

## TRANSCRIPT

# "FROM THE FRONTLINES OF LGBTI RIGHTS ADVOCACY IN RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND GEORGIA"

*A Conversation With Taras Karasiichuk, Igor Kochetkov, and Ana Rekhviashvili  
Moderator: Maxim Anmeghichean*

\* \* \*TRANSCRIBER NOTE: CORRESPONDENT AND INTERVIEWEES ACCENTS ARE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND AT TIMES\* \* \*

### **ANNOUNCER:**

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### **MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:**

Hello to everybody and welcome-- to this event about LGBTI rights-- situation in central and eastern Europe with a particular focus in countries in former USSR. We have a pool of three amazing, inspiring activists from the region, from Russian, Ukraine, and Georgia. We'll hear from-- from them three presentations which will take about 40 to 45 minutes.

And then, we'll open the floor for discussions and questions that you may have to them. We also have interpretation-- and Igor from Russian, from the Russian LGBT network-- will be using interpretation services. And when he makes his presentation, it will be translated consecutively. As you know, maybe some of you-- LGBTI rights situation in-- former USSR-- has been experiencing a backlash over the last three to five years.

This backlash takes form of legislative proposals and legislation passed that prohibits the so called propaganda of homosexuality to minors. Russia was the pioneer of such

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legislation, having passed the first piece-- of-- legislation at the original level in the city of Resan about six years ago. And as we heard this year, this legislation was also passed at the federal level.

Similar laws are discussed across the region and, in some cases, passed. In Moldova, there is a series of-- ordinances that have been passed at the local and regional level that-- declare villages and cities across the country as the so called gay free zone and which also ban organization of any public events. In Ukraine, legislators want to go ever further and not only to introduce administrative but also criminal-- punishment for the so called propaganda of homosexuality with terms of imprisonment of up to five or seven years.

Similar legislation has also been discussed in Lithuania. And-- over the last few months, we heard statements from politicians in Armenia, in-- Azerbaijan, in Kurdistan, in Kazakhstan-- and a number of other countries. So-- this backlash, this legislative backlash is obviously very serious. Apart from that, we can see that the church, the Russian Orthodox church in particular is taking an active-- a very active stance against LGBTI rights.

We also see an emergence of so called family values coalitions that stage anti-LGBTI protests throughout the countries in the former Soviet Union block. We also see that the environment in which LGBTI human rights defenders work is becoming more and more dangerous. And it is a very dangerous exercise to organize a public event in support of LGBTI rights pretty much anywhere in the former USSR.

All (UNINTEL) supports work off courageous activists throughout the region including in Russia. Russian LGBT network coming out and a number of other-- LGBTI rights groups. In Ukraine, our foundation, the Renaissance Foundation, supports the efforts of the anti-discrimination coalition, which is a civil society coalition which advocates and pushes for adoption of the anti-discrimination legislation in Ukraine which is inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity.

And we also support LGBTI rights efforts-- in Georgia, where the situation is a little better. But how much better, we are gonna find out from the presentation from Ana who is the-- policy-- director and the director of the community center of the LGBTI rights organization called Identoba. And it is Ana that I give the floor to first. Thanks.

## **ANA REKHVIASHVILI:**

Thank you. Thank you very much. I would love to give you a pre-- presentation to give you an overview of what's going in the country. I'll first introduce myself. I'll give you a little bit of context of what's going on in Georgia. And I'll talk more specifically about the possibilities of the Russian-- similar to Russia loss that might be introduced to parliament pretty soon. And I'll also introduce you with my vision of what LGBT activists and organizations need to do next in Georgia to, you know, prevent similar processes that are going on in Russia.

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So my name is Ana Rekhviashvili community center (UNINTEL PHRASE) an LGBT organization which was established three years ago in Georgia. We started off as a small community organization. We were really small. We did a lot of community services. And we really managed to gather a lot of LGBT people who were ready to fight for-- for the right-- rights for over those three years. And I-- consequ-- next-- next thing we started to do was to, you know, starting doing advocacy with other human rights organizations, the government.

And that's pretty much what we're doing now. But with the emergence, we-- what-- what we managed to do was to, you know, give certain publicity to LGBT issues and public discourse. Because, before, all the issues would be muted. Like, nobody would talk about LGBT issues at all in Georgian context. The visibility grew. But with the growth of-- growth of LGBT-- visibility, the backlash also grew a lot.

And I think it's not only backlash to LGBT issues per se, but it's also attendance. You have growing nationalism in countries like Georgia, which is very much an echo of what's going on in Russia. So we have a church that really got stre-- strengthened over the past few years with a lot of governmental money and with a lot of public support. And the church who now tries to, you know, reclaim its power by trying-- by picking up the issues that are especially sensitive for the society.

And that's what happened on May 17th this year. I think that was a pretty good illustration of the point 'cause on May 17th, we planned the rally on International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. Around 200, 300 people were supposed to come at the rally. The rally was really, really moderate. We tried only to have anti-discrimination posters.

Like, nothing positive or proactive, just like reactive sort of. You know? Messages. However, simultaneously, church was able to mobilize over 40,000 people in the streets of the (UNINTEL) to violently attack us. And there was a violent, violent, you know, attack on the plant rally. However, the police were-- was somehow well mobilized to take all the activists away. But not mobilized all to keep the counter protesters away from us.

So the injuries were not so-- physical injuries were not so bad. However, the trauma and also this, like, demonstration of such public violence was I-- I think was the first incident of what-- what happened in the country. That-- that happened in the country on that issue. So yeah-- so-- but these incidents perked a lot of public discussion on LGBT issues, which has, you know, some positive and some negative effects.

The positive effects are that the government started to openly-- at least on the verbal level, openly support LGBT rights, some of LGBT rights. Like the prime minister set, for example, that everyone has the right to assembly, which is a good thing. The other thing which I think you're all interested is-- is that many a position parties rely with the church and-- or rally with the church.

And they started to agitate. They started to get societal support by advocating for anti-gay propaganda laws or even-- how is that? Like there is one marginal party that

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is now going around the country. It's very well organized also, like, how they are set up. And they are collecting signatures to initiate the-- initiate a constitutional change that would define marriage clearly between man and woman. And they say that this is a preventive-- mechanism so that, in 20 years, nobody in Georgia would ask for a gay marriage.

And this is totally absurd. But what it indicates is that these parties try to get political power by, you know, manipulating with the issue. Other than that, some of the initiative groups very openly speak about gay propaganda too. And the problem with that (NOISE) is that-- this idea of gay propaganda somehow is very well-- the arguments that-- that support anti-gay propaganda laws, prepared by the Russian church by the way and then copied by the Georgian actors, are very appealing to the majority of the people who say that we're against violence.

So that violence is not acceptable for people. However, you know, don't impose your values on me sort of appeals to most of the people. And that's the scary part. And the scary part there is also the government's reaction to it. Because after May 17th, many of the parliamentarians were in the majority now. They also sort of voiced similar arguments.

However, with a lot of international pressure, they had to stop. But if these such laws get introduced to the parliament, I'm still not sure how it would work. So there is-- there is some tension. Also what-- you know, what also sort of hints to support of newer problems is that the government's response to the May 17th was not quite adequate. What they did is that they basically did not really execute anybody who organized the violent rally in the-- in the streets of (UNINTEL).

And those people basically attacked the police. They literally-- they-- they violated public order the whole day. But the government didn't really respond to it. Two people were given 50 Euro fines, administrative fines. And two priests-- (COUGHING) were taken to the court. And one of them was already released for insufficient evidence.

So that pretty much indicates the political will of, you know, fighting what's happening in the country. The scary part there is also that the church is really-- has a lot of power. And to me, it seems that the government is actually afraid of the church. 'Cause after the rally, the messages from the church were not directed at LGBT activists at all. The church was addressing the government.

They said, "We gathered thousands. We can gather millions. Elections are coming." You know, you look up to what you say. So it was really not about us anymore. And then the government turned out to be weak in the situation. Really, scares me a lot. That's one thing. (COUGHING) The other thing is that what we can do with it. And I'll try to brief and some-- to give others the space. How much time I have left (UNINTEL)?

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

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## ANA REKHVIASHVILI:

Okay, thank you. So what I see we need to-- needs to be done is for us to-- because Georgia has a very anti-Russian attitude. And Georgian people have very, very anti-Russian attitude. So I think once strategic di-- direction of our work would be to, you know, expose Georgian church as coping Russian church and government's agenda. That would, like-- that-- that-- that would pretty much-- that-- that would be strong enough argument against everybody who-- who agitates for-- anti-gay propaganda laws.

So I think that will be one part of our work. Other thing is mobilizing civil society to, you know, have larger voice when we try to advocate for something. 'Cause before, most of the human rights actors in the country, they wouldn't w-- were-- want to cooperate with us. You know? We would work together. We would write the statement.

They would publish a statement with our ad-- without our name on it. But like, now I think after May 17th, some of the actors became more proactive because it became very visible that it's not only about us. It's about the power of a traditional force that can, you know, like, target anybody at any time. (COUGHING) I think a lot of direct work with the government is needed to be done.

We-- we will try to advocate for specific policies in education and like health s-- systems so that the government is sensitized towards-- LGBT discrimination. And also, it becomes proactive 'cause at the-- at this moment, most of the government representatives think that if they say they're not discriminating against LGBT people or they're not homophobic, it's enough. They think that this is achievement in itself and nothing else needs to be done because we're not homophobic.

"Hey," you know, "Look at us." So-- so I think it's very important to start working proactive work with the government. And the first step is also working with the police, 'cause also after May 17th, the height-- the hate crime rate was, like, unbelievable. The office was full of people being, like, beaten up, beaten up and beaten on their skin and kicked in leg-- kicked between their legs and whatever. It was really awful.

So police needs to, you know, have the skills to (UNINTEL). And the other thing is that working individually with the parliamentarians that are more or less open minded, 'cause there are some, a few, quite a few. But they're always scared to, you know, openly state their opinions. So what I see is important is to empower those liberal minded parliamentarians to speak up their minds when it's necessary.

And you know, like to develop, again, this course of arguments that would make sense for them and that would appeal to either public too, 'cause that's the-- like, that's the key issue here. Thank you my-- very much for your attention. If you will have any questions, I'll be glad to answer. Thank you.

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## MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:

Thank you Ana. It reminds me that a few years ago in internal activist discussions and someone would say that this would be happening in Georgia. Probably people would say that, you know, they did not see that coming, as we probably did not see the anti-propaganda laws coming in Ukraine. And I also remember very vividly the-- (COUGHING) discussion in Russia when the anti-propaganda law was introduced in St. Petersburg and the activists were saying, "No way. No way they're gonna do it just before the presidential elections."

And yet, they did. So there was no way this was gonna happen in Ukraine. And yet, it's happening. And there are two things happening at the same time. On the one hand, there are a few versions of the anti-propaganda law that offer various degrees of punishment for the so called propaganda.

On the other hand, there is also very active discussion under the pressure from the European union of a comprehensive anti-discrimination bill which could be inclusive of sexual orientation if it is amended. So about these two pieces of legislation and the work that is happening in Ukraine, you'll hear from Taras Karasiichuk who is also the leader of Kiev Pride.

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Yes. First of all, it's a pleasure for me to be here. And a little bit-- shortly about the (UNINTEL) in Ukraine. I think that-- the first discussion about anti-propaganda law in Ukraine was in 2007 when-- our-- some (UNINTEL) allow-- contra-- homos-- homosexualism-- began to gather s-- signature.

And-- in two years, I think-- they submit to our-- government around-- 100,000-- signed. So-- the first reason-- to appear-- such anti-propaganda law was-- pressures from-- homophobic movement-- which is very strong-- in Ukraine. And (UNINTEL) this year also-- this-- homophobic movement-- implement a lot of-- public-- information campaign against-- against-- homosexuality. That-- and-- they just prepared such a base for-- the current-- for-- for this current situation.

Because-- right now, I-- I just cannot-- I-- I think that in all spheres-- in political level and on social level, the situation-- very-- dangerous and-- very homophobic. As-- Maxim already-- already said-- we have in our parliament two-- different-- anti-propaganda law. First-- is-- like a relatives of-- very well-known-- bill-- 87-- 8711 which was-- submitted to-- our parliament--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Yes, in the-- in-- in-- in the-- in the-- (UNINTEL)-- which was adopted in the first reading. This bill-- doesn't-- recognize good. What-- what does it mean?

Propaganda and punishment there-- just administrative. But s-- but next-- bill-- 1120--  
- 1122-- he is more dangerous-- because-- it's-- it's already was set that-- the  
punishment-- which is-- mentioned in this-- law-- has also criminal--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

The criminal-- criminal-- criminal responsibility-- till seven year-- for-- for-- for-- for  
propaganda of homosex-- gom-- homosexuality. But-- I believe and we-- we believe  
that-- such a bill will not be adopted because-- Ukraine right now-- has very strong  
discussion with the European union. In November, maybe we'll be sign some--  
association agreement with this-- Eur-- European union. In-- in Ukraine, we-- have  
just now two-- different process.

First, this-- movement toward-- signing the-- association agreement. And-- and  
second is-- liberalization. Yes, with-- with-- with the liberalization movement. And I  
think-- and-- one of-- very important point to-- continue this visu-- with the  
liberalization process is-- to adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimina-- anti-  
discrimination law. Several-- I think it's already several months ago in parliament  
was submitted, created by-- our government, a bill of-- comprehensive-- anti-  
discrimination law.

They are-- in which-- sexual orien-- orientation mentioned only in libel court. And as  
I know, as we spoke with-- with our-- European commiss-- European-- our European  
union mi-- mission in Kiev that-- in Ukraine that it's even-- it's-- it's not-- it-- it  
wasn't enough for European union that-- sexual orientation was mentioned on the--  
in libel court because-- there was some requirement from European union side that  
their-- sexual orientation must be mentioned in the--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Yes, yes, in the-- in-- in the basic-- in the basic notions, not only in the-- libel court.  
But-- right now-- we have-- and right now, this-- libel court-- as this anti-  
discrimination law are discussing. And discussing very-- I don't know.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Very-- yes, and-- and discussing very-- very-- very intensively. And-- as I know-- that--  
- our parliament passed point-- this-- bill. And-- they just tried to find some  
possibility not to adopt-- not-- not-- not-- not to pass such-- such a bill. And-- it was  
very-- very bad surprise for me because-- we just have in our parliament-- one little

bit liberal-- political power. It's-- party of-- Klitchko (PH).

Part-- party to (UNINTEL) and they-- they said that in principle, they will support such anti-discrimination law. But after-- submitting-- to this party some requests, once more again, will you support such-- such-- a bill-- they answered that-- "We will support this anti-discrimination law only in case when-- only without-- mention of-- LGBT-- and-- sexual-- sex-- sexual orientation.

So right now, we have no-- deputy. We have no power in our parliament which supports such a law. I think our government, it's more-- I think it's more-- not liberal. It's a little bit-- better in case of-- LGBT right because-- we have some-- a good example of cooperation with-- our government. It's-- holding-- Kiev Pride-- March-- this year. It was first-- first ever gay-- gay-- gay pride. And we had a lot of (UNINTEL). And it was successful-- because-- for one-- 100-- participants-- was around-- several thousand policemen. And every-- the protection was organized-- was organized-- good-- good enough. What's happened-- in the future, I-- I-- I-- I just cannot--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

--mention because the situation right now, it's very difficult because we have-- tremendous-- pressure from Russia's side. We have-- very huge informational campaign against-- European integration. The number of people-- which-- don't support-- European integration-- in Greece-- and-- the situation become worse. And-- in general, as I see that-- our civil society movement and pro-European part-- pro-European part of our society cannot give-- good response to such a huge and good organized-- anti-European and homophobic movement. Okay, I think that's all. Thank you for your attention.

## MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:

Thank you Taras. And I guess the next speaker is Igor. And he'll tell us more about the situation in Russia. And I would be curious, Igor, also to hear your opinion about how much Russia is involved in pushing for some of this legislation in other countries in former USSR. And answers to some of the traditional Russian questions. What to do and who is responsible? (SPEAKS RUSSIAN)

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

Good day. Hello. In-- in fact, Maxim already told you everything that is happening in Russia that may be possible for me to eat. (LAUGH)



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(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

But I will tell you anyway. And the presentation by Maxim-- will allow me to concentrate more on the context. I will tell you-- what's happening and why it's happening.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

If you-- as rece-- as recently as a few years ago, we couldn't even imagine that-- the law on the-- sexual-- the law on the homosexual propaganda will be passed-- in our country and that-- the issue of-- sexual-- sexual orientation and similar issues of-- LGBT-- community will be-- discussed-- on-- on the first pages of all national-- newspapers.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

Until 19-- until 2011, Russian authorities didn't really talk about-- the issues of LGBT at all. It was s-- completely silenced from the public discourse.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

That was-- on both national and international level. And we were-- concerned with the fact that they were not really tackling any of the problems of-- discrimination or anti-discrimination-- laws and so on. And they-- they just ignored us, which-- was a serious cause of concern to us. Because they showed-- to the world that we just don't exist.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

The-- general-- level of homophobia in-- Russian society was-- pretty high but it was not-- shown in any way in the public discourse. So-- it-- it was never discussed.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

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## INTERPRETER:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union-- the level of homophobia-- has been-- steadily falling. For example, in the early '90s-- according to-- public opinion-- investigation-- polls-- the-- the 30% of-- the population was ready to-- support-- prison punishment for homosexuality. And-- presently-- this level fell to 10%.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

So since-- 2011-- everything changed. And-- we are dealing with a very-- aggressive-- stance on the part of the government against-- the-- the gay-- LGBT community in general. And-- all they-- media controlled by the government are-- attacking the community, are-- accusing-- gay people-- of-- all the evils-- and-- trying to-- har-- hurt children, the minors-- and-- and-- destroy Russia.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

The same is happening in the international-- arena-- with Russia. Russia is trying to promote the-- ideology of the traditional values, of (UNINTEL) traditional values.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

And-- however, it may seem-- strange but-- the-- the main-- the traditional value-- that is being promoted by the Russian government-- and the international arena and the UN and so on-- is-- it seems to be the heterosexuality.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

So-- the-- the-- this is why-- Russia is trying to promote this kind of-- approach-- legal approach to-- the-- the-- these-- issues-- on the international arena. And they're trying to influence-- the countries-- neighboring countries and-- create a coalition-- of countries that-- will display the same anti-western sentiments-- by criticizing-- western-- anti-discrimination laws, legalization of-- same sex marriage. They are trying to gather a coalition of countries that would-- stand by Russia in-- defending the so called traditional values.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

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**INTERPRETER:**

And the-- question is why all of this happened to-- toward the end of-- 2011.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

First of all, the campaign-- for (UNINTEL) and-- local legislation and the presidential campaign has-- began at that-- particular time.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

The-- and-- first-- it-- it hap-- it hap-- what happened is-- that the Russian-- ruling party (UNINTEL) here, the united Russia-- has-- felt-- that it's losing its support.  
(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

Be-- because they had very little chances to-- pass any legislation-- local legislation in the-- St. Petersburg. And to-- to-- get to win the elections in St. Petersburg. That's why they pushed this legislation.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

And-- as a result-- at the end of-- in December of-- 2011, there were riots-- and-- protests-- around the country. And-- they-- the wave of protests actually-- continued until the end of the-- 2012.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

This-- caused-- a great-- fear-- which-- can be-- described as-- a complex of losing control among the-- Russian authorities and-- which resulted in various-- very poorly thought-- reactions and actions on the part of the government.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

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## INTERPRETER:

So the-- as a result, the Russian authorities are trying to unite-- around their-- own causes and their own-- vision. The lowest-- levels of the society, the least-- educated and the-- most-- socially disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged. And-- among those groups-- the level of homophobia is the highest. Therefore-- the situation becomes-- more-- dangerous.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

And the-- the-- the authorities are very nervous about any public-- discussions or-- expression of opinions that are-- not-- along the lines of the-- official-- opinions. And-- they are trying to suppress it any way they can.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

You may know about the-- a series of-- legislative measures taken-- passed during-- 2012-- that-- are aimed at-- limiting the various-- civic-- civil-- liberties like-- the-- freedom to assembly-- and-- and freedom of expression. They also-- are against-- any-- free activities of NGO's and-- that-- that is-- why they created-- this special-- category of-- foreign agent-- in the-- in the legal system that-- will-- that-- put in a responsibility on those-- organizations that are-- funded-- by-- through-- through foreign sources to declare themselves foreign agents. That has a very negative connotation in the Russian system. It sounds like-- the enemy of the people.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

The-- first victim of this-- Draconian law, of course-- is the LGBT movement and all the organizations that are representing it-- because it-- does not-- in any way-- coincide with the-- ideas of the-- of traditional values that the-- the Russian authorities are trying to promote.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

And so-- the second movement-- the most-- annoying to the-- Russian government is the-- the-- the-- an-- any-- activity on the part of a gay community. And that-- that's-- why they-- passed this gay propaganda law-- which-- puts two-- two main-- the

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main goals-- in-- in front of this-- in the-- before the government. One is to-- divert the threat of-- gay revolution in the country and-- and the decay of the-- of Russia.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

So-- the second is-- two of control and repression-- that-- they-- very-- eagerly use. They basically, based on this legislation, can forbid us from any public-- expression. Because what-- no matter what we say, they can say, "Oh yeah, children can be here and-- and it's-- it's very-- harmful to them."

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

And-- how effective this tool is I would like to illustrate by the simple fact that-- it-- envisions a-- punishment-- a penalty of one million rubles for-- violating-- this law.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

Too many of the-- NGO's in Russia-- the penalty of this-- scale means effectively the end of their-- operations.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

On the other hand-- the-- passing of this-- anti-propaganda law had-- indirect but very serious-- results in the increased violence against the LGBT community.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

We-- we've-- observed a great (COUGHING) intensification of-- various actions by neo-Nazi groups and various radical groups-- homophobic groups-- and those-- groups do not even try to cover their real-- ideology and purpose.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

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**INTERPRETER:**

Because-- the authorities, in effect-- through that leg-- legislation-- encouraged and legitimized-- their actions. It-- it became a call for-- in a way, a call for-- violence against the-- our groups.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

The-- the purpose-- of those-- they-- the difference between homophobia that existed before, because we've had-- we've dealt with this-- basically throughout the-- time, a memorial, but-- in-- in present time-- through the-- government actions and legislative acts-- the-- which became actually-- a carte blanche for all those organizations to-- use violence against-- our me-- community, the entire community, and they use it in a very organized way-- not as a single-- instances but-- very organized way. And they do it through-- attacks that are then-- videotaped and put on the internet-- with the purpose of-- threatening the entire community.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

The police doesn't-- bring any actions against the perpetrators of those acts. It doesn't investigate anyone.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

And it's not-- an instant-- an incidental thing because-- both President Putin and the foreign minister-- Lavrov-- had-- declared-- on many occasions that-- Russia doesn't have any problems. And the gay people in Russia don't have any problems.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

And if-- the police started investigating and prosecuting-- the-- those-- those acts of violence, it would actually contradict the declarations by-- President Putin and-- Minister Lavrov.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

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## INTERPRETER:

That's why they-- don't do it. The police doesn't-- respond to acts of violence against gay people because they have-- in fact-- effective tool of-- legislative tool that allows them to ignore-- ignore this kind of-- violence.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

At this-- time, I would like to stop-- my-- presentation and I will be glad to add-- to whatever you would like to hear-- during the session of-- questions and answers.

## MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:

And this would be the good time to ask our respective panelists some of the questions that you may have as you were hearing their presentations. I will use the opportunity to ask the very first one, abuse my facilitator role. But we can do a collective few questions from the audience as well and ask-- our panelists to answer them too.

So my question to you, Igor-- first would be maybe the more obvious one. And I know that you've been discussing over the last two, three weeks that you hear in the states a lot, the campaign that has been mounted about boycott of such Olympics. I wonder how-- whether-- what you think about it, whether boycott could be effect-- in fact, an effective tactics or strategy-- in terms of repealing the anti-propaganda laws and maybe the foreign agents laws, the overall crackdown in civil society. And if not-- what do you think can be some of that effective strategies in terms of international solidarity and support?

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## EMILY MARTINEZ:

So-- I'm Emily Martinez-- from the Open Society Foundations. I-- I have a somewhat related question, I think, which is-- do you think efforts-- I think there has been some advocacy efforts that have really singled out the LGBTI rights issues particularly in Russia as attacks against the LGBTI community. Do you think that's a more effective approach?

Or do you see grounding some of the attacks we see in the LGBTI community in the overall attacks against civil society in Russia as a more effective advocacy strategy? Because I do wonder sometimes that-- there is an-- it's convenient for the authorities to kind of keep the LGBTI rights issues separate from the issues affecting the rest of civil society in countries. And I'm curious to what extent that plays out also in

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Georgia and the Ukraine to the extent that the particular attacks against the LGBT community are similar to attacks others in civil society are experiencing and how ef-- how useful it is to be trying to-- to build those coalitions with other civil society groups.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

I have a technical question for any of the panelists on--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

--on enforcing the administrative sanctions in the-- propaganda law in Russia and any other laws that are being contemplated. I don't remember specifically. It seemed like in the Russia propaganda law, you mentioned a fine, Igor. I may have misread or I'm misremembering, but I thought there was also jail time as a sanction. But in an-- in any regard, how-- who actually is enforcing the sanctions? Are-- are investigations being conducted by law enforcement authorities? And/or is it happening at the municipal level?

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

I think that if the-- tactic of-- actually implementing the boycott of-- Sochi Olympic Games-- or to be successful, those people in Russia that actually come up with those-- new laws-- anti-propaganda laws and anti-- LGBT laws would be more than satisfied with such a solution.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **INTERPRETER:**

Because that would open to them a possibility of using a very simple argument that, look, this-- malicious west is-- breaking the Olympic Games-- and is-- helped by-- those-- revolting-- gays.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)



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**INTERPRETER:**

In my opinion-- having the Olympic Games gives us an international platform to have-- a dialogue and-- al-- that will allow us to talk about-- issues in Russia-- in various ways, sym-- symbolically and directly.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

Publicly-- in spite of the fact that publicly, the Russian authorities pretend or declare that they don't care what the west is saying-- about-- their actions-- they are very sensitive to any criticism, in fact-- any criticism from the west-- of their actions against-- human rights and s-- specifically LGBT rights. Therefore, it is-- in our opinion, very important to-- continue that criticism and the pressure on the Russian government.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

I think-- you know, the-- the other question was about whether it is more effective to talk about-- human rights-- as a whole or specifically about different-- types of human rights. And I think-- we should always talk specifically about various human rights and their violations.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

In fact, today in Russia, the main-- victims-- and objects of attacks-- by the government-- are three groups. One is LGBT, the other is-- civic society-- leaders, and-- then-- my-- migrants-- mi-- migrant workers-- which are-- in effect-- I think minorities from-- the surrounding countries. And-- you know, the-- and the-- the-- the leaders of civic society that-- who-- who are-- you know-- have the-- got to-- to speak publicly.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

At-- at this point, the-- the law on-- L-- on gay propaganda does not envision any-- the-- any prison terms for Russians. It only-- it's only-- directed against-- the foreigners.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

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**INTERPRETER:**

Many-- laws that are passed in Russia are not passed in order to-- enforce them but to use them as-- propaganda.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

So in this respect, the-- law on-- anti-- anti-gay propaganda has-- achieved its-- goals. The hy-- hysteria that the authorities were trying to incite within this-- Russian-- society-- has been actually effectively-- incited.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

As far as the mechanism of enforcing this law is concerned-- that-- answering that question-- the-- it is in the-- jurisdiction of the lowest-- legal-- level-- level of the legal system.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

But we've-- had many instances-- of-- police arresting people for-- organizing various-- events. But they-- they were never brought to the court, those-- those-- arrests.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**INTERPRETER:**

So this-- in other words, this-- law is used for-- exerting pressure on the civil activists-- outside of the court.

**ANA REKHVIASHVILI:**

This is a difficult question. I was thinking about it now. And like, what I thought is that sometimes doing some sort of activism is really not about strategy that much but as for-- for (UNINTEL) too. So it's interesting if we can afford forming these coalitions at the moment or not.

Like, the way I see it, I think that some issues need to be emphasized separately and specifically in broader human rights context. And-- simultaneously, coalitions with other minorities should be built. And I don't see this as mutually exclusive things. I

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think these processes go hand in hand together. So like in terms of strategy, I pretty much agree that it's important on the one hand to advocate very specific causes. On the other hand, to, you know, have-- cooperation with the others.

Now, what-- what happens in reality is that it's very difficult because, like, looking at Georgia for example, the-- after May 17th, so after sexual minorities, that's how they call it, were eliminated, the threat to the country, you know, they fought them back. The new threat emerged which are mostly minorities.

And people started to, you know, (UNINTEL PHRASE) in the region. So these are very connected. But now, then we have a problem because-- we really don't have any civil-- active-- activists sort of minority groups in Georgia and either in other countries when I was looking at it, when-- when I was listening to the presentations before, because we've been together for two weeks. So these countries are not-- like these countries are not used to activists sort of lifestyle.

Or like-- advoc-- people advocating, social groups advocating for their rights. So what happens is that, when there is an attack on Muslim population in the village, we go out and make a protest or we go to the officials and say that they have to do something. It's still, you know-- as a few broader human rights defenders who do one and the same jobs.

So the alliances that are possible are built. We are trying to reach out more. But it's also very difficult especially with the religious minorities 'cause they don't really wanna support gay rights. And like, we also had this conference, (UNINTEL PHRASE) pre-organized (UNINTEL) my situation of minorities in Georgia. The first part was about religion, other second part was about LGBT.

And everybody demonstrably (?) left for-- after lunch. You know? Everybody. And then they said why they left. So it's a long process. I see it as an-- as an important strategy call. But it's not like, "Here I decide and the next day I do it." It is important. We try to do it. We try to do it. It's difficult. Thank you.

## **MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:**

We'll take a few more questions. I think Jeff had a question. Yes.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **TOSHAR:**

Hi-- my name is Toshar (PH) and I'm for the-- from the human rights campaign. My question goes out to Igor. Well, apart from the fact that of course-- human-- like, LGBT rights activists have been protesting. They've been-- like, beaten up and they've been assaulted and everything. What is the government's-- like-- what is their status? What are their comments on the videos that are emerging every other day of-- young people getting beaten up? Because I don't think there's any law that

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says that a person can be beaten up because they're gay.

Because these kids are definitely not doing anything, like, to, like s-- so to say propaganda. So has the government come out with a statement? Or is there anything being done for such hate crimes right now? Like even in terms of just someone being beaten up irrespective of their sexuality?

## **MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:**

We'll take a few more. Yeah.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## **WADE:**

Hi, my name's Wade. I'm from the Robert F. Kennedy Center for justice and human rights here in DC. Our work is a lot more focused on-- anti-gay legislation and homophobic-- rhetoric and violence and (UNINTEL) in Africa. And so, I was wondering if maybe you could speak to-- a little bit of the trends that we see there. And that there's different levels of homophobia. There's the zealots, who are very anti-gay and fear based.

But there's also this level of political homophobia where-- in Uganda, for example-- politicians know that they'll rise in popularity if they start spewing homophobic rhetoric. And in a very divisive political de-- environment in a place like Uganda, they use the anti-gay legislation as a way to rally-- religious leaders and traditional leaders and different political factions around one common cause. So I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to the level of political homophobia that's going on in-- each of your contexts. Thanks.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

## **JEFF GOLDSTEIN:**

Jeff Goldstein, also from the Open Society Foundations. Over the course of my lifetime, public attitudes towards homosexuals (NOISE) in the United States have changed radically. So looking beyond today's issues with-- with legislation, can you talk a little bit about-- the road forward you see in terms of how you go about trying to change popular attitudes in each of your countries? Are there any-- tactics or strategies that have been employed in other countries, like the United States, that you think-- might work in your countries? In general, how do we get beyond the current situation?

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## CATIA CONCOVA:

Hi—my name is Catia Concova (PH). I work for-- the website eurasianet.org-- which is based here in New York at OSF. And I had a question for Ana, or actually two questions. You said that-- some of the most radical comments that have come out since May 17th have sort of died down under international pressure. And I'm wondering-- what that looked like. What kind of international pressure?

What's in Georgia and-- and what-- what kind has worked? And then my second question was actually what you've said about the-- the animosity between Georgia and Russia, and how if Russia is doing something, Georgia doesn't wanna do it. That seems kind of like an obvious point in this situation. And I'm wondering why that didn't catch on almost quicker. You know, in other words, is the Russian situation just not really getting as much attention? Or is this something that only seems obvious to us here and not necessarily to people on the ground? Thank you.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

I will-- first say about-- a few words about the coalitions-- issue because I haven't-- so far tackled this problem in Russia.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

The difference between Russia and US regarding those coalitions is that in Russia those coalitions are not possible-- coalitions between the various-- sexual orientation groups--

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

The-- the coalitions between-- racial-- ethnic-- religious and sexual-- gro-- groups are not really possible in Russia.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## INTERPRETER:

One of the reason is that-- those-- small minorities both-- esp-- especially it-- concerns the mi-- religious minorities. When they are trying to obtain or-- gain-- support-- from the government, they will say, "We are with you." And-- and they-- they will display-- an increased homophobic-- behavior to-- stress that they are with

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the government and they are trying to-- get their support and be on their side.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

There are some coalitions that work very well and they are based on ideological or political-- basis.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

For example-- coalitions-- of-- human rights defenders. People that have defended human rights-- and they share that ideology.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

In the last few years, we've done-- a lot of work-- toward that goal. And at this point, we basically have had support from all-- human rights organizations and-- the human rights community in our country.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

We are also-- getting a lot of support from the progressive journalists who actually are criticizing anything that-- the authorities are doing. Therefore, they will criticize also-- what they do toward us-- against us. And-- thus, we have their support.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

And I've noticed also-- the-- the rule that-- the opposition parties will support us whenever the rating of their-- political strength goes under 3%. And I've noticed that.  
(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

So-- as far as the-- the reactions-- response-- or the lack of it of the-- police-- to the video of-- beatings of-- of-- LGBT activists or LGBT community member-- members--

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(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

So the responses are various. For example, we hear that-- they are doing their-- investigation into the matter. And then-- it turns out that it doesn't bring any results.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

And-- the other-- type of answer is that we are unable to establish the perpetrators-- even though-- it is absolutely clear-- who's beating whom from those videos. And very often, we are able to supply names of the people that-- launched the attack against-- gay people.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

And the most cynical-- response-- type of response that we get is that we are ourselves-- to blame because we are provoking people. And the people are indignant. And so, if you stay at home and you don't provoke anybody, nothing will happen. You'll be safe.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

And of course, there was a question about political homo-- homophobia. And of course-- there is political homophobia which is not in the response to-- homophobia that is-- still exists within-- Russian society. On-- on the contrary, it's-- the-- way-- it's-- it's-- tool to incite more homophobic acts from those-- parts of society that already are homophobic.

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### **INTERPRETER:**

And-- and the Russian-- church-- that is kind of a leader in those-- in-- in the homophobic propaganda-- in this spreading homophobic propaganda-- they do it only as-- the political-- as-- political-- answering to the political order from the government because-- historically-- the church was always-- dependent on the government and all-- never did anything that was-- contradictory to the official line

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of the Russian government.

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

For Ukraine, the public opinion and change in pub-- public opinion, I think it's the main point because our-- political homophobia is respond to-- public opinion. Because-- because our-- politic-- so for-- for the politic, very important understand that-- (UNINTEL PHRASE) is that the people like--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Yes they-- they want to be liked. And--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Yes-- according to the homophobic-- sentences--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Sentiments-- among-- among-- society-- they just--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## TARAS KARASIICHUK:

Yes they-- justify their existence. So it's-- why it's so important to work with-- public opinion. And-- for-- two words about-- strategy. For-- for us, the most important-- things is-- global ignorance among-- among gen-- general population.

Our people just-- don't understand some very simple things, like democracy, like-- human rights. They just cannot understand what is Europe-- what is Euro-- Europe (UNINTEL)-- and-- and some-- and something like this. And-- when we speak about-- public opinion-- I think we should start from the very, very, very, very beginning, which we should understand. We should explain for our people-- this-- the very-- the very simple things as-- as yeah-- as I told-- told before.

And-- in this case-- we have not very good situation because in the United States was some past-- of fighting for-- for some right before. In Ukraine-- and in our post Soviet-- Union country, we-- we have no-- we have no such experience. And sometimes it's-- it seems to me that LGBT community in Ukraine-- its first ever



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community-- that-- begun to fight for their-- for-- for their-- for their right. So-- and in from-- in-- informational campaign--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## **TARAS KARASIICHUK:**

And also-- if you speak about public-- public opinion, of course-- public-- general population should-- LGBT community-- should be-- show for general population. And it's-- and it's possible only-- if-- if we will have some community. In Ukraine, we don't have community. We have just-- sev-- several-- representative of-- gay or lesbians or-- (COUGHING) or something like this. And-- for change in public-- public-- opinion, it's crucial. It's also-- provides some community building. (UNINTEL).

## **ANA REKHVIASHVILI:**

The-- the first thing was what-- what sort of international pressure works for the government. And after-- before May 17th and after May 17th, I think the-- the pressure that worked was attention-- and was, like, really personal communication of the representatives of the government of-- with-- diplomatic core, like, missions. Different diplomatic missions in the countries.

And that the messages were very clear. And like many of those co-- cooperation or communication have been behind our backs even. So I don't really know. There was like-- there was no such big sort of campaigning internationally-- that-- that would lead to the pressure. But I think there was a lot of internal pressure which I didn't myself observe that well. But I think that worked because, like, the messages we were getting, we were getting, you know, softer and softer and nicer and nicer-- wi-- (LAUGH) slowly.

So I-- I think that's one thing. The other thing is that after May 17th, for example, Thomas Hammarberg (PH) visited Georgia. He had meetings with us, with the government representatives. We suggested who were the friendly ones, who were, you know, not so friendly ones. So I think, like, working internally.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

## **MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:**

Sorry just-- Thomas Hammarberg is the council of Europe commissioner for human rights, for those who don't know.

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## **ANA REKHVIASHVILI:**

So yeah. So I think the-- the, like, direct pressure on-- on the ones who make decisions is somethings (SIC) that's very important. I think international, like, broader campaigning could help too. But I'm not quite sure, because with the campaigning, the messages-- because the messages go to the people too, like regular people, the voters. Then people-- politicians become more cautious, I think.

I think, like, one to one sort of pressure is very support-- like, very helpful. That's one thing. And as for the other thing, is it not obvious for Georgia that what happens in Russia shouldn't be duplicated? It's absolutely no. No, people-- no, like, if it is spelled out that this is what happened in Russia, we shouldn't duplicate it because the-- that-- then it would be clear.

But people don't know. So it's either that they're-- you know, Georgian news don't cover that much of Russian news. That's why people don't know. It's either LGBT issues in general is not covered by mainstream media. That's why people don't know. But like, people do not know. And anybody who uses and abuses Russian produced arguments, they of course don't say that this is what happened in Russia and now let's do it again.

They say it is their own finding. Like, we have a politician with a knife face. And it's just like, "So I'm not against anybody but what about"-- you know, like-- it's a general rhetoric with this like very-- as if you discovered it the first time now. You know, so no, people don't know that this is what happened in Russia and we shouldn't do it. Absolutely not.

However, on the other hand, the-- scary thing is that there is-- that church is openly starting all-- already to use, like, to explicitly lean towards Russian-- to explicitly say that Russia is actually good. And if that process goes really fast, then I don't know where we will be. Okay. Thank you.

## **MAXIM ANMEGHICHEAN:**

Thank to everybody who came for the event. And thanks very much to the panelists who shared their stories (UNINTEL PHRASE). (APPLAUSE)

\* \* \*END OF TRANSCRIPT\* \* \*