a higher education than from respondents with a primary or incomplete secondary education (in 2007, 39 percent of those with an incomplete or complete higher education supported equality for gays and lesbians, whereas only 22 percent of respondents with a primary or incomplete secondary education did—almost half as many).

On average, respondents in all age groups became more



homophobic between 2002 and 2007. People between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine remain the most tolerant. The report, however, states: "Here the most obviously negative tendencies can be seen. Whereas in 2002 respondents favoring equality for homosexuals made up 63.2 percent of those between sixteen and nineteen [years of age] . . . (with 19.5 percent opposed), by 2007 we can see that the proportion of positive answers from this cohort has decreased to 40 percent (42 percent opposed). This trend is one of the most dangerous uncovered by the poll" (Nash Mir 2007, p. 68).

If tolerance among teenagers can decrease so significantly in five years, the trend poses a challenge to Ukrainian democratic society in the future. We can draw a parallel to the assessments of xenophobia and anti-Semitism levels that Volodymyr Paniotto (2008, p. 213) of KIIS has produced according to the Bogardus Social Distance Scale. On the whole, from 1991 to 2007 levels of xenophobia and anti-Semitism increased. Of the changes Paniotto noticed over the last ten years, the one that particularly worried him was that anti-Semitism rose fastest among eighteen- to twenty-year-olds.<sup>5</sup> An important issue that merits discussion in another venue is the intersection and overlapping of intolerance based on gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, religion, and other factors.

In Ukraine we can also see distinct regional differences in attitudes toward LGBT rights. Inhabitants of Kyiv and Crimea show the greatest tolerance, residents of eastern Ukraine demonstrate less, and the most homophobia occurs in western and northern Ukraine. For example, the proportion of respondents who support equality for LGBT people is 58.2 percent in Kyiv—as compared to 25.4 percent in eastern Ukraine, 15.6 percent in the northern regions, and 27.2 percent in the western part of the country (Nash Mir 2007, p. 68).

Urbanization can explain a large part of these responses. Citizens of western (and northern) Ukraine hold more conservative views on gender and sexuality and, in general, traditionally exhibit higher religiosity than those of other regions (Parashchevin 2009, p. 20). Few NGOs serving the LGBT community operate in western Ukraine (see below).

In brief, Ukrainian citizens have become less tolerant of LGBT people since Ukraine gained its independence, although attitudes are not homogeneous and depend on sociodemographic characteristics, and 20–30 percent of respondents can give no firm answers on these questions. There may be a lack of debate in Ukrainian society on homosexuality as a whole and on the human rights of the LGBT community.

The question of interest here is what caused the change in attitudes toward homosexuality. I have identified two factors that may have stimulated greater intolerance (homophobia) among Ukrainians: (1) the increasing activism of the LGBT community in the post-Soviet period, especially during the last ten years; and (2) the rather negative portrayal of LGBT issues (as deviant or abnormal) in the media, hate speech (regarding sexual orientation) by some Ukrainian politicians, the churches' negative stance on homosexuality, and the views expressed by certain political groups and NGOs, such as the self-proclaimed "movement" Love Against Homosexuality.

## The LGBT Community in Ukraine: Numbers, Activities, Structures

The contemporary Ukrainian LGBT community is institutionalizing. Throughout the years of independence, LGBT NGOs expanded in numbers and geographic terms and diversified their activities. According to March 2011 data provided by the Gay Forum of Ukraine, the country has thirty-two officially registered LGBT organizations, one association of LGBT organizations, and twenty-six informal LGBT groups.<sup>6</sup> The biggest success in LGBT community institutionalization is the registration (in January 2011) of the first national association of LGBT organizations: the Council of LGBT Organizations of Ukraine. We may consider the appearance of an NGO serving LGBT Christians as another prominent success, expanding the LGBT community's activities to the religious sphere.

In 2010 and 2011, ten regional LGBT organizations opened in the cities of Poltava, Zaporizhzhya, Vinnytsya, Odesa, Kherson, Uzhgorod, Zhytomyr, and Donetsk. Although the first LGBT NGOs were established only in the latter half of the 1990s (the Nikolaev Association of Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals "LiGA" [[www.gay.nikolaev.ua](http://www.gay.nikolaev.ua)] in 1996 and Nash Mir Gay and Lesbian Center [[www.gay.org.ua](http://www.gay.org.ua)] in 1999), approximately one-third of the current LGBT NGOs have been registered in the last two years. Now there are LGBT NGOs at all levels: national (the Gay Forum of Ukraine [[www.lgbtUA.com](http://www.lgbtUA.com)], the Gay Alliance of Ukraine [<http://ga.net.ua>], and others—five altogether), interregional (Nash Mir Gay and Lesbian Center for Kyiv, Donetsk, and Lugansk oblasts, etc.) and local (either oblast or city levels).

Although LGBT NGOs are active in most regions, we can perceive differences. Western Ukraine has the smallest number of NGOs (two), compared to seven in the north (six of which are in the capital, Kyiv), seven



in the south, five in the center, and five in the east.<sup>7</sup> New LGBT organizations appeared predominantly in the south and center (three each).

The difficulty of organizing public actions can explain the disproportion in the more religious and traditional west. That is, it is harder to mobilize members of the LGBT community, and this type of NGO generally favors peaceful operations. In western Ukraine, people tend to support traditional patriarchal family values more than in other regions.

In addition, according to the Gay Forum of Ukraine, there are thirty-two organizations working with men who have sex with men (MSM), twelve of which also serve the LGBT community.<sup>8</sup> Western Ukraine has only two MSM service NGOs, which means that in this region of the country it is difficult to gather a “critical mass” of people who are coming out and need support.

LGBT activists join forces and establish organizations to acquire a legal opportunity to defend their human rights, particularly at the state level. There are approximately 150 activists within the LGBT community, and LGBT organization members represent approximately sixty Ukrainian cities (Women’s Network 2009). According to Sviatoslav Sheremet, the leader of the Gay Forum of Ukraine, the LGBT community as a whole includes anywhere from 800,000 to 1,200,000 people.

There are, however, no official state statistics on the size of Ukraine’s LGBT community. The only figures available relate to people who identify themselves as practicing homosexual “risk behavior” for HIV/AIDS infection. The International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine conducts research and evaluates the size of populations most at risk of HIV infection, including MSM (AIDS Alliance Ukraine 2008, p. 86).

According to various findings—and taking into consideration the high level of stigmatization of MSM, which promotes underestimation of the group’s size—estimates of the total number of MSM at the national level range between 117,000 and 430,000 people (Balakireva et al. 2006, p. 38). Although most research on homosexual behavior aims at evaluating risk behaviors for HIV infection, LGBT NGOs conduct their own research on LGBT issues (sometimes in cooperation with other NGOs, mostly international ones). But the attention paid by the international community (NGOs that finance HIV/AIDS prevention in Ukraine) to research risk behavior among homosexual men may encourage the victimization of the LGBT community (which could be seen as problematic and sick).

Not all the results of international involvement are

negative. Some leaders of Ukraine’s LGBT movement believe that the LGBT community would have less funding and fewer human resources without international HIV/AIDS support. MSM service NGOs provide not only medical support but also information (for example, legal consultations and essential information) and mobilize activists for various events. So even if MSM groups work only on behalf of homosexual men and mainly on HIV/AIDS issues, these NGOs expand the activities of and support for the LGBT community as a whole (as noted above, twelve of the thirty-two MSM service NGOs work on general LGBT issues). The main difference is that MSM service NGOs focus on behavior and LGBT organizations on identity.

The LGBT NGOs that are most active in the public sphere aim to serve the needs of the LGBT community and those of Ukrainian society and the state as a whole. According to Sviatoslav Sheremet, the LGBT movement in Ukraine has two main goals: internal (developing the LGBT community as a public force in civil society) and external (achieving equal rights and opportunities for LGBT people). But not all LGBT movement leaders support this division of aims, which may seem too diffuse.

The LGBT community of Ukraine has, with some success, conducted several campaigns to lobby for the recognition of sexual orientation in Ukraine and in the international arena. On March 31, 2010, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CE) unanimously (meaning with Ukraine’s support) adopted the Recommendation on Measures to Combat Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity (Nash Mir 2010). The document recommends that CE member-states (including Ukraine) implement measures to improve human rights legislation and policies toward LGBT people in the workplace, the freedom to associate and to hold peaceful meetings, private and family life, education, health care, sports, the prevention of hate crimes, and so on (Council of Europe 2010).

On April 29, 2010, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) followed the CE Committee of Ministers by adopting two documents deploring discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (PACE 2010a, 2010b). Like the Committee of Ministers’ resolution, these documents aim to ensure civil rights for LGBT people and recommend measures to prevent human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity and hate crimes toward LGBT people in the CE member-states. In addition, the CE addressed the issue of same-sex partnerships for the first time (Nash Mir 2010).



In April 2010, the Ukrainian LGBT organizations again appealed to the Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament and the heads of the relevant parliamentary committees to introduce changes into the first reading of the bill on the Labor Code (Nash Mir 2010). In line with the CE Committee of Ministers' resolution, the LGBT leaders asked lawmakers to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of prohibited types of discrimination in the workplace. This time, however, in contrast to previous occasions, the LGBT community did not receive even a formal response from members of the Ukrainian parliament (Nash Mir 2010).

Three years earlier, the LGBT community had submitted a bill of the Labor Code for parliamentary review; it was adopted on first reading on May 20, 2008. In this bill, the antidiscrimination clause did not prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. One of the bill's authors, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Labor and Social Policy Vasyl Khara (Party of Regions), said in an interview: "Personally, I think that gays and lesbians violate all moral norms. It [homosexuality] is a physical defect that should be concealed, not flaunted. On the other hand, what they [sexual minorities] are demanding is a European norm that is likely to be included in the draft of the code. I am against it, though." Despite numerous appeals concerning the urgent need to ban workplace discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, the bill did not address this issue (Nash Mir 2008).

The most famous openly homosexual leader, Sviatoslav Sheremet, tends to compromise with the state authorities. Specifically, he does not organize large, public gay pride demonstrations, because Ukrainian society is not "ready" for them; and he does not demand legal marriages but rather registered partnerships (Sheremet 2008). In communications with church and religious organizations, Sheremet supports the idea of neutrality. Being familiar with the results of public opinion surveys, Sheremet believes that it is important to follow people's attitudes. But not all LGBT organizations and their leaders support compromise. Some think, given that society may never be ready, it is better to lead than to follow.

The LGBT community is stratified along gender identity and age lines and by the duration of individuals' activism. Gender experts and lesbian activists in Ukraine pay attention to the marginality of nongay organizations in Ukraine. Gender and queer studies expert Maria Mayerchyk notes: "For quite a while, the lesbian civil rights movement has been developing into the vanguard of gay organizations, which address women's issues only when they coincide with the aims of homosexual men.

An independent lesbian movement emerged only at the beginning of 2000" (Mayerchyk 2009, p. 333).

Of the thirty-two LGBT organizations, only two focus on lesbian and gender inequality issues. One of them, the Informational and Educational Center Women's Network ([www.feminist.org.ua/english/basic.php](http://www.feminist.org.ua/english/basic.php)) works on gender issues, feminist theory and practice, and human rights within the lesbian community of Ukraine. Its strategic goals are to shape state policy on lesbian issues; to promote public tolerance of lesbians; and to provide informational, educational, and consulting services to lesbians, their relatives and friends, and interested specialists. Because they are not associated with MSM groups, lesbian NGOs are less "visible" and receive less financial support from international NGOs. But homosexual men, being more visible in society, are also more stigmatized than lesbians.

Insight ([www.insight-ukraine.org.ua](http://www.insight-ukraine.org.ua))—an NGO founded in June 2007 and officially registered on May 26, 2008—is one of the few LGBT organizations that also represents transgender people and the only one with an ideology that includes queer issues. Insight (2010) presented Ukraine's first research findings on transgender people. Transgender and bisexual people are the least visible and recognized group even within the LGBT community.

The ghettoization of the LGBT community is another problem. On the one hand, self-isolation or a concentration on working inside their specific field may be considered an acceptable strategy during institutionalization. On the other hand, in the latter half of 2000, Layma Geydar, Ukraine's most famous openly lesbian and feminist leader, and two lesbian NGOs urged the addition of other topics to the LGBT playbook. They had in mind gender sensitivity or feminism, topics that would address the double discrimination faced by lesbian women in a patriarchal and heteronormative society.

The idea of mainstreaming sexual orientation and gender identity issues into the antidiscrimination discourse is rather new for Ukraine. At the beginning of 2011, the Donbas-SocProject Interregional Center for LGBT Research instituted a new project, Antidiscrimination Action, in cooperation with the Gay Forum of Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Another example in which gender and sexual identity issues intersect is *Za Ravnje Prava* (For Equal Rights) and Insight's "Shadow Report: Discrimination and Violence Against Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Transgender People in Ukraine," prepared in January 2010. In the report, *Za Ravnje Prava* mentions that it "has documented cases of violence toward lesbian and bisexual people, including



rapes, beatings, and psychological pressure, as well as domestic violence” (Za Ravnje Prava and Insight 2009, p. 2). This was the first time when reports from different Ukrainian NGOs (including LGBT ones) were submitted to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As a result of the data in the shadow report, CEDAW (2010) concluded, “the committee regrets the lack of detailed information in relation to vulnerable groups of women, such as . . . female sexual minorities and notes with concern that these groups of women may be subjected to multiple forms of discrimination.” This case illustrates the importance of moving LGBT issues to the international arena.

In general, the Ukrainian LGBT community has yet to coordinate its goals with other institutions of civil society, such as NGOs that work on human rights or women’s issues. To avoid marginalization, the LGBT community should move closer to Ukrainian civil society. In my opinion, the LGBT community should link homophobia to the broader issue of xenophobia (racism, ageism, sexism, etc.) to teach Ukrainian society (above all, the young) to tolerate others. According to the executive director of the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, Volodymyr Yavorsky, the LGBT community has not prepared an appropriate (high-quality) report on violations of LGBT human and civil rights that he could include in his annual human rights report.<sup>10</sup>

Although the LGBT community of Ukraine is large, it remains rather marginalized and hidden. Even in Kyiv there are no openly gay-friendly places (with LGBT symbols posted outside and visited by people outside the gay community). Members of the LGBT community are hardly ready to stand up for their civil rights. Because of the belief that “society is not ready” and its low level of mobilization, the community seldom protests. Rather than engage in grass-roots activism, it prefers to host academic events (conferences, discussions, film festivals, etc.).<sup>11</sup> The Center for Society Research’s Ukrainian Protest and Coercion Data Project found that since September 2009, only twenty-two protests have been connected with LGBT issues (of more than thirty-six hundred protests recorded between September 2009 and December 2010).<sup>12</sup> Most of these twenty-two protests were anti-LGBT activities launched by religious people against homosexuality and to support family values.

Special dates and events have been set aside to draw attention to homophobia throughout the world, including in post-Soviet countries. May 17 marks the International Day Against Homophobia. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA)

chose this time of the year to release a report on state homophobia around the world to raise awareness of the extent of institutionalized homophobia (ILGA 2007). In Ukraine on this day LGBT NGOs (or other NGOs that work with human rights issues) organize special events (such as Queer Week, an annual festival of LGBT culture) to fight stereotypes about the LGBT community and pay attention to the problem of homophobia in Ukrainian society. But such initiatives have mostly local import. Official organizations (even those that deal with human rights as a whole) regard LGBT community rights as a marginal and largely invisible problem.

In sum, the LGBT community itself has strengths and weaknesses that may influence public attitudes toward people with alternative sexual orientations. Compared to twenty years ago, the community has acquired greater visibility among society and state officials, increased in size, and intensified its activity. But it continues to be marginalized by Ukrainian society (and even by LGBT people themselves) and victimized by an international community that inhibits public tolerance of LGBT people.

## Ukrainian Media, Politicians’, and Church Views of Homosexuality

One reason for Ukrainian intolerance of LGBT people becomes clear from an analysis of the official state discourse (shaped by the media) on this issue. A content analysis of coverage in the Ukrainian press reveals that the press, especially the regional press, presents LGBT topics in a neutral way, primarily in an entertaining context (Stulova et al. 2010, p. 7). Most publications compile articles from the foreign press and write about the sexual orientations of famous people. There is a lack of educational information about sexual orientation issues and the LGBT community (Stulova et al. 2010, p. 7).

An ILGA press release titled “Hate Speech by High-Ranking Politicians in Ukraine” (ILGA Europe 2007a) provides information about this problem. ILGA is an LGBT NGO that monitors examples of “hate speech” in Ukrainian society (nationwide homophobia, including the actions of several governmental bodies, as well as antigay statements made by political leaders and homophobic groups).<sup>13</sup>

Ukrainian politicians of all stripes demonstrate homophobia. Since 2006, the mass media have covered many statements by politicians about homosexuals and their rights (Nash Mir 2007, p. 75). In February 2007, we saw a clear example of “hate speech” aimed at the homosexual community from an official charged with



protecting human rights in Ukraine. Leonid Grach, chair of the Committee on Human Rights, National Minorities, and Interethnic Relations and a member of the Communist Party, stated in his official capacity, "The state must protect society against evil, violence, and particularly against homosexuality and lesbianism" (ForUm 2007). In response to this statement, Ukrainian LGBT organizations sent Grach a letter in which they called on him to respect and protect the rights of homosexual people, but Grach not only did not change his attitude but continued to utter hate speech against homosexuals.

When asked about same-sex marriages, Olexandr Turchynov (second-in-command of the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc) declared: "We are categorically against! It is a big sin." After the reporter commented that such an answer was more typical of the conservative party, Turchynov added: "I do not agree. If a man has normal views, you label him a conservative, but those who use drugs or promote sodomy you label as progressives. All of these are perversions" (Nash Mir 2007, p. 69). Other politicians have made similar comments about homosexuality. Mykola Danilin, a socialist member of parliament, stated in 2006: "Personally, I won't support the political ideas and demands of homosexuals. . . . I believe we need to protect the family and the spiritual values of Ukrainian society" (Nash Mir 2007, p. 73). I have already mentioned Vasyl Khara's remark that gays and lesbians violate all moral norms. Even the president of Ukraine has made some troubling comments. When asked during an Internet conference on December 14, 2006, "What do you think about same-sex marriage legislation in Ukraine?" President Viktor Yushchenko answered: "Can I answer in one word? Complicated." He added, "Although in this context I would not like to offer an opinion different from that given by the society and the law" (Nash Mir 2007, p. 69).

One positive aspect of LGBT community work, however, is the appearance of some tolerant politicians in Ukraine. Before the elections of 2009, Anna German of the Party of Regions answered the question "What is your attitude toward gay people?" by saying: "Everyone has his or her own choices in life, and everyone should have the right to choose. It is difficult for me to understand this. But my political views are those of a democrat. I believe people should have the right to choose and society should respect the choices they make" (*Korrespondent* 2009b).

In a similar Web chat, the presidential candidate Sergii Tygypko said: "I am rather tolerant. I believe it [sexuality] is personal. And I am not God to judge anybody in this regard. At least it's not a crime, that's for sure. Let everyone

decide for him- or herself" (*Korrespondent* 2009a).

Hate speech on the basis of sexual orientation has become normal state discourse, especially in the media. It gains additional support from such initiatives as Love Against Homosexuality (<http://love-contr.org>). Since 2003, this homophobic group has been active (publicly and through press statements) in Kyiv. In 2007, it launched an initiative to establish criminal prosecution for propagandizing and popularizing homosexual behavior that threatens the national security of Ukraine (Nash Mir 2007, p. 75). It sent its appeal to all the institutions that can initiate legislation: the president, the prime minister, and members of the Ukrainian parliament. On October 2007 in Kyiv, another group, the Embassy of the Blessed Divine Kingdom for All People, organized a march "For the Moral Cleanliness of Ukrainian Society." Almost five hundred people marched from Kyiv's central square to the Ukrainian Presidential Administration building.

Love Against Homosexuality also announced that it had in its possession a letter from the Parliamentary Committee on the Freedom of Speech and Information about increased propaganda for sexual perversion in the mass media: "The situation requires the government to take resolute and immediate measures to stop the popularization of homosexuality, lesbianism, and other sexual perversions that do not conform to society's moral principles" (Love Contra 2008a). Moreover, Love Against Homosexuality blames homosexual people for disseminating HIV/AIDS in Ukraine and publishes on its official Web page such articles as "AIDS Is 'Mowing Down' Gays" (Love Contra 2008b).

Another argument that the media employ against the LGBT community is demographic (and simultaneously nationalistic): its existence allegedly threatens the survival of the Ukrainian nation. The demographic crisis in post-Soviet Ukraine and other former Soviet states supports the formation of a negative image of homosexuals as people who cannot create a "normal" reproductive family.<sup>14</sup> After the authorities registered the nationwide Council of LGBT Organizations of Ukraine, Love Against Homosexuality sent a statement to the president and the minister of justice, insisting that "homosexuality is acquired and has no genetic component; it spreads in response to a number of factors, especially propaganda" (Love Contra 2011).

Again according to Love Against Homosexuality, the "spread of homosexuality conflicts with the national interests of Ukraine" (Love Contra 2011). The main evidence of this conflict is HIV/AIDS dissemination, a worsening demographic crisis, the destruction of the family as an institution, the restriction of citizens' constitutional rights,



and the elimination of freedom of religion. Certain Ukrainian political parties (mostly ultraright groups) make similar arguments against homosexuality (and sometimes against gender equality). In December 2010, for example, the Kyiv city organization of Svoboda (Freedom) held a demonstration against homosexuality “in support of traditional family values and against the propaganda of perversion.”<sup>15</sup>

Homosexuality and homosexual people are used as a “common enemy” to bind young people to churches. In March 2011, certain NGOs, well known in Lviv, mounted a protest against homosexual propaganda and the juvenile justice system. The organizers included the student unions of certain Lviv universities, as well as the student government and student mayor—who underlined the “position of Lviv youth and the younger generation of Ukraine: let’s preserve Christian and traditional family values in Ukraine” (Elita natsii 2011). Other slogans of the protest were: “Today the rescue of Ukraine and of yourself depends on you! Say yes to God and no to perversion!” (Elita natsii 2011).

In June 2010, the high-ranking clerics attending the Council of Christian Churches of Ukraine adopted a draft declaration “condemning the sin of homosexuality, its propagation in society, and attempts to legalize same-sex marriages (register same-sex partnerships)” (RISU 2010). Ukrainian churches continue to focus on the “Christian notion of marriage, family, and society, propagating sin and disguising it as democratic tendencies.”

Meanwhile, the LGBT community has been trying to fill the important gap between sexuality and religion and to explain that religious groups and churches can tolerate other forms of sexuality. On August 21, 2006, LGBT NGOs sent an open letter to the president of Ukraine and to the legislative and executive branches that underlined the important role of churches in forming public opinion toward homosexual people: “We treat all religious organizations registered in Ukraine with respect and tolerance. Without question, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and other religious organizations have the right to formulate and to express their views on homosexuality and homosexual behavior. But we must consider that intolerant statements can incite hatred of homosexual citizens and lead to violence against them” (Nash Mir 2007, p. 71).<sup>16</sup>

Same-sex marriage is one of the most “subtle” disputes in Ukraine involving the LGBT community, the state, and churches. The LGBT community estimates that Ukraine has a hundred thousand to two hundred thousand same-sex couples (Maimulakhin 2009, p. 25). HIV/AIDS preven-

tion experts place the number of male same-sex families between forty thousand and a hundred thousand (Nash Mir Donbass-SocProject 2009).

So, the Ukrainian LGBT community is working to establish human and civil rights law to protect privacy in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity. Yogyakarta Principle no. 24, “The Right to Found a Family,” states: “Everyone has the right to found a family, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Families exist in diverse forms. No family may be subjected to discrimination on the basis of the sexual orientation or gender identity of any of its members” (Yogyakarta Principles 2007, p. 27). LGBT NGOs (for example, Nash Mir) stress the need for discussion of human rights in state policies on sexuality and the family. Above all, they note the absence of antidiscrimination articles in the Constitution of Ukraine (article 24), the Code of Labor Law (article 2-1), and the Criminal Code (article 161) (Nash Mir 2007, p. 81). Specifically, the list banning unequal treatment and discrimination does not contain the phrase “sexual orientation.”

Compared to other social problems in Ukraine, the protection of LGBT human rights seems less urgent. As Yuri Pavlenko, minister for family, youth, and sport, put it in an interview with NTN News on November 16, 2006: “Today the question of legalizing same-sex marriage is not timely. And personally I oppose such legalization.”

State officials responsible for human rights do not provide statistics on violation of LGBT people’s rights. If we are to combat discrimination against vulnerable social groups (including the LGBT community), we must study public opinion on this issue. According to the European Commission report “Discrimination in the European Union,” discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is the third most widespread form (after discrimination based on ethnic origin and on disability). Fifty percent of respondents (EU citizens) perceived discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation as widespread (European Commission 2007, p. 4).

In 2011, Ukrainians often used the issue of sexual identity to raise questions about morality, demography, and even threats to the nation (see Martsenyuk 2011). Six Ukrainian parliamentary deputies from all the major political parties (Yevhen Tsarkov, Katerina Lukianova, Pavel Ungurian, Yulia Kovalevska, Taras Chornovil, and Liliia Grygorovych) argued for the “morality” of Ukrainian society and against a “threat to national security.” Even though Ukraine has ratified numerous international and European legal documents on human rights, including the United Nations Resolution on Sexual Orientation and



Gender Identity, in June 2011, the parliament recorded a bill “On the Introduction of Changes to Certain Laws of Ukraine (Regarding the Protection of Children’s Rights to Safe Information).” Their rationale is: “The bill . . . is designed to strengthen protection from homosexual propaganda in Ukraine and establish a legal framework to prosecute violations of the laws that protect public order and morality in Ukrainian society. The spread of homosexuality is a threat to national security, as it leads to an epidemic of HIV/AIDS, destroys the institution of the family, and could cause a demographic crisis.”<sup>17</sup>

LGBT activists believe that this bill absolutely contradicts the Constitution of Ukraine and the European Convention on Human Rights. On October 17, 2011, Human Rights Watch sent its “Letter to Chairman of Parliament Volodymyr Lytvyn Regarding Proposal for a Bill on Banning ‘Propaganda of Homosexuality’ <|>” (Human Rights Watch 2011). In response to this “discriminatory and stigmatizing legislation,” Human Rights Watch urges Lytvyn

to call for the rejection of the bill on the grounds that it is incompatible with a large number of rights protected by international treaties to which Ukraine is a party. The provisions of the proposed bill would violate the protections on freedom of expression and assembly as well as create an unacceptable environment of state-promoted discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, including those under eighteen years of age. It would endanger the rights of human rights defenders to promote rights protections and engage in free discussion about rights principles. It would threaten the health and well-being of Ukrainians, including children, by restricting their access to information necessary for them to make critical decisions about their lives, and could potentially have life-threatening effects by censoring accurate information about HIV and AIDS.

This bill is still awaiting further consideration, which could come in 2012.

In sum, the general situation regarding attitudes toward homosexuality can be seen in international reports. For example, a submission to the Parliamentary Assembly Monitoring Committee rapporteurs addresses the situation of LGBT people in Ukraine (2009) and stresses the need for strong recommendations on combating discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>18</sup> The report notes that homophobia in society is intensifying; mainstream politicians increasingly oppose the fundamental rights of LGBT people, and their intolerant statements go unchallenged by persons in authority; the Legal Department of the Supreme Court, instead of

upholding fundamental rights and defending a vulnerable minority, opposes proposals to protect LGBT people from discrimination; and all leaders of mainstream religious organizations in Ukraine have united in opposing the rights of LGBT people, expressing their opposition in disturbingly bigoted language.

## Conclusion

Society’s attitudes toward homosexuality have become more homophobic. According to the results of public opinion surveys, levels of tolerance depend on respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics: women are more tolerant than men; citizens of western Ukraine less tolerant than easterners; young people are the most tolerant among age groups. But public opinion surveys also show Ukrainian teenagers are half as tolerant of homosexuals as they were a few years ago, just as they are now less tolerant of different ethnic groups. This issue needs further discussion and research. Given the increased visibility and activity of radical groups in the last ten years, the trend toward intolerance among the young can be perceived as posing a challenge to Ukrainian democratic society in the future.

I must emphasize that sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual) is a difficult and sensitive topic to research, especially by interviewing respondents. As noted above, the choice of survey questions can be criticized as stereotypical, even homophobic. Should we ask the public questions it can understand, even if that means using a more homophobic terminology? Do sociologists form public opinion through their research, and if so, can they make it more tolerant? Moreover, levels of homophobia (and xenophobia [Paniotto 2008]) are difficult to measure with a couple of questions. Sociological research on sexual orientation and gender identity, attitudes toward these phenomena, and the like should rely on both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Although in recent years the LGBT community in Ukraine has dramatically increased in size and diversified its main spheres of activity, it retains certain weaknesses (internal stratification, the ghettoization of the community, limited street activism and willingness to stand up for the group’s human and civil rights) that hinder the development of tolerance toward LGBT people. Ukraine’s regional diversity is reflected in the activities of the LGBT community: the more traditional western region has fewer organizations and activities than other regions. Input from the international community and the threat of HIV/AIDS have conferred more resources and power on gay organizations while stigmatizing LGBT issues.



One reason that Ukrainian society remains homophobic is the influence on state discourse of politicians who are themselves homophobic. Svoboda and Love Against Homosexuality fight for the moral cleanliness of Ukrainian society. The churches use images of a “common enemy” (LGBT people) to attract youth. Hate speech by Ukrainian activists—particularly those from youth NGOs and ultraright organizations—and the point where it intersects with Ukrainian nationalism is another topic that demands analysis. Also interesting is the way in which some groups or individuals who oppose homosexuality link it with gender politics and the juvenile justice system as issues that are violent and alien to Ukrainian society.

## Notes

1. I presented much of this article at the Sixteenth Annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), held at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, on April 14–16, 2011. The Carnegie Fellowship Program has supported my research. All translations from Russian and Ukrainian are mine.

2. In this article, I employ a rudimentary definition of homophobia as an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals.

3. The survey, which included twelve hundred respondents aged between sixteen and seventy-five, was representative in terms of age, sex, and types of settlement. The findings have a mathematical accuracy of  $\pm 3$  percent. A similar survey was conducted in March 2002.

4. In November 2006, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS, <http://kiis.com.ua>) presented the results of a large survey “Opinions and Views of the Ukrainian Population on the Eve of the Referendum on Independence and Fifteen Years Later,” in which one block of questions addressed levels of hostility shown toward people with a homosexual orientation and with AIDS.

5. The survey included no respondents younger than eighteen.

6. For a list of LGBT organizations in Ukraine, see the Gay Forum of Ukraine database at <http://ga.net.ua>, accessed March 29, 2011.

7. This information comes from the person who interviewed Sviatoslav Sheremet on March 29, 2011. The regions are defined as follows: west (Volynska, Zakarpatska, Ivano-Frankivska, Lvivska, Rivnenska, Ternopilska, and Chernivetska oblasts); south (the autonomous republic of Crimea, Zaporizka, Mykolayivska, Odeska, and Khersonska oblasts, and Sevastopol); north (Zhytomyrska, Kyivska, Sumska, and Chernigivska oblasts and Kyiv); east (Donetska, Luhanska, and Kharkivska oblasts); and center (Vinnytska, Dnipropetrovska, Kirovogradska, Poltavska, Khmelnytska, and Cherkaska oblasts).

8. MSM includes men of any sexual orientation who identify themselves as engaging in homosexual risk behavior for HIV/AIDS infection. Here we should distinguish between identity and behavior, because people can engage in homosexual behavior without identifying themselves as homosexuals. Not all MSM identify themselves as homosexual. For a list of MSM service organizations of Ukraine, see the Gay Forum of Ukraine database at <http://ga.net.ua>, accessed March 29, 2011.

9. Personal communication from one of the project coordinators.

10. Yavorsky made these comments during an online interview conducted by e-mail, March 11, 2011.

11. In 2005, Nash Mir held a large international conference, “Our World: Extending the Borders,” which included a round-table discussion among LGBT activists and scholars on “New Homophobic Trends in Central and Eastern Europe.” Another international conference at the end of 2008, “Gay and Lesbian Rights Are Human Rights,” covered a range of issues from human rights and homophobia to tolerance in education.

12. The Center for Society Research (CSR, <http://cedos.org.ua>) is an

independent nonprofit organization researching social problems and collective protests. Since September 2009, the CSR has studied protests and the authorities’ reaction to them, applying the European Protest and Coercion Data methodology and monitoring more than a hundred national, regional, and activist media outlets. The project leader, Volodymyr Ishchenko, supplied the data on numbers of protests.

13. See also, for example, Nash Mir ([www.gay.org.ua](http://www.gay.org.ua)).

14. For data on the demographic crisis, see the State Statistics Committee Web site ([www.ukrstat.gov.ua](http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua)).

15. Svoboda is an ultraright party in Ukraine. For more information, see its party platform at [www.svoboda.org.ua/pro\\_partiyu/prohrama](http://www.svoboda.org.ua/pro_partiyu/prohrama), accessed February 14, 2012. The quotation is from Svoboda 2010.

16. The heads of the Gay Forum of Ukraine, the Women’s Network, LiGA, Nash Mir, the Gay Alliance, and Chas Zhyttya Plus signed the letter.

17. For the Ukrainian text of the bill, see [w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb\\_n/webproc4\\_1?pf3511=40734](http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb_n/webproc4_1?pf3511=40734), accessed February 14, 2012.

18. The administration of the Nash Mir Gay and Lesbian Center in Kyiv, Ukraine, provided these findings in a personal communication.

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