

GUEST ESSAY

From Florida to Poland, We Must March for the Right to Exist

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By Mark Gevisser

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Last Saturday, toward the end of the Riga-Kyiv Pride March for Freedom in Latvia, I saw a burly man in a unicorn head lean out of a second-floor window and wave grandly at the parade below. His yellow and blue shirt had "Kyiv" emblazoned across it. March participants had been leading the 5,000-strong crowd in the chant "Make love, not war," artfully linking the right to love, everywhere, with the right to self-determination and peace in Ukraine. In response to the queer Minotaur in Ukraine's colors, the marchers erupted into cries of "Slava Ukraini," or "Glory to Ukraine."

There can, of course, be no Pride marches in Ukraine this year. Instead, Kyiv Pride, which has been organizing marches in the Ukrainian capital since 2012, has been invited to participate in a series of joint events across Eastern Europe, such as last week's in Riga. The largest of these will happen on Saturday in Warsaw, where 80,000 people are expected to attend; many will be Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Kyiv Pride's 2022 manifesto calls on everyone — from governments to people on the street — "to imprint on their memory the geographical line of border between Ukraine on the one side and Russia and Belarus on the other, because it is not just a separation line between the states but also a boundary between the territory of freedom and a zone of oppression."

In Riga several marchers made signs bearing a line written by the poet Emma Lazarus: "Until we are all free, none of us are free." In this part of the world, what with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the official homophobia of Poland's and Hungary's right-wing governments, such sentiment is not metaphorical. But too often, in other places where Pride has become pro forma, we forget that it holds such significance. This year, in every country, we must remember that Pride's power comes from its politics of struggle.

This weekend, New Yorkers will march down a Fifth Avenue festooned with rainbow flags, in the United States' biggest and loudest Pride event. In the past few years, these Pride events — in New York and elsewhere in the Western world — have become formulaic. Those who remember the way the movement began as protest complain, with clockwork predictability, that Pride has become little more than an excuse for a party or a branding opportunity for corporations, one that wraps the month of June in feel-good rainbow colors rather than powering genuine, year-round transformation.

But American Pride celebrants have taken to the streets in a country where, this year, more than 300 anti-L.G.B.T.Q. bills have been introduced in state legislatures. Given this climate, Pride cannot be just a gay party or a corporate branding opportunity. It must once more find its role as an emblematic struggle against the gathering of illiberal forces — from the United States' Donald Trump to Russia's Vladimir Putin and Hungary's Viktor Orban — who would shut down personal autonomy, ostensibly in the name of traditional values or faith, in order to reassert patriarchal control over a population that, increasingly, makes its own decisions.



A "Free Ukraine" banner at the Pride procession in Wrocław, Poland. Amadeusz Swierk/SOPA Images -- LightRocket, via Getty Images

In Poland, the country's ruling Law and Justice party won the 2020 presidential election, in part by threatening that what was called a "rainbow plague" worse than the "red plague" of communism by the archbishop of Krakow would engulf the country if pro-E.U. liberals were to govern. About 100 municipalities have declared themselves L.G.B.T.-free zones.

But tens of thousands of people have attended recent Warsaw equality marches, likely in direct response to Law and Justice's politics of hate. "Here beats the heart of a smiling, open Poland," Warsaw's mayor, Rafal Trzaskowski, told the crowd last year. Trzaskowski, who supports L.G.B.T.Q. rights, narrowly lost the presidential election in 2020. "The parade is a celebration of the L.G.B.T.+ community," he said, "but it is also a celebration of all who are tolerant, all who are smiling, all who look to the future, all who want Warsaw to be for everyone."

Trzaskowski will no doubt say something similar on Saturday, extending the metaphor eastward. The Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens the pluralism that has been growing, if slowly, in Eastern Europe since the fall of Communism. In March, the Russian Orthodox Church's Patriarch Kirill, a Putin ally, said explicitly that one of the objectives of the Ukraine invasion was to save ethnic Russians from the horrors of Gay Pride parades.

Pride in Ukraine had, in fact, come a long way. The first Kyiv Pride, in 2012, had to be canceled because authorities said they could not guarantee the safety of marchers. The following year, about 100 people marched, protected by police from a much larger number of counterprotesters. But last year, 7,000 people marched peacefully through the Ukrainian capital, led and protected by the police. The country's hate crimes law would likely have been expanded this year to protect L.G.B.T.Q. people, too. This, of course, has been postponed indefinitely.

While I was in Riga, I met Lenny Emson, a Ukrainian activist who is directing this year's Kyiv Pride and has been involved with the organization since its founding. The organization now functions largely as a service-provision organization to help queer Ukrainians who have been displaced by the war.

Many enlisted Ukrainian troops have come out on social media over the past few months; these stories reveal the way that the war's outcome and L.G.B.T.Q. rights are intertwined in Ukraine. Emson noted that while this new visibility could have a positive effect on the way queer Ukrainians were perceived by their compatriots, ultraright-wing homophobes were also joining up and becoming heroes. "Things are in the balance," Emson said. After Kyiv Pride began a campaign this month featuring an exhibition of 12 L.G.B.T.Q. Ukrainians contributing to the war effort, Emson added, a right-wing social media effort countered that Putin was invading Ukraine "because of the gays."

If Ukraine joins the European Union, this will have a significant effect on L.G.B.T.Q. rights in the country: New members would be party to the E.U. Charter of Fundamental Rights, which guarantees equality on the basis of sexual orientation. But there was a strong risk, Emson said, that an E.U.-affiliated Ukraine could go the route of Poland or Hungary — where, even as they receive E.U. subsidies, right-wing leaders campaign against what they call L.G.B.T.Q. ideology as a way of maintaining church support and defining a nationalist agenda against the perceived onslaught of Western Europe.

The playbook for this strategy was invented in the West, specifically in the United States, by the generation of anti-L.G.B.T.Q. laws touched off by Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign in the 1970s. In the gathering culture wars, Republican political operatives used homophobia to mobilize voters, in the name of traditional values and individual freedom, against what they saw as a secular liberal hegemony. Such moral panic is being rekindled in the United States — most prominently in Florida, where Gov. Ron DeSantis signed "Don't Say Gay" legislation — after being used over the past decade in Eastern Europe, most prominently by Putin.

In 2013, Putin's government enacted anti-"gay propaganda" legislation that bans "the promotion of nontraditional sexual relations" (read: homosexuality) to minors. This was specifically done to cement his relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church, as a way of mobilizing support against the growing opposition in the cities to his rule-for-life strategy. Since then, Putin has used such politics primarily to promote a "wholesome" and traditional Russia — one in which heterosexuals increase the Russian population through procreation — against what he paints as a decadent and dying West, symbolized by homosexuals and trans folk. It is that decadent West that he has said he is fighting in Ukraine.

Putin's wartime repression of his own people includes renewed assaults on Russia's L.G.B.T.Q. movement. Organizations have been shut down after their staff members were declared foreign agents, and many of the country's leading L.G.B.T.Q. activists have fled. This month, legislation was submitted in the Duma to strengthen the anti-gay law so that the "promotion" of "unnatural lifestyles" would be forbidden not just to minors but to everyone. If the measure passes, it will essentially make public expression of homosexuality or transness illegal.

Pride is about visibility, and visibility has a double edge. The Harvey Milk maxim that is at the root of Pride politics — "Gay brothers and sisters, you must come out!" — has been proved, time and again, as the best corrective to the canards that queer people are dangerous or possessed by demons or are foreign agents. But what if it's forbidden or simply too dangerous to come out? There are, for example, very few Pride events in Africa outside my home country, South Africa. In much the way Eastern European nationalists use the American culture wars playbook to assert their cultural sovereignty against the West, some African nationalists use the sodomy laws inherited from Britain, a former colonizer, to insist that homosexuality is un-African.

And yet, last Sunday, another Pride celebration took place, this one held by L.G.B.T.Q. asylum seekers awaiting confirmation of their refugee status in the vast Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Many of the celebrants have fled their home countries because of a fear of persecution on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, but the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees processes them in a

country where homosexuality remains illegal and holds them in camps filled with other refugees who hold the same homophobic or transphobic attitudes prevalent in the environments they fled.

Augustine Kayemba, an asylum seeker who leads the L.G.B.T.Q. community at Kakuma, told me that over 600 people from seven countries attended Pride but that many just passed quickly by his gathering, afraid to linger, for fear of reprisal. “There is not a day that goes by without some news of violence due to hate,” he said. Kayemba told me that last Sunday night, after the Pride celebration, one of his housemates, Oscar Katamba, was severely beaten with pipes by assailants who called him a Kiswahili slur for “homosexual”; he suffered a head wound requiring 10 stitches.

Kayemba offered two reasons for holding Pride in such a hostile environment: to establish community within the camp and to use the event “to tell the wider world about our predicament.” In a letter he wrote to supporters, with photographs of the event, Kayemba said, “Despite all the misery, we try to find some time to kill the stress when celebrating official L.G.B.T.I.Q. days and festivals.”

For Kayemba, Pride is the “official” day not just of a movement but also of a set of values that represents the kind of freedom he can only dream of while waiting at Kakuma. I have written about the disillusionment of L.G.B.T.Q. refugees when they arrive in “liberated” rainbowy Vancouver or Amsterdam or Cape Town: Their poverty or dark skin or Muslim faith makes it hard for them to integrate into L.G.B.T.Q.-friendly Western society the way they had imagined. Even in these places, then, Pride must reconnect with its political roots.

The party, of course, is also important: It is a way of claiming the street. Even at Stonewall in 1969, there was a performative element to the protest. The engagement in Pride by corporations is important, too. In countries like India and Mexico, the diversity and inclusion policies of multinational corporations have created space not just for their employees but also in society more broadly as they or their products become emblems of a cosmopolitan modernity that embraces pluralism and diversity.

But when such branding dominates, Pride becomes just a branding exercise. Against this, we need to hold to heart this year’s Kyiv Pride manifesto, to understand how, wherever and however we are participating in Pride events, we are working to expand the “territory of freedom” against that “zone of oppression.” We need to remember that even if it carries little risk for those of us on the streets of New York or Amsterdam, it is a matter of life and death for so many others.

In Riga, at a rally after the march, Lenny Emson spoke about Roman Tkachenko, a member of Kyiv’s L.G.B.T.Q. community who was killed in battle last month near Kharkiv. Tkachenko was a 21-year-old university graduate passionate about mosaic restoration and eco-activism. “We often say we march for those who are not able to march themselves,” Emson said — because of fear or discrimination or danger. “But these days we are also marching for those who cannot, and will never be able to, because they are no longer on this earth.”

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