

## EDITORS TO ADD TITLE

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In 2021, the Hungarian parliament passed a law banning the distribution of information about sexual orientation and gender identity to minors. What has been referred to as Hungary's "anti-gay-propaganda law" and "anti-pedophilia law" calculatedly conflated homosexuality and pedophilia in an example of state-sponsored homophobia. The bill was inspired by Russia's infamous 2013 anti-gay law, which the country's parliament strengthened in 2022. In 2023, Uganda passed the Anti-Homosexuality Act, which criminalizes the identities and behavior of LGBTIQ<sup>1</sup> people, imposing a life sentence on consensual same-sex conduct among adults and even the death penalty in exceptional cases.

Hungary, Russia, and Uganda rate differently on the democracy indexes,<sup>2</sup> although none qualifies as a liberal democracy, and each country handles socioeconomic and religious-cultural matters differently. And yet, all three governments have passed bills targeting LGBTIQ people. Why are illiberal governments in different corners of the world, and even some right-wing politicians within consolidated democracies, making resistance to LGBTIQ rights a central pillar of their political agendas?

The pushback against LGBTIQ rights is a global phenomenon, based on a common agenda of promoting traditional values over individual human rights, and it forms a bond between illiberal and undemocratic forces across autocratic regimes, authoritarian governments,

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and some consolidated democracies. Part of what makes sexual orientation and gender identity useful targets is their fluidity, which governments and antidemocratic political actors can easily contrast with and present as a threat to the fixity of tradition, the sovereignty of nation, and common understandings of “nature.” The global resistance to LGBTIQ rights poses a serious challenge to liberal democracy because it undermines the liberal commitment to human-rights egalitarianism, weakens international institutions, and weaponizes regular democratic pluralism for a polarizing discourse of persistent culture wars.

### **LGBTIQ Rights Are Human Rights**

After a century of struggle, LGBTIQ rights emerged in the 2000s as a trademark of consolidated liberal-democratic regimes. If women’s suffrage marked the early starting point of liberal-democratic inclusion, it is the addition of LGBTIQ rights—previously relegated to a handful of small, secular, advanced industrialized democracies—in international human-rights frameworks that symbolizes the achievement of modern egalitarian pluralism. To be sure, liberal democracies’ support for LGBTIQ rights is neither longstanding nor equal. Many liberal democracies denied even the most basic protections to LGBTIQ people until recently; for example, the United States did not ban antisodomy laws until 2003, legalize same-sex marriage until 2015, or extend workplace protections until 2020. And there exist today dozens of provisions to exclude trans people in parts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

The partial realization of such rights, including around partnership, parenting, antidiscrimination, decriminalization, and gender recognition, was slow and required the hard work of dedicated activists who managed to break patterns of exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization. Although still limited, the magnitude of these recent changes has been remarkable

given the starting point.<sup>4</sup>

Since many politicians and citizens in the West see the consolidation of LGBTIQ rights<sup>5</sup> in their own societies as the result of a long learning process, they may be tempted to view states that continue to discriminate against LGBTIQ people with lenience: “They are not yet ready,” goes this thinking. But if politicians and citizens in the West see LGBTIQ rights as something that can come only with time and democratic experience, they may fail to appreciate the challenge posed by autocratic regimes and illiberal politicians who are stoking anti-LGBTIQ sentiment and attacking LGBTIQ rights in hopes of halting or hindering democratization in their countries.<sup>6</sup> Political homo- and transphobia are also useful tools for mobilizing constituencies at election time.<sup>7</sup> Frequently playing on existing stereotypes and homophobic prejudices, leaders present LGBTIQ rights as a dangerous and unattractive side of democracy.

### **The Global Resistance Against LGBTIQ Rights**

Patterns of resistance against LGBTIQ rights vary among illiberal regimes, but many assertions and strategies are shared. While closed regimes such as Iran and Saudi Arabia persecute homosexuality with extreme sanction (including the death penalty), autocratic and competitive authoritarian regimes may resort to subtler, though still violent, ways of restricting the freedom of LGBTIQ people—for example, upholding laws that criminalize homosexuality, banning information about LGBTIQ rights in the public sphere, or upholding discriminatory legislation. Whatever the means, the resistance to LGBTIQ rights has become a global phenomenon based on a set of claims that stir emotion and polarize public debate. They aim to create suspicion and fear and to convince the people that liberal democracy, with its respect for individual human rights, is a less attractive political option than majoritarianism and

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authoritarian rule, which will keep in place the majority's core values. Indeed, "common sense" claims about religion, the nation, and children, women, and family make up an agenda of intersecting traditional values that unites autocrats and illiberal politicians across the globe.

**Religion.** Conservative religious teaching about traditional gender roles is a primary reason for discrimination of LGBTIQ people in many parts of the world. Autocratic regimes with state religions formally in place, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, translate such religious teachings into laws that criminalize and allow for the persecution of gay people. The Russian government passed anti-LGBTIQ legislation in the name of the traditional values represented by the Orthodox church. Illiberal and socially conservative politicians in democracies also use religious arguments to oppose LGBTIQ rights. The Polish right-wing government has declared "LGBT-free zones" across the country, clashing with the EU. In Italy, right-wing parties teamed up with the Vatican to prevent the adoption of a law criminalizing hate speech against LGBTIQ people. Populist right-wing leaders in Europe often claim that their opposition to granting equal rights to LGBTIQ people is based on religion, yet they do not abide by all religious tenets equally—often ignoring, for example, church teachings on hospitality and charity in the context of migration.<sup>8</sup>

These leaders depict the push for LGBTIQ rights by liberal states and international organizations as part of a liberal "totalitarian" project intended to restrict or extinguish religious freedom. Take for example the words of the Spanish conservative politician Jaime Major Oreja in a speech to the Budapest World Congress of Families in 2017: "The new times, the new world order, has a sick, pathological obsession to destroy Christian values in terms of civilization, and replace them with nothing."<sup>9</sup> Moral-conservative activists understand religious freedom as the right to affirm their convictions through the rejection of LGBTIQ expression in the public sphere—excluding LGBTIQ people from the public space, justifying discrimination, and

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allowing hate speech. Paradoxically, many of the countries and authorities that use religious claims to attack LGBTIQ rights, do not respect freedom of religion and belief within their own borders. Russia, for example, restricts the practice of and persecutes some non-Orthodox Christian minorities. In fact, it is religion as a marker of identity—and not religious freedom—that defines the core of the traditional-values narrative.

**Nation.** Belief in the superiority of the nation, its strength, durability, and privileged history leads nondemocratic actors to reject the message of pluralism, diversity, and transnational solidarity inherent in the LGBTIQ rights movement. Such leaders argue that allowing gender and sexual identities outside traditional norms will threaten the fabric of the nation.<sup>10</sup> They leverage this juxtaposition of fluidity and fixity in different ways. Some leaders, for example, highlight Western insistence on LGBTIQ rights as a condition of granting aid or claim that tolerance of LGBTIQ people constitutes a form of Western neocolonialism, and that foreign-imposed tolerance tramples domestic sovereignty and leads to moral decay and demographic decline.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, they blame low birthrates in Western industrialized and secular democracies on the decline of the family and traditional values. This demographic anxiety dovetails with their assertions about children, women, and family.

Nationalism also plays a role in legal claims against LGBTIQ rights. By working through international-governance venues, such as the European Union or the Organization of American States, and international human-rights law, LGBTIQ-rights activists have obtained policy goals that would have been harder to reach in the domestic context alone. These achievements, in turn, can be used as leverage to change national laws, and many illiberal leaders vocally resent this. They consider the LGBTIQ rights movement, which they link to the European Union, the United Nations, or “the West,” as agents of infringement of national sovereignty.<sup>12</sup>

**Children.** Illiberal actors often claim that LGBTIQ rights are a threat to children. They argue that sex education in schools exposes children to nontraditional relationships and early sexualization. Often, the claim is paired with the baseless insinuation that society must protect children from potentially predatory homosexual people. The opponents of LGBTIQ rights thus claim to be protecting children when they pass anti-gay legislation and deny protections to LGBTIQ people. Notoriously, the Russian government said exactly that when it passed a law in 2013 against so-called gay propaganda, as did Victor Orbán when the Hungarian parliament did the same in 2021. In the mid-2000s, some Polish parliamentarians unsuccessfully floated the idea of banning LGBTIQ people from teaching in primary schools. The program advanced by many conservative political groups across Western democracies to limit the discussion of gender identity in education uses a similar logic. In this form of populist right-wing discourse, upholding liberal-democratic values could be a slippery slope to children being harmed.

**Women.** Women's rights are integral to a functioning democracy, and achievements in women's rights—equal treatment before the law, access to health care, nondiscrimination in the workplace—are part and parcel of the struggle for LGBTIQ rights. It might therefore seem paradoxical that illiberal actors use women's rights to argue against those of LGBTIQ people. Yet the traditional-values narrative pits women and LGBTIQ people against each other. In an excellent example of what Clifford Bob calls the language of competing rights, moral conservatives, in alliance with anti-trans feminists, argue that equality for transgender people amounts to the erasure of cisgender women. Moreover, they claim that cisgender women need to be protected from the expansion of transgender rights and (in some spaces) transgender women themselves.<sup>13</sup>

**Family.** The claim that traditional families are in need of defense from expanding

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LGBTIQ rights and the threat they pose to the nation, children, and women forms the basis for transnational, moral-conservative alliance-making. This idea unites illiberal regimes and right-wing policymakers in Western democracies. Especially at the United Nations, the effect of coalition-making around “family” is striking, creating frequent deadlocks and argumentative standoffs between the liberal democracies and other states. Within the UN Human Rights Council, for example, a group of countries comprising Belarus, Russia and Egypt, and others, created the “Group of the Friends of the Family” in support of the traditional family as juxtaposed to more open and inclusive definitions of family frequently advanced by Western democracies.<sup>14</sup>

Leaders often raise the specter of an LGBTIQ threat for political gain, even more so when elections are tight. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan frequently did so during his 2023 campaign. At a May rally in Rize, Erdoğan said, “Mr. Kemal, we know you are a supporter of LGBTQ,” in reference to his opponent, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. “We will never allow [LGBTQ people] to injure your family.” He went on to tell a reporter that the “thing called LGBTQ is a poison, once introduced into the family institution.” Other politicians extend the link to the nation: Istanbul governor Davut Gül banned his city’s 2023 Pride parade, claiming that “no activity that threatens our family institution, which is the guarantee of our nation and state, is allowed.”<sup>15</sup>

The political establishment has also taken on the issue in Lebanon and Jordan, once seen as standouts for queer subcultures in the Middle East. Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon asserted in a televised address that the United States was leading a charge to change school curricula in countries everywhere to “promote a culture of homosexuality in schools and universities.” He later condemned “children’s books promoting

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this deviant culture,” called for government intervention in education, and said that “sodomy” merited the death penalty.<sup>16</sup> The vice president of the Jordanian Scholars Association has issued a call to safeguard the sanctity of the family amidst the emergence of campaigns within the country advocating for LGBTIQ rights.<sup>17</sup> Concurrently, the Jordanian Senate has passed a cybersecurity law that subtly alludes to the preservation of public decency, thereby targeting activities categorized as “immoral.”<sup>18</sup> In Israel, Rabbi Thau, the leader of the Noam Party, has called on his followers and constituents to “wage war” on the “fatal disease threatening to destroy” the country—referring to the LGBTQ community.<sup>19</sup>

Such rhetoric has also swept Africa in recent years. For example, about the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni declared, “Africa should provide the lead to save the world from this degeneration and decadence which is really very dangerous for humanity.” Then, using a common framing in Africa, Museveni linked LGBTQ rights to neocolonialism: “The homosexuals are deviations from normal. The Western countries should stop wasting the time of humanity by trying to impose their practices on other people.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the Kremlin has relied often on anti-LGBTIQ rhetoric to construct its moral justification for its invasion of Ukraine, claiming that it is defending Orthodox Christians in Ukraine from Western “moral decay” and “pride parades”. At home, it has introduced a slew of anti-LGBTIQ legislation passed in 2022 and 2023 to highlight its stance.

Illiberal leaders in a diversity of countries are telling their people that their religions, nations, children, women, and families are under threat from changing gender norms and in need of protection from them. Yet the struggle of LGBTIQ-rights activists to obtain the right to form a legally recognized family or to conceive, adopt, and raise children are direct efforts to strengthen family life (although not all queer activists have embraced this course).<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the choice by



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some same-sex couples to get married with a religious ritual similarly endorses rather than undermines the persistent value attached to religion.

The global traditionalist actors opposing LGBTIQ rights ignore such logic. Their criticism is directed against the LGBTIQ-rights movement itself, which is portrayed as a “lobby.” At the same time, the traditionalist agenda is directed against the ideologically neutral, secular, and liberal-democratic state, which makes legislation affirming LGBTIQ-rights possible in the first place. In countries of the Global South, as well as in Eastern Europe and Russia, right-wing politicians and activists often argue that equality in matters of sexual orientation and gender identity is a Western ideology designed to destroy traditional social structures. In other words, the rejection of LGBTIQ rights is a means to cast off the liberal-democratic idea as such.

### **The Global Anti-LGBTIQ Movement**

Autocrats and right-wing actors inside Western democracies not only share ideas, they are connected via a global network of conservative activists and transnationally active NGOs that transmit these ideas.<sup>22</sup> Right-wing and moral-conservative groups are increasingly networking across borders in ways similar to transnational human-rights organizations (or what the anti-LGBTIQ activists call the international “gender lobby”). Moral conservatives organize across cultural, national, and denominational boundaries with the aim of influencing international organizations as well as national parliaments, governments, and other institutions.

Religion plays a central role in these efforts. Moral conservatives often claim that liberal and democratic values threaten their religious freedoms. Conservative evangelical, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox groups and churches play a leading role in transnational anti-LGBTIQ networks, often in cooperation with Jewish activists and partner organizations in Islamic

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countries. This “ecumenism of the trenches” is a child of the 1980s “culture wars” in the United States, which has spread globally and brought together unlikely allies.<sup>23</sup> In the United States, both terms denote conflicts between progressive and conservative positions, sometimes within the same denomination. The U.S. religious right, which includes evangelical and Protestant churches, Pentecostal churches, and Catholic groups as well as Mormons, has always seen itself as transdenominational and therefore calls itself “ecumenical.” The partners are united less by the search for Christian unity than by a constructed common enemy: modern, secular society with its pluralistic values. LGBTIQ rights serve as a symbolic stand-in for them.

Moral-conservative value alliances modeled on the U.S. Christian right have spread from the United States to the Europe, Russia, and the Global South.<sup>24</sup> Networking happens in person and online. For example, the U.S.-based International Organization for the Family (IOF) promotes personal contacts between moral conservative groups and activists. It has hosted the World Congress of Families for more than twenty years—including in Prague in 1997, Mexico City in 2004, Sydney in 2013, and Budapest in 2017. The organization brings together conservative activists and politicians from around the world. Orbán, Italian prime minister Georgia Meloni and Lega Nord leader Matteo Salvini, former Moldovan president Igor Dodon, Nicolas Bay of France’s National Rally, and Maximilian Krah of Alternative for Germany have all taken part. IOF also promotes local partner organizations in Europe, Russia, Africa, and Latin America.

We have attended several of these meetings as part of our research. In our interviews and participant observation, we have found that the personal networking of activists through international conventions has an important function in spreading the moral-conservative agenda. Participants are urged to broaden the base supporting their demands in their own countries, to

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reach out to religious people of all denominations, and to seek the support of prominent political, religious, and media figures. By encouraging local partners to recruit new members and train activists and leaders, the IOF is helping to expand a transnational conservative network and accelerating the creation of new organizations. NGOs in Hungary, Italy, Poland and Spain are part of this network, as are activists in Kenya, Mexico, and Nigeria. In Russia, the IOF has inspired the creation of at least four local organizations that advocate for traditional family values and oppose abortion.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to personal contacts, digital networking plays an important role in transnational mobilization around antidemocratic, morally conservative issues. The international conservative activist and petition platform CitizenGo, founded in 2013 by a Spanish anti-abortion activist, shows how this works. CitizenGo exists in English, Spanish, and French, as well as Croatian, Dutch, German, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese, Polish, and Slovak. (The Russian-language website shut down in the spring of 2022, presumably to hide CitizenGo's connection to Russian partners after the invasion of Ukraine). Two types of articles and petitions can be found on the platform: those that are translated and published on all websites simultaneously, and those that focus on a specific national context in only one language. The campaigns address issues ranging from abortion to same-sex marriage to transgender rights, reproductive rights, and religious freedom. For example, a particularly large number of people signed a petition opposing "LGBT indoctrination by LEGO" after the toy manufacturer launched a rainbow-colored building-block set. On CitizenGo, morally conservative concerns are shared and spread across geographic and linguistic borders.<sup>26</sup>

These conservative transnational networks ironically are made up of groups and activists that claim to stand for particularism, traditionalism, and national independence and often criticize

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liberal-democratic rights movements and progressive movements for a pernicious internationalism. Yet today's moral-conservative groups are globally networked in a way that mirrors how liberal human-rights NGOs connect and cooperate. Moreover, the moral conservatives' programs borrow from the classic themes of U.S.-style Protestant religious conservatism.

This borrowing effect is particularly visible in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church. As Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner show in *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, Russian Orthodox actors use the themes of the global culture wars to present themselves as a bulwark against the West. Russian conservatives, for example, often tell so-called depravity stories.<sup>27</sup> These are accounts of the supposedly disastrous effects of social liberalization in the West—of how sex education, for example, corrupts children and sets them on a path of rampant sexual behavior; of gay couples adopting boys and supposedly raising them as girls; or of governments in European countries allegedly wanting to replace the terms “mother” and “father” with “parent 1” and “parent 2” (which President Vladimir Putin repeated in his speech on the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories). Western audiences have only recently become aware of how Russia, through the war sermons of Patriarch Kirill and Putin's speeches, is exploiting the depiction of “depraved” Western society to justify the war on Ukraine. But these stories have dominated Russian anti-Western propaganda for years. Also in other countries, such as Poland, Hungary or Uganda, such tales have long circulated in conservative milieus.

The globalization of the movement against LGBTIQ rights has consequences—from countries such as Bulgaria refusing to ratify the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention Against Domestic Violence (because vocal Orthodox and euro-sceptic activists in the country

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objected to the term “gender” used in the document) to the criminalization of LGBTIQ people in Africa resulting from successful lobbying by right-wing Christian groups from abroad. The aforementioned Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act is an example. Its passage was preceded by a decade of lobbying by fundamentalist Evangelical and Pentecostal groups from the United States.<sup>28</sup>

These cases of transnational antifeminist and anti-LGBTIQ organizing demonstrate that transnational networking of civil society and protest movements is not a unique feature of progressive, democratic, and liberal movements. Right-wing and moral conservative groups also work together across denominational, religious, linguistic, national, and cultural borders. In doing so, they create a transnational conservative-values agenda that political forces in many countries use to advance antiliberal and antidemocratic policies.

### **Why Target LGBTIQ Rights?**

Opposing LGBTIQ rights offers a host of political benefits to autocratic regimes, notably in terms of legitimacy, status, identity, and alliance-building. Playing off existing homo- and transphobia among their people, illiberal leaders can scapegoat LGBTIQ people for all their societies’ problems while simultaneously discrediting liberal democracy for tolerating such supposedly corruptive forces. For competitive authoritarian regimes, maintaining an image of democratic legitimacy and representativeness, despite unfair elections, is important. Even autocracies do not rely solely on repression for securing domestic consensus and some form legitimacy.

In many countries, prejudice against LGBTIQ people is especially widespread, and authoritarian governments draw advantage from tapping into and reinforcing this bias as a way

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of boosting regime legitimacy. Political homophobia<sup>29</sup> helps nondemocratic governments to divide society into a base of regime loyalists with more traditional values from segments of opposition. LGBTIQ rights thus become a wedge issue. Often it is not only the LGBTIQ community that is being scapegoated but also opposition politicians, journalists, and intellectuals who are then branded as “gay” or “pro-gay” to denigrate them in the eyes of the public. The Russian Duma notoriously called the European Union *Gayropa* in the lead up to its 2014 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

Nondemocratic governments sometimes also mobilize against LGBTIQ rights to raise their status. International-relations theory argues that small and medium-sized states and declining powers in world politics are likely to aim for status “by being conspicuously good or moral actors.”<sup>31</sup> The status argument was originally theorized for states such as the Netherlands<sup>32</sup> that seek to be pioneers on progressive values such as environmental protection, racial justice, or women’s and LGBTIQ rights. But not all states share the same understanding of what is moral or good in terms of gender. Opposition to LGBTIQ rights can therefore also become the basis for geopolitical status, and the traditional-values agenda has allowed some states to gain new purpose and to play a role on the global political stage.

When the Soviet Union fell, Russia suffered a tremendous loss in status. But by the 2010s it found and seized an opportunity to once again become an ideological leader—this time of a global alliance supporting so-called traditional values. For Hungary, the traditional-values agenda has also been a tool to carve out a seemingly “strong” identity in the EU, which may help the country to shed its status of middle-sized member state. Such strategies may come at considerable cost in standing with liberal-democratic allies and partners. But promoting traditional values and opposing LGBTIQ rights—in essence, demonstrating power and

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authority—will likely win favor with some domestic audiences and may help these regimes to construct a strong identity separate from the liberal-democratic political mainstream.

For nondemocratic states, the anti-LGBTIQ agenda carries with it not just potential geopolitical status, but other advantages of identity politics. Such states typically construct their identity as in continuity with a pure and imagined past rooted in national or religious tradition. Resistance to LGBTIQ rights has become a shortcut to signal a Christian state identity, for example. The return to religion as a form of national identity observable in many European countries is not just about morality politics, however. It is, as in Poland or Hungary, also about nativist opposition to immigration, especially from Muslim countries. In states where elections still matter, even to a small degree, the projection of national identity as Christian may carry advantages, in terms of both domestic electoral success and international alliance-building.<sup>33</sup>

Paradoxically, leaders in some democratic states in favor of LGBTIQ rights have used that very support to “other” outside groups. The concept of “homonationalism” explains why the far right in some West European states have embraced elements of gay rights—though for their own, usually, white citizens—in order to exclude immigrants or others (often Muslims in both cases) whom these governments paint as potentially “too homophobic” to be safe for *their* gays and lesbians.<sup>34</sup>

Some autocratic leaders may also see opposing LGBTIQ rights as beneficial to alliance-making in world politics. Resistance to LGBTIQ rights can help to build or break such bonds. Some Christian conservatives in the West identify with Putin’s Russia because of its opposition to LGBTIQ rights, and this may have worked in Russia’s interest when it came to easing the sanctions-regime imposed after it annexed Crimea in 2014. After the EU Commission threatened to take Hungary to court over its 2021 anti-LGBTIQ legislation, several conservative U.S.

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politicians traveled to Hungary to show support for the law.<sup>35</sup> In short, illiberal and undemocratic actors may draw benefits from lashing out against LGBTIQ people and blocking their attempts to secure equal rights. Such benefits may include domestic political gains and electoral success as well as strengthening status, identity, and alliances at home and abroad.

Finally, attacking or denying LGBTIQ rights may also work to mobilize constituents. Research shows that individuals holding traditional values participate politically at higher rates when their leaders deliver homo- and transphobic rhetoric and legal infrastructure.<sup>36</sup> When governments affirm citizens' personal positions, it makes them feel more empowered. Likewise, individuals with tolerant views mobilize to a greater extent when their governments champion LGBTIQ rights. The strategic benefits that states can derive from staking a position in either direction contributes to the reason LGBTIQ rights rank high on the international political agenda.

### **How to Respond to the Anti-LGBTIQ Agenda**

How should politicians and activists committed to pluralism go about advancing LGBTIQ rights in this challenging global environment? Do increased visibility and rights promotion make things worse in certain countries, perhaps even making LGBTIQ people more of a target? There remains a heated debate on how rights defenders can best pursue LGBTIQ emancipation. What has become clear in recent decades is that extremes—on one side, engineering LGBTIQ norm promotion from abroad and on the other, taking a completely hands-off approach—are unsatisfactory and potentially dangerous. In fact, as the issue of LGBTIQ rights is circulating globally in both politics and the media, autocrats do not need a homegrown movement to crack down against. But if they decide to do so anyway, they will have access



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through their transnational network of advocacy groups to the resources needed to sell the sense of threat at home.

Indeed, the transnational, networked nature of resistance to LGBTIQ rights explains waves of homo- and transphobic crackdowns that have spread across dozens of states in Africa and the Middle East in recent months.<sup>37</sup> The governments carrying these out are not reacting to an issue of visible domestic concern; they are strategically, and often preemptively, lashing out against queer communities.<sup>38</sup> This reality makes it hard to advocate for a do-nothing approach—as LGBTIQ activists and their foreign-office counterparts in states with an LGBTIQ foreign policy explained to us in interviews. It certainly also does not place the burden of the backlash on LGBTIQ advocacy, nor substantiate its silence. Unfortunately, LGBTIQ people are being targeted the world over, with or without human rights advocacy.

That said, such advocacy must be done carefully, and supportive activists and governments have learned approaches for navigating this challenging global reality. Certain tactics, for example, naming and shaming autocracies for their anti-LGBTIQ stances or actions, may be misguided in some cases. They have backfired several times, including when U.S. president Barack Obama spoke about LGBTIQ rights in Kenya during a visit in 2015. Indeed, highly visible strategies should be avoided in the many states where backdoor organizing, away from the spotlight, by civil society and diplomatic representatives is more effective and prioritizes the safety of LGBTIQ communities living there. There are ways to adopt less visible strategies of support—for example directly to local civil society—or use tactics focused on continuing to include the norm-violating states in global society and avoiding stigmatizing them.<sup>39</sup>

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Integral to any successful attempt to help LGBTIQ populations abroad are local actors and civil society. They work as norm brokers, advising on how to channel support toward their local communities, as well as how to frame contentious human-rights norms and graft them to local contexts.<sup>40</sup> Local actors doing this brokering sometimes suggest a course of action that would seem paradoxical in another context. For example, they might decide to rotate between high- and low- or no-visibility strategies—particularly trying to stay under the radar when working with external rights-promoters in domestic contexts with little prior exposure to discourse on LGBTIQ rights.<sup>41</sup>

In many cases, behind-the-scenes and soft diplomacy should take the place of aid conditionality or highly visible tactics such as indiscriminately supporting pride parades or flying rainbow flags. Relying on local actors also helps to defang the “neocolonial” argument. Local advocates may use religious or national symbols to highlight the indigeneity of the cause, dispel the charge of foreignness, and root the LGBTIQ community locally. The visible defense of LGBTIQ human rights is critically important, but it depends on who is wielding that visibility. Local civil society will know how, and this means no one-size-fits-all approaches.

Choosing the right strategy is crucial because the stakes are so high. As long as persecuting LGBTIQ people and denying them rights serves the political interests of nondemocratic, illiberal leaders, they will continue to do so. After all, it is much easier than trying to solve society’s biggest challenges such as poverty or the climate crisis. But nondemocrats’ weaponization of the LGBTIQ-rights issue does more than divert public attention from government failures, it also turns the public against democracy, raising the stakes even more.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the acronym LGBTIQ when referring to people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer.

<sup>2</sup> The EIU Democracy Index 2022 classified Hungary as a “flawed democracy,” Uganda as a “hybrid regime,” and Russia as “authoritarian”; [*the 2023 V-Dem report classified Hungary, Russia, and Uganda all as an “electoral autocracies”*]; and Freedom House’s [Freedom in the World 2023](#) classified Hungary as Partly Free and Russia and Uganda as Not Free]

<sup>3</sup> Zein Murib, “Backlash, Intersectionality, and Trumpism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 295–302.

<sup>4</sup> Phillip M. Ayoub and David Paternotte, eds., *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe: A Rainbow Europe?* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2014); Phillip M. Ayoub, *When States Come Out: Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Kelly Kollman, *The Same-Sex Unions Revolution in Western Democracies: International Norms and Domestic Policy Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The same cannot be said for the rights of trans and intersex people at this point in time.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, many have pointed to the shallow use of LGBTIQ rights as a democratic “litmus test” as problematic, arguing that we must look to transformative societal change to achieve queer transformation, which is lacking across states, including democracies. Markus Thiel, *The European Union's International Promotion of LGBTI Rights: Promises and Pitfalls* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Phillip M. Ayoub and Douglas Page, “When Do Opponents of Gay Rights Mobilize? Explaining Political Participation in Times of Backlash against Liberalism,” *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2020): 696–713.

<sup>8</sup> Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing Against Equality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Sonja A. Strube et al., eds., *Anti-Genderismus in Europa. Allianzen von Rechtspopulismus und religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung—Vernetzung—Transformation* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Jaime Major Oreja, “The Necessary Strengthening of Truth,” *Hungarian Review* 8, no. 3 (2017): 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ayoub, *When States Come Out*; Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross. White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia, eds., *Global Homophobia. States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Rahul Rao, *Out of Time. The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Ayoub, *When States Come Out*; Conor O'Dwyer, *Coming out of Communism: The Emergence of LGBT Activism in Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Bob, *Rights as Weapons: Instruments of Conflict, Tools of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 175–81. Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur, eds., “Trans-Exclusionary Feminism and the Global New Right,” special issue, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Kristina Stoeckl and Kseniya Medvedeva, “Double Bind at the UN: Western Actors, Russia, and the Traditionalist Agenda,” *Global Constitutionalism* 7, no. 3 (2018): 383–421.

<sup>15</sup> Quotes are from Mohamad El Chamaa, “Anti-LGBTQ Backlash Grows Across Middle East, Echoing U.S. Culture Wars,” *Washington Post*, 3 August 2023.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Chaim Levinson, „‘Wage War’ on LGBTQ Community: Meet Israel’s Most Homophobic, and Powerful, Rabbi,“ *Haaretz*, 7 August 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Alice McCool, “Ugandan President Calls on Africa to ‘Save the World from Homosexuality,“” *Guardian*, 3 April 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Julian Jackson, “The Homophile Movement,“ in *The Ashgate Companion to Lesbian and Gay Activism*, ed. David Paternotte and Manon Tremblay (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 31–45 .

<sup>22</sup> Velasco, Kristopher, “Transnational Backlash and the Deinstitutionalization of Liberal Norms,“ *American Journal of Sociology*, 128, no. 5, (2023): 1381-1429.

<sup>23</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Clifford Bob, *The Global Right Wind and the Clash of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kapyka Kaoma, *Globalizing the Culture Wars. U.S. Conservatives, African Churches and Homophobia* (Somerville: Political Research Associates, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Kristina Stoeckl, “The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: the Case of the World Congress of Families,“ *Religion, State and Society* 48, no. 4 (2020): 223–38.

<sup>26</sup> Lara Whyte, “‘They are coming for your children’—The rise of CitizenGo,“ *OpenDemocracy*, 9 August 2017.

<sup>27</sup> After Janice Irvine's book *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Oakland: California University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu, “Christian Fundamentalism Lies Gehind Harsh New Anti-LGBTIQ Bill in Uganda,“ *Open Democracy*, 23 March 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Weiss and Bosia, *Global Homophobia*.

<sup>30</sup> Maryna Shevtsova, “Fighting ‘Gayropa’: Europeanization and Instrumentalization of LGBTI Rights in Ukrainian Public Debate,“ *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 6 (2020): 500–10; Ayoub and Paternotte, *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe*.

<sup>31</sup> William C. Wohlforth et al., “Moral Authority and Status in International Relations: Good States and the Social Dimension of Status Seeking,“ *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 526–46, 528.

<sup>32</sup> Kelly Kollman, “Pioneering Marriage for Same-Sex Couples in the Netherlands,“ *Journal of European Public Policy* 24, no. 1 (2017): 100–18.

<sup>33</sup> John Anderson, *Conservative Christian Politics in Russia and the United States. Dreaming of Christian Nations* (London, New York: Routledge, 2015); Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy, eds., *Saving the People. How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Gabriele Magni and Andrew Reynolds, “Why Europe’s Right Embraces Gay Rights,“ *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 50–64.

<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth Zerofsky, “How the American Right Fell in Love with Hungary,“ *New York Times* 19 October 2021.

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<sup>36</sup> Ayoub and Page, “When Do Opponents of Gay Rights Mobilize?”

<sup>37</sup> Chamaa, “Anti-LGBTQ backlash”; McCool, “Ugandan president calls on Africa.”

<sup>38</sup> Weiss and Bosia, *Global Homophobia*.

<sup>39</sup> Elise Rainer, Phillip Ayoub, Katie Mclain, and Karen Chen, *Guide to Inclusion of LGBTI People in Development and Foreign Policy* (New York: OutRight Action International, 2021); OECD. *Over the Rainbow: The path to LGBTI Inclusion* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Ayoub, *When States Come Out*; Ayoub, Phillip M. “Protean Power in Movement: Navigating Uncertainty in the LGBT Rights Revolution,” in *Protean Power: Exploring the Uncertain and Unexpected in World Politics*, Peter Katzenstein and Lucia Seybert, eds, 79–99, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Ashley Currier, *Out in Africa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).