

# A Silent Dissonance

*LGBT Rights & Geopolitics in Maidan and Post-Maidan Ukraine*



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## Introduction

*"In Paris, everybody is in black, but in Ukraine, everyone wears bright colors,"*  
-Olga Kurylenko<sup>1</sup>

A faceless speaker cries out in a crowded square. Around him is an uneven cacophony produced by an undefined group of people. Fires crackle, smoke soars, and skies blacken. These masses rush frantically toward a new world order beckoning lustfully, greedily with open arms. They rush toward a vision of a new Ukraine—a European Ukraine—no longer bound to a traumatic destiny with its neighbor Russia. A European Ukraine could spell infinite possibilities but, most importantly, is seen as an optimistic future for a Ukrainian nation scarred by centuries of foreign control. Unfortunately, this vision of Ukraine has amounted to nothing more than a wicked tease for a large minority of Ukrainians.

The aforementioned description is derived from Sergei Loznitza's critically acclaimed documentary *Maidan*<sup>2</sup>, a cleverly construed collection of footage of the Maidan Revolution. The Maidan Revolution, also known as the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, emerged as a mass reaction to the Ukrainian government's decision to break negotiations for EU membership and has produced many unforeseen consequences on the part of Ukraine, Russia, and Europe. While much

in the documentary is ready to be devoured by eager scholars and parties interested in contemporary Ukraine, I find that there remains a part of Ukraine and the revolution completely nonexistent from the narrative (if one deems the word appropriate for such a piece). Absent from the sea of yellow and blue on the maidan (Ukrainian for "square") were four other colors: red, orange, green and purple. Among a mass of protestors waving proudly their nationalist flags were a silent few who left their rainbow flags to remain in the confines of an ancient closet.

As these flags continue to collect dust, so too do their owners' dreams of a new Ukraine free of its aggressively homophobic consciousness. This is a conscious decision on the part of these Ukrainians as many queer groups choose to hide their identity deliberately among a larger protesting crowd to which they also belong. Why is it that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender identities (LGBT+) community drowns its own aspirations for acceptance and integration in a new post-revolution European Ukraine? Putin, the EU, and a legacy of homophobia within the former Soviet Union (FSU).

In an effort to break away from the Russian sphere of influence, Ukraine underwent a revolution (colloquially referred to as Maidan) to rid itself of a corrupt, pro-Putin government

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led by former president Viktor Yanukovich. However, lack of international pressure in post-revolution Ukraine due to an escalating geopolitical struggle between Russia and “the West” has allowed for continued discrimination against those who identify in the LGBT+ spectrum.<sup>3</sup> This is despite the fact that the LGBT+ community has helped play a considerable role in supporting and carrying out the actions of the Maidan Revolution which ousted the former pro-Russian government.<sup>4</sup> LGBT+ activists were among the original Maidan protestors who helped begin the revolution in Ukraine but, given an intense legacy of Soviet homophobia, could not openly express a desire to see their own rights immediately realized in the European Ukraine to-be. In an effort to help legitimize the revolution, LGBT+ Ukrainians have chosen to remain silent on their cause hoping their revolution is just moments behind that of their nation’s revolution.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the EU’s abandonment of its advocacy for LGBT+ rights in Ukraine has further contributed to self-shrouding of LGBT+ individuals within the Maidan. As tensions rise between not just Ukraine and Russia, but Russia and the West as well in a manner unprecedented since the Cold War, these hopes seem a long way off.

### **Maidan vs. Putin’s Russia**

The Maidan Revolution began on 21 November 2013 on Kiev’s Maidan Nezalezhnosti (“Independence Square”) following the Ukrainian government’s decision to “[suspend] plans for a landmark agreement with the European Union [and instead]...renew active dialogue with Russia.”<sup>6</sup>

Protestors took to the streets in anger and flooded into the capital’s maidan in large numbers to riot against the Yanukovich government’s decision. The EU-Ukraine agreement would have meant “a pivotal shift westward for the ex-Soviet republic’s 46 million people, away from [its] historic Russian ally.”<sup>7</sup> The Yanukovich government did not anticipate, however, that its decision would result in it being ousted from power some three months later by pro-West Ukrainians occupying the Maidan Nezalezhnosti. Those pro-West Ukrainians, in turn, must not have anticipated the ability of Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, to use Maidan against them.

In an official 2014 speech to the Kremlin, Putin declared the lack of a “legitimate executive authority in Ukraine” due to the onset of the 2014 revolution.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Putin, in order to protect Russian “interests” in Ukraine, called for a referendum in Crimea that would allow its residents “for the first time in history...to peacefully express their free will regarding their own future.”<sup>9</sup> Putin included statistics on the referendum claiming that an overwhelming majority—96% of the 82% of Crimean voters<sup>10</sup>—voted for independence from Ukraine and eventual integration into the Russian Federation. The fall of the pro-Russian Kiev government at the hands of what he called “[Ukrainian] nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites” revealed Putin’s view of the post-revolution government as both illegitimate and composed of deliberately staunch anti-Russian agents. This revival of World War II-Era rhetoric, coupled with the Russian

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president's description of the referendum as a purely Western-style referendum, allowed Putin to depict himself as a leader against fascism, a discreditor of the hostile Ukrainian government, and the implementer of Crimea's justified "reunification of Russia."<sup>11</sup> "[T]he people," Putin claimed, are "the ultimate source of all authority."<sup>12</sup> Yet, there exists a flaw in the president's logic: the "people" chose Europe, not Russia, popularly.

Yale University professor and historian Timothy Snyder looks past the Kremlin's smoke and mirrors by characterizing the Maidan Revolution as "a classic popular revolution."<sup>13</sup> The revolution began with a corrupt leader (Yanukovych) taking power via democratic means. Subsequently, this leader began increasing and exploiting said power (embezzling millions from the Ukrainian treasury to fund "the ugliest [homes] in architectural history,"<sup>14</sup> among other things) for personal gain to the detriment of the people. Consequently, the people rose up and rebelled against this corruption and exploitation via a popular revolution (Maidan). Snyder, in a multitude of works concerning Ukraine, Maidan, Crimea, and many other Ukrainian contemporary histories, slams the Russian government's actions and rhetoric concerning events which transpired (and are still transpiring) in Ukraine. Snyder labels the intense homophobic propaganda which dominated the state-sanctioned news cycle in Russia as "the gay conspiracy."<sup>15</sup> The rhetoric espoused by the ousted Ukrainian government consisted of heavily inspired uncompromising homophobia imported from an increasingly LGBT+-hostile Russian

Federation. "Ukraine could not have closer cooperation with Europe, since the EU [is] interested chiefly in gay marriage,"<sup>16</sup> was the reasoning behind a failed deal between Ukraine and the European Union. Russian propagandists coined the term Gayeuromaidan during their propaganda waves as well in order to persuade Ukrainians out of their desires for membership in the European Union. The former government claimed there could be no Ukraine in the EU without conceding to popularly opposed pro-LGBT+ measures. Yet despite a hostile Russian front and a domestic uncertainty, the greatest threat to a future in which Ukraine embraces its LGBT+ population is, arguably, not Russia or Putin or conservative Ukrainians, but the European Union. The very liberalizing force so tantalizing to the Ukrainian nation—a force Ukrainians have and continue to die for—has proven to be a false hope for many.

### **Voiceless Echoes: The EU & LGBT+ Ukraine**

In 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine made history by becoming "the first post-Soviet country to decriminalize homosexuality."<sup>17</sup> But, other than this landmark achievement, conditions for the gay community in Ukraine have been at a stagnant low point compared to its East European neighbors. Despite multiple violent attacks targeting Ukraine's LGBT+ population in recent years, "there is no article in the [Ukrainian] criminal code on hate crimes committed on the basis of sexual orientation."<sup>18</sup> However, had the Yanukovych government completed the deal former Prime



Minister Yulia Tymoshenko helped negotiate with the European Union, Ukraine would have needed to meet certain requirements, including an anti-discrimination bill to be implemented in Ukraine which would have finally protected LGBT+ Ukrainians under strict federal and international law.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, a powerful propaganda machine by the Kremlin emerged against Ukraine's EU bid, since "the [European Union] really does mean homosexuality."<sup>20</sup> Dmitry Kiselyev, head of the Russian media conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya, known to be a staunch homophobe, "successfully weaponized gay rights and turned them against the process of European integration."<sup>21</sup> Kiselyev, who once said that gays' "hearts should be buried in the ground or burnt as unfit for helping to prolong anyone's life,"<sup>22</sup> discredited Ukrainian politicians Vitalii and Volodymyr Klychko after they "met with the gay former German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle."<sup>23</sup> Yet, while the Kremlin attempted to question the legitimacy of a pro-LGBT+ Ukraine, the European Union already turned a blind eye to Ukraine's own homophobic agenda.

During initial talks between the revolutionary Ukrainian and European Union officials, rumors spread among the Ukrainian LGBT+

community that the EU considered dropping its anti-discrimination requirement for the nation to join the union. In March 2014, the newly appointed Ukrainian Justice Minister Pavlo Petrenko "triumphantly announced that the EU had dropped a demand requiring the inclusion of sexual orientation in an anti-discrimination bill."<sup>24</sup> A mixed response within the LGBT+ community surfaced, some arguing the Kremlin's effective anti-gay spin team would have salivated at the opportunity to scare Ukrainians straight while others felt betrayed by their supposed Western liberators. European Union officials denied the dropping of the anti-discrimination bill. Yet Ukraine reportedly "ignored the requirements of the EU visa liberalization roadmap by failing to include prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation"<sup>25</sup> in the amendments package requested by EU officials. In May 2014, the European Union endorsed Ukraine's exclusion of the anti-discrimination bill for LGBT+ citizens "by allowing Kiev to move to the second phase of visa liberalization anyway."<sup>26</sup> Such a move by an organization viewed as the epitome of Western ideals contributes to the lack of "visibility"<sup>27</sup> of a large minority of LGBT+ people in Ukraine. Domestic homophobia, Russian propaganda, and an increasingly aggressive Putin policy toward Ukraine have

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*Pictured opposite, protestors celebrate after a compromise deal is reached between parliament and President Yanukovich.*

been cited by Ukrainian politicians, LGBT+ activists, and EU officials as reasons to deter LGBT+ legislation. This has proven critical in the LGBT+ community's decision to halt calls for pro-LGBT+ legislation.

### **“Gay” Euromaidan & Ukraine**

In any piece of writing concerning attitudes towards homosexuals in contemporary Ukraine there appears a commonly quoted statistic. A poll conducted in 2013 by Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK Group) “found a full 80% of [Ukrainian] citizens [hold] negative attitudes towards sexuality.”<sup>28</sup> This is an almost universally referenced finding in journals, newspapers, blogs, and interviews on homosexuality in Ukraine. Less featured is another poll conducted in 2013, this time by Gay Alliance and the State Sociology Institute, which found “63% of surveyed Ukrainians said homosexuality is a perversion or mental disease [and] only 9% supported same-sex marriage.”<sup>29</sup> Even after the revolution the LGBT+ community helped create, violence against the LGBT+ community has only increased. The number of far-right groups in Ukraine “who prey on LGBT+ people has increased from 30 to 74”<sup>30</sup> between 2012 and 2013 alone, before the revolution. During a screening of an LGBT+-friendly film at a Ukrainian youth festival in November 2014, “right-wing radicals burned down the Zhovten cinema in Kiev”<sup>31</sup> which played the film. To the many LGBT+ people in Ukraine, these are not statistics but facts of life. They are a legacy of the Soviet regime and an amalgamation of homo-hostile historical factors. Surprisingly enough, it is not the intensely homophobic Ukrainian majority

that has succeeded in actively suppressing invisible pro-LGBT+ activists from Maidan, but the LGBT+ community itself.

“We use Ukrainian and EU flags instead [of rainbow flags],”<sup>32</sup> replied prominent Ukrainian LGBT+ activist Bohdan Globa when speaking on LGBT+ participation in Maidan, describing the process of intentional concealment as “self-closeting.”<sup>33</sup> Globa, like many other LGBT+ Ukrainians, chooses to place gay rights on the backburner of the Euromaidan Revolution, and “opposes including sexual orientation in the non-discrimination law [required by the European Union for Ukrainian acceptance into the organization] because Moscow would cynically seize upon it to tell Ukrainians [the EU means homosexuality].”<sup>34</sup> Realizing the current geopolitical calculus in the Russo-Ukrainian region devised by a certain anti-Western Russian president has made LGBT+ rights in the foreseeable future in Ukraine a very unlikely possibility, LGBT+ activists in Ukraine like Globa have chosen to put the revolution before their own political aspirations. In fact the LGBT+ community “was almost the only revolutionary group which, in the aftermath [of Euromaidan], did not insist on converting their participation in the events into new positions of power”<sup>35</sup> as many other revolutionary groups had done.

In order to preserve and maintain the unity of Maidan protestors and prevent an already extensive homophobic propaganda campaign from Putin's Russia to discredit the revolutionary vision, the LGBT+ community “didn't champion the rights of the gay minority.”<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that

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the gay rights movement in Ukraine has been permanently silenced in order to establish the “European Ukraine” desired by Euromaidan activists (whether LGBT+ or not). Rather, leaders of the movement have opted to wait for democratic revolution (in the form of Maidan) to establish a democratic government (a pro-Western government) so as to “start a nationwide debate, based on logic, science, and European values, about Ukraine’s history of intolerance [towards homosexuals].”<sup>37</sup>

### **Post-Soviet Ukraine: Axing the Soviet Legacy**

Political science professor Philip Ayoub argues “the extent of states’ openness to international organizations and informational flows...has demonstrable effects [by allowing]...new ideas to enter the domestic discourse.”<sup>38</sup> In a Ukrainian context, openness to Western ideas of LGBT+ rights as fundamental human rights would come from a dissemination of pro-LGBT+ ideas. Furthermore, the degree to which “international norms [in this case LGBT+ rights] resonate in various states—and become internalized within them—depends on...transnational channels and domestic interest groups that make political issues visible.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, international pressure, through the creation of a transnationally homophobic solidarity network, coupled with strong domestic efforts, has proven effective in combatting traditional political atmospheres. Ukraine possesses a cultural climate in which LGBT+ rights are “inherently contentious...often portrayed as violating the moral foundation

on which nationhood is structured.”<sup>40</sup> Ukraine has yet to “come out” to itself. Only through this “coming out” process, which Ayoub terms as “visibility,” can LGBT+ rights fully emerge. What proof is there that these political theories can translate into tangible success?

During the consolidation of the Soviet Union, attitudes toward homosexuality seemed to be radically changing for the better. During the October Revolution, Russia decriminalized homosexuality.<sup>41</sup> LGBT+ people living within the ever-changing borders of the Soviet Union experienced a period of tolerance. This would be a very brief period as 1933 witnessed the reinstatement of many of its anti-LGBT+ legislation.<sup>42</sup> Sociologists Roman Kuhar and Judit Takács trace the development of anti-homosexual attitudes in the former Eastern Bloc in their book *Beyond the Pink Curtain*. They find that LGBT+ people represented in film appear “not as themselves, but as a metaphor for political dissidence, or for capitalist exploitation and corruption.”<sup>43</sup> However the political suppression of LGBT+ people under strict homophobic laws kept them closeted allowing “straight directors” to create representations of LGBT+ people. Under Article 121 of the Soviet criminal code, “sexual relations between men are punishable by prison terms of up to five years.”<sup>44</sup> Yet over time there would be a fusion of identities, the homosexual taking on the form of the antithesis to an ideal communist form. By rooting the norm of LGBT+ as a synonym for internal collapse, the Soviet government successfully propagated a negative image of homosexuals. In doing so, a suppression

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*Protests and parades often experience forceful and even violent interruptions.*

of sexuality spearheaded by the government created a lack of visibility of LGBT+ citizens in the country.

Although the Soviet Union no longer exists, its legacy remains largely intact in much of its former territory. In fact, certain portions of Ukraine – specifically the pro-Russian eastern Ukrainian provinces as well as the whole of Crimea – have made a conscious effort to return to criminalization laws such as Article 121. In the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution, tensions between a pro-European western Ukraine and a pro-Russian eastern Ukraine have produced a crisis of political legitimacy. “Russia has waged an aggressive propaganda war in Crimea”<sup>45</sup> that leaves many LGBT+ people in Crimea just as susceptible to legal discrimination found throughout separatist regions of Ukraine. The new prime minister of Crimea, Sergei Aksynov, has taken to implementing “Soviet legal templates” of anti-gay legislation in Crimea as the province “[does] not need such people.”<sup>46</sup> What hope then lies for LGBT+ Ukrainians? Current research suggests that historically homophobic nation-states, when tempted with economic advancement and efficient international pressure, are willing to redefine the national consciousness to include their LGBT+ population despite an overwhelmingly homophobic majority.

### **Eastern Europe ‘Comes Out’: LGBT+, ECE, the EU and Post-Maidan**

Ayoub argues that “individuals in groups less wedded to nation and tradition, will be more likely to incorporate [the] “framed” or “grafted” international norm [of LGBT+ rights].”<sup>47</sup> Conversely, individuals embedded in tradition are “more likely to reject”<sup>48</sup> international efforts to redefine national norms. In a Ukrainian context this would mean that Ukrainians closely linked to traditional nationalist Orthodoxy are more likely to reject international LGBT+ efforts. Similarly, Ukrainians less committed to traditional nationalist character are more likely to accept LGBT+ rights as an internal norm compatible with nationalist characteristics. As a result, eastern Ukraine and Crimea have been more resistant to the post-Euromaidan government citing traditional Slavic Orthodoxy as inherently mutually exclusive to a gay Ukraine. Ayoub would attribute this to the fact that if “LGBT+ right norms are portrayed as an inherently external, then the degrees to which individuals are socialized in their national identities and traditional values [Slavic Orthodoxy] will influence reactions to the norm [homophobic retaliation].”<sup>49</sup> Only by resisting the branding of LGBT+ as an external threat to society and promoting an understanding and awareness of LGBT+

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within a Ukrainian context can the LGBT+ rights movement in the region make headway.

Serbia, a traditionally homophobic nation, launched its “first successful gay pride parade in Belgrade”<sup>50</sup> in 2013, despite a sizeable number of homophobic protesters at the ready. Serbian riot police were required to attend the event to ensure violence did not break out against the 500 participants in the parade. That same year another triumph for LGBT+ rights occurred in equally conservative Moldova when the government “repealed an anti-gay law modeled on Russia’s [2013 legislation].”<sup>51</sup> What prompted the governments of such traditional and historically homophobic nations to make such radical efforts? The European Union. Serbia, desperate to show its liberalizing efforts to a reluctant EU, used the event as a gesture of good will. Similarly, Moldova repealed its discriminatory law only when “it became clear that it was standing in the way of further integration with [the European Union].”<sup>52</sup> Even in Ukraine, desire for European integration resulted in some success for LGBT+ rights. When Ukrainian parliament members “proposed a bill to ‘prohibit promotion of homosexuality,’”<sup>53</sup> there emerged “pressure from human rights organizations and foreign diplomats”<sup>54</sup> in predominately Western countries arguing that it mirrored the 2012 Russian anti-gay propaganda laws. Thus, it can be argued that Ayoub’s theory of coordinated international solidarity efforts and “incentivization” of promoting LGBT+ rights has proven effective

in the cases of these three countries. Yet as the aforementioned geopolitical realities have noted, Euromaidan, Russia, and the European Union have placed each other in a gridlock so as to deter any semblance of LGBT+ triumph. With nowhere to turn, LGBT+ refugees are pouring into Kiev from throughout the country only to find they are unwelcome in their own state.

As recently as January 2015, Kiev has received an influx of immigrants from eastern Ukraine and Crimea seeking refuge from “both war and rising levels of homophobia.”<sup>55</sup> Yet the Ukrainian government remains opposed towards its supposedly decadent and unorthodox population of gays and lesbians. Yuriy Syrotyuk, a Ukrainian parliament member of the conservative Svoboda party, claimed “LGBT+ legislation will blow up [Ukraine]...and not only Crimea will secede, but Ukrainian provinces will also start to leave the country.”<sup>56</sup> Although not the sole reason for conflict in Ukraine, LGBT+ rights remain an explosive issue in the nation, leaving many politicians indifferent if not outright hostile towards LGBT+ Ukrainians. The same month of the Ukrainian LGBT+ diaspora, “participants of [a gay march] in downtown Kyiv were brutally beaten by Euromaidan activists [after trying]...to join a pro-EU demonstration.”<sup>57</sup> Euromaidan hostility towards pro-EU LGBT+ activists is so well-known throughout the Ukrainian gay community that leaders of Ukrainian LGBT+ organizations swiftly condemned the march in Kiev, accusing Russian propagandists of



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orchestrating the “fake march.” No evidence supports these claims. Ukrainian journalist Dimiter Kenarov argues LGBT+ groups actively and aggressively condemned gay Euromaidan activists “because [of] an understanding that talking about gay rights in Ukraine in the current political situation [is] a huge liability.”<sup>58</sup> Ironically, this self-closeting is stagnating LGBT+ rights in Ukraine. In essence, LGBT+ Ukrainian leaders are willingly digging the graves of their own, aiding the rest of the world in shadowing the visibility key to regaining a lost hope of a free Ukraine for all.

## **Conclusion**

As Europe continues further into the 21st century it continues to evolve both in structure and meaning. In the past 100 years alone the continent has gone from the center of global imperial power to the wasteland of declining converging forces. As of today, the idea of Europe acts as a symbol of modernity and liberalism. And yet, despite its reputation as a force of change, its people continue to live under the specter of the Cold War which brought the whole of Europe to its knees and created stark polarization within the very heart of Europe. While the Iron Curtain may have fallen some 25 years or so ago, many people in this region of the world continue to be subjected by the legacies of its architects and engineers. The fall of communism and the Soviet Union may have marked the end of “postwar parenthesis”<sup>59</sup> in the historical development of the whole of Europe, but by no means did it destroy its legacy on the

hearts and minds of many Eastern European peoples.

Ukraine—the historical heart of Russia—in its attempt to embrace Europe, left Russia scorned and in shock. The “special relationship” between Ukraine and Russia, unlike its Western counterpart, suffered the wrath of Euromaidan in 2014 from which it has yet to recover. Many view the events in Ukraine not as a revolution but as the final confrontation, the definitive battle of East meets West. As the former Eastern bloc turns its head toward the direction of the setting sun, Russia is left to confront itself for the first time in 25 years. While abstractly the grandest geopolitical encounter takes place on Ukrainian territory, on the ground a battle older than Russia and Ukraine takes place: the battle for acceptance. Bearing the brunt and beatings of not one but two frontiers (internationally via Russia and domestically in Ukraine), and with empty promises from its “ally,” the European Union, Ukraine’s LGBT+ population faces an uncertain future.

Even with its revolutionary intensity and ferocity, Euromaidan has failed and continues to fail to include some of its most significant initiators. Some, like Maidan Amazon member Olena Shevchenko, ask “what gay rights would [Ukrainians] be talking about [in the case of a pro-Russian government]”<sup>60</sup> not overthrown by Euromaidan (despite its not so friendly pro-LGBT+ stance). Others, such as Ukrainian gay activist Zoryan Kis argue the “new Ukrainian government uses the chaotic,

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post-revolution situation as a pretext for not letting any kind of gay rights legislation to pass through parliament [it's]...a sellout.”<sup>61</sup> Another LGBT+ activist, Olena Semenova, claimed LGBT+ Ukrainians “are between two evils: Russian homophobic culture and Ukrainian homophobic intolerance.”<sup>62</sup> The task is difficult, but, without an international effort, LGBT+ Ukrainians will continue to be subjected to discrimination, terror, and fear of death.

*“There are some people who just want to join ‘Europe’ without changing their values and without understanding what it all means. But if people really want to change [Ukraine], the change has to start within them and their relationship to others.”*

*-Anonymous LGBT+ Ukrainian<sup>63</sup>*

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