

Discourse on Minority Rights in Kazakhstan

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Declaration

Herewith I declare that I clearly understand §11 of the Academic Regulations and that the submitted paper is accepted by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek on the understanding that it is my own effort without falsification of any kind. I declare that I am aware of the consequences of plagiarism or/ and cheating.

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Abstract

This thesis project explores the discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan using Queer Theory within a poststructuralist framework and a critical evaluation of the way cis-heteronormative system establishes the discourses and reinforces them. The research covers detailed analysis of historical roots and sociopolitical pre-texts for the formation of discourses of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan based on the history of politicized homophobia during the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. The paper draws on the insights obtained during the public hearing on the proposed legislation against LGBT “propaganda” in August 2024, analyzing the discourses promoted by political actors, who participated in the public hearing. The research identified patterns of dehumanization, vilification, and pathologization of LGBTQIA+ people within contemporary discourse of politicized homophobia within Kazakhstan.

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Introduction

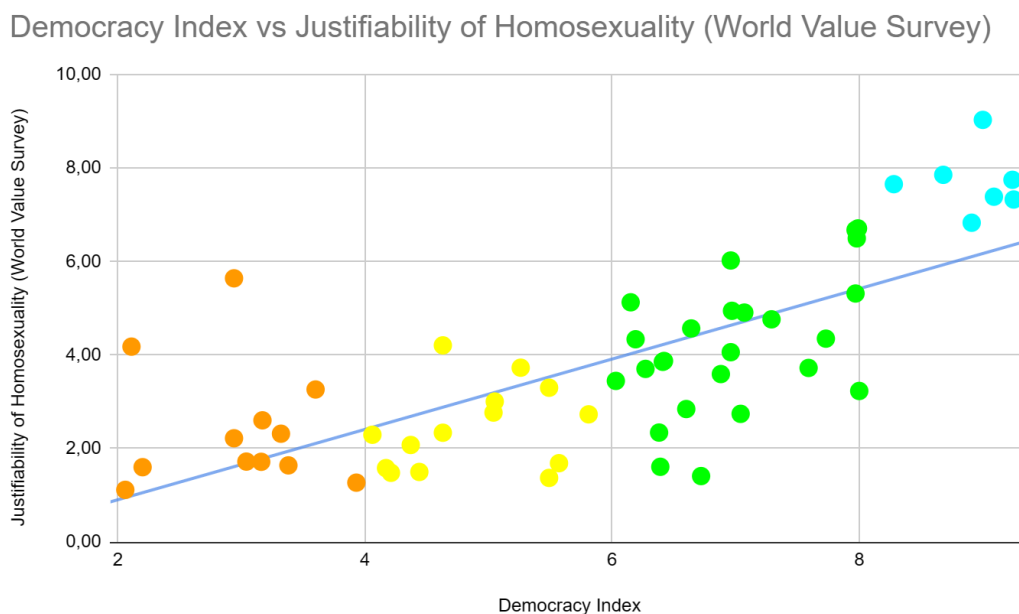
“Personal is political”. This is the approach that I take to analyze the current reality of LGBTQIA+ people in Kazakhstan as being politicized by Kazakhstan’s authorities and other non-state actors. The narratives about LGBTQIA+ people vary across different countries. Some embrace strong politics of hate and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people, while other countries might treat the subject indifferently or with an explicit homonationalism, which refers to the active incorporation of LGBTQIA+ rights discourses into the nationhood of a state, frequently playing out with nationalism to oppress other groups, especially Muslim people (Dhoest, 2020). What remains constant is the tendency of some political actors to politicize the subject of LGBTQIA+ rights for the advantages that these actors get for themselves.

The unique feature of politicized homophobia is that it is correlated with authoritarian regimes, whereas the more democratic ones resort to homonationalism. Interest drives politics; therefore, exploring peculiar to authoritarian regimes interests is crucial to unravel the reasons behind discriminatory politics. Authoritarianism is not the same as the discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people and weaponization of politicized homophobia i.e. some authoritarian states do not reserve to politicizing the subject of queer people’s rights and do not build their national identity in opposition to LGBTQIA+ people’s identities. Nevertheless, exploring the way that authoritarian states weaponize LGBTQIA+ identities and what are the interests that drive these regimes to do so is a useful prism that allows for a better understanding of the subject. Exploring the relationship between the authoritarian regimes and politicization of LGBTQIA+ identities provides a broader understanding of the link on how the oppressive power structure of the authoritarian states that have a deeply rooted interest in sustaining its regime and control leads to politicized homophobia and abuses it for the regime’s gain. In other words, to understand the usage of politicized homophobia we should explore the authoritarian regimes themselves and their interests when perpetuating politicized homophobia as a way to lay the contextual grounds to open up the research paper.

There is a clear positive correlation between the level of democratic development in countries and their treatment of LGBTQIA+ people. In democracies, where individual rights are respected, power is balanced, and electoral processes are fair, LGBTQIA+ individuals are more likely to have their rights recognized and protected. Although it is hard to say that all democracies provide full recognition and protection for all vulnerable groups within

LGBTQIA+ community, it is rather an exception that democratic states fail to protect queer people. Conversely, authoritarian regimes tend to deny LGBTQIA+ rights, rejecting policies that would support sexual and gender diverse groups. These regimes often manipulate democratic norms and institutions to maintain power and the regime. The tendency of oppression politics within authoritarian regimes is evident from Graph 1, where we can see a clear correlation between people’s perception of homosexuality within democratic states and other countries that are inclined to develop towards democracies in contrast to the perception of homosexuality in authoritarian regimes. Just as not all democracies fully recognize or support LGBTQIA+ rights, not all authoritarian states’ perception of the LGBTQIA+ community is oppressive or discriminatory with some interesting exceptions that can be observed on the Graph 1.

Graph 1. Correlation between regime type and perception of homosexuality within the corresponding countries.



To provide more information on Graph 1, it was constructed combining data from The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index (horizontal axe) and World Value Survey’s indicator on the justifiability of homosexuality (vertical axe). Democracy Index evaluates countries on a scale from 0 to 10 across 60 indicators in five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, government functioning, political participation, and political culture (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023). Countries are classified into four regime types based

on their overall scores: Full Democracies (8+, sky blue), Flawed Democracies (6-8, green), Hybrid Regimes (4-6, yellow), and Authoritarian Regimes (4 or below, orange). Full Democracies have independent media, effective governance, and strong checks and balances, while Authoritarian Regimes suffer from censorship, state-controlled media, and limited political pluralism. The World Value Survey, which explores general societal values, includes a question asking respondents to rate the justifiability of homosexuality on a scale from 0 to 10 (Haerpfer et al., 2022). The World Value Survey is generally conducted through sampling that is representative of the broader population with the number of respondents per country ranging from 1,200 to 2,000, depending on a certain country. The data from all of the surveyed countries is then compiled into country reports with the indication for each question in their survey. World Value Survey's question on the justifiability of homosexuality serves as a dependent variable in analyzing the relationship between political regimes and societal attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ people, using the Democracy Index as the independent variable. To make these two indices cross-referenceable, the average score on the question of justifiability of homosexuality was deducted and compared to the level of democracy of the corresponding country. Although the Democracy Index covers over 160 countries and the World Value Survey only around 60, the analysis includes 58 countries where both datasets overlap. These 58 countries are represented in the Graph 1 with all of their corresponding levels of democracy and justifiability of homosexuality. After compiling the graph, a trendline (blue) was added to the Graph 1 to demonstrate the correlation between democratic development of countries and the corresponding attitudes towards homosexuality in the respective country. Results show a clear trend: the more democratic a country, the more likely its society is to accept LGBTQIA+ people as justified in their existence.

Although the trendline does not indicate a direct causal relationship on whether or not a country with a lower level of democratic development weaponizes politicized homophobia and the reasons why the perception of homosexuality's justifiability is lower in authoritarian regimes than in democracies, the societal perception of the justifiability of homosexuality nonetheless reflects the state's actions towards establishing equality in practice. According to Economic and Social Council (2009), governments "must adopt an active approach to eliminating systemic discrimination and segregation in practice" and "consider using incentives to encourage public and private actors to change their attitudes", meaning that the sustained nature of disapproval on LGBTQIA+ people's existence in the country reflects government's interest to sustain the status-quo i.e. marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people by

the public. Moreover, the states play a crucial role in perpetuating certain discourses on homosexuality and can contribute to the exacerbation of queer people's rights and their perception or improve them (Monro and Richardson, 2014). The role of the state in terms of its capacity to establish LGBTQIA+ friendly attitudes within the society is indisputable; therefore, both actions, like acceptance of discriminatory legislation or perpetuating hate-speech, and inactions, like absence of policing hate-crimes and inclusive legislation, of the government demonstrate the state's interest to either sustain oppression or provide protection. In short, even though the Graph 1 does not provide direct causal evidence on the interest of the authoritarian governments on maintaining marginalization of the LGBTQIA+ people in the society, the trendline still offers important insights that reveal indirect relation between regime type and their extent of interest in improving societal perception of LGBTQIA+ people in general.

One of the questions that is still left unanswered by the insights of the Graph 1 is why would authoritarian regimes rely on politicized homophobia? It is of no surprise that identities of many minority groups are being politicized, be it religious, ethnic or sexual and gender minorities, in authoritarian regimes, where the identity of one group is contrasted to the identities of the, so-called, majority group that has the power to oppress the minorities (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). But what interests drive political actors to politicize homophobia? To unravel why authoritarian regimes actively use anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric as a political tool, in contrast to democracies where such tactics are less prevalent, we should understand peculiar features of authoritarian regimes. A key feature distinguishing authoritarian regimes from democracies, which is relevant for our discussion, is the desire of government representatives in authoritarian states to maintain unchecked power and control. Although political actors in both authoritarian regimes and democracies seek power and control, the difference lies in accountability. In democracies, where checks and balances are stronger, abusing power to perpetuate politicized homophobia can come at a high political cost. In contrast, authoritarian regimes, with weak or dysfunctional accountability mechanisms, allow such abuses with far fewer or no consequences for those in power.

Authoritarian states are in a constant struggle with its citizens and civil society in terms of power relations, where the states aspire to gain as much power as they are able to, while avoiding being held accountable in terms of the committed human rights violations. On the other hand, the citizens and civil society in authoritarian regimes attempt to limit the state's

power and ensure proper functioning of accountability mechanisms and rule of law. Within such a bipolar framework of power relations, oppression of marginalized communities emerges as a tool to ensure power and control. Henderson has clearly put together the relations between authoritarian states' interest in maintaining power and oppression of vulnerable communities, including LGBTQIA+ people, as a tool to enforce wider societal obedience, including in cases of maintaining or refusing to police oppression that is perpetuated by state and non-state actors:

“authoritarianism means opposition to the "liberal" values of tolerance of ambiguity and difference, insistence on obedience to rules, insistence on conformity, and use of coercion and punishment to ensure that obedience. [...] Authoritarianism need not be based only in active coercion and oppression of disfavored groups by the government. The government may also allow authoritarianism to flourish by omission - by permitting other institutions or persons to coerce and oppress others in the interest of maintaining control” (Lynne, 1991, p. 382).

Now, let's further unpack the instrumentalization of hate against LGBTQIA+ people among the authoritarian regimes as tools to sustain the control and power. We will look into oppression of LGBTQIA+ people as a way of maintaining the state power, but also study the ways that discourses perpetuating LGBTQIA+ as “deviant” and “immoral” are instrumentalized by authoritarian leaders to gain electoral leverage, evade accountability and abuse democratic norms to defy democratization.

Firstly, homophobic populism, which revolves around spreading hate against LGBTQIA+ people, is a common strategy among authoritarian regimes to gain electoral support from conservative and religious people, which are the groups that most likely share similar prejudice towards LGBTQIA+ people. The way that appeals of candidates to being against sexual and gender diverse people to “protect traditional family values” works based on the prevalent extent of the rootedness of homophobia. The leaders that choose to position themselves as anti-LGBTQIA+ have a good understanding of how this appeal would relate and ensure the public endorsement of the majority population. Given that these political actors are aware that the majority of people hold discriminatory views or that there are no legal mechanisms to prosecute hate-speech and discrimination, they can effectively avoid being held accountable for perpetuating politicized homophobia.

One of the most recent examples of hate speech's exploitation in the interests of populism was the 2023 presidential elections in Türkiye. As reported by Independent (Muzaffar, 2023), just a week before the voting day, the leader of Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, translation: Justice and Development Party) - Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - implicitly claimed that his political opponents are "pro-LGBT" in the statement, where Erdoğan said: "AK Party and other parties in our alliance would never be pro-LGBT, because family is sacred to us. We will bury those pro-LGBT in the ballot box". The aim of the speech was to frame his opponents as the enemy of the nation, who threaten the sacredness of the family institution because of their allegedly inclusive position towards LGBTQIA+ people's rights. Although it is hard to assess whether or not Erdoğan's speech resulted in fewer citizens voting in favor of the other party, the aim of discrediting political opposition is undoubtful. We should also take into account other contextual speeches of political actors to put Erdoğan's allegations against his political opponents further into context. Taking into account the way that the government officials of Türkiye, like Davut Gül, who is the Governor of Istanbul, have been engaging in hate-speech, referring to LGBTQIA+ events, like pride, as "threatening the institution of the family", claiming your opponents being pro-LGBT is a technique of defamation based on the widespread anti-LGBTQIA+ narratives in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In other words, Erdoğan's allegations had the aim of impeding the political opponents' reputation and framing them in contrast to what the average citizen of Türkiye would find acceptable.

In countries where homophobia is deeply rooted in society, political actors are more tempted to politicize the subject of LGBTQIA+ people's rights in favor of electoral advantages, compared to regimes where homophobia is less entrenched. Leveraging support based on populist hate-speech comes at a greater expense for political actors in countries, where LGBTQIA+ rights are more recognized and protected. Therefore, the rootedness of prejudice towards members of LGBTQIA+ community allows the political actors, who perpetuate politicized homophobia, to evade being held accountable and, at the same time, maintaining power and control.

The fact that authoritarian regimes resort to politicized homophobia does not only reveal lack of mechanisms of accountability and checks and balances, but gaining legitimacy through perpetuating populist hate-speech against LGBTQIA+ people is also a characteristic of authoritarian regimes that lack rational-legal legitimacy of their governance (Abbasov, 2022). In other words, the states that lack legitimately recognized leadership based on rational choice

of the public resort to politicized homophobia as a way to leverage support based on traditional or charismatic forms of legitimacy. These states construct their legitimacy on societal customs and traditions or the image of strong, authoritarian ruler, rather than on rational-legal authority, which is founded on public choice and the perception of the ruler's legitimate right to govern within the boundaries of the law and acting under the country's rules, i.e. in the rational-legal leadership the ruler's actions are limited by the law and their legitimacy stems from the law.

Secondly, the “othering” techniques that we have discussed above are also used to divert public's attention from socio-economic issues to scapegoat the LGBTQIA+ community, which creates the conditions where the authoritarian states are capable of evading accountability in particular issues of human rights violations. Demonizing any marginalized groups, whether it would be religious or ethnic minorities, migrants or LGBTQIA+ people creates discourses of “insiders” and “outsiders”, essentially contrasting two groups between each other and creating negative sentiments between these communities. If such narratives are consistently and regularly promoted, then they become rooted and might be exploited by the state authorities to leverage on hate. If the disinformation is entrenched, then relating something that would continue the path of demonizing a marginalized community would have higher chances of convincing the public, despite how absurd a piece of disinformation would be.

Consequently, such leverage on disinformation provides the ways to circumvent being held accountable for certain issues within a country. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Türkiye, where there is a longstanding demonization of LGBTQIA+ community by political actors, Erdogan and Türkiye's top Muslim cleric - Ali Erbas - scapegoated LGBTQIA+ community as being responsible for the spread of the virus. These claims were stated in an attempt by the government to distract public's attention from the government authorities' failure to contain the spread of COVID-19. When Erdogan and Erbas claimed that LGBTQIA+ “brings illness”, already around 137,000 cases of COVID-19 were registered, which was the ninth highest number of cases in the world (Erdemir and Kowalski, 2020). Apart from the poor healthcare performance at the time of that statement, Türkiye's currency had decreased almost 20%. In such a scenario, the public's dissatisfaction grew rapidly; therefore, in response to that there had to be some “other” that was responsible for these issues, which became the long-hated LGBTQIA+ community. Despite the lack of any logical correlation or evidence linking the LGBTQIA+ community to the rising number of COVID-19 cases or the depreciating value of the country's currency, the government's emotionally charged statements

along with the deeply rooted societal prejudices against LGBTQIA+ community was an opportune option that gave the chance to the government in fueling further tensions and redirecting accumulated public frustration away from its own failures and onto the LGBTQIA+ people.

A similar case had happened in Kazakhstan as well with a rather political issue related to protests of Kazakhstan's oil workers (Rickleton et al., 2023). These employees faced mass layoffs based on the unstable working conditions in a governmental fossil fuel company. In order to demonstrate their dissatisfaction, dozens of fired oil workers have traveled from a small city - Zhanaozen - to the capital - Astana - to boycott the Ministry of Energy in Kazakhstan. They arrived on 10th of April and have slept over nights for a couple of days to call up the attention of the relevant people in the position of decision making to their struggles. Unfortunately, all of them were detained by the government forces and just two days after the arrival of these oil workers and the consequent arrest of all of them, a parliament deputy has called up the government to introduce the legislation to ban so-called "LGBT propaganda" during one of the meetings (Adyrna, 2023). There was extensive media coverage of both issues. Although it is difficult to state to what extent the Kazakhstan's government had the intention to divert public's attention from labor rights violation and whether or not the attention has indeed shifted, the concern that these actions of the government were coordinated remains valid.

In short, authoritarian states leverage disinformation and "othering" against LGBTQIA+ community with the intention to shift the blame for government's mismanagement to marginalized communities, which allows the state to cover up its failure in effective governance and refrain people from challenging the overall legitimacy of the office in power to govern, essentially keeping the status quo where authoritarian regimes retain their power and control.

Finally, authoritarian regimes attempt to defy democratic values and democratization within their own countries through spreading the narrative of a certain "gender ideology" being imposed over their states by the "West", who often is told wants to corrupt the national values of the authoritarian regime or threaten the state's sovereignty. These claims evoke ontological fear for the existence of the nation or country through perpetuating an image of an external enemy, who is allegedly attempting to destroy national identity through violating morals, traditions and population of the country, all of which are constituting parts of the national identity. Emotional appeal of these statements touches upon the identity of a person and plays along deeply rooted fear for the existence of the nation.

Even though there is little to no causal relation between the LGBTQIA+ community and extinction of the state, the emotional influence of these statements is profound, which essentially makes such discourse of politicized homophobia an appealing tool to deflect international human rights norms and juxtapose local values of the authoritarian regimes to the democratic values. Sleptcov (2018) studied the discourses on homosexuality in Russia. According to Sleptcov, the international human rights standards are a way of socializing international norms into a country, which leads to more inclusive norms on LGBTQIA+ rights being created, promoted and internalized by the state. The international stakeholders and civil society play an important role in this process, while the active defiance of socialization into international norms disrupts the process, creating a gap between local and international values. This gap allows authoritarian regimes to reject democratic principles by framing international human rights norms as “an encroachment on [state’s] sovereignty”. The public expression and events with the agenda on LGBTQIA+ people’s rights are used as an “evidence of how corrupt and dangerous Western influences are at undermining the country’s moral and family values” to essentially justify the regime’s oppressive nature as being inherently different to the democracies in Europe or America, putting forward an argument that to preserve national identity an authoritarian regime must remain in the face of the “perverted West”. This discourse does not only vilify democracies, but makes the authoritarian nature of the regime perceived as a necessity that serves the purpose of protecting the nation's identity, traditional values and morals.

In some cases, authoritarian regimes defy democratic values using some of the norms defined by democratic mode of governance. For example, authoritarian regimes take advantage of widespread homophobia and some norms upheld by democracies, including the rule of people and influence of the majority, to consolidate political power. If these narratives are combined with nation-wide anti-Western discourse, then leveraging on the imposition of “Western gender ideology” becomes an available tool to sustain power and control of the authoritarian regime, while also positioning themselves as democratic states that are guided by selectively chosen norms inherent in democratic governance and refusing to fully incorporate democratic values, such as respect to human rights and dignity and the right to non-discrimination.

The most prevalent example of this discourse would be the narratives promoted by Russia, where Putin's anti-LGBTQIA+ discourse has been one of the fuels that brought the

needed support of the public in favor of the war in Ukraine. The appeal of Kremlin's propaganda and justification of the war in Ukraine happens through widespread public's support in favor of Putin defending "traditional values" against "Western ideology," which Putin puts in parallel with LGBTQIA+ rights. Putin in one of his speeches has frequently appealed to how the "West" destroys the traditional values as a way to justify the war in Ukraine:

"The Western globalist elites still insist on their exclusivity, divide people and split societies, provoke bloody conflicts and coups, sow hatred, Russophobia, aggressive nationalism, destroy family and traditional values that make people human" (Kun.uz, 2023).

In that way, not only the Kremlin's propaganda was successful in gaining greater public's support based on hate and justify the war, but also to sustain his authoritarian influence. In using the opinion and the influence of the anti-Western and anti-LGBTQIA+ majority of Russians, which represent some elements of democratic type of governance, Putin has challenged and manipulated democratic norms and values, which had given him the needed resources to maintain power and control. Moreover, such discourse served a purpose of further legitimizing his authoritarian rule as he positioned West and LGBTQIA+ people as external enemies that Russia needs to protect itself from. In the face of all of these alleged threats Putin, as the country's leader, emerged as the "savior" capable of protecting Russia and what is considered to be the "true" Russian identity against the "false" and "corrupting" influences of the West.

All in all, the research on politicized homophobia finds its relevance not only in the field of queer studies, but is helpful for research that looks into regime transformation, including the backsliding of democracy and the pillars of legitimacy used within authoritarian regimes. Studying politicized homophobia can contribute to the literature on democratization as well, since one of the fundamental features of democracies is the respect and protection of minority rights (Kekic, 2007).

The existing global literature on politicized homophobia has largely been studied throughout Africa, Europe, the Middle East and some Caribbean countries. Within the research on Africa Malawi (Currier, 2018), Ghana (Tettey, 2016), Senegal (Berlot & Masse, 2019), Zimbabwe (Saugy, 2022), Zambia (Klinken, 2015) and Kenya (Parsitau, 2021) are covered,

while among the European countries politicized homophobia was researched among Poland (Graff, 2010), Latvia, Serbia, Russia (Mole, 2016), Hungary (Pino & Karamanakis, 2017) and Georgia (Gvianishvili, 2019). Additionally, some of the Middle Eastern countries, like Iran (Korycki & Nasirzadeh, 2013) and Turkey (Altay, 2022), and Caribbean countries, like Trinidad and Tobago (Wahab, 2012), were researched. Little research has, however, been conducted on politicized homophobia in Central Asia. Therefore, this research project proposal aims to fill the gap by understanding both historical and contemporary discourses of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan.

Through researching the use of politicized homophobia the academic field would be able to unravel the similarities and differences on how politicized homophobia is exercised in Central Asia with its unique historical and social realities. If we speak about the shared characteristics Kazakhstan has with other researched countries, we should highlight that Kazakhstan had been colonized for over three centuries and only became independent in 1991. Not only does it share the colonial experience with some of the other researched countries, like those in Africa, but it also shares the experience of being colonized by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union with other post-Soviet countries.

While Kazakhstan is similar to some extent to the countries already covered, there are important differences, which contribute to the significance of researching Kazakhstan and Central Asia at large. Unlike other researched post-Soviet countries, like Poland and Hungary, Kazakhstan has Islam as the dominant religion, which sets it apart from the research on Eastern Europe. Religion plays a role in fueling politicized homophobia to some extent, but the way discourses on politicized homophobia are constructed in Christian-majority populations differs from Muslim-majority populations.

Moreover, Kazakhstan borders some of the major authoritarian regimes - Russia and China. This significant geopolitical difference sets it apart from the covered countries as well. Taking the unique historical and social conditions that characterize contemporary Kazakhstan, we can see that this research project is able to fill in a unique gap of knowledge that has not been addressed so far by the research community. Undertaking this research would not only foster the literature on the ways authoritarian countries exercise their power and maintain regime functionality, but also contribute to the body of literature on the political queer studies in Post-Soviet countries.

It is important to reflect on the general historical past and “Soviet legacy” of Kazakhstan that serves as the pretext for and conditions the discourses on LGBTQIA+ people in contemporary Kazakhstan’s political discourses, which echo the Soviet ones. An analysis of the historical discourses of politicized homophobia in the Soviet Union is helpful in the analysis of politicized homophobia within contemporary Kazakhstan, but historical narratives are not the main focus of the research. The aim of the project is to explore the contemporary discourse of how politicized homophobia is used rather than conducting a comparative and retrospective study. Additionally, the authoritarian political regime that Kazakhstan is currently operating under is taken as the main variable that shapes and contributes to the discourses on LGBTQIA+ people in Kazakhstan. Such an interplay of politicized homophobia under authoritarian rule with the consideration of the historical context of Kazakhstan is an attempt to encapsulate the complexity of the LGBTQIA+ discourse in Kazakhstan.

Definition of politicized homophobia

It should be noted that within the academic literature, the definition of what is politicized homophobia varies greatly. Some of the research may use the term “political homophobia” or “politicized homophobia”. Unfortunately, there is no “set in stone” definition that would provide a comprehensive definition largely accepted by the academic community and outline the difference in the usage between “political homophobia” and “politicized homophobia”. For example, Boellstorff (2004) within his research on political homophobia in Indonesia has come up with the definition that political homophobia constitutes the interplay between emotions, sexuality and political violence directed at LGBTQIA+ community, arguing that masculinity and national belonging are among the cornerstone emotions that lay the foundation of homophobia, which on the societal discourse turns into political tool of violence. Carrier (2018), on the other hand, does not consider the emotional part of politicized homophobia and uses the concept to denote the repressive function that politicized homophobia takes in crippling social movements. Bosia and Weiss (2013) go further to generalize and universalize the concept of politicized homophobia as a purposeful action performed by state actors in scapegoating LGBTQIA+ people.

Due to this uncertainty within the academic community, I define politicized homophobia in rather broad terms to encompass its different expressions that might be explicitly or implicitly shown. To define the scope of usage of the concept of “politicized homophobia” we

should attempt to define its constituting parts, where the first one is “politicized” and the second part is “homophobia”.

The word “politicized” indicates that an action that is being perpetuated has a political goal or a certain interest. For example, within the context of political violence, Sousa (2013) defines the concept as “the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals”. Therefore, for something to be “political” or “politicized” that use of power or force should have a certain interest that it pursues, which can constitute a number of things, like affecting national and international policies, amending laws, achieving societal change or changing the current political power dynamics. Regardless of what it is, the political goal is driven by a certain interest, for the achievement of which a certain power or force is being exerted. Therefore, for something to be “politicized homophobia” then this action should inherently have a deliberate use of power or force in achieving certain political interests.

Now, we should elaborate on the second constituting part of the concept - homophobia. Essentially, homophobia is any type of discrimination that is being perpetuated against homosexual people, but for the purposes of inclusivity homophobia in the context of this research paper would be used as an umbrella term to denote any discrimination that happens based on sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) of a person, stretching the concept to include the experiences of trans people apart from the homosexual and bisexual people. Fortunately, the international community has a comprehensive definition of what constitutes discrimination. We can use the General Comment of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which defines discrimination in the following way:

[D]iscrimination constitutes any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference or other differential treatment that is directly or indirectly based on the prohibited grounds of discrimination and which has the intention or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of Covenant rights. Discrimination also includes incitement to discriminate and harassment. (Economic and Social Council, 2009)

If we bring together the concepts “politicized” and “homophobia” together we can come up with a definition that has four main components to it. Essentially, politicized homophobia is (1) the deliberate use of power (2) in achieving political goals (3) through perpetuation of discrimination based on (4) SOGI. As we can see, discrimination based on SOGI is integrated

within this concept more as a mode through which the use of power happens, but at the same time perpetuation of homophobia should not necessarily be the end goal of such an action. Another strength of this definition should also be noted: it does not limit the usage of power by a specific actor as in some of the previous definitions presented above. To perpetuate politicized homophobia, it is not necessary for it to be driven by a political entity or actor. The action in its own nature should be political or, in other words, pursuing some certain political goal. At the same time if perpetuated homophobic discourse does not have a certain political goal, then this action would not be considered as politicized homophobia, but rather an expression of overall discriminatory attitude.

There should be all four constituting parts of the definition to define something as politicized homophobia, which is essentially the main focus of this research project. For example, if (1) power is (3) discriminatorily used (4) based on SOGI without (2) a particular political goal, then this action would not qualify to be politicized homophobia, but it would rather constitute discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. For example, if an employer decides to fire an employee based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Cases like these fall out of the scope of the current research, while cases where an anti-gender activist pursues to criminalize the public expression of LGBTQIA+ people through introducing a legislative ban on the so-called LGBT “propaganda” are the focus of this thesis. What should be highlighted is that it is not necessary for a political goal to be stated outwardly to be considered politicized homophobia. For example, actions perpetrated by political actors, who are involved in the political arena, are inherently driven with political interests; therefore, these actions will be considered as having an intrinsic political interest, even if the direct intention is not stated publicly. These cases can include a politician’s discriminatory speech about LGBTQIA+ people, including but not limited to, in pursuit of leveraging electoral support or pushing forward discriminatory laws.

Unfortunately, there is no literature that highlights the difference between the usage of “political homophobia” or “politicized homophobia”. Within this research project the version “politicized homophobia” will be used, as there is an added emphasis that the perpetuated action with the use of bias, prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people is made political or politicized rather than the issue itself being inherently political by its own nature. In a nutshell, for the aims of this thesis, I define politicized homophobia as any action or narrative promoted by political actors, including activists, politicians and other entities, with

aims of influencing local politics and policies with four constituting parts. To be classified as politicized homophobia it should be (1) deliberate use of power (2) in achieving political goals (3) through perpetuation of discrimination based on (4) SOGI.

Literature review on politicized homophobia

The literature on politicized homophobia is diverse and outlines many ways political actors use homophobia as a means of achieving political aims. One of the features of the way politicized homophobia is used revolves around the usage of heteronationalism, which refers to the way that some political actors use homophobia to reinforce the “nation’s religio-conservative, anti-gender, and hegemonic masculine image” (Unal, 2024). Heteronationalism basically uses “homophobia [...] as an aspect of state governance and nation building”, where the assertion of nationhood depends on exclusion or, in other words, state’s identity is not defined by what it is, but rather by what it is not i.e. anything except non-cis-heterosexual people or the expression that does not fit into the cis-heteronormative thinking (Johnson, 2013). To put it differently, scholars have researched how politicized homophobia in authoritarian regimes contributes to constructing and unifying people’s identity against a foreign “other”.

It is another important branch of the research on politicized homophobia to foster understanding of how LGBTQIA+ people are being positioned as the “abnormal”. It is useful to deconstruct the way that these narratives are being framed because national identity that revolves around “traditional values” can hardly exist without the existence of the “flawed” and “wrong” as one of its foundational constituting parts is the juxtaposition of the “pure” to the “abnormal” (Sleptcov, 2018). Paradoxical as it may seem, traditional values, as constructed through narratives of conflicting identities, cannot exist without the LGBTQIA+ community serving as the contrasting “other” — the perceived adversary in an alleged war to preserve so-called traditional morals and values.

Scholars have dived in-depth into researching and deconstructing the narratives used by the populist leaders in leveraging on hate and prejudice against LGBTQIA+ people to understand how in these populist discourses LGBTQIA+ people are being positioned. Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024) researched the ways that illiberal countries weaponize the issues of LGBTQIA+ people’s rights across countries all over the world, comparing the experiences of states, like Hungary, Russia and Uganda, where anti-LGBTQIA+ laws have been introduced into the legislation.

One of the insights offered by Ayoub and Stoeckl on the ways how LGBTQIA+ people's identities are being weaponized in politics relates to the flexibility that is offered by the sexual and gender diverse groups in relation to SOGI, essentially making them vulnerable targets to juxtapose their identities to “traditions, national sovereignty and conventional notions of “nature”,” which is based on the binary perception of gender and sexual orientation. LGBTQIA+ people construct a reality, where their existence by its own nature challenges these binaries of gender and sexual orientation, offering the fluidity of these concepts and making LGBTQIA+ community an easy target to position them in a conflict with what is considered to be “proper” and “natural” or “dysfunctional” and “unnatural”. The usage of the discourse with the division between “natural” and “unnatural” also touches upon the reproduction and gender norms within cis-heteronormative societies, where sexual relations between what is considered to be male and female are perceived to be the only acceptable norm, while “deviations” of the categories or the fluidity of the relations between these groups is perceived to violate the “natural” gender boundaries.

To further sophisticate the construction of politicized homophobia we can explore the ways that LGBTQIA+ people also challenge patriarchal masculinity as it disrupts “traditional” gender roles, undermines the dominance of heteronormative ideals, and exposes the fragility of the rigid, hierarchical structures that patriarchal masculinity relies on to maintain power and control. LGBTQIA+ people challenge this discourse on “militarized, religionized nationalism, and threaten the reproduction of the heterosexual patriarchal narrative of the nation” (Ameling, 2022). All of these essentially lead to the cis-heteronormative people to feel that the gender boundaries and patriarchal masculinity that they were socialized into are violated; therefore, there is a perceived need to police such expression in a response to the breach of cis-heteronormativity and patriarchy. In summary, the discourse used to perpetuate politicized homophobia is convenient to be exploited since it relies on positioning LGBTQIA+ people in opposition to the “natural” gender binaries and patriarchy, concepts into which many people are socialized into, making it easy for many to feel that the way of life they are used to is being threatened.

In the face of all these threats emerges a need to see a figure that can assure the public that they will safeguard the traditional values and national identity, which in practice becomes a tool for authoritarian leaders to legitimize their governance. Politicized homophobia “facilitates the state’s objective of uniting the society around its national leader” (Sleptcov, 2018). The authoritarian leaders in such contexts serve the purpose of re-establishing the cis-

heteronormative identity of the society, incorporating the notion that only people of the accepted gender and sexual orientation can constitute a state's "proper" citizens. According to Abbasov (2022), by either publicly expressing hate or persecuting LGBTQIA+ people, the authoritarian regimes "signal to the majority that they represent a broader society and therefore are entitled to rule". As a result, the perception of nationhood becomes exclusionary towards LGBTQIA+ people, essentially leading to the establishment of self-legitimizing "gendered nationalism" (Ameling, 2022).

Within such a context, when LGBTQIA+ people are positioned as a "foreign" threat that contradicts the local perception of the nationhood, repression against LGBTQIA+ people is not only seen as justified, but also becomes a tool to strengthen the authoritarian leader's legitimacy in the public's eyes. In the framework, where an authoritarian leader is perceived as "the protector of traditional societal values", the repressive actions against LGBTQIA+ people are not considered to be actions against human rights, but a necessary means for the survival of the national identity, "boosting their popularity and generating a public perception [that the authoritarian leaders] are entitled to rule" (Abbasov, 2022).

Politicized homophobia is not only a strategy to build legitimacy of the authoritarian state based on constructing national identity that excludes non-cis-heterosexual people, but it can also be used to build legitimacy through leveraging electoral support. Politicized homophobia serves as an effective tool to mobilize "constituencies by framing LGBTIQ rights as incompatible with traditional values" (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). Heteronationalism and gendered nationalism leverage the support of the religious and conservative communities, especially during the campaigning periods before elections. As the theories on populism and its usage in electoral advances state, "populist movements frequently use discourse to trigger perceptions of ontological insecurity", basically referring to the way that populist movements evoke feelings of the majority's identity and existence being threatened (Şahin, 2021). Within the context of politicized homophobia, such populism, which carries the goals of gaining electoral support, happens as the populist movement starts to label LGBTQIA+ people as a "security threat", which has happened during the Türkiye's elections of 2023 (Abaday, 2023). Within the provoked ontological insecurities to the identity of the populists, the political actors appear to be the saviors, who can fight against these existential threats, resulting in them being in a favored position by the populists (Unal, 2024).

The research community has also demonstrated that politicized homophobia is not just a tool for leveraging political support, but can also be used to maintain the legitimacy of authoritarian powers through diverting public's attention or directly scapegoating LGBTQIA+ community for failures made by the state. Politicized homophobia in the way that it "others" LGBTQIA+ people "can either distract from [...] or undercut [...] economic deregulation", diverting public's attention from socio-economic issues and scapegoating the LGBTQIA+ community (Bosia & Weiss, 2013).

Economic failures of the state and other domestic issues spark public dissatisfaction and can build-up discontent among people, which may lead to a momentum where citizens no longer want to tolerate the state's lack of competence. Authoritarian regimes do not favor people, who challenge the state's position to lead the country and social unrest, protests and demonstrations threaten the regime. In such cases, when the authoritarian regimes face a potential crisis of public trust and legitimacy, they resort to politicized homophobia. There is a need for an authoritarian government to find another strategy to legitimize the regime and avoid accountability. They need to shift people's resentment towards another subject apart from issues of inefficient usage of the national budget, poverty, inequality and corruption. Politicized homophobia emerges as a convenient and inexpensive legitimation strategy, especially in countries where prejudice towards LGBTQIA+ community is widespread. Therefore, authoritarian states "act to repress sexual minorities, implementing homophobic policies to divert public attention from poor economic conditions and discourage citizens from demanding redistributive policies" (Abbasov, 2022). As a result, authoritarian states create the conditions where they are capable of shifting the blame on a marginalized community; therefore, evading accountability and maintaining legitimacy.

Within the broader context of social movements that form within authoritarian states, politicizing homophobia is used to spark resistance within the civil society between different movements for human rights. As it was discussed earlier, authoritarian regimes attempt to portray LGBTQIA+ people and those who advocate for equal rights as being foreign agents, who act in the interest of "Western" powers that intend to encroach on state's national sovereignty in a neocolonial attempt to establish influence over these countries (Ameling, 2022). Therefore, resistance to queer rights is considered to be a resistance against neocolonialism and those who promote LGBTQIA+ rights are perceived to act in violation of national identity. According to Currier (2018), such portrayal of LGBTQIA+ activism allows political elites to "coerce activists into distancing their movements" from consolidating the

power of their movements together. Currier conducted the case study on the discourse of politicized homophobia in Malawi, where she notes how discourse about “LGBT propaganda” has been used by the state to discredit the reputation of a number of human rights organizations by associating them with LGBTQIA+ rights or gay marriages. Malawi politicians have claimed that human rights NGOs allegedly promote good governance, but their real objective is to institutionalize gay rights, leading to a division within human rights movements.

Although there is nothing wrong with a human rights NGO promoting principles of non-discrimination, the allegations about an organization promoting LGBTQIA+ rights within states that have a high degree of systemic homophobia and transphobia leads to public’s condemnation. Within authoritarian contexts, the human rights community, who advocate for the protection of LGBTQIA+ people, face deliberate fake allegations of attempting to encroach on “traditional values” and “promote” homosexuality, which discredits them and puts them in antagonistic position with the populist majority, like in Malawi, where the government was depicting the image of civil society as promoting gay rights, “knowing the majority of Malawians would not accept at least for now that gay rights should be part of ... [society]” (Currier, 2018). As a result of politicizing homophobia, human rights movements in practice experience an impeding growth and a decreased collaboration between them. As in the example of the Malawi regime usage of politicized homophobia “convinced some activist leaders to compromise their positions on sexual rights, to side completely with the state and elites against LGBT rights” (Currier, 2018).

Lastly, the literature on politicized homophobia also explores the way that it is being used to defy international institutions and justify resistance against democratization. Authoritarian regimes weaponize the democratic pluralism and position their values as inherently distinct from what is promoted within the international community to weaken the influence and legitimacy of international institutions within their countries (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). They resort to the same techniques of evoking feelings of ontological fear among the public for the existence of national identity, traditional values and sovereignty “as part of a larger push to delegitimize” human rights (Bosia & Weiss, 2013). In short, the narrative of a certain “gender ideology” being imposed over their states allows the authoritarian regimes to defy democratic values and democratization within their own countries (Kováts, 2018).

Theoretical framing

This research paper embraces poststructuralism as the framework of analysis, specifically the Queer Theory. Within the context of LGBTQIA+ people and research on discourses, poststructuralism is one of the most useful frameworks as it attempts to explore the ways in which language and discourses are central to the construction and use of politicized homophobia, revealing the power dynamics that are laid at its foundation i.e. the domination of cis-heterosexual majority across all the structures over non-cis-heterosexual people.

Applying discourse analysis is relevant for this research since it is concerned with the way that language maintains or transforms social relations. Poststructuralism with its critical stance on heteronormativity would enable the research to deconstruct the way that our societies, where cisgender heterosexual people constitute the majority and have the decisive power to narrate what is wrong and right, have positioned non-cis-heteronormativity as the distinct and oppositional category, resulting in the “deviances” being perceived as abnormal to the “normal” sexual and gender identities. It is the norms promoted by the hegemony of cis-heteronormativity that “dictate that 'proper' human beings are either women or men, that 'proper' women and men are heterosexual and that people articulating other identities and desires are deviant” (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013).

As Sedgwick (1990) argues, it is the way that discourses on LGBTQIA+ people are portrayed in the media overall that their identities are marginalized, while the identities that fit into the boxes of cis-heteronormativity are normalized; therefore, critically assessing the perspectives on the cis-heteronormativity, which is what Queer Theory is about, internalized by the actors perpetuating politicized homophobia is a starting point of this research paper.

Diving into the depth of the perception that actors, who use internalized homophobia, is essential for the contextual analysis of the reasons for its usage. The Queer Theory informs the research methodology by highlighting the importance of researching the way that political actors create the binary and oppositional discourses between what they would portray as “normal” or cis-heterosexuality and “abnormal” or non-cis-heterosexuality.

Through unraveling this juxtaposition it would be much simpler to identify the internal reasoning guiding the political actors in using the politicized homophobia, even if these meanings are assigned arbitrarily with little to no logical relation. Moreover, as with any theory

in poststructuralism, Queer Theory embraces the significance of language and discourses in the way that reality is constructed through social constructs and meanings ascribed to them.

Applying poststructuralism to the discourse analysis of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan will also allow the research to uncover the underlying assumptions that political actors rely on when promoting such rhetoric. This approach will help reveal the ideological frameworks shaping their statements. When using poststructuralism, focus of the research will not only be on what is said on the surface by the political actors, because discourse analysis goes further beyond the speech or text. But the research will go in-depth to unravel what are the factors within the speech that legitimize domination and abuse (Barrett and Bound, 2015). Within this research it means that the way that language is used to maintain and justify oppression over LGBTQIA+ people will be analyzed. The way that LGBTQIA+ people are named, what features are prescribed to them and within what context these narratives are promoted will assist the examination of the ways that domination over LGBTQIA+ people is legitimized.

The assumptions that reflect the structure and that are upheld by the speech are reflected not only in what is being said, but also what is excluded from the discourse (Rugina and Ahl, 2023). Therefore, attention will be given not only to what discourse is promoted by political actors, but also what these actors exclude from their narratives, which would further compliment the analysis of politicized homophobia.

Research design and methodology

This research aims at answering the following research questions: “What are the constructive elements that politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan is built on?” and “Why and how politicized homophobia is employed?” The epistemology of the research is interpretivism, as the research aims to construct an understanding of the reality that is made by the inter-subjective narratives promoted by individual or collective political actors. The hypothesis of this research project is that politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan is used to promote and sustain the authoritarian regime of Kazakhstan through defying democratic norms. The following are the research objectives of the project:

- To investigate the discursive construction of politicized homophobia within Kazakhstan's regime around the “deviance” of non-cis-heterosexual people;

- To examine relevant historical contexts that contribute to the discourses of politicized homophobia in contemporary Kazakhstan;
- To explore the motivations, ideologies, and agendas driving the utilization of political homophobia as a politicized tool by political actors in Kazakhstan.

Empirically, the main data source for this research will be the recording of the public hearing conducted on the petition for introduction of so-called “LGBT propaganda” law in August of 2024.

For background information, in May of 2024 anti-gender movement – Kazakhstan Union of Parents with the leadership of Bagila Baltagayeva – initiated a petition on criminalizing, so-called, LGBT “propaganda”. In the beginning of June 2024 the petition gathered 50,000 signatures, which are needed for any petition to be considered on a national level. After the consideration of the petition, a public hearing was conducted and recorded with anti-gender activists and human rights activists participating in the public hearing to express their opinions on that matter. The public hearing was conducted by the Ministry Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan and is recorded in the section on live streams on their Facebook page. Despite the fact that not all the people participating in the public hearing represent governmental institutions, they nevertheless pursue certain political goals in terms of the encroachment on LGBTQIA+ people’s rights and change of legal system. By the fact that they are involved in activities oriented at national policies, all of the participants of the public hearing fall under the category of political actors, who are studied in this research. The research will analyze the discourses of political actors on the topic of LGBTQIA+ people within the framework of the mentioned public hearing. The recording of the public hearing was transcribed. Then, the transcript was coded for thematic discourses. After that, all the similar themes were grouped and are presented as research findings.

The researcher’s position in regard to this study should be separately highlighted. The researcher is an LGBTQIA+ activist, who comes from Kazakhstan and works in a LGBTQIA+ rights NGO. The researcher has frequently observed the tactics of misinformation and vilification directed towards LGBTQIA+ people, which has sparked the interest to further study the topic. Current background and overall experience of the researcher would likely make the final research paper critical of the narratives that oppose recognition and protection of LGBTQIA+ people’s rights. Nevertheless, the critical stance on such discourses would not make the researcher disregard the narratives promoted by the anti-gender movements.

Research findings

Historical legacy of homophobia in Kazakhstan

Within this section of the research paper, the historical background on homophobia in the preceding states of Kazakhstan is provided. Historically contextualizing stigma against LGBTQIA+ people is important, since the analysis of the background can provide us with important insights on how the current discourse of politicized homophobia echoes back in history. Although there is no research available on the history of homophobia on the land of Kazakhstan before joining the Russian Empire, we are still able to analyze some of the historical developments through the researchers, who have studied the history of homophobia within the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. Through studying the history and discourses of politicized homophobia within Russian Empire and Soviet Union, we will be able to uncover some of the historical parallels that have served as the pre-condition for the formation and framing of the politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan, after the country obtained its independence.

The earliest available research on the history of homophobia in the scholarly work goes back as early as when Kazakhstan was colonized by the Russian Empire. The law, which criminalized consensual sex among people of the same gender, was passed in 1716 in the Russian Empire. It was known as “Peter’s Code” and only prohibited consensual sex among soldiers on active duty (Lehn, 2017, p.14). Peter’s code was a European import of homophobia as it attempted to modernize the Russian Empire based on Western European models of governance and legislation. Although Kazakh land was fully colonized by the Russian Empire only around the middle of the 19th century (Beisembayeva, 2021), meaning that Peter’s Code might not have had significant influence over Kazakh legislative norms at the time when it was accepted in 1716, it is still important to consider the acceptance of Peter’s Code with criminalization of consensual sexual relations between soldiers on active duty as an important milestone in history as it is one of the focal points, when the homophobic legislation started to appear in the region.

It is unknown whether or not discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people existed before the colonial integration of Kazakh people into the Russian Empire, but the existing recorded historical data points out that the discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people had taken place from Peter’s Code in the Russian Empire and has later started to transition into Kazakh people’s

legal norms. Later, in 1832, Tsar Nicholas extended the provisions of that law, making consensual sex between all men criminally punishable with 45 years in resettlement in Siberia. Around that time Kazakh land was fully colonized by the Russian Empire. It had taken almost a century of severe persecution of homosexual people before the law would be overthrown as a result of the 1917th Great Russian Revolution. The people, who had led the revolution decided to banish all the past legislation within the Russian Empire, including the law that criminalized consensual sex between men. There were 16 years of freedom from direct persecution before 1933-1934, which is already the time period that transitions to the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that there were no criminal provisions to detain LGBTQIA+ people in the early years of the Soviet Union, people were still punished for public display of same-sex affection. As stated by Dan Healey, one of the most influential researchers on the history of LGBTQIA+ people in the Soviet Union and Russia, LGBTQIA+ people were still charged with “hooliganism” (Mongayt, 2022, 17:51).

The intention behind the re-introduction of laws criminalizing consensual sex between people of the same gender in 1933-1934 was to protect “Soviet” morality through punishing the people with prison sentences between 3 to 5 years. Homosexuality was perceived as a threat to the “moral foundations of society and the psyche of society members” (Alexander, 2018, p.44). The Soviet government believed that homosexuality had a damaging influence on the masculinity of the state and led to the degradation of individuals, particularly the image of a “perfect” Soviet citizen. The role of the narrative of a “perfect” Soviet person within the broader discourse on homosexuality is important, as it puts into the antagonistic opposition the identity of a Soviet citizen with the sexual orientation and gender identity of a person. Homosexuality was viewed to be a “degenerative disease of the terminally bourgeois” (Lehn, 2017, p.15) and “moral perversion” (Alexander, 2018, p.38). These narratives divided Soviet people into distinct categories of “healthy and morally normal” or cis-heterosexual people and “diseased and morally perverted” or LGBTQIA+ people. Such discourse excluded LGBTQIA+ people from the “perfect and pure” Soviet identity and was an attempt to police the morality of the general public through establishing state sanctioned control over what identities are allowed to exist within the Soviet Union. For example, in the early 1960s the Soviet Union introduced a science field named psychopathology, which studied issues of sexual health and “sexual perversions”, including homosexuality, essentially perpetuating a “desired” image of morality and policing the expressions that were outside of the “norms” defined by the state (Alexander, 2018, p.39).

We should also highlight the way how LGBTQIA+ people were positioned as an ontological threat to the Soviet identity imposed by the “bourgeoisie” or the West, artificially manufacturing a threat in people’s minds through appealing to fight against neo-colonialism of the “Western” countries. When a nation's identity is perceived to be under a threat, a "need" to defend that identity against the constructed danger inevitably arises. Therefore, the Soviet Union had to defend the regime and the nation, where anything outside of the state’s “morality” was viewed as a “political disloyalty” to the communist values and Soviet regime (Alexander, 2018, p.32). All of these regulations of morality served the purpose of preserving the Soviet Union’s vision of a 'pure' Soviet citizen, who would be free from foreign and corruptive influences.

The discriminatory legislation and active policing of the public’s morals have led to dozens of thousands of LGBTQIA+ people being persecuted by the state. As Valodzin (2020) found out there were at least 38,000 people, who engaged in same-sex relations, were criminally prosecuted. The data comes from the State Archive of the Russian Federation and presents the data of criminal persecution between 1946 and 1991. It should be highlighted that the above-mentioned number is far from accurately representing the actual number of LGBTQIA+ people, who were persecuted for their sexual orientation and gender identity. Unfortunately, the data does not include the time between 1933-1934, when the law criminalizing consensual sex between people of the same gender was reintroduced, to 1946. The data also does not include the statistics on how many people were sentenced by GULAG courts and extrajudicial bodies related to the state security apparatus, who could also persecute people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. Also, the author reports that the data for the late 1940s and early 1950s is also incomplete. Lastly, a significant number of persecution cases against LGBTQIA+ people could have happened unofficially without any police records being written on these cases.

Despite the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, homosexuality continued to be criminalized by Kazakhstan's government even after obtaining its independence. Consensual sexual relations between people of the same sex were still a part of the Criminal Code in Kazakhstan for seven more years until it was extracted from the Criminal Code in 1998 (LGBT Organization Labrys, 2010). As the evidence points out, criminalization of consensual sexual relations between people is part of Kazakhstan's recent history, which had taken its start from the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Although Kazakhstan decriminalized homosexuality and it was no longer punishable by imprisonment, LGBTQIA+ people continued to be

persecuted and discriminated against based on their sexual orientation and gender identity with no legal recognition of their human rights and available protection granted by the state up to this date.

In the next section, where the research paper presents the detailed analysis of the discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan, the link between the discourses promoted within Soviet Union to the narratives of politicized homophobia perpetuated by the political actors in the modern Kazakhstan will become more apparent, reflecting the influence of Soviet Union's "legacy", as a historical pre-context, in framing the discourses of nowadays' Kazakh society. It is important to note that the experience of LGBTQIA+ people in terms of the criminalization, pathologization, and violent victimization in the Soviet Union and the GULAG form part of a relatively recent history for Kazakhstan; therefore, the parallels between the two regimes will inevitably find their continuity and resonance through the part of the population that had lived their adult life throughout the transition period between Soviet Union to the independent Kazakhstan.

A large number of people experienced internalization of violence against LGBTQIA+ people during the Soviet Union, when they experienced repressions by the state in the GULAG prisons. The concentration camps and prisons socialize people into certain acceptable norms and behavior that is permitted in these places, which essentially is very discriminatory and violent towards LGBTQIA+ people; therefore, people, who have experienced the repressions and were placed into GULAG concentration camps carry these norms of how LGBTQIA+ people should be treated into the larger society. Dan Healey, an influential author about the history of LGBTQIA+ community in the Soviet Union, has argued that the deeply ingrained discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people in the GULAG prison culture has affected a considerable number of people. In GULAG prisons homosexual individuals were treated for sexual satisfaction as prostitutes, raped and assigned the most humiliating types of work in the camps:

“At least 18 million people have gone through GULAG during Stalin's time. Around 85% of them survived and returned. These people witnessed a very visible and violent homophobic culture in the camps and colonies. They internalized this knowledge and brought it back to their families and society” (Mongayt, 2022, 24:11).

The internalization of harmful norms towards LGBTQIA+ people has continued even after Kazakhstan obtained its independence and the Soviet Union no longer existed.

Homosexuality was only decriminalized in 1998, meaning that a significant part of Kazakhstan's today's population had been brought up within the context of oppressive and discriminatory legislation against LGBTQIA+ people. To be more precise, approximately 14 million adults (those people who were over 18 years old by 1998), representing 73% of Kazakhstan's current population, have been brought up in the homophobic and transphobic legislative norms towards sexually and gender-diverse individuals (United Nations, 2022). This is a considerable part of Kazakhstan's current population, who have internalized harmful ideas about LGBTQIA+ people since the Soviet Union and the period of Kazakhstan's independence when homosexuality was criminally punishable. These people continue to perpetuate past discourses of politicized homophobia and contribute to historical continuation of the discriminatory narratives between the two regimes.

In regards to the way Kazakhstan's population was socialized into the perception of transgender people we can study the process of depathologization of transgender identities. If homosexuality was excluded from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Diseases (DSM) in 1973, the medicalized stigma towards transgender people continues to persist in Kazakhstan up to this date. Trans people are diagnosed with gender dysphoria, a label which to this day keeps a negative connotation about transgender people overall, and attaches a pathologizing meaning to the experiences of the trans community (Kirey, 2015). Despite the depathologization homosexuality and some progress in terms of terminology used about transgender people, LGBTQIA+ people continue experiencing social pathologization and their identities are labeled as a "disease" that must be treated. For example, just four years ago, Bekzat Mukashev, a 28 years old gay Kazakh from Uralsk, was forced to undergo brain surgery by his parents, who tried to cure his homosexuality this way (Kok.team, 2020).

In summary, the overview of historical roots of homophobia and transphobia throughout the time period of when Kazakhstan formed a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union lays the foundation to analyze how these historical discourses are reflected in the contemporary discourses on LGBTQIA+ people in nowadays Kazakhstan, particularly the discourses of criminalization, pathologization, and violent victimization. The discourses of politicized homophobia in modern Kazakhstan are explored in the next section below.

Discourse analysis

The discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan has many layers to it and overall is a sophisticated picture. We can start the analysis from one of the first trends that could be observed within the discourses on politicized homophobia of the political actors, who were participating in the public hearing on the petition against LGBT “propaganda”, which is a trend of dehumanization of LGBTQIA+ people in Kazakhstan.

Dehumanization is essentially a process by which a group or individuals are stripped of their human qualities, dignity and rights and the existence of these people is reduced down to an overly generalized or stereotypical image. Based on the discourses promoted by the political actors, who perpetuated politicized homophobia during the public hearing, we can see how they frame LGBTQIA+ people as generally harmful to the society and having little to no things to offer for the greater good of humankind. For example, one of the participants of the public hearing has said that “this LGBT community is a concept that goes entirely against humanity and the overall development of humankind”. Such a discourse demonstrates that in the perception and social reality of that person LGBTQIA+ community do not have any agency as equal members of the society, but rather are inferior to an average Kazakh citizen, who is thought to be obliged to contribute to the well-being and social development of the nation.

Interestingly, the underlying assumption of the above-mentioned quote reflects the way cis-heteronormativity puts a functional reproductive duty on people in terms of rearing biologically related children, which they are obliged to offer to the larger society. It frames those relations, which are capable of raising biological children, as acceptable and all the other relations, which allegedly do not result in biological children being born, as flawed or dysfunctional, failing to meet expectations of the cis-heteronormative belief system. The perceived lack of reproductive capacity and ability to rear children within the cis-heteronormative system positions LGBTQIA+ couples as being unable to contribute to “the overall development of humankind”. Within the framework of politicized homophobia the difference in the way that LGBTQIA+ people engage in sexual relations from the cis-heterosexual people and the perceived inability to reproduce inhibit them from completing their functional reproductive duty. The worth of the people, who are capable of bringing biological children into life and executing the functional reproductive duty imposed by cis-heteronormativity, is higher than the perception of worth of those people, who are allegedly

unable to recreate, making not only someone's value, but also humanness and treatment as an equal depend on their capacity to bring up biological children.

The discourse of politicized homophobia perpetuated during the public hearing also dehumanizes LGBTQIA+ people by positioning them as deprived of morality. In the belief system of the public hearing participants morality is perceived to be one of the qualities that distinguishes humans from animals. But the relations that LGBTQIA+ people engage in are considered to be deprived of morality by the political actors, who perpetuated politicized homophobia during the public hearing; therefore, they exhibit animal-like behavior. Based on these underlying assumptions, some of the participants of the public hearing have compared LGBTQIA+ people to animals and equated recognition of same-sex relations to recognizing and introducing a marriage based on relations between a human and an animal.

“One-gender relationships are animalistic behavior. I consider it the ultimate form of moral depravity. Therefore, my message to the youth is to stay away from such notions and focus on developing knowledge and contributing to building a better future.”

“Tomorrow, someone else might come forward saying they want to marry an animal. Are we going to sit and discuss that without shame? Someone from these circles might declare they want to form a union with an animal. Should we allow that too? What kind of disgrace is this? Such things should never be permitted.”

Within such a framework, where morality is positioned as one of the inherent qualities that makes people human, a person deprived of morals is essentially the one, who lacks humanness. If we put it into the context of politicized homophobia, the fact that LGBTQIA+ people's relations and identities do not fit into the rigid categories defined by cis-heterosexual system serves as evidence for political actors that their morals are non-existent because only a person with no morals, allegedly like an animal, would engage in LGBTQIA+ relations. In other words, comparing LGBTQIA+ people to animals is a way to perpetuate their image as one of the morally corrupt individuals, who lack the basic human qualities, such as attraction to the same species. These discourses of politicized homophobia demonstrate the lack of recognition of humanness of LGBTQIA+ people in Kazakhstan and they become a convenient tool to dehumanize LGBTQIA+ people, claiming that they lack morality that is inherent to humans regardless of any other aspects, attributes, or actions that could demonstrate their humanness or morals.

The discourse of politicized homophobia during the public hearing revealed further trends of dehumanization of LGBTQIA+ people through shifting the focus away from them as human beings towards associating them primarily with sexual “deviance” or “perversion”. A number of public hearing participants have referred to LGBTQIA+ people as if “they engage in all sorts of obscene behavior” or label their relations as “dirty business”. We should further note two insightful commentaries, which demonstrates the trend of dehumanization, where LGBTQIA+ people’s identities are reduced to a single aspect of their existence – sexual behavior – while dismissing their broader humanness and their rights.

“Among them, we need to thoroughly study the issue of LGBT, its impact on us, especially on the youth, children, and adolescents. After that, we need to research it from a legal perspective. We are being told from various sides that this [introduction of legislation against LGBT “propaganda”] violates human rights. However, we should not frame the issue of what is below the waist as human rights.”

“I agree that there should be protection. Protection of the human. If he is not disruptive, not broadcasting his sexual misbehavior and all that goes on in his apartment, within his walls, but when he is carrying it around and broadcasting it, propagating it, I am against it.”

To paraphrase the main argument of the commentary above – the issue of whether or not to introduce legislation against LGBT “propaganda” is not an issue about people and their rights, but rather their “deviant” sexual relations and identity. Such discourse defies LGBTQIA+ people’s human rights, such as freedom of expression in public spaces, and even moves beyond simple rejection of human rights. It deprives LGBTQIA+ people of dignity by equating LGBTQIA+ people’s worth to genitalia or “sexual misbehavior”. No human dignity is involved in the issues that are primarily about the “perversion”; therefore, there is an absence of consideration and recognition of LGBTQIA+ people’s humanness.

In other words, this discourse of politicized homophobia reveals the perception of the LGBTQIA+ community, where the broader depth and meaning of their existence is overridden by their sexually “deviant” or “immoral” relations. The underlying assumption beneath the above-mentioned discourse is that the virtue of the person is evaluated based on how acceptable would the person’s sexual relations be considered within cis-heterosexual prism. Basically, a person’s humanness within this discourse is rather defined by acceptance of their relations than the person’s existence as a human being.

Another branch of politicized homophobia that emerged during the public hearing was pathologization and stigmatization based on the health of the LGBTQIA+ community. One of the public hearing participants referred to the behavior of LGBTQIA+ people as “actions of a person with a disturbed psyche”, while another participant stated that “this type of relationship [LGBTQIA+] causes reproductive health issues.” The last commentary that would be valuable to highlight is the stigma related to HIV infection, where the public hearing participant stated that “HIV infection directly spreads through these [LGBT] organizations and same-sex relationships; therefore, we must protect public health in this regard.”

Pathologization is essentially portrayal of a certain group or individuals as unhealthy or assigning the connotation of being “infectious” to a certain community and requiring medical attention. The emphasis on the medical or psychological problems that is allegedly inherent to LGBTQIA+ community forms part of the pathologizing discourse of politicized homophobia. Claiming that only people of unsound mind would engage in LGBTQIA+ relations and associating their identities to health-related issues, such as HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, within the discourse of politicized homophobia portrays LGBTQIA+ people in opposition to the “natural”, “functional” and “healthy” cis-heterosexual majority. The narrative attempts to pinpoint the differences between cis-heterosexual people in comparison with LGBTQIA+ people in terms of health and well-being as evidence that demonstrates the inherent “dysfunctionality” of the LGBTQIA+ community.

The underlying assumption beneath the pathologizing discourse of politicized homophobia labels the expression of any identity that goes beyond the acceptable rigid frames within the cis-heterosexual system as a “deviation” that requires medical, psychological or moral correction. LGBTQIA+ identities are portrayed to be as “dysfunctional” to force them to fit into the “functional” categories dictated by the cis-heteronormativity. Within this paradigm of cis-heteronormative system LGBTQIA+ people’s identity as something that forms a foundational constituting part of a person’s selfhood is rejected. Instead, the non-cis-heterosexual identity is perceived to be a flawed and fixable characteristic of a person that must be treated. In an alleged attempt to protect “public health”, cis-heterosexual society acts to police LGBTQIA+ people, exerting social control to regulate expression of non-cis-heterosexual identities deemed as a pathology and enforcing conformity onto LGBTQIA+ community assisted by the appeals to the medical and psychological “deviance” of LGBTQIA+ people.

The discourse of politicized homophobia during the public hearing on the petition against LGBT “propaganda” in Kazakhstan also focused on vilifying LGBTQIA+ community, positioning them as a threat to children and their development. Vilifying a person or a community is an action of portraying someone as evil through stating highly critical or defamatory claims, which result in the spread of prejudice and harmful information about the targeted group.

During the public hearing, a number of participants have claimed that there is a special vulnerability that children have in terms of the negative influence of LGBTQIA+ community on their well-being. For example, open discussions about LGBTQIA+ issues and rallies were claimed to be “harmful, especially when involving children and adolescents”, while the, so-called, LGBT “propaganda” was said to “confuse the youth”. The discourse of vilifying LGBTQIA+ community based on an alleged intention to “corrupt” children, who are perceived to have “unformed psyches”, evokes moral panic that the “harmful” influence of the LGBTQIA+ people will affect children and result in the lack of proper moral development. The discourse of politicized homophobia that LGBTQIA+ people threaten the safety and well-being of children has also manifested itself through the direct appeals to potential negative dysfunctional physical and mental development and protection of children against cases of sexualized violence allegedly caused by the spread of LGBT “propaganda”.

“Overall, during this survey, 57.1% of respondents expressed the opinion that the advocacy and propaganda activities of LGBT communities negatively impact the physical and mental development of children, identifying it as one of the most significant consequences of these communities' functional activities.”

“Regarding types of crimes, last year saw an increase in nearly all offenses against the sexual inviolability of minors. [...] The main reasons for the growth of such crimes include the dissemination of information about free sexual relations in mass media, social networks, and internet resources. [...] In turn, the Ministry identified 3,000 foreign internet content sources spreading pornographic materials this year. [...] Given the above, we believe it is necessary to first and foremost stop any sexual propaganda, including that related to LGBT issues and pornography.”

Apart from establishing a predatory image of LGBTQIA+ community, which are believed to attempt intentionally violating children, studying the underlying assumptions of this discourse reveals the idea that LGBTQIA+ people or their relationships will disrupt the

“natural” development of “traditional” norms and family values of the children. LGBTQIA+ people stem out of the cis-heteronormative image of the family structure, which is considered to have two parents of different gender bringing up children. Non-cis-heterosexual couples challenge the rigid definitions of family and the gender roles within the “traditional” family, offering an alternative to the notion of family prescribed by cis-heteronormativity. The flexibility in terms of parenting offered by the LGBTQIA+ community is assumed to threaten a child's future functional reproductive duty dictated by the cis-heteronormativity of bringing biological children into life. The “proper” moral, physical and psychological development that the discourse of politicized homophobia refers to is the formation of the child, who will later fit cis-heteronormativity in their adult life.

As it was mentioned before, the worthiness of a person's life and the extent to which they will be treated equally within the cis-heteronormative system depends on rearing biological children. This further sophisticates the picture of politicized homophobia, revealing additional underlying assumption of the promoted discourse – parental relations, which are not formed by cis-heterosexual couples, are unable to reproduce cis-heteronormativity; therefore, they do not have the moral grounds of rearing children in the framework of politicized homophobia.

We can also highlight the underlying assumptions related to children themselves within the vilifying discourse of politicized homophobia. Children are portrayed as entities deprived of their own agency and autonomy. They are perceived to be a passive object that is being influenced by a number of external factors and threats, rather than an active subject with their own agency and capabilities to form independent identity apart from what is promoted in cis-heteronormative system. Due to supposedly having no personal agency, there is a perceived need to protect the child from corruptive and harmful influences, including LGBTQIA+ people, in order to safeguard the child's future fulfillment of functional reproductive duty in the cis-heteronormative society.

The child within the cis-heteronormative system is deprived of any agency to the extent that it is considered inconceivable for them to have the capacity to understand or form their own identity, relationships, or sexual orientation. Cis-heteronormativity rejects any possibility for children themselves to be a part of LGBTQIA+ community. They can only be “propagated” into becoming LGBTQIA+ person due to the “unformed psyche”. Therefore, according to this discourse of politicized homophobia all LGBTQIA+ people were “victims” of LGBT “propaganda” at some point in their lives. After being exposed to the influence of

“propaganda”, they were forced into becoming a part of LGBTQIA+ community during their childhood, when they allegedly could not have resisted the “corruptive” influence due to having no personal agency.

In terms of identity, studying the way the discourse of politicized homophobia during the public hearing portrayed LGBTQIA+ identity in an opposition with the Kazakh identity, essentially promoting heteronationalism and gendered nationalism. It is interesting to find the relations between the discourse that Kazakh identity excludes LGBTQIA+ identity with the discourse on dehumanization of LGBTQIA+ people through portraying them primarily as “perverted”. There is an antagonistic perception between the national identity, which is seen as something sacred and pure, and LGBTQIA+ identity, which is perceived to be profane and impure. Such antagonistic discourse between the two identities becomes evident when we take a closer look at the way public hearing participants were referring to the Kazakh nation in comparison to LGBTQIA+ people. For example, Kazakh identity was referred to as being “a noble nation”, while LGBTQIA+ people were claimed to be “a concept, so foreign to our [Kazakh] national consciousness” and “foreign upbringing”. In the face of the threat, which is perceived to be LGBTQIA+ community, a number of public hearing participants stated that “we must preserve our blood, lineage, and land”, essentially positioning Kazakh identity and LGBTQIA+ identity as mutually exclusive categories that cannot be reconciled.

Exploring how public hearing participants also reacted to open LGBTQIA+ activists wearing Kazakh national clothes is further evidence of how the discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan is built to exclude LGBTQIA+ people from the concept of national identity. For example, one of the public hearing participants stated that seeing LGBTQIA+ activists wearing Kazakh national clothes during the public hearing was offensive to her dignity as a Kazakh person: “Wearing our national clothing and associating it with same-sex relations is them spitting in our faces and a direct insult to our [national] pride. It offends my honor”. The existence of division between “proper” and “flawed” Kazakh citizens essentially attaches the moral values of a Kazakh person to their sexual orientation and gender identity.

The expression of Kazakh identity by LGBTQIA+ people during the public hearing was interpreted to be a “mud” on the name of Kazakh nation because the discourse of politicized homophobia perpetuates an image of LGBTQIA+ people as being morally degraded and perverted – things that Kazakh identity can not be associated with. It is inconceivable for political actors, who perpetuate such exclusionary discourse of politicized homophobia, to see

the intersection of these opposing identities. As a result of such perception, seeing the representation between these supposedly antagonistic categories of sacred Kazakh nation and profane LGBTQIA+ people evoked shame and rejection among some of the public hearing participants. Interestingly, even the case, when Kazakh LGBTQIA+ activists took a photo on the background of Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, which is considered to be a sacred place for Kazakh nation, emerged as a separate theme during the public hearing:

“Sekerbayeva [LGBTQIA+ activist] and that other woman [Sekerbayeva’s colleague], who is of my generation, I have a request for you – please, take off those clothes, I beg you. Do not disgrace my nation. LGBT represents same-sex relations, gay sexuality, transsexuals, and people in same-sex relationships. For centuries, my nation has worn that clothing; you should not wear it. It is shameful. Take it off. It is shameful. I perceive it as a disgrace to my nation, as trampling on the Kazakh people, as dragging my national pride into the mud. This is how I see it in my worldview. Therefore, I ask you – I am not scolding you – you make your own choices, but you must take that off.”

“On social media these two individuals went to Turkestan city, promoting the LGBT flag in front of our most sacred site, the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. Why is this not being prohibited? Where is the Ministry of Internal Affairs looking? Where are the National Security Committee and the Prosecutor's Office looking?”

Studying the underlying assumptions of this particular discourse of politicized homophobia is quite insightful, since the cis-heteronormativity has become integrated into the concept of Kazakh identity. The discourse claims that LGBTQIA+ people are not a part of “Kazakhness”, making the opposite of LGBTQIA+ identity or cis-heterosexuality an acceptable part of the national identity based on the perceived lack of morality of LGBTQIA+ people. The underlying assumptions of the discourse above also reveal the rigidity of the boundaries of national identity that are created by politicized homophobia. In other words, the Kazakh identity is assumed to have fixed, unchangeable and exclusionary boundaries. It is not flexible to include diverse and intersectional identities of different Kazakh people, including LGBTQIA+ Kazakhs, essentially establishing nationalism based on the extent of acceptability of sexual orientation and gender identity in the society.

The discourse on the exclusionary nature of Kazakh identity towards LGBTQIA+ people is, perhaps, the most sophisticated out of all the discourses explored within this paper. It is intrinsically intertwined with the next group of discourses – the ontological threat that

LGBTQIA+ community is perceived to present against the existence of Kazakh nation. It is possible to position LGBTQIA+ people as a direct threat to Kazakh national identity precisely because a discourse that excludes LGBTQIA+ people from “Kazakhness” and positions them in an opposition to each other exists. These discourses do not simply compliment each other, but make it possible for both to reinforce one another.

The discourse of LGBTQIA+ people being an ontological threat to the existence of Kazakh nation portrays LGBTQIA+ people in Kazakhstan as being a threat to five things that each constitute a part of national identity: country’s demography, national sovereignty, family institution, traditions and religion.

The discourse of LGBTQIA+ people as being a demographic threat is probably the easiest to deconstruct. The participants of the public hearing appealed that LGBT “propaganda” will “negatively affect the demographic situation in the country” through “instilling non-traditional values”, essentially implying that the birth rates in the country will plummet. A deeply rooted fear for the existence of Kazakh nation and identity is provoked through this discourse. One of the public hearing participants has even stated that the influence of the, so-called, LGBT “propaganda” has the capacity to “destroy the Kazakh nation down to its very roots and to eradicate it completely”. Within the discourse, the ontological fear for the Kazakh nation’s future existence is further exacerbated by the appeal to a relatively low population of Kazakhstan, compared to powerful countries in the world: “Currently, we have a population of barely 20 million, compared to global powers and large cities, 20 million is a population that does not even match that of a single city”. The threat to the population and birth rates allegedly posed by LGBTQIA+ community was interpreted as being a threat to the state:

“As you all know well, we in the Republic of Kazakhstan abide by our Constitution. The first article of our Constitution states that the most valuable matters for our nation are human life and health. This means we must adhere to this fundamental principle. Another issue is that a state exists only if it has a population, a nation. If there is no nation in that state, if there are no people, that state will disappear from the world.”

What is important to highlight is that this discourse plays on the feelings of nationalism among the population, appealing to people through a perceived threat of “Western” countries attempting to colonize Kazakhstan’s land through the promotion of LGBT “propaganda”. The neo-colonial interest in obtaining Kazakhstan’s land is portrayed together with the previous narrative of LGBTQIA+ community being a threat to the demographic situation in the country.

As a result, this discourse positions the issue of LGBTQIA+ rights as an issue of national sovereignty. In other words, the discourse opposes national interests to the global neo-colonial powers.

For example, the LGBTQIA+ activists and people, who expressed their support during the public hearing, were referred to as “strangers, outsiders and foreign people”, who are driven by “imperialist, bourgeois liberal ideology that has already taken root” in Kazakhstan. It is important to notice that such discourse also rejects the authority of international human rights norms or international treaties based on the perceived contradiction to national traditions and local way of life. Within such a framework the problem of national sovereignty arises not only in terms of Kazakhstan's land, but also in terms of the independence Kazakhstan has over their national traditions, laws and values:

“Here, we must consider moral, ethical, and cultural issues, as well as traditions. Therefore, let no one from outside come and interfere with our internal matters. How we live in our home, what principles we follow, what laws we adopt—these are decisions we must make for ourselves.”

The public hearing participants argued that LGBT “propaganda” of the Western countries is promoted through financing of local human rights organizations. Also, the colonial experience of the United States was provided as evidence that proves the colonial interest of global powers in violating the national sovereignty of Kazakhstan and obtaining its land. Interestingly, in terms of the threat posed on the population of Kazakhstan the discourse promoted by political actors resorting to politicized homophobia highlighted the reproductive duty posed on women, while the discourse did not touch as much the cis-heteronormative duties posed on men. A further investigation could be conducted to understand the differences posed on men and women through studying the intersectional relations between cis-heteronormativity and gender roles.

“We know that any propaganda is a targeted activity; accordingly, it is financed by someone, resources are invested in it, and it is dependent on certain forces that benefit from its spread. We ask ourselves, where does this propaganda come from? Where does the signal originate that drives the dissemination of this information? It all comes from America, from England, from Europe. These are their values. They are imposing them on us. This imperialist, bourgeois liberal ideology has already taken root here. As a user of social media, I personally observe that this indeed comes from affiliated

organizations. My position is that foreign agents should be banned, and foreign influence must be prohibited.”

“Ultimately, as a nation, we Kazakhs can disappear. This is where [LGBT] will lead us. If women do not give birth, where will people come from? MP Zhanbyrshin said it correctly. So, friends and comrades, this is not just a legal issue. It is a deep socio-political issue—a demographic problem. Tomorrow, 100 million people will be left without a place to live, and they will flood here [into Kazakhstan]. They are preparing for everything so that there will be no Kazakhs left here [in Kazakhstan]. Just as 100 million Native Americans were destroyed by America, and now Americans live there, the same thing will happen here to us and someone else will inhabit here [our land].”

“I want to say, since the entire public is gathered here, that on behalf of all mothers of many children in Kazakhstan, I state clearly, openly, and unequivocally that our country lacks its own ideology, and that what we are now discussing is a threat to national security. Because on this vast territory, rich in natural resources, there are only 20 million of us. [...] LGBT will lead to a reduction in our population. Our land will be torn apart by the West. We cannot afford to allow LGBT to exist at all in Kazakhstan. We are against LGBT. We do not need LGBT. We need a population of 30, 40, 50 million because we are a vast land. We must protect our land, and if our mothers of many children give birth to 8, 10 children, then these mothers are raising the heroes who will guard the borders and frontiers of our country tomorrow. But when LGBT is imposed, instead of 20 million, in 2-3 years, we will be 10-15 million because same-sex marriages will not provide population growth. We are against LGBT. We are against it. This is a matter of national security. Where is our president looking? Where is our parliament looking?”

Exploring the underlying assumptions beneath the discourses of LGBTQIA+ being a threat to demography and national sovereignty of Kazakhstan reveals that there is an assumption of a zero-sum population growth, where the amount of recognition and protection provided to LGBTQIA+ people and their rights will inevitably result in a similar amount of hampered birth rates. This discourse echoes back the discourse of LGBTQIA+ being a threat to children, but also lays the foundation to the next discourse, which frames LGBTQIA+ people as a threat to the family institution:

“Next, it is believed that this [LGBTQIA+ presence or advocacy] contributes to a decrease in population size, a decline in the birth rate, and leads to changes in the nature of relationships within traditional families.”

All of these discourses reflect how within cis-heteronormative system the perception of the sustainable demographic growth in the country can only be provided by the “traditional” family, which essentially is based on a binary notion of gender and heteronormativity. This narrative dismisses the possibility of diverse family structures, rejecting any potential possibility of imagining LGBTQIA+ people that contribute to the strengthened family institution apart from bringing up biological children. The underlying assumptions of this discourse of politicized homophobia further reveal the rigidity of the boundaries of the notion of “traditional family”, which can not go beyond the borders defined by cis-heteronormativity.

The last two constituting parts of the national identity, which are portrayed to be in opposition to LGBTQIA+ people in Kazakhstan, are the traditions and religion of the country. Although they only replicate the discourses promoted by the previous narratives, including them as part of the analysis nevertheless helps to expand the depth of understanding how much the national identity plays a significant role in the politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan.

“We have traditions, values, and a heritage passed down from our ancestors. With all of this in mind, we must put a stop to the laws currently being proposed. Laws that claim to protect LGBT rights, under the guise of protecting children’s rights, but instead take our children from us, or claim to support women’s rights, while promoting LGBT rights, must be stopped. The state has a nation, and that nation is built by the Kazakh people. The traditions and customs of the Kazakh nation must be protected by law.”

“What are these extremist ideologies from abroad that go against our national upbringing—such as same-sex religion? God forbid! We have our future generations, our children. Are we not going to raise them properly? Are we not going to become a proper nation? Why should we even discuss such things? We have our traditions as Kazakhs! We have our customs! We have our Kazakh bloodline passed down from our ancestors! Why should we find ourselves in such a shameful situation?”

It is also interesting to unpack the way religion figures as part of the national identity in the discourse promoted by politicized homophobia. One of the participants of the public hearing stated: “There are only two “sexes”. People are born male or female. No one can oppose

or contradict Allah's creation". This statement is interesting to analyze since the person used the Muslim word for "God". Kazakhstan is a majority Muslim country and the religion, alongside traditions, is considered to be part of the national identity. Although the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan states that the country is secular, the Islam within the perception of Kazakhstan's population is associated with and forms part of national identity. The theme of intersection between Kazakh national identity and religion did not emerge as much during the public hearing to study it deeply, but conducting further research on the positionality of these identities in relation to each other would be valuable to establish a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan.

Limitations of the research

One of the first and main limitations of the research project is the limited knowledge of the Kazakh language of the researcher. Although the researcher has an overall good comprehension of the language, some specific expressions in Kazakh have resulted in minor misunderstandings of the speech during the transcription process of the public hearing. Some other issues that have arose were also related to the translation of phrases into English, as some of the specific expressions have a certain meaning that does not fully translate well from either Kazakh and Russian languages into English; therefore, the translations can have somewhat different meaning or the meaning could have been slightly changed to translate it into English.

The second limitation of the research is its scope of sources. The analysis primarily relies on public statements made during the public hearing on petitions against the LGBT "propaganda". Although a number of important insights were extracted about the discourses of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan from the recorded public hearing, the research could benefit from a larger sample of data or a more diverse number of data sources. For example, there is a significant potential to dive in-depth to analyze the intersections between the gender roles and politicized homophobia, both of which highlight the reproductive burden placed on women to give birth to the new generation. Additionally, the insights about the dominant religion, which in case of Kazakhstan is Islam, could sophisticate the analysis and provide a more comprehensive picture of the employed discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan. During the public hearing there were not as many appeals to Islam as the appeals to the national identity and sovereignty; therefore, devoting a special attention to the way that

the Islam can be used to justify politicized homophobia can give important contributions to the broader research on politicized homophobia in authoritarian regimes.

The third limitation of the research project is that it has only qualitative research integrated as part of the research. Qualitative data collection allows one to obtain a strong in-depth understanding of a particular subject with the establishment of relations between different factors. Nevertheless, qualitative data does not provide numerical evidence that could strengthen the arguments presented in this research paper and is an interpretivist research method, which means that the results of the findings are interpreted through subjectivity of the researcher. For example, the hierarchy between the narratives could have been established through a survey, which would aim at understanding which of the discourses are the predominant ones and which discourses are complementary. Also, studying which segments of the population that promote politicized homophobia the most would give a more nuanced picture of the discourse. Future research can concentrate on integrating quantitative research methods to elaborate more on the topic of politicized homophobia. Another recommendation can be to have a longitudinal study that would analyze the way the discourses of politicized homophobia are evolving throughout the independence of Kazakhstan to create institutional memory of the subject in the long-term.

The final limitation and recommendation is related to the geographical specificity of the research. This paper focuses only on the discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan. The larger research on politicized homophobia could benefit from studies that would focus on the region of Central Asia as the whole to understand the specificities of each context and provide the visibility of the regional contextual differences to the literature all over the world. Although it may be challenging to carry out a research that would encompass all the Central Asian countries, there is a significant potential to reveal the broader trends of politicized homophobia in a comparative perspective between and within Central Asia, considering socio-political and cultural similarities and differences of each of these countries.

Recommendations for further research

The further research on politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan can touch upon a number of topics related to this paper. First of all, the research in the future can focus on the ways LGBTQIA+ activists are able to resist the established discourses of politicized homophobia and what are the counter-narratives that the human rights community promotes to direct the

conversation towards equality and non-discrimination. The current research did not cover the agency of the LGBTQIA+ activists in how they approach these challenges since the research focus was about the discourses of politicized homophobia. Nevertheless, the human rights community will benefit from an institutional analysis of the strategies employed by the activists to understand how different initiatives and organizations approach and counteract the discourses of politicized homophobia used by political actors in Kazakhstan. The efficiency of the work of civil society and advocacy groups can also be a part of this research, as it will allow the human rights community to critically evaluate the approaches they use to counter the discourses of politicized homophobia.

Additionally, further research on this theme can cover the inter-alliance between different movements, such as feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements, and study the way these movements compliment each other's counter-narratives against politicized homophobia. Studying best practices would also result in the empowerment of the movement through providing the examples of counter-discourses that were successful at both – counteracting the harmful discourses and allowing the audience to internalize more inclusive discourses.

Secondly, further research can also study the impact experienced by the LGBTQIA+ people as a result of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan. Has politicized homophobia resulted in an increase of violence and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people? How does it influence people's well-being apart from the apparent damage inflicted on the societal perception of LGBTQIA+ people? These are crucial questions that can transition the study of politicized homophobia from a theoretical field of deconstructing the discourses into the practical implications towards the lives of LGBTQIA+ people in Kazakhstan.

Thirdly, the role of media in shaping the discourses of politicized homophobia would be another valuable field of research that can have a number of practical implications on the lives of LGBTQIA+ community. How do LGBTQIA+ friendly and prejudiced media portray LGBTQIA+ people? Do they perpetuate politicized homophobia, essentially reinforcing the used discourses, or do they offer alternative perspectives to provide a different perception of LGBTQIA+ community apart from what is promoted by the state entities? Given the significant role of media in establishing and shaping people's perceptions, examining how LGBTQIA+ issues are represented in Kazakh media, including both state-controlled and independent outlets, will make the agency of all the political actors involved clearer, leading to improved advocacy.

Lastly, the research on politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan can also focus on studying the key decision-makers within the governance and their attitudes towards issues of LGBTQIA+ rights. Such an analysis could explore how personal biases, political motivations, and societal pressures shape decision-making of stakeholders, who represent the government. It will also be useful to understand how these political actors approach policy decisions and public statements related to LGBTQIA+ people. Understanding the perspectives of these decision-makers will help civil society and advocacy groups to comprehend how to best approach people in the position of power. Additionally, this research could identify potential allies within the government who might support LGBTQIA+ rights or advocate for a more inclusive approach in terms of governmental policies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan is a multi-layered discourse that has proven to be related to a number of historical and social factors. The sophisticated picture of politicized homophobia is a result of “Soviet legacy”, which serves as the foundation for the narratives promoted by the political actors, whose expressions were studied in the paper. The research revealed that the historical discourses of dehumanization and pathologization during the Soviet Union have found their expressions in modern Kazakhstan, while the discourse on violent victimization of LGBTQIA+ community is yet to be studied in further editions of the research or by other scholars. Despite the fact that the data collected during the public hearing have not demonstrated the violent attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people, the historical continuations of this discourse require separate scholarly attention. If more attention will be directed at studying this discourse, the usage of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan will have a fuller and a more comprehensive picture.

It is important to note that the discourse of criminalizing LGBTQIA+ people, which had manifested itself within the discourse of Soviet Union, was also seen throughout the research paper, but a special attention to this discourse was not given due to the fact that the whole public hearing that was analyzed was about criminalizing LGBTQIA+ people’s expression in public spaces i.e. introducing legislation against the, so-called, LGBT “propaganda”. The narrative of introducing legal liability for people’s LGBTQIA+ identities was integrated throughout the studied speeches.

In terms of comparing the discourses on the existence of an external enemy, it is worth to highlight that the modern discourse of politicized homophobia like the discourse promoted during the Soviet Union referred to LGBTQIA+ community as being a disguise for neo-colonial attempts of the global western power to corrupt the national sovereignty and autonomy of the country. It is interesting that the same discourse of neo-colonialism used by the Soviet Union – a previous colonial power that had authority over Kazakhstan’s land – is replicated by the local political actors. Although it is hard to point out the reasons for why the political actors refer to the discourse of neo-colonialism, which was part of the discourse of the previous colonial power, the research into that aspect of the historical continuations in the discourses between Kazakhstan and Soviet Union/Russian Empire would be valuable for the larger research not only on politicized homophobia in Central Asia or Post-Soviet countries, but also the influence of colonialism after regime transitions.

The current research also revealed some of the data that demonstrates how the discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan serves to defy democratization in the country and allow for the authoritarian regime to prosper further. As it was highlighted in the section on research findings, the discourse of politicized homophobia relies heavily on nationalism, attempting to establish rigid boundaries of Kazakh national identity based on the accepted categories of sexual orientation and gender identity within the cis-heteronormative system. This discourse is used to create two oppositional categories of Kazakhstan’s citizens – “pure” cis-heterosexual Kazakhs and “profane” LGBTQIA+ Kazakhs. Such division between different citizens of Kazakhstan serves as a ground to position “Western” values of democracy and human rights, which includes recognition and protection of LGBTQIA+ people’s rights, as oppositional to the values of the local communities, even empowering the political actors to defy international human rights norms or the authority of international democratic institutions.

The anti-Western discourse integrated into politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan also fits the larger literature on the ways the authoritarian regimes manipulate the democratic principles of pluralism and the governance of the majority to sustain the regime. The trends of scape-goating LGBTQIA+ community as a way of distracting public’s attention researched in the literature review section have also found partial expression in the discourses of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan. Although that discourse was not duplicated verbatim by the political actors, who were participating in the public hearing, the trend of vilification of LGBTQIA+ community could serve as the foundation that can be used for scape-goating LGBTQIA+ people. In general, the research demonstrates that the discourses perpetuated by

political actors not only marginalize LGBTQIA+ individuals in Kazakhstan but also reinforce the authoritarian regime, its power and control over people's morality.

The study also highlights the gendered dimensions of politicized homophobia, particularly the emphasis on reproductive duties as part of what ensures the reproduction of "traditional" cis-heteronormative national identity. While women are positioned as bearers of the nation's demographic future, men are largely exempt from similar scrutiny within the public discourse. This unequal framing highlights the intersectionality of oppression faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, who are vilified for disrupting traditional gender roles and family structures.

The usage of post-structuralist framework of analysis based on the Queer Theory had significantly assisted the in-depth analysis of the narratives of politicized homophobia in terms of how the cis-heteronormative power structure gives rise to all these narratives and enforces them, positioning all the identities that are outside of cis-heterosexuality as deviant or even threatening the power structure of cis-heteronormativity. Post-structuralism allowed the research to reveal not only these underlying assumptions promoted by heteronormativity, but also explore the interrelated nature of these discourses between each other, where they serve to legitimize each other. Such interrelatedness was observed in the discourse on how Kazakh national identity excludes LGBTQIA+ people and the discourse of LGBTQIA+ people being a threat to demographic growth, national sovereignty, family institution, traditions and religion.

In conclusion, the discourse of politicized homophobia in Kazakhstan demonstrates a complex interplay between the historical legacy of the Soviet Union's discourses, the interests of Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime and societal prejudices against LGBTQIA+ people. This analysis did not only shed light on how LGBTQIA+ community faces oppression by the cis-heteronormative system and the country's authoritarian regime, but the research can also serve as a foundation for advocacy and informational campaigns to LGBTQIA+ advocates and human rights defenders in their journey for equality. Understanding the way discourses of politicized homophobia work helps organize the media projects that would address the underlying assumptions of the discourses and offer alternative positions to the political actors, who resort to politicized homophobia, enabling the change of the discourses. Furthermore, this research contributes to a growing body of literature on politicized homophobia in authoritarian contexts, offering insights into how minority rights are manipulated to sustain power and resist democratization. By situating Kazakhstan within global trends while recognizing its unique

historical and cultural specificities, this study underscores the need for further research on the intersection of authoritarianism, nationalism, and LGBTQIA+ rights in Central Asia.

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