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Sovereignty As a Structure of Feeling

The Homosexual within Post-Cold War Armenian Geopolitics

SAMMANFATTNING

Efter en offentlig panik kring homosexualitet år 2012, började en rad gräsrotsaktörer i det postsovjetiska Armenien att engagera sig i frågor om Armenien som nation och geopolitiska influenser från Ryssland i öst och Europa i väst på landets interna angelägenheter. Artikeln bygger på tolv månaders etnografiska studier av vänsteraktivister och högernationalistister i Jerevan, Armenien. Medan queerforskare som arbetar med det post-socialistiska Central- och Östeuropa har studerat hur EU och grannmedlemskap påverkar livet för LHBT-personer, aktivism och nationalistiska stridigheter, är denna forskning i stället inriktad på hur Ryssland och i synnerhet ”eurasianism” påverkar känslan av självbestämmande i den post-socialistiska kontexten. Jag använder Raymond Williams (1977) begrepp ”känslostrukturer” för att hävda att i tiden efter kalla kriget är det genom konspirationsteorier knutna till figurer som den homosexuelle och dennes hot mot ”kulturella värden”, som självbestämmande upplevs, förhandlas och utmanas. Dessa förståelser av självbestämmande skapas i frånvaron av officiella eller begripliga statspositioner, vilket ger nya infallsvinklar på postkolonialitet.

Keywords: structures of feeling, sovereignty, post-socialism, post-Cold War, homosexuality

IN MAY OF 2012, two young men who self-identified as nationalists firebombed and destroyed the DIY Pub, a small basement level bar in central Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia. The pub, they claimed, was a gay bar that needed to be destroyed in order to protect their nation. This event stirred public consciousness, especially around the question of homosexuality, which was repeatedly represented in the press as a kind of threat that needed to be eliminated. Members of Parliament like Rouben Hayrapetyan, claimed that while terrorism cannot be condoned, homosexuals needed to be punished and "completely eliminated from society" (*Aravot* 2012). Some politicians, however, like ruling Republican Party Member of Parliament Eduard Sharmazanov, claimed that the firebombing was a "rebellion" and was "right and justified," and further, Artsvik Minasyan of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Party posted the bail of the young men when they were finally arrested two days later (Artyan 2010). Many right-wing nationalists celebrated the firebombing on social networking sites such as in Facebook groups like, "If we need to, we will burn them," where users posted claims like: "Let's burn them all!" or, that the existence of a gay bar was caused by the nation's excessive aspirations to become European. At the same time, bloggers on the site *BlogNews.am* wrote that the firebombers did not do their task as well as they could have because they did not get rid of "them" (homosexuals) once and for all. With constant media attention on the pub and what it meant for there to be visible homosexuality in the country, Armenia was thrown into a sex panic in which concerns around homosexuality seemed to be of the most critical importance to the nation's future.

A few weeks later, on May 21, the event of the DIY firebombing was followed by another – an attack on a "Diversity March" that had been organized by LGBT and feminist activists to recognize the cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of the country. On the day for which the event was planned, the organizers were outnumbered by about two hundred young men and women who self-identified as nationalists leading their own counter-protest of what they considered a "gay parade" that was spreading "homosexual propaganda" (ArmNews 2012). The counter-protest was mostly organized by a newly emerging nationalist orga-

nization known as Hayazn [The Armenians], who has since successfully petitioned to become a political party. Public attention and discussion continued around the figure of the homosexual. As Anna, an LGBT activist, told me during an interview I conducted with her regarding the firebombing and its aftermath: "It was like there was nothing else going on. Like all other problems had disappeared and the whole future of the nation was dangling at the whim of homosexuals."[1]

Through these events, Armenians structured, felt, and debated the nation's geopolitical positioning. The homosexual's association with Europe to the West and disassociation with Russia to the East led to much conspiracy theorizing about Armenia caught once again in and between these forces. In this article, I draw on twelve months of ethnographic research from August of 2012 to August of 2013 in Yerevan, Armenia, during which I conducted interviews with right-wing nationalists, journalists, and leftist activists as well as participated in events and discussions with these groups. I suggest that the homosexual as a figure within these conversations is very telling of how feelings of sovereignty are structured in the post-Cold War era and especially in post-socialist worlds. As such, I trace some threads within public debates and conspiracy theories regarding Armenian sovereignty in the aftermath of these May of 2012 events.

I argue that these conspiracy theories were based on structures of feeling (Williams 1977), creating a sense that a kind of new Cold War was on the rise and was destabilizing Armenia's ability to remain as a sovereign nation with its own particular cultural values. I show how conspiracy theories form ways of knowing and understanding politics that have had major impacts on grassroots formations and actions in the country, even if largely based on feelings and associations that have little to no place in official discourse. Understanding sovereignty as a structure of feeling, I suggest, helps makes sense of how on-the-ground conspiratorial knowledge creates its own realms of debate and oppositional politics, making up new conceptions of the nation itself. While I draw upon the Armenian case study, situated in the South Caucasus, this article is meant to contribute to a wider interest in how sovereignty

is being negotiated in post-socialist contexts in the post-Cold War era in which the geopolitical is no longer defined by clear bilateral position. Much has been written on the European Union's (EU) effects and influences on LGBT rights activism as well as nationalist movements in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Woodcock 2009; Davydova 2012; Butterfield 2013; Fejes and Balogh 2013; Panayotov 2013, to cite just a few). While there has been some attention to "Eurasianism" as it makes up how LGBT activists understand the position of nation (Buelow 2012), I am here particularly attentive to Eurasianism's use of the figure of the homosexual as it makes up feelings of sovereignty within grassroots politics. The feeling of a new Cold War that I take up here has arisen out of the cultural feelings associated with Eurasianism in Vladimir Putin's Russia and the geopolitical competition between the EU and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) over Armenia. This structure of feeling regarding a new Cold War in the post-Cold War era has implications in understanding post-socialism's postcolonial mergings. I explore these connections at the end of the article and in the conclusion.

Threats to Sovereignty

In June of 2013, while homosexuality remained a major topic of discussion within Armenian public discourse even a year after the DIY firebombing, I interviewed Armen Mkrtichyan, the director of Hayazn. Hayazn, Mkrtichyan explained, had as its main mission the establishment of a "national government," or:

> A government of which control is founded by citizens and not extra-governmental institutions like the European Union or European this or that, etc. As in an independent government and a government in which citizens find themselves safe within, which, unfortunately, does not exist today in Armenia.

Mkrtichyan's contention was that Armenia had ceded national sovereignty to supranational organizations and foreign governments. During my fieldwork, grassroots actors on the left and the right used "Russia"

and the "West" as forceful elements charged with feelings and attached to certain values.

As scholars attentive to sexuality have argued, "East" and "West" are temporal figurations often measured by sexual progress toward freedom and liberation. Judith Butler (2008), employing the concept of "secular time," has argued that sexual politics is discursively understood as a measure of time, in which Modernity is the achievement of Europe whose sexual freedom is constituted by the lack of sexual freedom in other time-spaces, especially in the Middle East. Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa (2011) similarly argue that while Europe is understood to be following a "time of sequence" in which time moves progressively, CEE is understood as a mixture of times, or a "time of coincidence," in which times of past, present, and future are "knotted" together or "lopped" within the contemporary moment, and culture does not necessarily move only forward progressively. Borrowing on this concept, Samuel Buelow (2012) argues that in Kazakhstan, the ambiguous position of the nation between Europe, Eurasia, and Asia, culture (and especially its relation to sexuality) is understood as influenced by the times and linear progressions of all of these conceptual frameworks. As such, "East" and "West" are conceptual categories rather than geographical (Buelow 2012, 111). Shannon Woodcock (2011, 65) argues that the term "post-socialist" in itself becomes a gate-keeping term, positioning Central and Eastern Europe as in a different time and place by Western observers, on whom CEE countries are dependent to eventually "bestow recognition on its other," marking it as finally having arrived to capitalist and democratic time (no longer "post").

In Armenia, the two forces of "Russia" and the "West" are not only wholly conceptual of time and space, but chart a conceptual geography of supranational power. In other words, "Russia" and the "West" are concepts that get reattached to supranational alliances like the EU and the EEU, which are then seen to be exerting political force on Armenia. In the months after the homosexual panic in May of 2012, these conceptual geographies of political force were most often brought into play through the figure of the homosexual, understood as an important tool for geopolitical intervention, weaving actually existing political entities

like the EU and the EEU with enigmatic feelings manifested in conspiracy theories about Russia and the West. I suggest that these feelings must be contextualized within already existing internal tensions regarding national sovereignty.

Armenia became an independent nation-state after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it was already entrenched in a *de facto* war with neighboring Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno Karabagh, claimed as historically Armenian land, that would continue until 1994. During the war in the early 1990s, Armenia experienced extreme shortages in necessary resources like food, gas, water, and electricity. Because of these shortages as well as the disintegration of Soviet era systems of production and distribution, the new government instituted mass privatization. Thus, an oligarchy class closely linked to the government emerged, eventually liquidating the means of production (Astourian 2000) and causing widespread unemployment.[2]

These political and economic upheavals have had two major interconnected impacts on Armenians' feelings regarding sovereignty; first is distrust of members of the new government, felt to be concerned only with maintaining their own authority and accumulating wealth; second is a "crisis" in population of an already anxious "small nation" that survived Genocide in 1915 at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. In the years of the war with Azerbaijan an estimated 40% of the population fled the country's conditions of shortage.[3] While some have since returned, many continue to emigrate yearly, leading demographers to raise alarm (*ArmeniaNow* 2011). In addition to emigration, leaving the country with a feeling of being "emptied out," Armenia's fertility rate is also lower than it was during the Soviet era, at a stable 1.74 per woman since 2009 (Index mundi 2014).

While Mkrtichyan agreed that political crisis – the corruption of the new government and oligarchy class – were causes of the population crisis, he placed emphasis on disintegrating national values:

> Emigration will not stop until we have a government that respects its citizens and national values. After the national revolution, there will

> no longer be emigration. Of course, the economic situation will be fixed when a government who cares for its own *azg* [nation] is in place and allows people to be able to live comfortably. But, this will also be a government in which people will feel belonging because it is their nation and they will want to be a part of it. It is because people do not feel themselves as part of a nation here anymore that they want to leave.

In his conceptualizion of these problems and their interrelatedness, as the Armenian government's protection of Armenianness waned, Armenians felt forced to leave their *hayrenik*, fatherland, endangering the nation's very survival. While right-wing nationalists may oversize the impact of emigration on the viability of "Armenian values," there is evidence showing that these massive migrations have had long-lasting impacts on gender relations in the Republic as well as the region of Nagorno Karabagh, especially on the institutions of patrilineage and patriarchal households (Shahnazaryan 2008). The sense that those ruling over Armenia today are not protecting proper Armenian cultural values, is understood by Mkrtichyan, as well as many other right-wing nationalists, as a failure over maintaining *a properly Armenian sovereign domain*.

The kind of sovereignty Mkrtichyan was talking about was not the official territorial sovereignty that the government of the Republic of Armenia did in fact have. In other words, the Armenian government technically does have authority over the polity of internal affairs of the nation-state. This, for Mkrtichyan and many others, however, is a farce. Armenian national governance, a dream of a strong independence movement at the end of the Soviet era, had failed. The independence movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s had enveloped Armenians into "a common soul, a common mind, and (finally) a common feeling of national self-consciousness" (Abrahamian 1990, 72). The movement created a great deal of camaraderie and a euphoric sense of national unity, continuing to trace an historical legacy of fighting for Armenian freedom from foreign rulers that had emerged from political movements in the 19th century (Nalbandian 1963). As Harutyun Marutyan (2007) has argued, the beginnings of this movement in 1988 brought into play

the consequences of a lack of constitutional rights of Armenians by highlighting the 1915 Genocide. The 1988 pogroms against Armenians in Karabagh and Azerbaijan were popularly narrated as the "sequel" of Genocide (Marutyan 2007, 96–101). Criticisms of Russia's failures to intervene in the aftermath of these pogroms led to the re-emergence of a desire for sovereignty, rendering the Karabagh movement a national independence movement by 1989.

However, by 1996 mass protests called for the resignation of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first President of Armenia, claiming fraud during his second reelection. During the first four years of independence, the Republic of Armenia had transitioned from governance based on nationalist claims to sovereignty to one of oligarchs and their close friends. Razmik Panossian (2006, 225) calls this new formation a "postnationalist" government in "which elites are preoccupied with issues of power and economic gain and the main issues in the political sphere relate to socioeconomic policies and day-to-day concerns."

For the purposes of this article then, "right-wing nationalist," is not a reference to those affiliated with the government, nor with mass movements. Rather, actors have developed a new nationalist sentiment, forming an important thread of grassroots politics. For these right-wing nationalist actors like Mkrtichyan, the ideal of national governance was structured around Armenian values and its necessity for the nation's true sovereignty. As he explained during the interview:

> The government is not Armenian. The oligarchs are not Armenian. Yes, in terms of *azg* [nation] in the most simple form – blood – they are Armenian, but they do not value Armenians. They do not have Armenian values.

In this context, maintaining Christianity through the official Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian patriarchal family structure are geopolitical concerns. The Armenian government according to Mkrtichyan, in other words, does not place importance on the values that arise from these institutions, weakening the political entity of the Republic of Armenia and thus making it vulnerable to foreign intervention.

European Interference and the Homosexual

It was within this already tense situation regarding Armenian national sovereignty that the homosexual panics in May of 2012 emerged the homosexual as a threat. When I asked him about "human rights," Mkrtichyan quickly broached the topic of homosexuality in direct reference to European interference:

> To be honest, those movements in Armenia, human rights movements, are a little bit fake. Let me explain why. For example, for the rights of *hamaser-amolner* [faggots], people come out into the streets and have a march [he was referring to the Diversity March]. So, they raise artificial issues so that they can show Europe and say: "Look how in our country there are such problems." They say: "Give us $10,000 so that we can organize actions for this problem." But those problems don't exist. People who find themselves to be like that, with that orientation, and *chen qarozum* [do not spread propaganda], they will not have such problems. So, they have to show that these problems exist by creating propaganda and then show how people do not like their propaganda. Europe funds them so they can do this.

Here, Europe directly impedes on Armenian sovereignty when it funds organizations internally in order to spread "homosexual propaganda," already strongly associated with "European values." Mkrtichyan is drawing on similar affective feelings regarding European funding as have existed in Russia, leading to Vladimir Putin's July of 2012 signing into law a legislation which requires all non-profit organizations that receive funding from foreign sources and participate in local political activity to register as "foreign agents" (*Sputnik* 2015). Raising "artificial issues," for Mkrtichyan, meant that there was an active intention by European funders to incite political concerns in Armenia that in reality did not exist. Inciting these kinds of concerns leads to political unrest in the country, disturbing Armenian political processes from the outside, and leading to domestic vulnerability. While the logic here is conspiratorial, it is based on certain actually existing events. As Woodcock (2009) has noted, funding for LGBT organizations from EU governmental and

non-governmental organizations is often dependent on the showcasing of local state violence against LGBT persons.

Armine Ishkanian (2008) rightfully expresses suspicion about these notions of "European values" in post-Soviet contexts and how they relate to the realities of the transnational experience. Since the 1990s, she tells us, civil society is largely "portrayed by post-Soviet governments as unaccountable, meddling opportunists, foreign agents or 'puppets' for European interest" (Ishkanian 2008, 29). In Armenia, the local government understands NGOs as supported by Western organizations in order to "promote political demonstrations and regime change" (Ishkanian 2008, 29). But, Ishkanian contends, much of this thinking regarding the West, democratization, and suspicions of European funders is based on a sense of some pure Armenianness, a culture without influence from the outside.

While I agree on this point, understanding connotations of "Russia" and the "West" within structures of feeling rather than official discourse or "actual" political and economic processes, allows an interpretation of these connotations that takes seriously the ways in which conspiratorial logics impact the ways in which grassroots actors act within their social contexts and create useable knowledge. Raymond Williams (1977, 132) defines "structures of feeling" as "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt." David Eng (2010, 15) distinguishes this concept – or the "more ephemeral, intangible, and evanescent" feelings – from "formal concepts, structural analyses, and systematic beliefs." In other words, structures of feeling can be understood as those, which are experienced and lived, but not necessarily part of an official discourse. As Ronald Suny (2006, 288) has put it, "the receptivity in populations of nationalist appeals depends as much (or even more) on emotions as it does on rational calculation." But structures of feeling constructed through conspiracy theories *become* rational discourse, crystallizing forms of knowing and making sense of politics through various assumptions and suspicions that operate as fact. Ashot Voskanian (2007) describes this process as the "folklorization" of political discourse in Armenia.

The notion of Europe as exporter of homosexuality for the purposes of imperialism is in constant circulation and becomes truth through reitera-

tion. As such, this sense of homosexuality/Europeanness imbues political discussions. It is, of course, not a coincidence that Europeanization has come to take on strong attachments with homosexuality. As Nicole Butterfield (2013, 14–5) has argued in the case of Croatia, EU conditions for entry that depend on local anti-discrimination legislations with protections for sexual orientation have led to right-wing nationalist conspiracies regarding the spread of homosexuality in order to undermine national sovereignty. In this context, discourse about "European values" came out of documents used by transnational LGBT organizations themselves, who have been making use of the concept "European values" as tenets of progress and civilization to which countries entering the EU and the Council of Europe should also aspire (Butterfield 2013, 17–8). These are common experiences elsewhere in the world, including within the margins of Europe where the post-Soviet era has come to mean strenuous labor of "heterosexing" the nation (Waitt 2005), propelling popular sentiment that homosexuality is anti-national. In Asia, Dennis Altman (1997) has argued that LGBT activists must reckon with the "global gaze," constructing a particularly national version of gay identity that is only a reflection of its proper form in the West. As such, gay identity as requiring the gaze of the "global" has become a new form of cultural imperialism, always dependent on the recognition and in the form of what is culturally produced in the West. In the Middle East, Joseph Massad (2008) has termed this particular process the "gay international," in which local forms of homosexual practice are not only there to be recognized by the West through an imperial and Orientalizing gaze, but must be made visible in its particular forms of identity. LGBT activism in post-socialist countries is also based on transnational connections to and funding from Europe (Dioli 2011). Right-wing nationalists' readings of the Diversity March as gay pride parade in Armenia were based on associations of Europe with the export of homosexuality, especially through rituals (Davydova 2012) like the "gay parade." Thus, for Mkrtichyan, Hayazn as an organization, and for other right-wing nationalists it is these "European values" that threaten Armenia's own "national values" on which a properly Armenian "national governance" should be based.

Eurasianism and Russian Tactics

While structures of feeling are "emergent or pre-emergent [...] they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (Williams 1977, 131–2). Importantly here, anxieties regarding regime change and Western interference through extra-national values like homosexuality are structured by emergent rhetorics based on Russian influence. Right-wing nationalists in Armenia do not only focus on Europe as an outside force, but on Russia as well. While much of right-wing discourse emphasizes Europe, Russia, and the EEU often also come up as impediments to true Armenian sovereignty. As Mkrtichyan explained:

> Armenia is still not really Armenia. There is too much influence from Russia in governmental affairs, but also cultural influences. We don't yet understand ourselves as a nation with a national government. But our dignity as a nation depends on this.

While nationalists like Mkrtichyan contest European intervention, however, they do not necessarily place the same weight on Russian intervention, especially in the ways in which it is through Russian/Eurasian ideology that they frame Europe's interventions.

Russian Eurasianism, a "quasi-political and intellectual movement" (Shlapentokh 1997, 129) was first established by Russian émigrés in Europe during the Bolshevik revolution in the early 20th century (Kotkin 2015, 343–5). Today, Eurasianism has come to stand in for a kind of quasi-ethnic nationalism based on specifically Eurasian cultural, political, and economic values, often directly opposing what is considered "Western" (Nodia 2014; Lo 2015, 63–5). Putin and his administration have made use of neo-Eurasianism, influenced in part by the work of right-wing political scientist Alexander Dugin, who emphasizes the necessity for geopolitical aggression and is often described as "fascist" (Ingram 2001). As Timothy Snyder (2014) has argued, Putin's Eurasianism stands against Western global dominance, in which "the discrimination of gays is front and cen-

ter." "It's an attempt to create a kind of new ideology," Snyder explains, "whereby Russia can have some moral standing in the world." Putin's use of Eurasianism as a tool for geopolitical measures has necessitated its attachment to more easily attractive "values" than those of "autocracy promotion": anti-Western "immorality," especially gay rights as homosexual propaganda, and its positioning against Western military, economic, and political dominance (Nodia 2014, 143). As such, Armenian right-wing nationalists' anti-European feelings, especially those established by conspiracy theories regarding Europe's use of homosexuality to undermine national values, comes directly from Eurasian-based configurations.

Understanding Armenian right-wing nationalist notions of sovereignty means reading it as a feeling structured by the Cold War and its implications on global distribution of power. This reading must come between the lines of classical interpretations of sovereignty – or sovereignty as a juridico-institutional model – as well as the biopolitical interpretations "in favor of an unprejudiced analysis of the concrete ways in which power penetrates subjects' very bodies and forms of life" (Agamben 1998, 5). Both of these traditions come out of political theory interested in making sense of modern power within Western politics. More recently, however, the notion of multiple "modernities," understanding modernity outside of capitalism as well as liberal democracy (Kotkin 2001), demands new perspectives on modern politics that are neither "Eurocentric" nor "Euromodern" (Dirlik 2011). As such, Mkrtichyan's notion of national governance is based neither on juridico-institutionalism, nor on biopolitics. Rather, it is a merging of nationalist sentiment of self-determination – coming out of the 1980s and 1990s independence movement – and Eurasianism. In other words, his notion of sovereignty is structured not by official discourses of territoriality or the discipline of bodies (Foucault 1978) but by feelings of waning cultural values and the importance of these values for national governance. Right-wing nationalists regard state power in Armenia as legitimate only when it is ruled by Armenian national values. As such, the homosexual – felt to be a product of Europe and placing at threat Armenian configurations of family and patriarchy – threatens the nation's ability to govern itself through its own cultural values.

In May of 2012 the talk show *Post-Scriptum,* airing on *A+1 Network*, invited Marine Petrosyan, leftist poet, and Tigran Kocharyan, possibly the most popular right-wing nationalist blogger in Armenia, to take part in a discussion of the implications of the events of the firebombing and the Diversity March. During the discussion, the "West's" political and cultural influence came head to head with a feeling of particularly "Armenian" values:

> **Kocharyan:** Let me tell you the infamous story of the frog. When you throw a frog in boiling water, it immediately jumps out. But when you put it in cold water and slowly add heat, the frog dies. Now these are our options. They are trying to put us in a situation – where those same Americans, those French people – they arrived there through a period of a hundred or two hundred years to understand slowly that this is normal, it's something necessary.
>
> **Petrosyan:** So, now if finally the Americans and the French accept this, they have lost?
>
> **Kocharyan:** No. We have always lived in a society where homosexual propaganda does not exist and isn't all that well accepted. And now, by force, they are putting us in this position. Tomorrow they will say, "No! Homosexuals will get married…" You know, every nation has its own path to get to that point. There are nations that will get there and nations that won't. They are now throwing us in that boiling water. And that is why we [referring to right-wing anti-homosexual nationalists], are jumping out. Let there be more time, let this nation come to that on its own terms.
>
> **Petrosyan:** See now you are speaking in the name of the nation again [...]. Of course, if you are constantly scaring people – homosexuals are dangerous – repeating this over and over again, then how can they decide for themselves? Homosexual and anti-homosexual [you] are psychologically embedding these concepts within one another. (a1plusnews 2012)

The conflation of particular positions and opinions as that of the "nation" that Petrosyan is calling attention to is popularly expressed through the term *haykakan mentalitet,* or Armenian mentality (Ishkanian 2008, 47–8), the notion that Armenia has a fixed and pure set of values. The notion that Armenia is a particular *kind* of nation not suited to European values is directly borrowed from Eurasianist rhetorics stemming from Russia. As such, the framework through which Kocharyan is defining Armenian mentality, necessary for maintaining Armenian sovereignty in the post-Cold War era, is based on Russian understandings of anti-Europeanism and autocratic rule based on national values. Unlike the French, Kocharyan is insisting, Armenians cannot afford such individual freedoms. This rhetoric is akin to early Eurasianist notions of the "Slavic soul," as "individualism in its collective setting," necessitating totalitarian and despotic rule based on national – specifically Slavic – values (Shlapentokh 1997, 131).

The discussions surrounding the DIY firebombing and the Diversity March brought out other aspects of Eurasianism versus Europeanism as a post-Cold War struggle for geopolitical interests in Armenia as well. The DIY firebombing occurred on the early morning of May 8, 2012, just two days following parliamentary elections in which the ruling Republican Party gained more seats in office using the usual techniques of voter fraud (Mkrtchyan 2012), especially the erasure of stamps on passports for the submission of multiple votes per person (*Tert* 2012), ballot stuffing, voting in the names of the dead, exchanging votes for bribes and threats as well as misconduct during vote counts. Since 1996, post-election movements have almost always followed elections in Armenia. But there was no such movement in 2012, and as many of those whom I interviewed – on the right as well as on the left – argued, this had everything to do with the extensive attention paid to homosexuality.

When I interviewed Lala Aslikyan and Karen Hakobyan, two of the most vocal activists who spoke against the firebombing of DIY Pub, they explained that this was a tactic of manufacturing opposition between grassroots groups that the local Armenian government had learned from Russian government officials. As Hakobyan explained:

> They do not need leftists. But they also do not want a violent image themselves. So, how to get rid of these national enemies? They create an opposition between other groups who are willing to fight their cause – like these *Hayaznner* [members of Hayazn] and so on and now they have someone to fight for them. And the whole problem becomes nationalists against homosexuals and the government is free from any criticism. Russia did it with the skinheads. They created these groups who fight all of the homosexuals and leftists so that they do not have to deal with them. And, all of the attention then goes to these grassroots people and they have less attention on actual political and economic problems.

Hakobyan ties the tactic of distraction directly to Russia and, multiple times throughout the interview, referred to Armenia as a "little brother" of Russia, learning tricks from its big brother. Within this structure of feeling, Russia governs the tactics used by the governments of smaller Eurasian republics, now forming a union that is not the USSR, but some other kind of organization with less-than-licit affiliation and belonging. In other words, while Hakobyan is not necessarily invested in Armenian national sovereignty by way of cultural self-determination (he is an advocate of human rights, for example, through which he sees European intervention necessary), he understands Armenian sovereignty as a farce because of the political influence of Russian tactics. In this sense, Armenia is not a sovereign domain, but ruled by Russian tactics.

Others on the left make an even more direct link between Russia and Armenia. When asked about this distraction theory during the abovementioned discussion on *Post-Scriptum*, Petrosyan responded:

> It has become clear that we are dealing with some organized framework. But, I think that what is most dangerous here is that we are not dealing necessarily with something on a local level [...]. This is very much connected to Putin's plans regarding the Eurasian Union [...]. If Armenia has no other choice because of internal issues, then it will have to fall back on the shoulders of Russia. And I think that local government, as in Armenia's government, they know about this too

> and they are going along with it because they have their own benefits to gain from it. What are their benefits? Well, they get to hold on to their own power, which becomes stronger when the people are in panic and their attention is elsewhere and they do not bother them anymore. (a1plusnews 2012)

In this interpretation, the firebombing and the counter-protest against the so-called "gay parade" were not just determined by local governmental actors, but Putin himself, whose goals to "woo" (Anishchuk 2013) Armenia into the EEU involve plans to create social unrest within the small Republic, which will necessitate the Armenian government to eventually fall back on its shoulders. In other words, while some – like Aslikyan and Hakobyan – were concerned with a dynamic of power in which the Armenian government was learning tactics from Russia, on whom it depended, Petrosyan was claiming that these tactics were not just learned from Russians, but implemented by them.

Within these debates regarding the homosexual's role in geopolitics were heavy contestations regarding not only techniques of maintaining sovereignty, but traditions in sovereign will. For grassroots actors in Armenia, the nation has become the battleground for which the West and Russia compete over not just territory for markets and extraction, but forms of governance. The plays made by Europe and Russia, felt through conspiratorial logics of tactics, techniques, and threats, interfere with Armenia's ability to maintain its own governance. In different ways and through different political investments, these actors understand Armenia as non-sovereign and caught between the competition between Russia and the West. Homosexuality cannot be thought apart from the geopolitical oppositions of the superpowers and comes to be structured by the question of Armenian sovereignty.

Structures of Feeling Suspicion

As such, the homosexual, structuring and adding fuel to the feelings of Russia and the West as threats to national sovereignty, became an explicit grassroots object of contestation when it came to Armenia's politi-

cal decisions regarding EU alliance and its joining of the EEU. While Armenia's government was in the midst of working out these decisions, largely based on trade (Mkrtchyan 2009) and visa regulations (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015), these grassroots actors had their own structures of feeling regarding these alliances. In December of 2013, after President Serj Sargsyan had already announced that Armenia would be joining the EEU, a major rally took place in Yerevan, at which thousands of Armenians gathered to protest the government's talks with Putin. Following this rally, Tigran Kocharyan posted on *BlogNews.am*, a popular site that recirculates blog posts, Facebook statuses and news stories, giving them a wider audience since the site currently has over 400,000 "Likes" on Facebook alone. The post, entitled "Who in Armenia is spreading anti-European sentiment? Putin, or this flag-raising Europe-lover?" is short, but does a lot of work nonetheless.

02.12.2013 17:01

Ո՞վ է Հայաստանում հակաեվրոպական տրամադրություններ գրգռում՝ Պուտի՞նը, թե էս դրոշը պարացնող եվրոպասերը

Tigran Kocharyan

★★★☆☆

Հայկական իրականություն-2.

Ախր, որ մի բան ասում են, միանգամից արծագանքում են, թե Եվրոպան միայն գեյերի հավաքածու չի, իզուր եք էժանագին պրոպագանդա անում:

Ասելուց հետո էլ գեյ-դրոշը վերցնում են ու հայդա հակառուսական մծծինգի:

Հիմա հարց. Ո՞վ ա Հայաստանում հակաեվրոպական տրամադրություններ գրգռում՝ Պուտի՞նը, թե էս դրոշը պարացնող եվրոպասերը:

Կամ երթի մեջ լիքը մարդ կա, բա չեն ասում, արա, այ ռուսական ԿԳԲ-ի գաղափարները պրոպագանդող ագենտ, էտ դրոշդ վեկալ ու.....

Նյութի աղբյուր՝ https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10202695626217194&set=a.1262801135535.2040942.13949217...

Կայքում տեղ գտած մտքերն ու տեսակետները հեղինակի սեփականությունն են և կարող են չհամընկնել BlogNews.am-ի խմբագրության տեսակետների հետ:

Kocharyan's commentary reads as follows:

> But come on, anytime someone says anything it doesn't at once mean that Europe is only a congregation of gays. You are just making petty propaganda.
>
> But then right after they tell you this, they take their gay flag and appear at an anti-Russian rally.
>
> So now let me ask you: Who in Armenia is provoking anti-European sentiment? Putin, or the Europe-loving raiser of this flag?
>
> Or, there are lots of people in that march, why don't they tell that person hey, you agent of KGB propaganda and ideology, take that flag and…[4]

Kocharyan uses the image of a "gay flag" at an anti-EEU rally, to refute the criticisms of his own ideas as "petty anti-European propaganda." The "gay flag" at the march becomes proof that anti-Russian sentiment *is* automatically pro-European and being pro-European is being pro-gay. The other people in the crowd, he argues, do not problematize this homosexual symbolism, indicating it has widespread support among those opposing Armenia's inclusion in the Eurasian Union. In this reading, moreover, the flag-raising "Europe-lover" is performing *anti-European* propaganda rather than *pro-European* by highlighting the perversion and destruction an alliance with the European Union will bring to Armenia. While Kocharyan found Petrosyan's claims ridiculous – about Russian interference in Armenian politics by inciting talk of homosexuality that would ultimately produce social unrest – he develops his own version of such a theory. The inherently conspiratorial logic here is that the Armenian government, wanting to push the citizens of the country toward approval of Russian alliance, allows the appearance of the "gay flag" at the rally to show those present and those who may watch the protest later on television, what a turning away from Eurasia will look like. In other words, if those protesting

see Russia as a problem for Armenian domestic policy and economics, the appearance of the "gay flag" reminds them of a much larger threat: Europe.

Political corruption has created a sense that the government is constantly hiding something, emerging paranoid readings to explain what is *actually* going on. The moral failings of those in government have also produced widespread beliefs that the government does not care for its citizens and thus offers no protection against national annihilation. Members of government, then, become credible agents of the nation's undoing. Armenia's abrupt decision to join the EEU, having shown almost no indication beforehand that it would take such a turn, was no exception to this lack of transparency. President Serj Sargsyan made the decision immediately after negotiations with Putin in Moscow in September of 2013, even though just a few weeks prior, he had indicated that this would be very unlikely. Furthermore, members of Sargsyan's government, like Shavarsh Kocharyan, deputy minister for foreign affairs, had made claims that the EEU would mean "saying goodbye to one's sovereignty" (quoted in Grigoryan 2015). Such an abrupt decision emerged various conjectures, theories, and assertions within grassroots politics, often involving the newfound figure of the homosexual. Abrupt decisions like these also highlight the disorderly ways in which geopolitical alliances in the post-Cold War era are produced. Without established universal ideologies within the contemporary moment, it is no longer clear in what direction – East or West – the Armenian government will be swayed.

Sovereignty Between Post-socialism and Postcolonialism

The emergence of these new configurations out of the old Cold War era superpowers – Russia through the EEU and the "West" through the EU – cannot be understood through the old bilateral forms of global power distribution. Rather, these emerging alliances are exactly that: emergent. Understanding sovereignty in this way, as a structure of feeling not yet determined but in-the-making, has implications for grasping the complicated nexus of power negotiations within post-socialist

worlds, and, especially the ways in which post-socialism is coming to seem like a new kind of post-Cold War postcolonialism. For Williams (1977), understanding politics and culture through structures of feeling rather than already established official histories allows comprehension of the worlds that are always emerging rather than what those in power claim them to be. The post-Cold War era is particularly suited to analyses based on structures of feeling precisely because official narratives themselves seem out of grasp, opaque and lacking transparency. It is within this context of absent official ideology that the figure of the homosexual becomes particularly charged.

Following the presidential elections in February of 2013, human rights defenders, activists on the left and the right as well as thousands of other Armenians opposed official results (Sakunts and Grigoryan 2014) through a national post-election movement. One afternoon, after attending one of the many rallies that were held in Liberty Square from February to April of 2013, some friends and I got into a cab to get to a dinner party. In the cab, Gevorg the driver, looked slightly irritated by the crowds dispersing after that day's rally, crowding the streets and crosswalks. "You don't support the movement?" asked my friend, who sat in the passenger seat. "It's not that I don't support it," Gevorg answered. "I feel for the people. I feel for my own family. But what's the point?" My friend was not satisfied with this answer. "The point is to do something. Maybe it won't change anything, but doing nothing won't change anything either." But Gevorg had another sense of how electoral politics and government operated in Armenia. As he sped up on the wider Baghramyan St., he explained Armenia's political situation as such:

> In Armenia, the government and all of these puppets are placed there by the real power – Russia. They have already decided who will be the President. They have already decided who will run things, how the future will look. Armenia doesn't have a government. Russia is the real governing power. Even if hundreds of thousands of people came out tomorrow – you know, like during the Independence movement – it

> wouldn't change anything. Because it is not up to the people and it is not up to Armenia. If you want to change something, you have to go all the way up, until you reach the Russian authorities working behind closed doors.

This statement echoed many others I had heard during my fieldwork. As Grigor, a leftist environmental activist, explained during an interview I conducted with him in March of 2013:

> Armenia's entrance into the *Maqsayin Miyutyun* [Customs Union, or the EEU] will mean that Armenia will just become a colony of Russia. This is not like the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union allowed many economic rights for Armenia. This will be like the Soviet Union without any of the benefits.

Politics was felt as something that occurred as an exchange between a few elite at the top in connection to their own personal gain, often involving transnational networks. In these kinds of claims, Armenian authorities are involved in selling out Armenian land, resources as well as sovereignty neither for the benefit of the nation, nor for larger-than-national ideological belonging. Rather, for their own personal gain.

Gevorg's and Grigor's claims have much in common with those of nationalists like Mkrtichyan in that they are framed largely through conspiratorial logics regarding power; they are not founded on what is, but what *likely is*, based on loose evidence and conjectures situated within macro-political domains. However, those particular understandings in which Armenia is a not a sovereign territory but becomes the political domain of Russian dominance, differ from those of right-wing nationalists. While Mkrtichyan focuses anti-imperialist considerations on Europeanism and the EU as a supragovernmental force, his discourse is embedded in Eurasian rhetoric and, as such, is made up of what leftist actors regard a new frontier of imperialism – that of Russia. It would also be important to note, however, that for leftist activists like Grigor – as well as Aslikyan, Hakobyan, and Petrosyan – the questioning of

Russian influence on Armenian internal affairs similarly does not come with criticisms of European intervention.

Conspiracy theories arose out of the Cold War context in which "client states and most regions were shaped by the interventions, subversions, and intimidations pursued in the interests of a global conspiratorial politics of the superpowers" (Marcus 1999, 2). Now, in the post-Cold War era, these same superpowers – conceptualized through "Russia" and the "West" – and their ongoing "behind closed door" deals are re-emerging the feelings of the Cold War itself in the sense that there is a new Cold War in the making. The homosexual, as defining cultural belonging to these geopolitical forces, is central for the development of this new order – or rather, what Bobo Lo (2015) has called, the new world *disorder*, the contemporary breakdown in universal ideology. Within the new world disorder, Lo (2015, xvii) maintains, there is a tension between actual worlds and worlds of perception, structured by felt crises regarding the perseverance of governance.

In Armenia, it is no longer clear who is an ally, who is an enemy, and who determines political and economic conditions in the country, leading to contestations not only around what is best for the nation's well-being, but also around the very facts of what is, in reality, happening. This sense of an unknowableness of who is the governing/dominating force falls squarely within the themes of ambivalence and elusiveness within the emerging literature on the links between postcolonialism and post-socialism. For example, in an article on how LGBT persons identify Kazakhstan with Europeanism, Eurasianism, and Asianness, Buelow (2012) argues that it is precisely the ambivalent position of the nation within these conceptual frameworks that LGBT activists borrow from each and all to situate their senses of progress and practices of activism. Similarly, but in the different context of understanding Latvia's "historical myth" as a nation with its own colonial past, Dace Dzenovska (2013) suggests that the elusiveness of these feelings place Latvia in a strange position within the historical logic of Western, free market, capitalist, and democratic states and the post-socialist world of inherent difference to that very logic of coloniality. In other words, Latvia's

claims to a colonial past only seem strange or out of place because colonialism has been reserved and used within popular as well as academic publications to define the history of a particular (Western European) region. These ambivalences and not-quite-there-yet situatedness of CEE, Central Asia, and the Caucasus within new processes of imperialism and colonization can be understood as products of the in-betweenness of time and space – the Empires of then and now. Positioned within the chain of Western foreign aid for governmental and non-governmental agencies and organizations for the restructuring of human rights and governance (Wedel 2001) and the newly fraught relationship with the ex-centralizing force of Russia, post-socialist, and post-Soviet republics reckon with the conditions and conditionalities of both, affecting feelings of national sovereignty in wholly new ways.

Nataša Kovačević (2014, 334) terms the reconstitution of Empire in the post-socialist world as "consensual empire," in which "overt exclusions of difference no longer mark the current world order, but rather conditional inclusions into the global capitalist 'family' based on a host of meritocratic criteria." Rather than ordering through an inherent difference in which periphery becomes the zone of extraction for the metropole, these criteria situate the post-socialist world in a process of becoming the same as the West; not through force, but through levels of consent. In Armenia, as in other post-socialist republics, Cold War era notions of alliance through "first" and "second" worlds become messier as EU demands and conditions places expectations on all coming closer to Western free market, capitalist and liberal state. This is precisely the frame within which to locate Eurasianist discourse that puts forth a new rhetoric of difference to that project of sameness. If the EU and the figuration of "West" are propelled by liberalism, Eurasianism is understood to be moved by its opposition to this, namely, a politics of illiberalism, contesting the very logic of consensual empire of sameness by introducing loosely defined notions of difference like anti-homosexuality.

Scholars of post-socialism have been apt to point out that an important difference between Western Empire and Soviet state was the difference in ideologies and the circulating discourses that propped them up as

governing projects (Yurchak 2006; Chari and Verdery 2009). Katherine Verdery (Hann et al. 2002, 16), arguing that examining post-socialism through postcolonial studies can open up into new directions, points out a key difference between the ways in which Western Europe and the Soviet union produced colonial dominance in various satellite and periphery sites: the USSR accumulated the means of production through "allocative power," insulating its dependencies from capitalism's forms of accumulation based on plans for ideological transformation. What marks these projects as different in the post-Cold War era is precisely the indeterminacy of the colonizing force as well as the indeterminacy of the ideologies through which they rule.

Grigor, the environmental activist who contextualized the EEU as colonization, highlights precisely this difference through a temporal framework between now and then: the Soviet Union allowed for economic rights for Armenians and inclusion within distribution systems (based on the ideologies of socialism). While Armenians in the Soviet era did not have the kind of national sovereignty that the independence movement strived for, the USSR was not necessarily understood as a colonial system (at least not in Armenia). *Post-socialism,* however, comes to indicate something more akin to postcolonialism, than socialism's comparison to colonialism. In other words, grassroots actors in Armenia feel as if a system of allocation and negotiation of rule between metropole and periphery, or "open sovereignty" in the Caucasus (Grant 2009), is being replaced by a situation of extraction and dominance. But, unlike during the Cold War, when power distribution seemed clear (although the tactics were messy), within this new Cold War, exactly who is doing the extraction and dominating does not seem to be determined by an official state position. In other words, post-socialism has created an entirely new postcolonial context in which there are heavy debates regarding who indeed is maintaining sovereignty over whom and in what ways, requiring new versions of national purity in the face of new and multiple threats on national sovereignty.

Conspiracy theories have a magical and mystical quality to them (Grant 1999). Drawing on Verdery's (1996) work in Romania, Grant

(1999, 244) argues that in Russia the Mafia and its mystical co-symbolization with a class of rich "New Russians," comes to replace the "visible hand" of the state with the "invisible hand" of the market. However, post-Cold War social anxieties are situated not only in aggressive forms of market economy but concerns around sovereignty as questions of power and geopolitical alliance have become murky. This new Cold War, rather than on the grounds of official state ideologies, is based on opposition between Russia/Eurasia and the West through feelings about and attachments to loosely defined "values" like (anti) homosexuality.

Conclusion

The advent of homosexual talk in Armenia, which has become a staple of popular press and activism on the left and on the right is felt by many grassroots actors to be a major weapon in this new world, where Armenian cultural values are being negotiated by intergovernmental and foreign powers without the consent of those who make up the nation and with no regard for national values. Armenia's corrupt post-Soviet government – already understood as a problem for national sovereignty – is felt to be making the nation vulnerable to penetration by foreign influence as well as political intervention. Within right-wing rhetoric, Europe stands as the main looming threat, especially through its use of homosexuality as an imperialist tactic. These organizations and individual nationalist actors, however, borrow from Eurasianist discourse to frame these concerns. For leftists it is not Europe who is intervening for the purposes of extraction, but rather Russia. Within this framework, not only does Armenia learn certain political tactics from Russia (especially in how to make use of the homosexual), but Russian officials directly create political unrest so that the government will have no choice but to join with its new alliance.

Scholars of post-socialism interested in sexuality have paid significant attention to EU demands and conditions for entry and how it affects LGBT life and activism in ascendant and neighborhood countries. The research in this article, however, has also pointed to the importance

of understanding Russia's role within post-socialist – especially post-Soviet – nations and its implication on nationalist movements through discourses on homosexuality. The very understanding of sovereignty deployed by right-wing nationalists is akin to the forms shaped by Eurasian thought. These debates, I have shown, center on the homosexual as a pivot around which Russian and Western difference define themselves and are defined by actors on the ground. In other words, the new Cold War and its geopolitics, felt to be affecting Armenian sovereignty, are played out through loosely defined cultural attachments.

While this article has focused on nationalist debates regarding the impact of homosexuality in and between Russia and the West on Armenia's national sovereignty, this research also has implications on how we make sense of actually existing LGBT life-worlds. Thus, further research on sexuality in the post-socialist world needs to contend with geopolitics and the remaking of nation through differing notions of sovereignty. While paying attention to EU demands is important and necessary, the full picture must also include the ways in which local nationalist movements are structured by feelings regarding sovereignty and how they make sense of the EU in relation to other forms of dominance such as Eurasianism. In other words, what place does sexuality have in the nation's will to overcome new post-Cold War threats to sovereignty?

These discussions around sovereignty have implications for postcolonial thought in the post-Cold War. As the Armenian government continues to meet demands, constraints, and negotiations with the Russian-led EEU and the EU, Armenians continue to debate what forms of sovereignty the nation retains, negotiates, and loses. Postcolonialism should not be understood here as the cultural legacy of Soviet colonialism, as the USSR was not generally regarded as a colonial entity. Rather, post-socialism in the context of waning universal ideology configured around decisive positionality, is emerging new postcolonial structures of feeling. Within the post-socialist postcolonial, the legacy of imperialist and dominating forces is still undetermined. Grassroots actors might all agree that Armenia is losing its sovereignty, but to whom and how are

problems yet to be resolved. Williams' (1977) concept of structures of feeling is useful in understanding sovereignty within the post-Cold War world, especially within the post-socialist context, as a lack of official discourse on geopolitics manifests into conspiracy theories that seek to make sense of a new world order yet to take full shape (if it ever will). In whatever direction – with whatever alliances, exploitations, extractions, and imperialisms – the homosexual has proven to be an explosive weapon in the waging of the geopolitical contest between the new Russia and the new West.

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NOTES

1. All interviews conducted by the author were in Armenia and translated by the author into English. All discussions cited here similarly took place in Armenian and were subsequently translated into English by the author.
2. The current (2016) official unemployment rate – defined by those who are actively seeking work in the country as a percentage of the total labor force – provided by the Central Bank of Armenia is 19.6% (Trading Economics 2016).
3. The United Nations Development Program (Jijiyan 2009) estimates that in 1992–1993, 980,000–990,000 people left the Republic of Armenia, while some did return later (1993–1994). The total emigration is estimated to have been about 610,000–620,000.
4. *BlogNews.am*. http://blognews.am/arm/news/110247/ov-e-hayastanum-hakaev-ropakan-tramadrutyunner-grgrum-putiny-te-es-droshy-paracnox-evropasery.html (accessed on February 4, 2014).