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Where the personal is (geo)political. Performing queer visibility in Georgia in the context of EU association

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay between EU interventions fostering LGBT+ rights in Georgia, and the visibility-raising strategies of local queer activists. The growing antagonism between the EU and Russia over their ‘shared neighbourhood’ crystallizes the idea of a value-based divide between the West/Europe and the East/Russia on LGBT+ issues - with Georgia occupying a liminal position therein. The paper puts forward the concept of geopoliticization to unpack how the discursive construction of LGBT+ equality as a geopolitical issue shapes Georgian queer activists’ visibility strategies, and to interrogate the outcomes these processes produce.

Keywords: geopolitics; Georgia; Europeanization; LGBT; Pride marches

“In Georgia, everything is geopolitical. Even defending gay rights is geopolitical”

(heard at a policy event in Brussels, October 2019)

Introduction

In the past decade, the European Union (EU) has made LGBT+ equality a cornerstone of its human rights policies, to the extent that ‘LGBT-friendliness’ has become a symbol of ‘Europeanization’ (Slootmaeckers 2020). In this context, Georgia’s aspirations for association with the EU under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) enabled the local non-governmental sector to achieve significant progress on the level of legislation protecting LGBT+ rights. These developments generated increasing domestic polarization, although LGBT+ people still form one of the most vulnerable groups in society, experiencing discrimination in almost all spheres of public life (Public Defender of Georgia 2020). Conflicts over sexuality and gender identity have become “the vehicle for displacing social anxieties” (Gvianishvili 2020, 211) – i.e. the dramatic socio-political transformations experienced by Georgia since the Soviet Union’s collapse, including a civil war, two unresolved conflicts in which Russia is involved, and rampant economic inequalities. Fuelled by powerful religious and political elites who manipulate struggles for LGBT+ equality as a Western conspiracy to destroy Georgian traditions, these anxieties translate into (violent) resistance directed at visible manifestations of queer activism in the public space. This was epitomized by the contestation surrounding the first-ever Pride march in Tbilisi, Georgia’s capital city, in summer 2019.

This article speaks to literature which critically scrutinized the EU’s reframing of LGBT+ rights into standards of ‘Europeanness’ in the context of Eastern enlargements, and how the East-West othering dynamics this creates shape the strategies of queer activists in the post-socialist region (Gruszczynska 2012; Butterfield 2013; Kahlina 2015; Bilić 2016b; Slootmaeckers & Touquet 2016; Slootmaeckers, 2017). While these contributions provided a much-needed problematization of the discursive link between LGBT+ equality claims, ‘European values’ and

the related geopolitical imaginaries, they mostly focused on Central-Eastern EU member states and ‘candidate’ countries. Although similar processes of ‘Europeanization’ of LGBT+ rights are ongoing, lesser attention has been devoted to how these play out in non-candidate countries located in the EU’s ‘shared neighbourhood’ with Russia (except Ukraine, see Shevtsova 2020; Channell-Justice 2020). At once, existing analyses of queer activism and politics in post-Soviet Georgia (Rekhviashvili 2017; Gvianishvili 2020), have not focused on the (unintended) effects of EU interventions.

This gap in the literature is striking, especially as a competing Russian gender order gains traction in the region, further complicating the symbolic association between LGBT+ rights and ‘Europe’ (Ryabov and Ryabova 2014; Foxall 2019; Shirinian 2020). As I will show, the case of Georgia provides useful insights into the effects EU LGBT+ equality interventions produce in locales constituted as in-between two competing centres’ ‘spheres of influence’ (Browning and Christou 2010; Cadier 2019). Against this backdrop, the article conceptualises struggles around LGBT+ equality in Georgia as a *geopoliticization* (Cadier 2019): while liberal groups frame the debate as being about ‘European values’, societal resistance is seemingly amplified by the Kremlin’s attempts to build a civilizational counter-discourse in the region. The article asks how the geopoliticization of LGBT+ politics in the context of EU association shaped queer visibility strategies in Georgia, leading to the first-ever Tbilisi Pride.

It has been claimed that “queer activism in Georgia must be understood in the context of the country's geopolitical history” (Rekhviashvili 2017). This article understands geopolitics as “a social, cultural and political practice, rather than as a manifest and legible reality of world politics” (Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 2). Instead of unpacking the effects of geographic influences on queer rights in Georgia, it denaturalizes the construction of this issue as a geopolitical matter and interrogates the outcomes this produces. Geopoliticization is understood here as the use of geopolitical signifiers to describe attitudes to LGBT+ equality which

crystallizes the idea of a value-based divide between the West/Europe and the East/Russia, with Georgia occupying a liminal position therein. I will argue that, while the geopoliticization of LGBT+ issues provides a strategic discursive framework for Georgian queer activists to advance claims for equality and a particular (Western) visibility agenda, this obscures more fundamental critiques around the politics of queer rights.

To illuminate how the geopoliticization plays out in Georgia, I rely on the concept of liminality, which defines a condition of in-betweenness, as well as a space where subversion, contestation and change can emerge (Bhabha 1984; Morozov and Rumelili, 2012). This is used in a two-fold way: first, to situate Georgian identity on a spectrum of ‘Otherness’ stretching between West/Europe and East/Russia and the respective civilizational discourses; second, to map the strategies of Georgian queer activists, who navigate a liminal position between the hegemony of EU-universal norms and the local conditions. As posited by Bhabha (1984), the agency of liminal ‘Others’ is a hybridized one: beyond “assimilat[ion] into the hegemonic discursive space of the Self”, liminality presents the possibility of negotiating and localising the master discourse, as well as of “existing outside of and beyond the socially pre-given positions” (Morozov and Rumelili 2012, 34).

Informed by post-/de-colonial insights, this contribution follows calls to de-centre the study and practice of EU foreign policy (Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis 2013). Instead of focusing on top-down processes of norms transfer/diffusion from the EU- into the ‘neighbouring’-country-level, it advances transnational and relational analyses of LGBT+ politics in the post-socialist region – by exposing the multi-scalar “combination and imbrication that created unique conditions, with unique opportunities and challenges, for lives and activism” of local queer people (Szulc 2018, 10, in Sloodmaeckers 2017, 4). Considering Pride marches as events where the international and local dimensions are increasingly intertwined, and where particular identities are performed and resisted, (Gruszczynska 2012; Sloodmaeckers 2017), the ‘making of’ the first

Tbilisi Pride constitutes an insightful entry-point for empirical analysis. The unprecedented international attention received by the event intensified societal struggles around LGBT+ equality; however, rather than as a completely new event, the Tbilisi Pride is examined here in relation with the visibility-oriented actions performed in Tbilisi on a yearly basis since May 17 2012, on the International Day Against Homo-Bi-Transphobia (IDAHOT).ⁱ

After a methodological note, the article unpacks the geopoliticization of queer (visibility) politics in the context of EU interventions. Then, through the lens of liminality, it shows how geopolitical discourses feed into domestic (LGBT+) politics in Georgia. In the empirical sections, I first discuss the visibility-raising strategies mobilized by queer activists on IDAHOT since 2012 and how these were shaped by broader (geo)political processes. Then, I zoom-into the debates surrounding the ‘making of’ the 2019 Tbilisi Pride, within and outside the Georgian queer movement.

Note on methods

The knowledge we produce as scholars is never neutral or universal, but situated and embedded in relations of power and coloniality: as a heterosexual woman born and educated in the ‘West’ I do not speak from the same “locus of enunciation” as Georgian queer activists (Tlostanova 2015). My position is both privileged and problematic: it may be read as an outsider’s meddling within activists’ internal debates, or as a colonial intervention silencing, instead of representing, local voices. While this tension may never be solved, it is key to acknowledge how my positionality affected the research process. I present debates around Pride as an illustration of the outcomes EU LGBT+ equality interventions produce in the Georgian context: these interventions’ discursive foundations, and what they obscure, are what I seek to problematise primarily. My analysis does not imply a judgment on queer activists’ choices: acknowledging multiple critical agencies within the movement, I seek to convey a nuanced picture of activists’

strategies in appropriating and negotiating dominant discourses, and of the possibilities available to them within a particular (geo)political conjuncture.

The article builds on a combination of qualitative methods: I conducted 19 interviews with Georgian and EU-based queer and human rights activists, representatives of donor organizations and EU officials (see List of Interviews). These were supplemented by observations conducted in Brussels, Tbilisi and online, a close reading of official documents, policy papers and statements issued by relevant actors, as well as the analysis of newspaper articles from Georgian and Western media, social media posts and other audio-visual material related to the events at study.

The geopoliticization of LGBT+ (visibility) politics

According to Baker (2016, 241), in the post-Cold War era LGBT+ politics became “a geopoliticised symbol in international affairs”: in the post-socialist region, this process was shaped by EU enlargements to the ‘East’ – throughout which the protection and promotion of LGBT+ rights were enshrined in the Copenhagen criteria and in EU external action – and the related ‘Europeanization’ processes. This reflects what Puar (2007) named homonationalism, a global trend by which states present ‘gay-friendliness’ as a ‘standard of civilisation’ and positive indicator of their international legitimacy, in opposition to (internal and/or external) ‘homophobic’ Others. In this context, the EU’s LGBT+ policies work to establish value-based, symbolic geographies of equality (associated with the idea of EUrope/West) and repression (associated with the East), underpinned by both spatial and temporal hierarchies (Kulpa 2014; Butterfield 2013; Kahlina 2015; Baker 2016; Slootmaeckers 2017, 2020). Not only Eastern/non-Western countries are constructed as ‘homophobic’ Others needing to be ‘civilised’ or ‘modernised’, but also they are posited as constantly catching up with EUrope on LGBT+ rights, within a model/narrative of progress (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011). These

discourses (re)produce post-socialist countries' difference, as well as the EU's own 'sexual exceptionalism' – in a homocolonialist fashion (Slootmaeckers 2017).ⁱⁱ

I take this literature further through the concept of geopoliticization. Cadier (2019, 7) argues that geopoliticization “can refer both to the discursive practices framing a policy in geopolitical terms”, through the use of geopolitical signifiers, and to “the resulting outcome in terms of crystallisation of meaning”. Although this concept was originally used to describe the framing of the EU's EaP initiative as an endeavour aimed at ‘winning over’ Eastern neighbourhood countries and ‘rolling back’ Russia's influence, I argue that it is equally useful to analyse articulations of LGBT+ politics in the region, and in Georgia specifically. Indeed, in the EaP, the discursive construction of LGBT+ issues in geopolitical terms is not only shaped by the symbolic association between equality and ‘Europeanness’, but also by the growing antagonism between the EU and Russia over their so-called ‘shared neighbourhood’ (Cadier 2019).

In the wake of Crimea's annexation and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russia started projecting a new gender order on the global stage (Ryabov and Ryabova 2014), besides intensifying political homophobia at home. While European leaders “demarcate[d] political distance between the condemnable Russian attitude towards homosexuality and European efforts to build a queer-friendly continent” (Ammaturo 2017, 63), the Russian neologism *Gayropa* (Gay-Europe) emerged as “a key geopolitical signifier of difference” between Brussels and Moscow (Foxall 2019, 3). ‘Gayropa’ casts the EU's liberal approach to gender and sexuality as a deviancy from (and a deliberate attempt to destroy) the traditional gender order upheld by Russia. In 2013, this was used as a geopolitical argument to delegitimise Ukraine's willingness to associate with the EU (Ryabov and Ryabova 2014). Thus, articulations of value-based dichotomies in relation to LGBT+ equality crystallised around new geopolitical signifiers: a “geo-normative debate” emerged in the ‘shared neighbourhood’ (Verpoest 2018), which linked attitudes to homosexuality with pre-existing discourses related to a country's

foreign policy orientation and participation in (competing) geopolitical alliances – the EaP and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Shevtsova 2020; Shirinian, 2020). This resulted in LGBT+ rights being framed by the media and liberal groups as a new ‘battleground’ for pro-European (= tolerant) and pro-Russian (= homophobic) constituencies across the EaP – which sharpened, instead of problematizing, the imagined East/West divide.

Following a multi-scalar perspective, these international processes have concrete consequences for queer activism and lives in the domestic realms. I address the ways in which activists navigate the geopoliticization of LGBT+ rights by focusing on visibility-raising strategies. Visibility in the form of Pride marches came to represent one particular ‘benchmark’ against which international organizations like the EU or the Council of Europe could assess the level of LGBT+ equality in the “other Europe” – also through differentiation from Russia’s ‘gay-propaganda’ laws (Ammaturo, 2017). Rooted in the US civil rights movement, the Pride model of campaigning reflects the “Western visibility paradigm” underpinning hegemonic contemporary human rights discourses, whereby public marches and coming out are privileged as a symbolic response to queer oppression (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2020, 53).

As the safe handling of Pride marches started being considered as a “litmus test” for a country’s readiness to join or associate with the EU, in several Eastern European countries these events became linked with ‘Europeanness’ and imagined geographies of belonging (Gruszczynska, 2012; Sloodmaeckers and Touquet 2016; Sloodmaeckers, 2017; Plakhotnik, 2019). However, as Baker (2016, 235) argues, “[t]he symbolic association between LGBT equality and ‘Europe’/‘the West’ could be made not only to write one’s city or nation into [Prides’] imagined geopolitical-ideological space, but also (as in the discourses of many national Churches or socially conservative governments) to distance one’s nation from such an idea of ‘Europe’ altogether” – resulting in Prides being banned or (violently) resisted (Ryabov and Ryabova 2014; Rekhviashvili 2017; Plakhotnik 2019).

When it comes to the interplay between EU discourses and local conditions around Prides in Eastern European countries, scholars offer a mixed but mostly negative assessment of its outcomes. It was argued that this conjuncture can be depoliticizing: while organisers may link the Pride with ‘European values’ to overcome domestic resistance or to seek Western solidarity, the emphasis may be put on universalistic notions of human rights (e.g. freedom of expression and assembly) rather on whether/how the Pride can improve queer people’s lives in a given context (Butterfield 2013; Sloomaeckers 2017). This can result in a lack of legitimacy or ownership, whereby the Pride appeals to international audiences but fails to attract support from local (queer) constituencies (Stella, 2013; Bilić 2016a; Sloomaeckers, 2017). Moreover, the Pride format can be appropriated by the state to claim ‘Europeanness’, while confining queer people into a policed ‘closet’ and perpetuating exclusionary conceptions of society (Sloomaeckers 2017; Plakhotnik 2020). Kahlina (2015) offers a more nuanced picture, by arguing that the repeated staging of Pride marches in Croatia improved the representation of sexual minorities in the media and their social position, but she also cautions that the EU’s homocolonialist othering can result in the consolidation of anti-LGBT forces.

These critiques seem paramount when examining Pride marches in the post-Soviet space, where trends sharply contrast with Western assumptions of an empowering relationship between LGBT+ visibility and political belonging (Wilkinson 2020). In the next sections, I discuss how the geopoliticization of LGBT+ politics in the context of EU association shaped the visibility-oriented strategies of Georgian queer activists. Bearing in mind that Prides across Eastern Europe are not “uncritically embraced by the activists” as a political strategy (Gruszczynska 2012, 1; cf. Channell-Justice 2020), I will also explore the possibilities for ‘dissent’ and alternative strategies in Georgian queer activism, which may delink from hegemonic discourses and geopoliticised imaginaries.

Georgia's liminal identity and the politics of queer rights

In the Georgian context, the binary relation where the 'colony' is seen as catching up with the EU- 'core' on LGBT+ rights is further complicated by the presence of Russia as a 'third pole' (Tskhadadze 2017; Rekhviashvili 2017). Building on Tlostanova (2015), Rekhviashvili (2017) argues that Georgia's condition is one of double colonial difference: a former colony of the Russian empire/Soviet Union, which in turn was subaltern to the 'West'. After the Soviet Union's collapse, Georgia refused the subaltern empire's dictate, "choosing a direct European influence instead" (Tlostanova 2015): the West/Europe was cast as the standard, the "source of modernization, progress, human rights and prosperity" towards which Georgia is supposed to 'return to' (Tskhadadze 2017, 66). Still, in light of Russian involvement in Georgia's unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the country continues to face military threat from the former colonial power (Rekhviashvili 2017). This 'in-betweenness' is sustained by the EaP framework itself: EaP countries are located between two competing centres along a spectrum of positive-negative otherness. Although not entitled to membership, they are expected to conform to the EU's Self-image, by accepting particular standards of 'good life' while drifting away from Russia (Browning and Christou 2010).

This condition, whereby Georgia remains split in-between the West and its 'bad' subaltern empire copy, ties in with the postcolonial concept of liminality (Bhabha 1984; Kakabadze 2016; Musliu and Burlyuk 2019; Morozov and Rumelili 2012). Kakabadze (2016) identified Georgia's liminality as part of a struggle between two discourses regarding the country's place in the world: the dominant liberal discourse and the nationalist/populist one. The former advocates for Georgia's democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration to become "more Western", casting the country as part of the European family; while accepting Western hegemony, this discourse (re)produces the image of Russia as an Other – "something Europe, and therefore Georgia, is not" (Kakabadze 2016, 77). The latter rejects Georgia's subaltern

position vis-à-vis the West/EU, while comprising rather diverse representations of Russia and Europe (see *infra*). Around this framework we can map competing discourses on LGBT+ equality, that Georgian queer activists navigate in different ways.

The liberal discourse became hegemonic in the aftermath of the so-called Rose Revolution of 2003. Georgia's newly-elected leadership under president Mikheil Saakashvili set the country on a path of radical neoliberal transformation, underpinned by modernization narratives emphasizing Georgia's transition from 'past' to 'future' and the superiority of Western values (Curro 2020). The decision to work towards Euro-Atlantic integration led to a proliferation of human rights NGOs; while homosexuality had been decriminalised in 2000, the first LGBT community-based NGO, Inclusive Foundation, was established in 2006. However, LGBT+ rights were not supported by liberal groups, at least until the early 2010s: then, with the negotiations for the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), "sexual citizenship became a signal for Georgia's qualification to enter the EU" (Rekhviashvili 2017, 246).

As LGBT+ equality claims did not emerge as a grassroots movement, but as a NGO-ised phenomenon linked to the Western donor community, queer activists struggled not to give the idea that issues of gender and sexuality were an ideology artificially imposed from the West. They downplayed the difference between what is "Western" and what is "Georgian" or "traditional" – pointing instead to the "non-Westerness" of Georgia's Soviet past, embodied by contemporary Russia (Tskhadadze 2017, 74; Interview 4; 5; 17). At the same time, Saakashvili's modernization narratives "rested on dichotomies which divided society into mutually opposed parts. [...] This opposition delineated people's moral, cultural and social attributes as either compatible or incompatible with the post-revolutionary project of radical renovation not only of political and economic institutions, but also of society and its members as a whole" – thus creating and deepening cleavages between 'progressive' and 'backward'

Georgians (Curro 2020, 52). Besides constituting the “dominant frame” among political parties (Interview 9; 13; 18), these dichotomies continue to be mainstreamed by the liberal civil society, for whom:

“Europe is everything good, and Orient is everything irrational, dirty [...] It is a black-or-white dichotomy, which is quite unproductive. It divides society into progressive and under-developed people, and mobilizes this second group to fight against these self-proclaimed progressives.” (Interview 3)

Although it continues to be pervasive in Georgian human rights discourses, the social anxieties it generates increasingly challenge the idea of the West/EU as a source of universal norms (Tskhadadze 2017). A competing narrative started being articulated by the so-called nativist civil society, i.e. “organizations and groups claiming to fight for the preservation of the country’s religious and ethno-nationalist identities”, sometimes through violent methods (Nodia 2018, 45). Nativists identify as their target of resistance the liberal ideology supported by ‘mainstream’ civil society, with “the most important perceived threats [being] seen in areas of sexuality and traditional family relations” (Nodia 2018, 47). A key actor is the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), the country’s most influential institution: it has consistently lobbied against LGBT+ equality by invoking the respect of ‘traditional values’ and reproducing *Gayropa* tropes – which testifies of its close relations with the Moscow Patriarchate (Tolkachev and Tolordava 2020). In line with the GOC’s positions are organizations such as the Union of Orthodox Parents and the Georgian Demographic Society founded by businessman Levan Vasadze (Nodia 2018).

Since 2017 the picture became more complex, as ultranationalist and far-right groups such as the Georgian March started mainstreaming homophobic and xenophobic narratives which “espouse Orthodox and traditional values that align closely with Russian soft-power narratives” (Gordon 2020, 5). While there is a tendency on the side of the liberal civil society to label these

groups as ‘pro-Russian’ (Kinchia 2018), their ties with the Kremlin are not obvious, as it would be controversial for actors claiming to protect ‘Georgianness’ to side with a country Tbilisi considers as ‘an occupier’.ⁱⁱⁱ Importantly, they take inspiration from like-minded groups and political parties in the EU and United States (Gordon 2020, 5; Gelashvili 2019; interview 4; 5; 17; 18).

The current government, ruled since 2012 by the Georgian Dream party, has shown ambiguous attitudes vis-à-vis the queer community. By pursuing the path of Euro-Atlantic integration it has been pushed to improve LGBT+ rights legislation – although commitment is weak and several challenges in implementation remain (Donald and Speck 2020; Interview 10; 17; 15). At once, it has flirted with the conservative electorate and failed to condemn religious and far-right extremism (Gelashvili 2019; Gvianishvili, 2020).

IDAHOT 2012-19: Setting the stage

A detailed account of queer visibility-raising strategies performed on a yearly basis on IDAHOT has already been provided by Rekhviashvili (2017) and by the NGO Women’s Initiative Supporting Group (WISG) (2019a).^{iv} I will focus on two aspects: the shifting (geo)political context surrounding these events, and the evolving debates around the meaning of visibility politics.

Anti-LGBT marches in Georgia have a longer history than attempts by queer activists to publicly demonstrate for their rights. While a first public action was held on May 17, 2012 in Tbilisi, already in 2007 and 2010 rumours were spread by the media about a planned “gay parade”, which mobilized conservative and religious groups (Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group 2019a). The sensationalist imagery and negative public perception associated with Pride marches explains why activists decided not to frame their annual public actions as Prides, but as rallies marking IDAHOT (Interview 17; 18). In 2012, the state failed to protect a small group

of queer activists who were attacked by religious counter-demonstrators, being later condemned by the European Court of Human Rights (*Identoba vs. Georgia*). In the following years, IDAHOT rallies have “either been subjected to even more serious assault by ultra-conservative activists with apparent police collusion (2013), cancelled for fear of such violence (2014, 2016, 2018 and 2019) or been held under such restrictive conditions as to arguably fall short of the requirements of Article 11 [of the European Convention on Human Rights, protecting freedom of assembly and association] (2015 and 2017)” (Donald and Speck 2020, 12-13).

The memory of violent clashes on IDAHOT 2013 is still vivid today (Interview 7; 10; 15; 17; 18). A group of around 100 queer activists was brutally attacked by a crowd of several thousand homophobic protesters led by Orthodox clergymen, leaving many injured and traumatized, while none of the attackers has been held accountable so far (Gelashvili 2019). Since then, LGBT+ politics have become part of a struggle among societal groups over public space in Tbilisi. In 2014, the GOC established a ‘Family Purity Day’ on May 17, which includes a march through Rustaveli Avenue – Tbilisi’s main street where the Parliament is located, a highly symbolic space for Georgians. This was meant to hijack the public space from queer activists on the day dedicated to their rights (Interview 4; 15; 17; Figure 1). Significantly, the Family Purity Day started being marked in May 2014, a couple of weeks after the Georgian Parliament adopted a law “On the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination”, banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, as part of the EU-Georgia AA and DCFTA. The adoption of the law and of the first National Human Rights Strategy and Action Plan for 2014-2020 are considered key achievements resulting from Georgia’s association with the EU, as confirmed by all interviewees.^v In light of vocal resistance by conservatives against the wording of the law, EU conditionality in the framework of a Visa Liberalization Action Plan played a decisive role (Interview 1; 7; 10; 12; see Tolkachev and Tolordava 2020).

In the meantime, the EU published a “myth-buster” emphasizing that the AA “does not pose a threat to Georgian culture and values” and does not “pave the way for gay marriage” in the country, besides denying the EU’s involvement in geopolitical competition with Russia over the EaP (European External Action Service 2014). Still, instead of explaining that the anti-discrimination law was not exclusively directed at protecting queer people or downplaying the perceived geopolitical character of the agreement, Georgian parliamentary speaker Davit Usupashvili framed it as a civilizational choice between Europe and Russia: “we have to take decisions [adopting the anti-discrimination law] that are acceptable in the civilized world in order not to stay in the uncivilized world with Russia” (Civil.ge 2014).

However, that very year queer activists were advised against publicly marking IDAHOT “because it was the Association year and we were asked from a lot of directions not to do it, including people associated with EU. The narrative was that if we give the opposition the reason to cause destabilization this could affect bigger political processes” (Interview 17). Furthermore, association with the EU did not discourage the government to introduce in 2017 a constitutional definition of marriage as a ‘union of a woman and a man for the purpose of founding a family’, to placate the conservative electorate – even though queer activists never advocated for same-sex marriage (Gvianishvili 2020).

Figure 1. Family Purity Day march on Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi, on May 17, 2019. The banner says “Happy family day”. Photo of the author.

[Insert Figure 1.]

In 2017 IDAHOT was for the last time marked publicly and in a coordinated manner by queer activists. The rally passed “largely without violence” and saw the participation of around 200 people, including a large numbers of allies from civil society organizations, media outlets and local clubs owners (OC Media 2017). However, that is recalled by some activists as the moment when they started wondering “why do we keep celebrating IDAHOT” (Interview 15; 17). The

overwhelming amount of resources directed at the event (including discussions with community members and month-long negotiations with authorities to guarantee participants' safety, usually mediated by the local EU Delegation and representatives of the international community), the negative/victimizing publicity surrounding it (as hate crimes tend to increase in correspondence with public demonstrations), and the always-persisting threat of violence caused burnout and distress among activists, while leading to very limited outcomes (Interview 15; 17). Moreover, there was a feeling that IDAHOT was being hijacked not only by the GOC, whose Family Purity Day forced activists to hold rallies in front of an "anthropologically meaningless" Chancellery building cordoned by police forces (Interview 15; also 7), but also by some community allies. These were seen as putting more emphasis on individual liberties rather than on the safety concerns of (more socio-economically vulnerable) queer people (Interview 17; Women's Initiative Supporting Group 2019a).

On the night between 11-12 May 2018, a large crowd of ultra-nationalist, far-right demonstrators gathered in front of the Georgian Parliament to counter a youth-led rally against the police raids on popular nightclub Bassiani, known for the thriving underground and queer-friendly culture it hosts. The government declared itself unable to contain violence from radical groups (Gelashvili 2019). Despite having received security guarantees from the government, community-based NGOs decided to cancel the upcoming IDAHOT celebrations to avoid ideological confrontation (Women's Initiatives Supporting Group 2018). Some activists decided to hold self-organized actions in front of governmental buildings, also as a way to contest the Parliament's Human Rights Committee's U-turn on their promise to observe IDAHOT annually – as announced by the Committee's chair in September 2017 in the presence of EU and UNDP representatives (OC Media 2018). According to two informants, the 2018 events showed that "opposition political parties used May 17 for their goals" (Interview 15), resulting in an exacerbation of interpersonal conflicts and divergent approaches to visibility:

“some parts of the movement, especially those working closely with our allies, were saying that May 17 is not just a matter of the LGBTQ community anymore, but a matter of freedom of expression, of secularism [...] People were calling [those who did not want to go out] cowards” (Interview 17).

One year later – just a month before the first-ever Tbilisi Pride was expected to take place – prominent community-based NGOs WISG and Equality Movement again refused to publicly mark IDAHOT, questioning the political gains the event would bring:

“we refuse to contribute to the creation of a one-day impression of illusory success for those, who benefit from such “success”; we refuse to allow the government and police to laud themselves in front of the international community for their efforts in protecting queer people’s freedom of expression on May 17, 2019, while throughout the year, these agencies remain inept at improving the queer community’s livelihoods, eliminating deep-rooted homophobic societal attitudes, and ensuring timely and adequate response to and effective investigation of homo/transphobic hate crime” (Women's Initiatives Supporting Group 2019b).

While part of the movement was starting to rethink the mainstream approach to visibility, another part was heading to a different direction. As one of the Tbilisi Pride co-founders explains: “we really believe visibility is the key to address a lot of issues. We had enough of underground: how long can you party and not be out at the same time with your family, or not be able to go to the streets?” (Interview 14).

The ‘making of’ the Tbilisi Pride

Despite the government’s unwillingness to authorize the event and an unexpected political turmoil in Tbilisi which resulted in its postponement (see *infra*), on 8 July 2019 two dozen activists came out in a Dignity March, holding rainbow flags in front of the Ministry of Internal

Affairs (MIA): this guerrilla-style action lasted only 30 minutes, as nativist counter-demonstrators were on their way to disperse it. The organizers tweeted:

“First ever Tbilisi Pride has finally happened! Despite the fact that radical groups and government tried their best to sabotage our events, we managed to hold our March of Dignity today! Public space belongs to us as well and we are not willing to give it up!”
(@TbilisiPride, 8 July 2019)

However, according to an activist from the Equality Movement, things went differently:

“A group of people had a really small demonstration near the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and it was called Pride. And then it was internationally presented that in Georgia we had Pride, but we did not have Pride — we do not have the freedom of expression [to hold such an event] in Georgia.” (Kuenning 2019)

Below, I discuss the main discursive struggles which surrounded the 2019 Tbilisi Pride: first, I focus on how the event was framed by the organizers and how the international/geopolitical dimension played a role therein. Then, I cast light on counter-articulations of queer (visibility) politics which were voiced by part of the movement.

Putting Georgia on the map

The holding of a Pride Week, consisting of several indoor events as well as of a Dignity March, was announced in mid-February 2019 through Tbilisi Pride’s official social media channels, then spread by local and international media outlets, as well as pan-European and international Pride associations. The organizers demanded “dignified and peaceful” lives for queer people, explaining the March would not have a festive character because “Georgian queer people have little to celebrate” (OC Media 2019). While the unusual decision to announce the event early on was met with concern by the community, who feared the mobilization of anti-LGBT groups, this allowed the organizers to gain unprecedented visibility in local and Western media, as well

as international support. The EU Delegation played a key role in the negotiation process between the Georgian authorities and the Pride organizers (Interview 2; 14). However, due to safety concerns, the ‘usual’ donors such as ILGA-Europe, the UNDP, and the Netherlands’ embassy refused to financially support to the Pride – although they called upon the authorities to respect freedom of expression (Interview 8, 10).^{vi}

Figure 2. Caption from the video “What do you need Prides for?” posted by Tbilisi Pride (Facebook, June 4 2019). The text in light blue and white says “Dignity March 2019 Georgia”.

[Insert Figure 2.]

On the level of communication, the hashtags #EU and #EaP were prominent on Tbilisi Pride’s Twitter page. Early June, after the MIA stated it would be “impossible” to ensure the safety of the Dignity March should the event take place in the centre of Tbilisi, then-MEP Rebecca Harms declared in an interview for Georgian TV channel *Rustavi2* she was “amazed that Georgia cannot do what the other countries associated with the EU have been able to do”, since “Pride was organized in Moldova and Ukraine”. She urged the government to reconsider its decision and guarantee freedom of assembly and expression (Rustavi2 2019). One organizer explained that the quest for international visibility, coupled with the presence of several international activists in Tbilisi on the Pride week, was part of a strategy to hold the government accountable:

“because that’s how Georgian government acts when it comes to the EU, Brussels and Washington, they care about what they say, they want to be good pupils, so we wanted to use this at our advantage, to be safe when we go out to the streets. Unfortunately things went differently but still we got huge international support: All Out! campaigning for us, MEPs making statements, the British Parliament discussing Tbilisi Pride.

Guardian, BBC, Reuters, Al Jazeera... pretty much all the main international media covered” (Interview 14).

According to a Western-based activist who visited Tbilisi to support the Pride, this can be considered a strategic success as it “forced the government to do things they would not have done otherwise” (Interview 8): for instance, mobilizing police to protect Pride supporters from nativist counter-demonstrators (during a protest against a GOC statement urging the government not to allow the Pride, on 14 June), or opening an investigation when nativist leader Vasadze called on its followers to form vigilante patrols to prevent queer activists from “hold[ing] any public action“ (Dumbadze, 2019).

In an op-ed published in the midst of the contestation preceding the Pride week, one of the organizers framed the holding of the Pride as “the biggest test for Georgia’s democracy”: he urged Georgian politicians and civil society to make a choice, “whether we will go in the direction of Russia – where queer rights mean nothing – or whether we will build a true western democracy, wherein the rights of all citizens are protected and everyone has equal opportunities” (Tabagari 2019). A similar framing is found in the trailer of “March for Dignity”, a documentary movie about the event shot by a British film-maker. In the trailer, the Tbilisi Pride is presented as the “farther East Pride in Europe” (Eames 2020). Two of the co-founders explain that “fighting for LGBT rights now is fighting for the idea of Europe, the idea of the European Union and the values that Europe is based on”, and “Pride is a very important signal for Russia that Georgia has a pro-Western direction” (ibidem).

On the one hand, these statements reflect the hegemonic understanding of Pride as a litmus test for ‘Europeanness’. According to an EU official, the event constituted “a test about implementation [of the anti-discrimination law], how it is in the local mentalities, to what extent it is really accepted” (Interview 12). Similarly, when asked which benchmarks in the realm of LGBT+ equality was Georgia expected to comply with to pursue closer ties with the EU,

another official mentioned the yearly holding of the Pride (Interview 13). On the other, these statements show a discursive link between LGBT+ equality struggles and Georgia's place on the geopolitical 'chessboard'. The geopoliticization was present in the coverage offered by Western media, and one of the Pride co-founders acknowledged that "Georgia's position on the map" was a key factor determining the level of attention the event received. However, they added an important clarification:

"we were not strongly pushing this [geopolitical] message, but it was present. We were saying it here and there. But we didn't want to undermine the EU, to put it in a way that the EU is seen as "spreading" this. We just wanted to say that equality and human rights are European values. [...] We need the EU's strong support on [LGBT rights], both behind doors and publicly to a certain degree. We don't expect the EU to march with us because this is a national matter and we understand this policy level" (Interview 14).

The sudden outbreak of mass protests related to the visit of a Russian lawmaker in the Georgian Parliament on the eve of the Dignity March (initially scheduled for June 21), led to the postponement of the outdoor action.^{vii} In the evening of June 20, the Pride organizers joined the ongoing anti-'Russian occupation' and anti-government demonstrations (later known as 'Gavrilov's night'), which according to one interviewee who was present testifies of the (geo)politically-charged nature of Pride in Georgia (Interview 8). The events led to the emergence of the 'Shame' movement, a grassroots initiative reuniting the liberal, pro-European civil society, which in the past year has been campaigning for democracy in Georgia. As one of the Pride co-founders explains,

"we joined the [Shame] movement and created a bigger momentum for the LGBT movement as well. They are our allies now. For the one-year anniversary of Gavrilov's night they asked me to speak in a protest which was anti-occupational, not a queer rights

protest. [...] It helped us become more cross-cutting and increase the support of other civil society movements in the country.” (Interview 14)

A picture of the Tbilisi Pride co-founder, wrapped in a EU flag while speaking at the Gavrilov’s night anniversary protest, was posted on Facebook accompanied by the message “Giorgi Tabagari and the Tbilisi Pride against Russian occupation!” (Tbilisi Pride, 20 June 2020) – which testifies of activists’ localising strategies to gain broader backing for the LGBT+ cause.

An invisible dissent?

Despite the organizers’ calls for cohesion within Georgian (civil) society in support of the Pride, leading community-based NGOs and other activists dissociated themselves from the event. Most critics considered that the visibility resulting from the Pride would have potentially harmful results for queer people – particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable ones such as trans sex workers, usually targeted by hate crimes when similar events take place (Interview 6; 7; 9; 15; 17). While safety concerns were not the only arguments raised, more fundamental questions related to the political meaning and the contextual appropriateness of the Pride were obscured in media coverage. For instance, the online platform *Codastory* reported about dissenting views on the Pride, but dismissed them as a consequence of Russia’s disinformation campaigns, which allegedly make it “much harder to define who exactly the enemies of the LGBTQ are” (Papachristou 2019). These views were also downplayed by some EU officials and representatives of Western-based LGBT+ organizations interviewed, who considered that the dissenting queer activists were “fearing for their lives” or “did not propose alternatives” (Interview 2; 10).

While some activists acknowledged the need for a renewed, more proactive approach to visibility and public events, they regretted the Pride organizers’ lack of consultation with the community, which raised questions regarding its legitimacy and representativeness (Interview

6; 7; 9; 15; 17). The lack of consideration for the local context was also criticized, particularly the growing influence of far-right extremism:

“there is widespread resentment toward queer people in Georgian society and far-right groups (such as Georgian March and the Alliance of Patriots Party) have been growing stronger, using homophobia to gain more influence and legitimacy. On the other side, there are pseudo-supporters (such as opposition parties European Georgia and Girchi, and liberal NGOs) who use LGBTQ rights instrumentally to gain support from the ‘progressive’ part of our society” (Ptskialadze 2019).

In this context, the Pride would become a “field of manipulation” for these groups (Interview 6; 15). It would allow the government to “wear the mask of a pro-European progressive which allows marginalised people to walk on the streets”, without providing any improvement to the lives of queer people (Ptskialadze 2019). Thus, while Pride has come to be internationally considered as an outcome per se, some activists stressed the need to use the government’s pro-European attitude as a leverage for deeper changes:

“some give us examples of holding Pride in Ukraine, Moldova, post-Soviet countries where homophobia is also quite high. Police protected them, but they have no legislation [for protecting LGBT rights], just Pride.^{viii} Their government does not intend to improve anything. But as our government wants to be part of the European society, we can demand real changes, not only Pride or IDAHOT” (Interview 6).

Activists who dissociated themselves from the Pride considered that the politicization of the event would lead to further exacerbation of societal conflicts, resulting in a “situation where the LGBTQ+ community is getting more and more alienated from the whole society” (Kuenning 2019; also interview 6; 7; 9; 15; 17). To contrast this trend, they expressed the need to develop alternative visibility strategies.

First, while highlighting the importance of the ‘Europeanization’ argument to push the state to adopt and implement LGBT-friendly policies (Interview 6; 15; 18), activists argued for constructing a different framing of LGBT+ equality: this should be able to resonate outside the “bubble” of ‘progressive’ people and address the “movable middle” in society – without “othering” them because of their ‘backwardness’ (Interview 7; 17; also 16). For instance, in an educational video issued by WISG on IDAHOT 2020, scholar Tamar Tskhadadze calls for reframing homophobia as a “very deeply entrenched, systemic and structural problem” in society, rather than as “a criterion by which groups of people should be rigidly differentiated and opposed to each other” (Women's Initiatives Supporting Group, May 17 2020). This entails working

“more on connectors than dividers of society, and it’s harder. It’s very easy to do identity politics, to say ‘we are different’. It’s important at some level, but [...] our visibility is not taking the streets if it leads to conflicts. This does not mean we are defeated. We do not want to reproduce the narrative of war [...]. We want to create alternative narratives based on strategic thinking, to be political in that sense” (Interview 7).

Second, some interviewees noted that anti-LGBT forces thrive upon inequalities resulting from neoliberal policies (Interview 3; 7; 9; 17), which the Georgian liberal/pro-Western agenda fails to acknowledge: “adherence to personal and political freedoms, equality, and tolerance comes packaged with systematic negligence towards — if not outright advocacy for — economic injustices” and the denial of human rights abuses under Saakashvili (Kinch 2018). Thus, while remaining sceptical of Pride events, dissenting activists stressed the need to articulate intersectional linkages between the queer community and other groups in society around shared concerns, such as poverty, labour rights, access to health and education (Interview 6; 7; 15; 17; 18). Third, activists considered important to empower the queer community, so that it would be

able to question visibility strategies which are disconnected from the lived reality of LGBT+ people (Interview 6; 7; 9; 15; 17):

“some NGOs decided to be very responsive to the international agenda, to repeat every step required from the country. I’m not saying [Western institutions] are requiring something bad, but there should be room for authenticity, to develop your own agenda built on your own needs, historical-cultural dimension, and how people interact with each other” (Interview 18).

However, these political critiques mostly remain on the declaratory level so far: as noted by an informant, the dominant frame of ‘liberal/pro-European vs. conservative/pro-Russian’ in Georgian public debates precludes the possibility for leftist queer critiques to be seriously acknowledged, as they do not fit either label (Interview 9). The liberal logic expects queer groups “to march on their ‘international days’ and to keep challenging conservative society, but not to question [...] the economic policies that feed social anxieties” (Kinch 2018). Moreover, as community-based NGOs remain tightly dependent on Western funding, they cannot afford to criticize donors’ liberal human rights agenda (Gvianishvili 2018; interview 9, 18).

In the past decade, these NGOs worked mainly on advocacy and litigation related to hate crimes, anti-discrimination and freedom of assembly – because donors are more focused on “measurable” improvements of the legal framework and on “things which are understandable to the Western community”, like visibility-raising in the form of public demonstrations (Interview 17; 18).^{ix} Long-term projects related to community empowerment or service-provision focused on socio-economic rights are not funded by donors, which consider these latter issues as a responsibility of the state – although the Georgian state does not provide such services (Gvianishvili 2018; Interview 2; 7; 16). As for the local EU Delegation, the focus appears to be on mainstreaming gender equality and anti-discrimination policies, through institution-building and cooperation with governmental bodies, while so far no project money

has been allocated to community-based NGOs (Interview 2; 15).^x Still, several interviewees positively assessed the recent evolutions within the movement, with the emergence of individuals and grassroots movements addressing queer issues from an independent standpoint (Rekhviashvili 2017; Gvianishvili 2018; Interview 17, 18). Some community-based NGO workers are already expressing the need to “be vocal about different political views” (Interview 7), while activists not constrained by donor funding are attempting to articulate more radical views: “to go beyond the anti-discrimination agenda, to ask for more, to criticize the system as well” (Interview 18).

Conclusions

By unravelling the ‘making of’ the first-ever Tbilisi Pride, the article interrogated the outcomes EU interventions fostering LGBT+ rights produce within a locale constituted as ‘in-between’ West/Europe and East/Russia, and the related civilizational discourses. In Georgia, a complex imbrication of international and domestic discourses results in the geopoliticization of LGBT+ politics – i.e. their construction in geopolitical terms, and the related crystallization of meaning. Through the lens of liminality, the analysis explored how Georgian queer activist map their agency and (visibility) strategies onto and/or beyond geopolitically-charged discourses.

The article’s findings resonate with Butterfield’s (2013) claim that transnational support for LGBT+ movements should “foster debate on the types of sexual rights that local communities might need”, rather than being confined to homogenizing discourses (re)producing the cultural superiority of Europe. Moreover, they suggest that politico-economic concerns silenced by human rights and neoliberal consensus should be re-centred in queer activism and support thereof, instead of civilizational talks (cf. Kováts 2018; Shirinian 2020). In the case of Georgia, however, the possibilities for such developments may be partly foreclosed by the geopoliticization of LGBT+ issues: while providing strategic discursive resources for local

activists to advance claims for equality and a particular (Western) visibility agenda, the geopoliticization obscures more fundamental critiques around the politics of queer rights.

This raises significant questions on the EU's future role in promoting LGBT+ equality in the world: while in 2014 the EU denied the geopolitical character of its interventions in the EaP, now it purports itself as a geopolitical power pursuing a “new geopolitical agenda on human rights” (European Commission, 2020). If this means more strongly promoting “EU standards” elsewhere (Interview 11; 12; 13), the chances the EU will take on board dissenting political views and support context-specific strategies for the improvement of queer livelihoods in third countries seem lower than ever.

List of Interviews

No.	Date	Function
1	15/05/2019	Georgian human rights NGO
2	16/05/2019; 03/06/2020	EU Official
3	20/05/2019	Georgian human rights NGO
4	21/05/2019	Georgian NGO focused on discrimination
5	17/05/2019	Donor organization, Tbilisi-based
6	22/05/2019	Georgian community-based NGO
7	22/05/2019	Georgian community-based NGO
8	16/03/2020	Pan-European LGBT+ association
9	25/04/2020	Georgian activist
10	07/05/2020	European LGBT+ umbrella organization
11	04/06/2020	EU Official
12	09/06/2020	EU Official
13	19/06/2020	EU Official
14	10/07/2020	Georgian community-based NGO
15	13/07/2020	Georgian community-based NGO
16	2/10/2020	Georgian government official
17	5/10/2020	Georgian activist
18	8/10/2020	Georgian human rights NGO

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ⁱ IDAHOT is an international campaign established in 2004 to draw attention to the violence and discrimination experienced by sexual and gender minorities. May 17 commemorates the World Health Organization's decision to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1990.

ⁱⁱ Although the EU's LGBT equality agenda is increasingly contested internally, this has not weakened the commitment to promote these norms in its external action, as confirmed by officials interviewed (Interview 2; 11; 12; 13).

ⁱⁱⁱ After the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 Moscow recognised the independence of the separatist entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The dominant discourse in Georgia portrays Russia as 'occupying 20% of the country'.

^{iv} It is not uncommon for Georgian lesbian, bisexual and trans women activists to work under a feminist umbrella as this is considered "safer" (Interview 7).

^v The anti-discrimination law's implementation has been significantly improved in 2019 through amendments which strengthened the Public Defender's mandate. Still, experts cited a general lack of legal literacy, lack of trust in the judiciary, and fear that reporting crimes will result in forcible coming out, as factors limiting its effectiveness (Interview 10; 17).

Regarding the first National Human Rights Strategy, "measures to tackle hate crime [...] were mostly unimplemented" (Donald and Speck 2020, 14). In February 2020, the Strategy was amended to include a separate chapter on sexual orientation and gender identity rights (Interview 2; 16).

^{vi} ILGA-Europe did not financially support the first Tbilisi Pride both due to safety concerns as well as to the dissenting position of some of its Georgian member organisations (Interview 8; 10; 14). Nevertheless, the event mobilised donors like the Council of Europe, the German

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus, the Eurasian Coalition for Male Health, and Human Rights House Tbilisi (Kuenning, 2019).

^{vii} Mass protests exploded in Tbilisi on 20 June 2019 after Sergey Gavrilov, a member of the Russian Duma who was visiting Georgia through the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, sat in a chair reserved by protocol for the Head of Parliament and delivered a speech in Russian. Georgians took to the streets demanding the government's resignation. As a reaction to excessive police violence to disperse the demonstrators, the protests continued for several weeks.

^{viii} On the level of legislation protecting LGBT rights, Georgia currently scores much better than other EaP countries (and some EU Member States) on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map, although attitudes towards queer people remain overwhelmingly negative.

^{ix} Notwithstanding its emphasis on improving the legal framework, the EU has so far failed to push Georgia to adopt a legal gender recognition framework, despite the government committed to it in several international fora (Interview 10; 17).

^x Since the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, which exposed the queer community's lack of access to basic socio-economic services, the Georgian government is unprecedentedly cooperating with two community-based NGOs to provide support packages and relief services for queer people. Funded by the UNDP at the time of interviews, this mechanism is expected to be taken over by the EU Delegation (Interview 16). The pandemic also led to a renewed cooperation within the movement, setting political and interpersonal conflicts aside (Interview 14; 17).