

Eurasian Family versus European Values

THE GEOPOLITICAL ROOTS OF “ANTI-GENDERISM” IN ARMENIA

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Since late 2012, the terms “gender” and “gender equality” in the Armenian discursive space have become enveloped in undertones of tremendous negativity and even used as insults. The backlash in this area has a strong transnational aspect. “Anti-genderism” (as we might call it) in the region and in Armenia specifically is largely—but not exclusively—connected with Russian soft power influences. When Armenia entered the Russia-led Customs Union in 2013, gender issues became another argumentative node in the Europe-Eurasia, West-East ideological confrontation. Conservative elements in Armenia, which already had leanings toward traditional gender roles and identities, began to strongly claim that gender discussions are the product of the Western values agenda and therefore correlate with moral and demographic decline. The escalated discourses and sweeping negativity toward gender issues have been buttressed by Kremlin geopolitical strategies and tools—the aim being to steer post-Soviet states away from Western political and social standards and back toward the “Russian” worldview. These pushback tactics and results have implications for future political developments in Armenia and the region.

Gender Hysteria: A Battle of Words and Worlds

Just after its independence, Armenia signed international agreements that endorsed gender equality, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. However, despite the high level of Armenian legislative liberalization, the laws often face resistance and function poorly. The turning point came in 2013 when chapters of an organization called the Parental Committee were launched in five countries (Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia) to promote the ideals of the so-called Eurasian family. The Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, along with several other organizations, rapidly arranged a variety

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of actions against NGOs as well as against state laws that upheld human rights. Armenian activists became publicly blacklisted and defamed. Under pressure, the Armenian government approved on May 20, 2013, amendments to the law “On ensuring equal rights for men and women” with one of the main feats being the deletion of the term gender from all documents.

Since 2013, the Armenian LGBT community and human rights groups have documented numerous assaults against sexual minorities and their defenders. In this aggressive environment, even the Armenian Apostolic Church began to look moderate on LGBT issues. Yulia Antonyan, a specialist on religion, said that the Armenian Church preferred to leave gender issues in the secular sphere, which, however, resulted in it being “privatized” by a range of actors, including ultra-nationalists and Russian soft power agents. Anna Nikoghosyan, former director of the NGO “Society without Violence,” saw the rounds of gender hysteria in the country as a Russian political method of tilting public opinion toward joining the Customs Union/Eurasian Economic Union instead of toward an EU Association Agreement.

In Armenia, Russian messages about moral fears and demographic decline went hand in hand with a range of neo-patriotic topics such as army conscription and pro-natalist policies. A parallel between LGBT causes and the memory of the Armenian genocide was even [explicitly made](#) when LGBT communities were called “Turks” to brand them as enemies. There were flyers posted in Yerevan in 2013 with the slogan: “Gender perversion is genocide.” Groups like the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee argued that gender equality legislation would threaten the nation’s survival—a powerful narrative in Armenia’s public memory. Social media campaigns replicated the negative claims, including an online petition on the website [change.org](#), which had comments such as: “The word gender undermines traditional moral values. Homosexuality will become widespread and fewer children will be born. This will lead to a decline in our already weak demographic growth and, given the military problems our state faces, it could threaten our national security.” According to blogger Tigran Kocharyan who played a leading role in the wave of protests against equality: “Soon we will adopt a law against discrimination, and a law about juvenile justice, and these three laws taken together are very dangerous... We are moving toward... Europe, but at the same time we need to worry about preserving our national identity.” (The third law Kocharyan references is the prevention of domestic violence.)

These types of narratives appeared very much in parallel with the Kremlin’s domestic and international messaging denouncing “Gayropa” (a pun on “Evropa,” the Russian term for Europe) in order to create new lines of collusion with influential regional and Western conservative organizations. The Russian aim was (and is) to discredit the West as a civilizational model, which post-Soviet citizens should not reach for and instead preserve the status quo in which gender roles remain fixed and machismo culture endures. As stated by Valerie Sperling in her book *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political*

Legitimacy in Russia (Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 2), "...in Russia political actors incorporated gender norms in their authority-building 'toolboxes' because of the accessibility and resonance of these aspects of cultural identity at the elite and mass level alike." Because machismo and hegemonic masculinity are at the very core of patriarchy, they provide relevant ways to validate the notion that being a powerful man is a natural part of being a political leader, thereby validating the political status quo of authoritarianism. On some levels, the core of the anti-genderism movement was a rather simplistic approach that allowed ruling elites to speak the language of conservative majorities: macho-man versus gay man; Eurasia versus Europe.

Armenia has a track record of yielding to Russian prompts. Take for example when the Russian ambassador to Armenia, Ivan Volynkin, [stated](#) in 2014 during the Russia-Ukraine crisis that Armenia should "neutralize NGOs that seek to drive a wedge between Russia and Armenia." Two years earlier, on November 21, 2012, Russia passed laws stipulating that many NGOs should be registered as "foreign agents." Armenian voices pushed back saying that the country has no organizations that try to hinder the development of Armenian-Russian relations, but the message was clear: do not accept outside forces that might affect your sovereignty—well-funded local chapters of the Pan-Russian Parental Committee aside. Even without close study, it is apparent that Russian soft power and Armenian conservative forces are focused on fear-mongering about women's rights and gays in order to manipulate the human rights requirements stemming from the EU.

It must be stated that anti-genderism narratives do have their own foundations in South Caucasian societies. [According](#) to the 2016 NGO Shadow Report To CEDAW, "deep-rooted beliefs about traditional family values drive gender stereotypes and enforce the notion that men should be dominant and women subservient and submissive." Justifications for inequality are frequently based on cultural and social norms that socialize men to be aggressive, powerful, unemotional, and controlling and women to be passive, nurturing, submissive, emotional, powerless, and dependent on men. Russian policymakers have undoubtedly been able to [play on](#) these cultural dynamics with fairly low effort and cost.

Cultural Wars or Business as Usual?

Backlash movements against gender equality and LGBT rights exist in most countries, but they seem to be particularly powerful in post-Soviet states. Even EU member states like Poland have been experiencing internal divisions on these issues. There has been a visible uptick in recent years as the Russian leadership became insecure and flexed its public relations messaging, including about the need to uphold so-called traditional values.

Armenia did pass a new law in May 2013 that promotes equality between men and women. Yet, it does not mention the term gender and does not give any status to LGTB citizens. Armenia is trying to bring its laws into line with institutions like the Council of Europe and the European Union, both to abide by the terms of conventions it has already signed and to trade for further concessions from the West. The May 2013 law is part of a broad series of government measures that are well intentioned and meant to reduce discrimination, but due to the topic being enflamed by anti-genderism, widely-held conservative values again came to the fore.

Likewise, discussions about domestic violence and the associated movement to enact appropriate laws became immobilized by both the decision of Moscow to semi-decriminalize domestic violence in Russia as well as pressures from Armenian conservative groups. There were verbal attacks on those trying to advance gender issues, such as on Western-educated lawyer-activist Aram Vardevaryan, who was accused of being influenced by “Western values” (the original accusation was “*Kembridgi phoshin drela vranery*” – “They’ve sprinkled themselves with Cambridge dust”). Filaret Berikyan, a deputy labor minister and one of the two authors of the draft domestic violence law, insisted it was well-written and that its critics were just ill-informed. Anthropologist Aghassi Tadevosyan disagreed and said the legislation showed a lack of knowledge of the subject and that the public is insufficiently informed about the problems under discussion. At least three Armenian political parties with explicitly conservative agendas appear to be on board with the anti-genderist movement: the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun), Conservative Party (Hayastani Pahpanoghakan), and Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutyun).

Conclusion

The situation in Armenia can serve as a case study of how the term gender has become a battleground in efforts for producing new geopolitical divisions and challenging the political status quo with Russian connections at work trying to create geopolitical gain while preserving the powers of the Kremlin elite. Conservative Armenian and Russian forces tactically are exploiting “moral panics” (Cohen 1972) and notions of “parent-power,” a mythologized sacralization of a parent’s authority as part of a “traditional value” system. When Armenia joined the Customs Union, anti-gender campaigns began to unfold and, in short order, the term gender and related LGTB issues became taboo; they were eliminated from legislation, pushed out of public discourse, and stigmatized as an almost pejorative, obscene lexicon.

Counter-strategies remain limited. There are only a handful of civic activists in Armenia developing positive discourses about gender issues. Civil society representatives largely agree that if the state had chosen to educate the population on even just the term gender during the height of the 2013 anti-gender campaign—choosing sovereign, moral

engagement over the politics of avoidance and Kremlin needs—the backlash against human rights defenders and members of the LGBT community could have been stymied and the ripple effect on legislative reform largely prevented.

An opening exists for policymaking progress in Armenia: citizens are suspicious of both Russia and the West, for different reasons. This gives hope to local and regional civil society representatives to map an educational and outreach plan to change attitudes, advance mainstream non-violent behavior, and improve human rights for women, LGBT members, and people with disabilities.

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