



**SITUATING THE RUSSIAN ADVOCACY OF
TRADITIONAL VALUES IN THE GEOPOLITICAL
CONTEXT**

**RUSYA'NIN GELENEKSEL DEĞERLER
SAVUNUCULUĞUNU JEOPOLİTİK BAĞLAMDA
KONUMLANDIRMAK**

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ABSTRACT

As epitomized by the invasion of Ukraine, the lasting geopolitical power struggle between the West and the rising nations, including Russia, has been dragging the international system towards polarization again. Its epicenter lies in the contest over the meaning of modernity that becomes particularly evident in the antagonistic attitudes towards sexual rights. Linking sexual rights to modernity has been counteracted by the discourse on traditional values. This article aims to critically examine Russia's advocacy of traditional values in the geopolitical context. Built on the tripartite of cultural authenticity, sovereignty, and anti-Westernism, the discourse of traditional values conveys the resistance to the imposition of liberal values regarding gender equality and sexual diversity as the constitutive parameters of modernity. The investigation extends beyond a simplistic unipolar or bipolar worldview and argues that Russia's stance is not merely counter-hegemonic against the West but also

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serves its imperialist aims as evidenced by its invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: Russia, Traditional Values, LGBT+ Rights, Modernity, Geopolitics.

ÖZ

Ukrayna'nın işgalinin de gösterdiği gibi Batı ile Rusya'nın da dahil olduğu yükselen ülkeler arasında süregelen jeopolitik güç mücadelesi uluslararası sistemi yeniden kutupluluğa sürüklemektedir. Yakın zamandaki kutuplaşmanın merkez üssünde modernitenin anlamı üzerine verilen mücadele yer almakta ve bu mücadele özellikle cinsellik haklarına dair benimsenen zıt tutumlarda belirginleşmektedir. Modernitenin cinsellik hakları ile ilişkilendirilmesine geleneksel değerler söylemi ile karşı koyulmaktadır. Bu makale, Rusya'nın geleneksel değerler savunuculuğunu jeopolitik bağlam içerisine yerleştirerek eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla ele almaya çalışmaktadır. Kültürel özgünlük, egemenlik ve Batı karşıtlığı sac ayağına dayanan geleneksel değerler modernitenin kurucu öğeleri olarak toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve cinsellik hakları gibi liberal değerlerin dayatılmasına karşı çıkışı temsil etmektedir. Makale, tek kutuplu veya iki kutuplu bir dünya düzeni anlayışının ötesine geçerek Rusya'nın duruşunu sadece Batıya karşı bir hegemonik duruş olarak ele almamakta; Rusya'nın Ukrayna'yı işgalinin de gösterdiği üzere geleneksel değerler savunuculuğunun Rusya'nın emperyal amaçlarına da hizmet ettiği tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Geleneksel Değerler, LGBT+ Hakları, Modernite, Jeopolitik.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the previously polarized global order during the clash between communism and capitalism yielded to a transition period. The expectations about the ideological struggle to lose its decisiveness in international relations flourished in the early years of the post-Cold War period. Cross-national global risks such as the threat of nuclear war, terrorism, radicalism, migration, and climate crisis have paved the way to a new world order, in which

the goals of international cooperation, solidarity, and integration have been emphasized against the ideological struggle (Mandelbaum, 1998). However, the increasing global hegemonic dominance of the Western bloc has constituted a condition of vulnerability related to the unfair division of power among the rising nations, including Russia. Consequently, the national aspirations to restore the global legitimate status against Western dominance have replaced “previous illusions of common goals and interdependence” (Melville, 2017: 151). As epitomized by the invasion of Ukraine, the international system has failed and missed opportunities to sustain a unified, secure, and peaceful order following the Cold War (see Sakwa, 2008), thereby paving the ground for new lines of confrontation.

The dynamics of this renewed confrontation have extended beyond mere military and political competition. A new ideological dimension has emerged where traditional values have assumed a pivotal role instead of class struggle. Traditional values are built upon a complex triad of cultural authenticity, sovereignty, and anti-Westernism that Russia employs in a strategic manner. These values have become instrumental in contesting the moral superiority of the West as the vanguard of modernity, and thus, generated new sources of conflict between Russia and the West. The contest over the meaning of modernity becomes particularly evident in the antagonistic attitudes towards sexual rights and diversity. While the legal advances and the growing social acceptance of LGBT+ individuals are conceived as a symbol of modernity, civilization, and progress from the Western perspective, the Russian state redefines the parameters of modernity via traditional values.

Parallel to the geopolitical power struggle, particularly in the post-Soviet space, the Russian state has accused the Western countries of not only containing Russia through military, economic, and political alliances but also of disrespecting the Russian civilization for being authentic, distinct, and incompatible with liberal values. When the harsh criticism of the Western countries about the increasing authoritarian tendencies of Putin coupled with unexpected resistance to his authority at home in 2011, the Russian state endorsed a cultural turn to strengthen the regime's legitimacy and ensure its geopolitical revival around the discourse of civilizational uniqueness. The simultaneous promotion of sexual rights and diversity as the new markers of “modernity” provides the conditions to turn the contest over values into a part and parcel of the geopolitical power struggle between Russia and the West. The discourses on gender and sexuality are incorporated into a boundary-making process that divides “us” and “other” by new lines of conflict around competing values. Accordingly, amid the spread of reactions to LGBT+ rights within and beyond Europe, the traditional values serve as a tool of geopolitical contest for Russia to restore and re-signify its position in the world system.

The geopolitical contest between Russia and the West over values related to sexual rights provides a sound empirical ground to examine the nexus between sexuality and state sovereignty and its international implications. The interplay between state sovereignty and sexuality is a complex and dynamic one; sexuality plays a crucial role in the construction and exercise of state power. In contrast to the traditional conceptualization of state as a gender-neutral actor, Brown (1995) argues, state sovereignty has a gendered aspect and the configuration of state sovereignty intermingles with heteronormative norms. Certain forms of sexuality are depicted indispensable to the construction and maintenance of state identity and power, thereby turning the regulation and control of sexuality into a tool for states to establish and reinforce its authority within and beyond their borders (Brown, 1995).

The suppression of non-normative sexualities perfectly illustrates the relationship between state sovereignty and sexuality in domestic and international politics. States use homosexuality as a symbolic construct to define and protect themselves against internal and external threats. States deploy homophobia as a constraining and checking mechanism of LGBT+ activism (see Adam et al., 1999) whereby a securitized discourse regarding sexual rights and diversity is articulated. State suppression on non-normative sexualities become a tool of statecraft in charging LGBT+ persons for internal troubles and for flirting with the external enemies (Bosia, 2013). Framing the external threat as a gendered body, the “perverse homosexual” in Weber’s terms, provides states with a justificatory framework for its actions within and beyond their territorial borders as a way of protecting their values. Accordingly, the constructed binaries between the “perverse homosexual” and “sovereign man” becomes constitutive to establish a sexualized order in international realm (Weber, 2016). Othering and distinguishing the self through masculine technologies reproduce the symbolic boundaries of a nation against internal and external threats and emphasize a hierarchical superiority against others (Slootmaeckers, 2019). Consequently, the claims to state sovereignty via the regulation of sexuality are not only confined to social solidarity and cohesion but are internal to geopolitical boundary-making.

The Russian state’s claims to sovereignty serves as a stark example of the interplay between sovereignty and sexuality within the evolving geopolitical landscape. In its opposition to championing sexual rights and diversity as new markers of modernity, the Russian state emphasizes traditional values as a tool of restoring sovereignty and signifying its symbolic borders against the attacks of Western countries that allegedly aim to destroy Russia. This article argues that traditional values serve a dual purpose related to sovereignty: they act as a counter-discourse to challenge the Western hegemony in the name of modernity and a justificatory framework for Russia’s imperial ambitions under the guise of reunification around a distinct value-based system. However, while the Russian

state utilizes the discourse of traditional values to challenge the Western hegemony on the grounds of sovereignty, its self-positioning as the savior and a vanguard of a unique civilization in the post-Soviet space contradicts the focus on sovereignty and serves the same purpose as “Western imperialism.”

This article starts with a discussion on the embeddedness of sexuality rights in the geopolitical power struggle and the geopolitical implications of their transformation into new symbolic and spatial borders of modernity in the post-Cold War. The second section elaborates on the constitutive pillars of traditional values with a focus on the conceptualization of the West as inferior to Russia. The third section engages with the shift in the Russian state’s understanding of traditional values amid the changing geopolitical concerns. It is followed by the examination of the geopolitical context underlying the utilization of traditional values for maintaining the sovereignty, security, and survival of Russia against the West and for justifying its imperial claims, particularly in its sphere of influence. Lastly, the article engages in the regulation of sexuality rights within Russia that enforces a homophobic climate in a society already hostile to LGBT+ rights. The article concludes with a general assessment of the importance of situating the promotion of traditional values *versus* sexual rights into the geopolitical power struggle between Russia and the West.

Despite the populist claims of Putin to represent the whole Russian nation, the Russian people are not uniform in social attitudes towards traditional values. In terms of gender, age, geography, class and several other factors, the Russian people show significantly diverging patterns in aligning with traditional values related to religion, sexuality, homosexuality and family (Gudkov et al., 2021). Therefore, the attempt of discussing how traditional values serve Russia’s geopolitical endeavors in domestic and international politics requires visiting the discourse of the Russian state. To this end, this article methodologically combines academic literature with empirical analysis, drawing from primary sources such as speeches by Putin, legislative texts concerning sexual rights and international reports. Given the focus on the cultural turn, the primary resources are specifically selected from the period starting 2012 to the present day but some early speeches of Putin are also selectively examined to show the shift in conceptualizing sovereignty. Secondary resources span a broader time frame but are primarily focused on literature published post-2012 to align with the study’s focus. Data is analyzed through thematic analysis, focusing on recurring themes, patterns and narratives that emerge from the primary resources. This is supplemented by a critical review of secondary literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

1. GEOPOLITICS OF GAY-FRIENDLINESS

Despite the recent legal efforts to accommodate sexual rights within the discourse of modernity and the evolving affirmative social attitudes towards sexual diversity, sexuality and modernity has never had an easy relationship, rather evolve through dynamic, complicated and multifaceted stages throughout history. With the emergence of modernity, especially in the 18th and 19th century, sexuality, sexual relations and sexual behaviors became a terrain of power and were conceptualized in a binary way, thereby exposing same-sex relations to inequality and intolerance that contradicts the founding principles of modernity. As Foucault (1978) emphasizes, repressing and controlling sexuality, especially homosexuality, through discursive and regulatory mechanisms constituted the dark façade of modernity with broader social implications of condemnation, marginalization, stigmatization and criminalization of same-sex relations. Criminalizing and policing homosexuality through legal acts and medical discourses continued to be a persistent pattern until the post-war period even in the most modern countries of Europe (Houlbrook, 2005). Since the 1960s, the inequality and discrimination pertaining to sexual identity started to gain a legitimate ground in the political debates in the Western democracies. As a result of a variety of related factors, including democratic culture, sexual revolution, women's rights movement, capitalism, consumerism and individualism, the legal landscape and social perceptions about same-sex relations started to take a new dimension (Kahlina, 2015; Rahman, 2020).

It is in the context of the post-Cold War era; that the politics of sexual orientation and gender identity has followed a globalized path with the incorporation of LGBT+ rights into the human rights agenda. LGBT+ politics has gained status and recognition in the discourses, attempts, and policies of international, supranational, and regional organizations on the expansion of human rights. The EU institutions and European countries have enacted several treaties and policy initiatives including decriminalization of consensual same-sex relationships, prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, and recognition of marriage equality for same-sex couples (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2020). In a similar vein, LGBT+ rights are included both formally and discursively in the UN bodies that set out its approach to the treatment of sexually marginalized groups with a rights-based approach at the global scale. With several initiatives, the UN bodies provide a set of shared goals and recommendations that can be integrated into national laws to safeguard sexual rights and identity (Edelman, 2020: 3).

The promotion of LGBT+ rights as a part of the human rights agenda has been accompanied by a discursive shift related to democracy, modernity, progress and civilization. Treating individuals equally regardless of sexual orientation has

become a litmus test for proving Europeanness, thereby turning into a salient area of political contestation between countries on cultural values (Slootmaeckers, 2020). Baker (2016) perfectly captures the international implications of this trend as the transformation of LGBT+ politics into “a geopoliticized symbol in international affairs” in the post-Cold War era (as cited in Luciani, 2023: 198). With the collapse of socialism, the disappearance of hard borders has required the EU to redefine its symbolic boundaries within and beyond the continent. This new geopolitical situation forced the EU to shift the process of “othering” from security concerns to normative grounds related to shared European values including LGBT+ equality (Slootmaeckers, 2020: 352). The alignment with civilization, which manifests itself in the endorsement of LGBT+ rights, has exclusively located east and west, north and South, and Europe within and beyond the EU (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2020: 8-9).

This global trend reflects the contestation between homonationalism and heteronationalism which play a significant role in redefining national boundaries and signifying the status of a nation. Homonationalism is the ideological use of LGBT+ equality to assert a nation’s progressive and civilized status (Puar, 2013) whereas heteronationalism represents a form of political homophobia that aims to protect a morally “sound” nation through control over sexuality. Despite the contrasting emphasis on sexual rights and diversity, these ideologies embody an illustration of similar boundary-making between nations that compete to qualify as superior against the other. Accordingly, these ideologies have created a rift between what is perceived as the “tolerant West” and the “homophobic East,” both within and beyond the EU (Kahlina, 2015; Luciani, 2023; Shirinian, 2021).

The global trend towards championing LGBT+ rights has created geopolitical borders that polarize and essentialize the European and non-European distinction within and beyond the continent although this imaginary identity-making does not necessarily capture the geographical clustering between a uniform West and East. Traditional values about sexuality have continued to be a part of European modernity with countries showing diverse patterns of decriminalization of and tolerance towards homosexuality even in the post-war period. Recently, these values have gained a new life source amid the rise of so-called gender ideology. In Europe, the anti-gender rhetoric that includes the attacks on the equality claims for sexual orientation and diversity in the name of protecting traditional values has been spreading.

Nonetheless, as Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) accurately state, the rise of anti-gender politics should not be narrowed down to the rise of religious backlash. Rather, it is closely interconnected to various sites of power struggle between European and non-Europeans, and within Europeans. Within the EU, anti-gender mobilization represents the protection of authentic cultural values against the

imposition of foreign values in a top-down, undemocratic, and technocratic manner by foreign forces (the EU) and corrupt elites (Korolczuk and Graff, 2017). Recently, the reactions given to the EU bodies in the case of prohibiting pride parades in many European countries (Serbia, Poland, Hungary) are verbalized with a reference to national decision-making. In a similar vein, the opposition to gender ideology is articulated as a matter of defending national sovereignty beyond Europe (particularly in Latin America) (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Accordingly, the attempts to incorporate LGBT+ rights into human rights discourse have led to resistance and opposition to “a new form of cultural colonialism whereby the West is seen as the vanguard of the progress” (Rahman, 2020, 11; see Korolczuk and Graff, 2018) while those that allegedly lag behind the adoption of progressive values are framed as “the guardians of morality, tradition and indigenous cultures” (Adam, 2020).

At the homonationalist turn, the resistance is articulated “by depicting LGBT rights as a Western, non-universal concept, or they (the opponents) can attempt to re-signify it by linking the meaning of modernity to so-called traditional values” (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016: 3). In the latter scenario, the endorsement of traditional values turns into a part and parcel of a geopolitical power struggle for “pure” European modernity that is not corrupted, decadent and disconnected from its Christian origins. The contestation over the meaning of European values is therefore “not to *rout* European values, but to *reroute* the European Project back to its Christian origins” (Mos, 2023: 114), which coalesces with the geopolitical claims of leadership for European values at stake. In other words, sexual politics turns into “a symbolic battlefield in an imagined clash of civilizations and competing conceptions of modernity” (Edenborg, 2018: 4).

At the nexus between sexual rights and modernity, Russia does not take side with the anti-modern camp but, to the contrary, resists the alignment with “new” morality as a condition of the evolving conceptualization of modernity. The traditional values are utilized by the Russian state to counter the self-appointed moral superiority and domination of the West on the basis of a uniform conception of modernity. The Russian state alternately offers a conceptualization of modernity irreconcilable with the founding values of pluralism, tolerance, and multiculturalism as for supposedly threatening traditional values. With a distinct conception of modernity, the Russian state does not officially position itself in Europe or Asia but stands for a civilizational uniqueness based on a system of values characteristic of Russia (Izvestia, 2014). By having traditional values and cultural heritage, the Russian state aspires to defend the imaginary Western civilization that is in grave peril due to the estrangement from moral and religious values (see Putin, 2013). Accordingly, the Russian state crafts “an attractive model to be followed by ‘other worlds’ in the light of a deepening crisis of global civilization” (Baranovsky, 2000). Such a positioning serves to blend the

geopolitical power struggle with the competing claims of moral superiority at the edge of the new Cold War. Amid the rising anti-Westernism around the globe, the Russian state's desire to be a vanguard of traditional values serves its geopolitical endeavors of closing the ranks among those nations, disturbed with the "Western" cultural hegemony, on the grounds of national sovereignty and authenticity against the attacks in the name of liberal sexual values.

2. TRADITIONAL VALUES AS A COUNTER-DISCOURSE

The discourse on traditional values is articulated as a counter-narrative against the depiction of LGBT+ rights as a symbol of modernity by the West. In the Russian view, the "imposition" of sexual values is allegedly instrumentalized for the moral superiority of Europe against the "other," which is not willing to align with a uniform concept of modernity. However, the function of traditional values is not limited to situating the Russian civilization as an alternative model of modernity against the West but also encompasses its imperial claims towards the post-Soviet space. Traditional values serve as a justification for the Russian state to self-appoint a civilizing, saving, liberating, and decolonizing role for the brotherly nations of the former Soviet Union, which assumedly remain vulnerable to external forces.

Traditional values, albeit vague and undefined, refer to the historically rooted and distinctive features of the Russian nation, including "patriotism, spirituality, rootedness in history, respect for authority, and adherence to heteronormative and patriarchal ideals of family and gender" (Edenborg, 2022). The secular (Putin) and religious (Patriarch Krill) proponents of traditional values are quite concise in configuring them as related to human dignity (like conscience, faith, duty, responsibility, solidarity, honesty, and unselfishness) as well as the universal and transcendental that allegedly crosscut the whole humankind and all religions (Stepanova, 2015). Particularly, the Russian Orthodox Church approaches human dignity, rights and individual liberty from an antagonistic perspective that opposes liberalism with tradition, secularism with religion, and individual human rights with the rights of the community, nation and family. These opposite conceptual pairs no longer capture a geographical clustering between the liberal West and the Orthodox East (Stoeckl, 2012), given the lack of a unified stance among Western countries on the recognition of sexual rights and liberties. However, "the image of 'the West' as existential enemy" serves to "strengthen Russia's distinctiveness as the defender of traditional values on behalf of humankind, to mobilize the people of Russia, and to unite them around political power and religious authorities, which guarantee security and stability" (Stepanova, 2015).

Accordingly, traditional values are incorporated into the process of restoring national sovereignty and re-signifying identity borders against the alleged attacks of the West. Moral sovereignty, as coined by Wilkinson, refutes the normative superiority of international human rights norms and transpires that “human rights are contingent on the observation, especially in public spaces, of local traditional values, which are seen to represent the values of the majority” (Wilkinson, 2014: 365). With moral sovereignty, Putin stakes a claim to protect the moral norms of society and justifies his claim not as an attack on the minority rights but as a duty to represent the rights of the majority that are supposedly united around traditional values, on the one hand (Putin, 2013). On the other hand, he utilizes moral sovereignty to illustrate the contingency of international norms and values and the need for compatibility with traditional values. Thus, moral sovereignty opposes the self-appointed moral superiority of Europe in promoting, protecting and extending LGBT+ rights beyond the region. In the face of widespread attacks on traditional values, the Russian state assumes the role of protecting and defending traditional values, “which are being diluted, depreciated, humiliated and mocked” (Chapnin, 2020: 134). In this view, Russia is positioned as “ready to steer the continent back in the right direction,” which has departed from its Christian roots (Mos, 2023: 145).

The idea that the West is a “decadent” civilization and Russia is the “savior of civilization” (Moss, 2017) is not a new phenomenon in the Russian history. In explaining its historical origins, Engström (2017) cites Russian messianism, whose origins date back to the 16th century. According to this understanding, Russia is portrayed as a restraining factor that protects civilization against the forces of chaos. Following the collapse of Rome and the Byzantine Empires, the idea of Moscow as the “third Rome” grants Russia a historical mission to represent and protect the “pure” Christian values. In this view, Russian people is the “chosen” nation to fight anti-Christ. During the Soviet times, anti-Christ undergoes secularization and the enemy of workers became capitalism and Nazism while the liberals, American spies, and LGBT+ activists embody the new ontological enemies in the post-Soviet period (Engström, 2017).

At the juxtaposition of the world between modernity (associated with feminism and homonormativity) and tradition (associated with traditional family values and heteronormativity), the advocacy of traditional values has been utilized as a coherent discursive tool by Russia at the geopolitical level to legitimize the powers to be. As a result of the legalization of same-sex marriages, the rise of feminism, the decay of the traditional family, and the erosion of the “normal gender order”, Europe is pitied for being entrapped by sexual deviance. Conversely, Russia stands up for a value system built upon traditional family, gender norms and identities (Riabov and Riabova, 2014). An amorphous group, including the pro-nationalist groups, the Communist Party, the Russian Orthodox

Church (ROC), family organizations and intellectuals, partners in understanding the erosion of traditional values as a security threat to national sovereignty and protecting the future generations from so-called degenerated ideas such as gender equality and sexual diversity (Edenborg, 2021: 3). Particularly, the ROC plays a significant role in conveying the messages of Putin about traditional values to the people. In a secular political system, the deepening alignment with the ROC provides Putin with the mechanisms for the sacralization of his ideas around the historical past, cultural heritage, and religious values (Zaporozhchenko, 2023). The ROC has long confronted the secularist and libertarian understanding of human rights in the West and pushed the incorporation of religious-spiritual and ethical dimensions into the human rights regime in the UN bodies. It sees itself not only as the defender of traditional values but also assumes a role of reminding the original meaning of human rights to the derailed West (Stoeckl, 2012). With the rhetorical support of the ROC and its representation at the international level, the Russian state feels more confident in holding the upper hand against the “other”, which loses the right to be a stronghold of pure Christian values due to moral degradation and the denial of religion.

3. FROM SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY TO MORAL SOVEREIGNTY

Putin’s use of traditional values for geopolitical goals is seen as a part of his cultural turn after his re-ascent to power in 2012, followed by a wave of mass protests that dragged the regime into a crisis of legitimacy. To contain the destabilizing implications of a possible color revolution, the cultural turn proposes a new social contract to unite the Russian people around moral and spiritual values (Østbø, 2017). However, the nuances of the centrality of traditional values are traced into Putin’s early attempts to resolve the problem of national identity around the ideas of sovereignty, security and stability with an implicit anti-Western component. Since his early years in power, a search for a strong anchor in historically and culturally distinctive values has guided the discourse and policies of Putin to re-signify national identity and global position for contemporary Russia (Doğangün, 2019).

The most evident shift in Putin’s discourse was to end Yeltsin’s pro-Western stance to “normalize” post-Soviet Russia for putting Russia into an inferior status in the global hierarchy. To reverse this pattern, the “special path of civilization” is utilized as an inevitable derivative of the historical, cultural and religious particularities of Russia (Verkhovskii and Pain, 2015) against the export of the Western model of democracy. In Putin’s own words: “Such primitive borrowing and attempts to civilize Russia from abroad were not accepted by an absolute majority of our people. This is because the desire for independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological and foreign policy spheres is an integral part of our national character” (Putin, 2013). A distinct Russian way of development

proposes a shift from the status of being in need of help and guidance from Western countries to self-sufficiency on the grounds of sovereignty (Putin 2005a; Putin 2005b; Putin 2005c).

Against this backdrop, the securitization of spiritual and moral values (read traditional values) has been central to restoring sovereignty and stability since Putin's first years in office. In the National Security Concept, published in 2000, the preservation and strengthening of society's moral values, patriotism, and humanism were defined within the scope of national interests. In this period, the weakening of moral values was primarily associated with the social crisis parallel to the weakening of the state authority following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The moral decline was perceived as evident in the increasing crime rates, the spread of bribery, the demographic crisis, and the weakening of the nuclear family (Russian National Security Council, 2000). Although the concern with moral and spiritual values was mostly domestic in this early period, such a commitment shows that these values were placed at the center of Russia's ontological security concerns related to the national identity, unity and survival in the post-Cold War.

In post-2012 national security and strategy documents, the way of dealing with spiritual and moral values is overtly placed in a geopolitical context. In the Foreign Policy Concept, published in 2013, it was mentioned for the first time that global competition started to turn into a clash of civilizations. It is also stated that different values and development models have come into competition and conflict as the diversity of civilizations has become more evident with globalization, and it has been emphasized that the hierarchy of values that certain countries try to impose threatens international relations (Russian National Security Council, 2013). According to this concept, Russia positions itself as a power that will contain and restrain the increasingly chaotic international system and presents itself as an alternative civilization that needs to spread by using soft power (Engström, 2017). Similarly, in the National Security Strategy published in 2015, it was emphasized that Russia's spiritual and moral values were targeted by foreign and international organizations trying to disrupt Russia's unity, regional integrity and stability (Russian Federation President, 2015).

To grasp the shift in the conceptualization of traditional values as a symbolic marker of Russian authenticity and its moral superiority vis-à-vis the West in foreign policy documents, the interplay at the geopolitical level must be considered. The complex nature of relations between Russia, the EU and the USA relies, on the one hand, on Russia's aspiration for acceptance and integration in the international community and the recognition of its distinct values rooted in religious traditions and strong state, on the other (Tsygankov, 2012). The changing power dynamics and perceived threats, as observed in the expansion of NATO

towards Russia's western borders (Putin, 2008), led to a shift towards a nationalist and assertive foreign policy. The expansionist policies of the West have been treated as an unwillingness to respect and cooperate with Russia as an equal player in the international system. Therefore, Russia has encountered "a choice between accepting subservience and reasserting its status as a great power, thereby claiming its rightful place in the world alongside the United States" (Trenin, 2006: 88).

In the Russian narrative, the military interventions of the Western countries in former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya and Syria are justified by the language of democracy and human rights but this narrative primarily serves to install the Western hegemony and encroach into the territorial sovereignty of the nations (Putin, 2022a). In the geopolitical order that is dominated by the Western bloc and especially the USA, Western values are allegedly used to weaken Russia's national interests and cultural identity, thereby dividing and destroying the country, and threatening its rightful global status. The rising clash with the pro-Russian governments in the post-Soviet space is seen as an indicator of strengthening Western dominance and a threat to Russia's "rightful" existence in the historically claimed region. The Western liberals, security agencies, and pro-democracy think-tanks are blamed for provoking the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan to install the pro-Western puppet governments that attack the Russian cultural values and interests in the region (Lionel and Sherlock, 2022). The Russian state interpreted the pro-European stance of Ukraine and the consequent Euromaidan revolution as a "Western-instigated" coup to draw Ukraine from the sphere of influence of Russia, thereby flaring up the insecurity of Russia against the West (Götz and Staun, 2022).

The contestation in the geopolitical space urges the Russian state to solidify the notion of state sovereignty with the moves for restoring a sovereign and morally sound Russia. Against the focus on democracy promotion, humanitarian aid and human rights, the traditional values help the Russian state counter the criticism of the international community for authoritarian tendencies. At the same time, the Russian state acquires an important tool to re-signify its international status within the context of rising global opposition to gender ideology and sexual diversity. To strengthen its position in the international community, particularly following the imposed sanctions on the economy for supporting the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, and defend national interests, Russia crafts itself a distinct civilization with the aims of uniting Russian people, shielding against the destruction of the Russian nation and state, and positioning itself as a worldwide defender of traditional values (Tsygankov, 2016: 151). Putin's commitment to traditional values comes into sharp focus in his 2013 address to the Valdai Club. In this speech, he underscores the right of Russia to independently choose its path of development and emphasizes the importance of respecting distinct cultural values. He critiques the Euro-Atlantic countries for their shift away from

traditional Christian values and their adoption of more liberal stances on sexual diversity. According to Putin, this shift represents a “moral crisis” that threatens to degrade the foundations of Western civilization itself.

“Another serious challenge to Russia's identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan. (...) And people are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world. I am convinced that this opens a direct path to degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis. (...) At the same time, we see attempts to somehow revive a standardised model of a unipolar world and to blur the institutions of international law and national sovereignty. Such a unipolar, standardised world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals. In a historical sense this amounts to a rejection of one's own identity, of the God-given diversity of the world.” (Putin, 2013).

This critique is not merely rhetorical; it forms part of a broader Russian strategy to define itself in opposition to what Putin sees as a “decadent” West. It also serves to reinforce the Russian state's claim to a unique, sovereign identity that stands in contrast to the allegedly moral degeneration taking place in Europe. In the Russian view, advances in LGBT+ rights, such as marriage equality and protections against discrimination, are not signs of progress but indicators of moral decline. The competing claims of modernity become evident in otherizing the EU through the concept of “*gayropa*.” This term is used by the Russian side to cast Europe as a continent that has deviated from traditional gender and sexual norms, thereby undermining its claim to moral superiority. In the Russian narrative, the European focus on sexual rights and equality is equated with a loss of moral and cultural integrity (Foxall, 2019: 176). This commitment to traditional values serves a specific geopolitical purpose: it allows the Russian state to draw distinct symbolic and spatial boundaries in its relations with the West. These boundaries are not just ideological but also serve to redefine modernity in a way that assumedly aligns with Russia's own cultural and moral framework. The competing claims of modernity, therefore, are not merely abstract debates but have real-world implications in the geopolitical sphere.

4. RUSSIA AS “THE SAVIOR” OF CIVILIZATION

Unpacking Russia's quest for dominance in the post-Soviet region, the focus on sovereignty and respect for distinct traditional values undergoes a significant

discursive shift alongside Russian imperial aspirations. In addition to the geopolitical rivalry with the USA, Russian imperialism features the attempts to offer an alternative world order and restore not territorial but spatial borders of the Russian-Soviet Empire (Zaporozhchenko, 2023). Regarding the post-Soviet space, particularly Ukraine, the Russian state is concerned with the Western expansion not only for threatening its security interests but also for its aim at reunification via a common value-based system. Thus, the Western attempts are viewed to depart the brotherly nations from historical, cultural and linguistic ties with Russia, create lines of division among them, and accommodate them with the Western system of values (Tsygankov, 2015). In that regard, the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) has been recently utilized as an instrument that grants Russia a civilizing mission to spread out an alternative, non-Western modernity among its kindred people who live outside its borders (Suslov, 2018). A geopolitical imagination, based on a “shared civilizational space”, provides the Russian state with a justification for following interventionist policies towards its neighbors, a rationale for reconnecting with the Russian diaspora, and a tool to stand for an alternative world order (Laruelle, 2015). However, the invasion of Ukraine illustrates the failure of an innocent imperial paradigm that rests on liberating, decolonizing and protecting the victims from external oppression as it disregards any decolonizing national attempt as an attack on Russia’s identity and interests (Kassymbekova and Laruelle, 2022).

This above-mentioned shift is also tightly connected to Russia’s claims of ascension in the region not only as a military and economic power but also as a morally sound, strong and masculine actor. Eurasianism as an element of Russian foreign policy extends beyond envisaging a cultural unity among the peoples of the former Soviet Union around a distinct conceptualization of civilization. The call for Eurasianism also includes the unification of the newly independent states under the Russian political entity, which denies legitimacy to the claims of autonomy and secession (Laruelle, 2008). While expecting global recognition for traditional values on the grounds of sovereignty and security, the Russian state blends its imperial aims with claims of moral superiority to justify its interventions, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine due to their departure from historical and cultural links to Russia. In other words, when confronted with the discrepancy between spreading Russian imperialism against Western imperialism, the Russian state plays the card of being a savior, which contradicts the principle of respect for sovereignty. This duality about the conceptualization of sovereignty conveys that the former Soviet countries owe their sovereignty to Russia’s tolerance and need to stay in compliance with the Russian interests, and entails “a patrimonial hierarchy between a masculine Russia acting as a dominant but benevolent authority, wielding its steady hand over the post-Soviet states, constructed as dependent, passive, and feminine” (Agiusa and Edenborg, 2019: 71). Amid the

confrontation with the West in the post-Soviet space, the Russian state seems to reserve a “right” and “moral duty” to intervene in these countries that are colonized and manipulated to drift towards the wrong side of modernity.

Against this backdrop, Russia’s strong resistance to LGBT+ rights signify its “rightful” claims in the region (Suchland, 2018) as the historically claimed savior. Accordingly, anti-homosexual propaganda is frequently used in framing the color revolutions, the Euromaidan revolution and the invasion of Ukraine whereby the symbolic and spatial borders were re-signified at the juxtaposition of a masculine defender of traditional values and a feminized actor inclined towards promiscuity. In the Rose Revolution in Georgia, Putin’s reaction was to underestimate democratization attempts through de-masculinization of the protestors and attack them with a so-called “humiliating” homophobic language (Sperling, 2015: 78). Through the use of Russian slang that associates “rose” with lesbian and “blue” with gay male, he dismissed the revolution as “the creation of a system of permanent revolution, whether that be ‘rose’ (*rosovykh*) or some yet-to-be-invented ‘blue’” (*golubykh*) (Hovarth, 2011: 7). Putin intended to diffuse fear and worry among the Georgian people about the risk of a gay revolution under the increasing pressure of the EU.

In the Euromaidan revolution, pro-Russian groups bang the drum against the EU’s attempts to force Ukraine to recognize liberal sexual values and legalize same-sex marriages as a part of conditionality (Shevtsova, 2020). The theme recurring in the media and social media during the Euromaidan events was the framing of the protests as gay square (*gayromaidan*). The underlying idea was to belittle Ukraine’s pro-European stance and resistance to Russia by feminizing and labeling it as a perversion from the traditional gender order (Riabova and Riabov, 2015). It was claimed that behind the protests, there was an attempt to drive Ukraine away from Russia with the support of homosexuals (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 2013). The LGBT+ groups were allegedly accused of hijacking the democratization efforts against the closing ranks between the pro-Russian groups and local conservative groups with strong homophobic attitudes. In the regime’s view, the EU utilizes the deepening cooperation with Ukraine as a tool to impose gay rights. Associating these rights with pedophilia, drug addiction, and unhealthy generations is a part of the narrative that demonizes the opponents on moral grounds and scapegoats the LGBT+ activists. The message was that Ukraine is faced with making an existential choice between moral “good” and “evil” (Gaufman, 2022), which are located at opposing sides of modernity.

In the process leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, Western countries are accused not only of expanding towards Russia’s sphere of influence but also of trying to destroy Russia’s moral integrity and dignity. Putin constructs his narrative of war as a crusade against the imposition of foreign values that are

contrary to human nature, cause moral degradation, and aim to destroy the Russian people from within. As Putin puts it, “The attempts to use us in their own interests never ceased until quite recently: they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature” (Putin, 2022a). Putin paints the war as a moral one that epitomizes the exceptionalism of Russia and its national resistance to the insisting sexual perversion: “Do we want to have here, in our country, in Russia, “parent number one, parent number two and parent number three” (they have completely lost it!) instead of mother and father? (...) Is that what we want for our country and our children? This is all unacceptable to us. We have a different future of our own” (Putin, 2022b).

The support of the ROC Patriarch Kirill to Putin has also confirmed the portrayal of the invasion of Ukraine as a geopolitical confrontation on traditional values *versus* sexual liberties. Despite the anti-war voices in the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill’s ownership of the war sanctifies a “rightful” excuse blended with historical memory, Orthodox Christianity and Russian messianism. Patriarch Kirill justified the military intervention in Ukraine on the grounds of the denial of traditional values symbolized by freedom, excessive consumption and gay parades in direct connection to the convergence with liberal culture (Orthodox Times, 2022). In Patriarch Kirill’s view, Russia had no other choice than to start this war both to protect Christian values and the persecuted Orthodox population in eastern Ukraine against the invasion of sinful forces as well as to save Ukraine from subordination to the “immoral West” (Szabaciuk, 2022). The “holy war” argument used during the occupation of Ukraine is based on the purpose of purifying Ukraine from satanism against the inclination of Western countries to deviant ideas (Sirikupt, 2022). In this narrative, Ukraine is portrayed as a powerless and vulnerable, thus feminized, country that has lacked self-determination under the attacks of Western countries and needs to be rescued by a masculine power – Russia – to restore its dignity.

The masculinization of Russia and the concomitant de-masculinization of the West serve as a glue that fixes and specifies its symbolic borders. The contest over traditional values through masculinization is not limited to “the idea of a Russian collective identity” but tightly connected to “the idea of Russia’s global mission to protect tradition” (Agadjanian, 2017: 48). With the incorporation of masculine politics into geopolitical play, Putin has attempted to restore the image of Russia as a fortress of traditional values for a growing moral majority around the globe, which is disturbed with the expansion of gender and sexual rights. Putin has located Russia at the top of the international hierarchy as the only pure and

masculine actor that can defend European civilization against Western cultural hegemony.

5. THE CRACKDOWN ON LGBT+ RIGHTS AT HOME

The aggressive resistance to external interference based on sexual values and the internal repression of the LGBT+ community constitute the two sides of the same coin in Russia. The domestic approach of the Russian state to unconventional sexual relations is to re-signify its symbolic borders on the grounds of non-heteronormativity against the threats to national security and survival. Despite the widespread assumptions about the current state of sexual politics in Russia, political homophobia is not a Putin-era novelty. As Healey (2018) argues, from Stalin to Putin, political homophobia has been utilized as a controlling and manipulative tool to unite the public against an imaginary threat and ward off internal dissent. Currently, this historical pattern to depict homosexuals as foreign entity that attacks the Russian traditional values has been persisting. Hate crimes against LGBT+ people are emboldened with the help of the justice system that standardize their maltreatment and circulate a version of disciplinary truth accommodating with the state discourse (Kondakov, 2022). The increasing surveillance of LGBT+ activism through security apparatuses force many Russians with non-heteronormative orientation to seek safer places abroad (Novistkaya, 2021). These political and legal interventions not only deprive LGBT+ persons from equal treatment but also unleash public hostility towards homosexuality on the grounds of destroying social fabric. This concern serves framing homosexuality “as an alien infection that prevents national harmony and regeneration, and thus, needs to be suppressed or ejected from the collective body” (Edenborg, 2023: 43).

With the defense of traditional values, the Russian state promises its citizens to not only restore its sovereignty and international status but also guarantee the future survival of the nation amid the rising concerns about the Western intention to wipe out the Russian people and the demographic decline which manifests itself in the falling birthrates among ethnic Russians, coupled with a significant increase among the Muslim population and migrants. The promotion of heterosexuality, with the help of pro-natal policies (like maternity capital) and the legal and social suppression of homosexuality, is constitutive to redefine the nation in sexual and ethnocultural terms (Suchland, 2018). The widespread anxiety about homosexuality among the Russian people is tightly connected to a narrative of national strength and security, which would be weakened by the inability to biologically and culturally reproduce the nation. In this narrative, the regulation of non-traditional sexuality is not about encroaching on the rights of sexual minorities but guaranteeing national survival (Persson, 2015).

Opposing the expansion of LGBT+ rights is consolidated by several initiatives to regulate sexuality and the crackdown on LGBT+ organizations and activists at home. To this end, an important legal step taken towards the regulation of sexuality is the ban on the propaganda about non-traditional sexual relations between minors, also known as the anti-gay law. Selecting minors as the target group is noteworthy as it reminds the duty of the state to protect the children (the nation) against the harmful ideas that might motivate them towards non-traditional sexual orientation. The law introduced fines for individuals that promote non-traditional sexual relations on media and the internet, higher fines and closing-down for organizations, and special fines in addition to detainment and deportation for foreigners violating the law (The Guardian, 2013). The law was followed by a constitutional amendment that banned same-sex marriages in 2020. Defining the family as heterosexual indicates the gendered terms of national belonging by leaving same-sex couples without legal protection against violence and discrimination.

Amid the rising tensions during the war, the anti-gay law re-emerged as a topic of political interest, which might be seen as a counter-measure by the Russia state against exclusion from the international community (i.e. the Council of Europe). The timing of the law is significant in that it shows the intent of the authorities to consolidate the support of the Russian people to the idea of a defensive war against the attack on traditional values. Such a framing enables the Russian state to further the restrictions on LGBT+ groups for anti-war activism that might allegedly destabilize the country. The scope of the anti-gay law was expanded to include all age groups and restrict the site of visibility for LGBT+-related issues. Any public display of LGBT+ persons' sexual preferences and related values, lifestyle, topics and symbols in the public sphere, social media, print and visual media, films, books and advertisements will incur a heavy fine for individuals, organizations and journalists (Reuters, 2022).

Another salient move by the Russian state was to pass a new presidential decree on the preservation and strengthening of traditional Russian values during the Ukrainian war. The traditional values encompassing human rights and freedoms, patriotism, high moral ideals, humanism, traditional family and concomitantly the resistance to gay propaganda, constitute the founding blocks of so-called Russian superiority, security and survival against the alleged Western attacks aiming to annihilate the Russian nation. The decree reiterates and legitimizes the geopolitical maneuvers of Russia as the true protector and representative of universal moral and spiritual values (Ukrainska Pravda, 2022). A final move taken by Putin against LGBT+ rights has been issuing new legislation that bans people from changing their gender officially or medically (The Guardian, 2023).

The state has furthered its crackdown on LGBT+ rights by targeting civic activism by extending the scope of foreign agent law. This law, introduced in 2012, requires all politically-oriented Russian organizations that receive financial and organizational support from foreign countries, organizations or individuals to register as foreign agents. In all public communications, presentations, and publications, these organizations are required to identify themselves as foreign agents, which has a negative connotation of “spy” in Russia. An increasing number of Russian LGBT+ organizations, including the umbrella organization of Russia LGBT+ Network, are forced to register as foreign agents (The Moscow Times, 2021). The law not only denies LGBT+ organizations access to international financial and organizational support and funds but also cuts off its network of solidarity with the international LGBT+ community. Additionally, this way of labeling has increased the social hostility towards LGBT+ organizations, groups and individuals for being in the service of foreign interests to destabilize the country (Buyantueva, 2022).

Alongside state repression, unleashing hatred and violence against LGBT+ activism has become increasingly constitutive to the homophobic climate after the enactment of the law. According to the report published by Human Rights Watch, the law has an overwhelming effect on the LGBT+ youth in their enjoyment of fundamental rights to dignity, health, education, information, counseling and support services and their subjection to vilification, violence, harassment and discrimination within family, at school and in public (Human Rights Watch, 2018). A nationwide survey conducted by the Russian LGBT Network in 2021 indicates alarming levels of violence and discrimination by homophobic groups against LGBT+ individuals because of their sexual orientation (Martirosyan, 2022).

The suppression of LGBT+ activism inside the country is countered with attempts to forge a transnational alliance with conservative Western organizations. A prominent example is the World Congress of Families (WCF), which was co-funded by American and Russian conservatives to close the ranks among conservative groups against the rising tide of sexual rights. The mission of WCF is to forge a transnational alliance around the promotion of traditional family values against the spread of LGBT+ rights around the world (Barthélemy, 2018). The WCF is strongly supported by the Russian Orthodox Church as well as the oligarchs that financially support its meetings (Moss, 2017). With the support and presence in similar anti-LGBT+ organizations, Russia has been trying to assume a “role model” resisting the liberal ideas about sexuality beyond its borders (Edenborg, 2023: 45). The interest in transnational alliances shows that the state-sponsored homophobia is tightly connected to the Russian geopolitical aspirations to stand up as the vanguard of traditional values beyond Russia.

6. CONCLUSION

In the evolving geopolitical landscape of the post-Cold War era, the struggle for sexual rights has taken on new dimensions. The visibility and acceptance of LGBT+ rights have engendered a complex field of geopolitical contestation. This contestation revolves around various conceptualizations of modernity, which, in turn, are deeply entwined with cultural, sovereign, and ideological boundaries. Within this complex arena, this article has explored the multiple layers of geopolitical contestation around the conceptualizations of modernity and the role of LGBT+ rights and traditional values in shaping these contestations. By doing so, it aimed to enrich the understanding of the geopolitics of sexual rights, emphasizing that these rights are not merely cultural or moral issues but also strategic tools in geopolitical endeavors. Russia's emphasis on traditional values has been dissected to reveal its multifunctionality: from asserting national sovereignty to legitimizing broader geopolitical ambitions. This examination offers a nuanced perspective on the instrumentalization of traditional values in geopolitical discourse, particularly within the context of Russia's foreign and domestic policy.

Far from being a straightforward narrative of the East *versus* the West, the issues at hand cut across multiple dimensions. The West itself is far from unified in its stance on sexual rights, and Russia's portrayal of the West as an existential enemy serves its specific geopolitical and domestic purposes. In this sense, the analysis provided here uncovers the multi-layered motivations behind the Russia state's advocacy for traditional values. It demonstrates how these values are intricately tied to Russia's broader geopolitical strategy, which aims to challenge Western dominance and carve out a space for Russia in the emerging world order.

By revealing how both sexual rights and traditional values are used to construct and contest different visions of modernity, the discussion extends the scholarly conversation around these topics. Moreover, the article shows how Russia's championing of traditional values serves as a multifaceted geopolitical strategy. The Russian state seeks to redefine modernity on its own terms to assert its sovereignty in a globalized world and claim a significant role in international relations. In doing so, it offers an alternative vision of modernity that stands in stark contrast to the features of the "morally degenerate West." With the promotion of traditional values, the Russian state aims to find a resonance among the countries that are highly skeptical and resistant to the imposition of sexual rights within and beyond Europe. Such an attempt serves its geopolitical goals to counteract Western global dominance by uniting and mobilizing an anti-Western bloc around moral anxieties in the context of the rising anti-LGBT+ movement. Therefore, Russia's mission of defending and protecting traditional values on a

global scale cannot be separated from the geopolitical role and position it aspires to in the new world order.

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