

Commentary from the Capital...

By Andrii Kravchuk



Andrii Kravchuk, a Ukrainian LGBT activist

Ukrainian LGBTs – between two worlds, Russia & the European Union

(August 26, 2014, KIEV) Because of all the highly reported violent events taking place in Ukraine since November of last year, the situation of Ukrainian LGBT community members has totally deprioritized and disappeared from the general public's consciousness and incites no public interest any more – possibly for the duration. We are surviving a real, large-scale and bloody war and, of needs, must be less and less surprised that our ongoing equality, health and lifestyle struggles attract so little attention in the present hyper-anxious atmosphere of invasion. But when peace finally comes, our hope is that society will seriously reconsider with whom and for what we all fought and what conditions of existence were actually won.

Considering the whole situation, what Ukraine is fighting against is the most readily apparent factor to define: the so-called "Russian World". This self-serving bizarre world, originating in the imagination of Kremlin ideologists and the Russian Orthodox Church, is comprised not so much of people as of *ideas* gone viral and border-crossing. It includes not only ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking peoples, and Russian citizens – but anyone Slavic or otherwise who is willing to side with the Kremlin in its opposition to the West and Western values. Headed by Putin (a shrewd prevaricator) and intent on building the Russian World, the Kremlin is bare-facedly trying to unite and incite all the many extreme right groups, ultraconservatives, euroskeptics, religious fundamentalists, malcontents, and others, for its own bold hegemonic purposes. These groups are precisely the disparate forces which are the mainstays of an overarching tent of homophobia. It is no accident that they assemble – or have been assembled – as main allies of Russia and are the main enemies in Europe and elsewhere of modern Ukraine. Likewise it is not by chance, both in the worlds of real politics and ideas, that the main allies of a free, evolving and strong Ukraine have been and are today the modern liberal democracies, notably the European Union.

Ukrainian society finds it more difficult to understand what exactly it wants. During our 24 years of independence no lasting influential liberal political force has appeared in the country. Almost all the leading politicians of Ukraine exploit the conservative theme of "traditional values", which certainly in one form or another includes intractable homophobia. With the start of the so-named "Euromaidan" mass protests against former President Yanukovich's refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU, the Ukrainian LGBT community on the one hand began to take an active part in these events, and on the other it tried with expediency not to publicize the protest. This caution seemed appropriate to the situation: anti-Western propaganda tried by all means to induce the sympathy of Ukrainians for Russia, while nationalist groups (becoming allies of the pro-European opposition – in particular, the Svoboda and Right Sector parties), openly and consistently declared their homophobic attitudes and intentions. This paradox is illustrative of the fact that the

defensive war we are in – Ukraine opposing the in-roading Russian World – has become not only a physical opposition to Russian and pro-Russian terrorists on our soil, but is also being waged ideologically inside the minds of Ukrainian citizens.

During the protest events in Kiev during the winter of 2014, several attempts were made by pro-Russian forces to organize fake actions allegedly by LGBT participants in support of Euromaidan, with the manipulative purpose of compromising the opposition in the eyes of society. But these actions were seen through and thwarted by the combined discreet efforts of LGBT activists and leaders of the protests. Hoaxers with LGBT symbols, who were been hired by unknown organizers, failed to provoke violence against them by members of Euromaidan. These persons certainly did not intend to take a real part in the protests, as they were paid by provocation organizers. Having provided photo-opportunities for the media, these opportunistic provocateurs were gone from the scene – but the real LGBT activists continued their work of collecting money and materials, participating in protests and other actions supporting the Maidan movement.

The Ukrainian LGBT community had hoped for victory of the pro-European opposition, as more advantageous in protecting their rights and interests, certainly, than any preservation of the post-Soviet status quo, let alone a victory for pro-Russian forces. After defeating the Yanukovich regime, the Ukrainian state, political parties and society in general found themselves in a new reality. In all spheres of life, sought-for immediate reforms aligned with modern Western standards may not be just postponed for the future, but out of the question and off the table. Furthermore, a unique situation is emerging in which even far-right Nationalist Ukrainian politicians cannot afford to identify themselves openly with their peers in Europe – because those Continental politicians support Russia.

Unfortunately, most Ukrainian politicians and society as a whole have demonstrated a real, though not overtly declared, solidarity with the Russian authorities in relation to LGBT people. Even when the risk was putting in jeopardy the Action Plan on visa liberalization with the EU, the new government and Ukraine's Parliament did not dare to institute the clear legislative prohibition of discrimination on ground of sexual orientation in employment which was thereto a definite and mandatory requirement of the European Union. They did everything in order to postpone the implementation of this requirement, limiting the issue to a letter of the High Specialized Court to appellate courts stating blandly that discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment is illegal in Ukraine. But this step is a very small, symbolic rather than real one on the long road that our state and society must travel toward full modernization. This equivocal advance may appear to be relevant, but has virtually no effect on the current situation of LGBT rights in our country, which has not change compared to previous years, except for territories which are currently occupied by Russian and pro-Russian forces (Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions). When the Russian world takes over land, there upon human rights in general and LGBT rights in particular always deteriorate. In Crimea an imported law banning "propaganda of homosexuality" actually took force forthwith, putting an end to any public LGBT activity. In Donetsk city, now ruled by ultra-Orthodox terrorists, being gay or lesbian has become life threatening.

Hope for a happier future for the Ukrainian LGBT community, as for most Ukrainian people, depends on building a new state reflecting the best Western standards of living and self-governance. On the eve of the presidential elections in May 2014, Amnesty International, together with a number of Ukrainian human rights organizations, analyzed the election programs and interview responses of candidates for the presidency. Particular regard was given to their attitude toward the banning of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in Ukraine. In all, only one candidate called for the legislative prohibition of such discrimination not only in employment but in all areas of life. This candidate, Petro Poroshenko, finally won the election, becoming the current President of Ukraine. We will closely monitor how his words match subsequent deeds. Currently discrimination against LGBT people in Ukraine is thriving in all areas of life, from legislation to the outright fomenting of hate speech and violence that the state just ignores.

Overall and undeniably, Ukraine has made its choice between the Russian World and the European Union. For this choice we have paid and continue to pay a high price – a price that includes painfully confronting our mistakes, illusions, and unwillingness to change. But by now most Ukrainians are convinced of the impossibility of living on as we lived before. Ukraine at present unwittingly finds itself at the forefront, defending Western civilization from the aggressive fundamentalism that Russia is trying to further globally. We repeat, this is a war not only for territory and resources, but a war for the minds of people. Whoever's ideas prevail, wins in this struggle. Russia is trying to make the most out of propagating the so-called "traditional values", which in recent years have actually been narrow-focused down to the promotion of homophobia and discrimination against LGBT people.

One should not underestimate the importance of what political parties have joined views with general Ukrainian society in this competition – their positions and coalitions may demonstrate who wins the battle of ideas. Public opinion polls and election results in Europe show that, after years of freedom and democracy, xenophobia and homophobia begin to grow again, and the political allies of Russia, from the far-right to far-left, are gaining popularity. Backward and conservative Ukraine could become a model for reform in Eastern Europe, but it could instead become a model for the collapse of freedom and democracy. Whatever the future outcome, changes in Ukraine have already begun, and, like it or not, the attitude of the state and society to LGBT people is one visual indicator of undeniable reality and the depth of these changes. Clearly, assisting the overcoming of social homophobia in Ukraine is an investment in the future of liberal democracy there and in the world.

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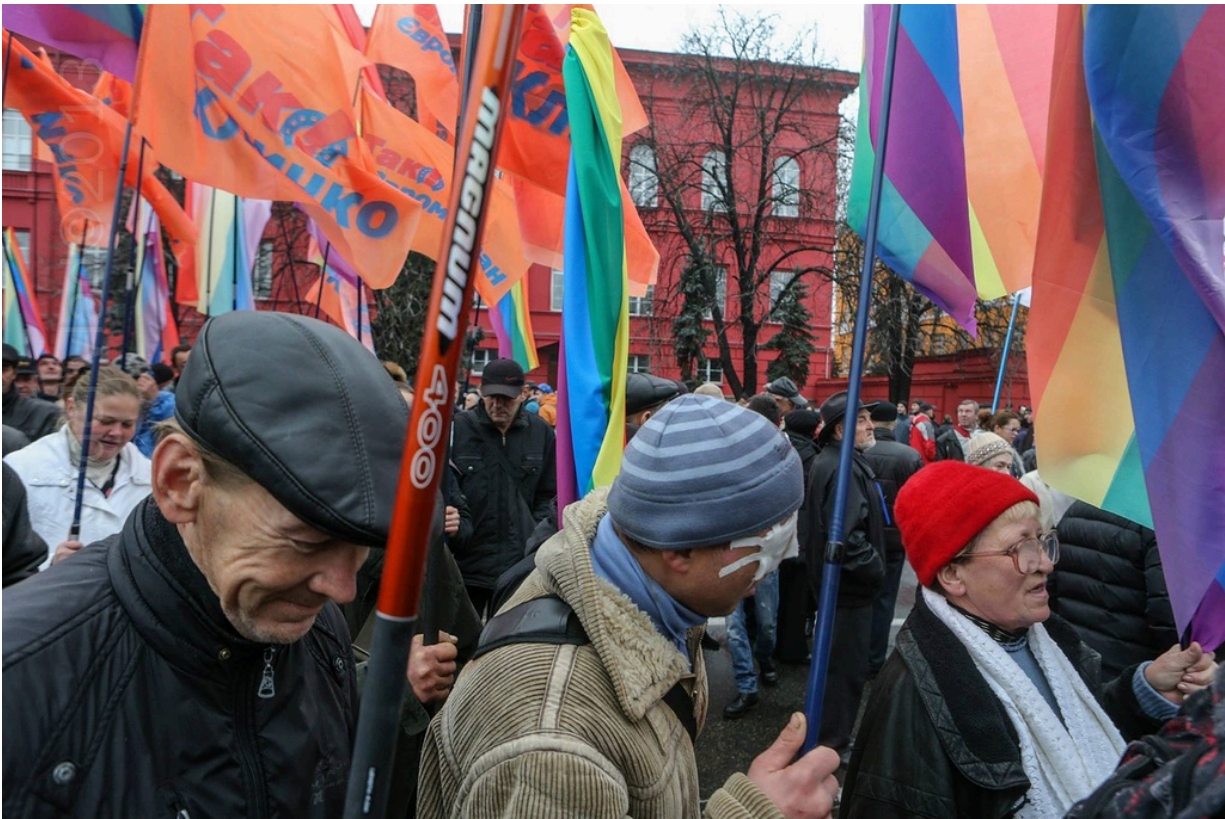
***Nash Mir Centre** was established in 1998 to protect the rights and freedoms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in Ukraine, to combat homophobia/transphobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, to support LGBT people and their identity and dignity as equal and contributing members of Ukrainian society. The main activities of Nash Mir Centre include the permanent monitoring of discrimination and infringements of human rights of LGBT people in Ukraine and the protection of LGBT equality at the legislative and political levels.*

For your kind donations and support of Nash Mir please contact us at:

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Situation of LGBT people in Ukraine in 2014:

<http://www.gay.org.ua/publications/nashmir2014engl.pdf>



Paid provocateurs posing as LGBT protesters during Maidan events



Guido Westerwelle, Foreign Minister of Germany and an openly gay politician on Maidan with its leaders – Vitalii Klychko (at present Mayor of Kiev, left) and Arsenii Yatsenyuk (at present Prime Minister of Ukraine, right)