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ANALYSIS

Recorded Future®

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RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: Effects on the Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ Community



This report focuses on the effects of Russia's war against Ukraine on the Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ community. Recorded Future's employee resource group Out@Recorded Future, along with Insikt Group, provide insight into Russia's anti-LGBTQIA+ policies, disinformation, the effects of being LGBTQIA+ in the Ukrainian military, LGBTQIA+ Ukrainian refugees, and LGBTQIA+ hardships that have been reinforced by Russia's war. In addition to these topics, this report also highlights anti-LGBTQIA+ laws globally over the past year and their impact on education and censorship in regions such as the US and China.

Executive Summary

Russia's war against Ukraine has invoked concerns specific to and exacerbated problems faced by the Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ community, in part due to Russia's anti-LGBTQIA+ reputation. Russia [posits](#) itself as a state that supports "traditional values", superior and in contrast to a decaying West. Russia has long leveraged its anti-LGBTQIA+ policies and narrative to [rally](#) the support of Russian domestic audiences and secure international support and political alliances. Russia [spreads](#) this narrative through disinformation that is disseminated through a network of state-owned media and propaganda websites, which is then disseminated more widely through social media and messaging platforms.

Along with many Ukrainians, LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians have [volunteered](#) to serve in the Armed Forces, motivated to defend Ukraine's national identity, dignity, and freedom, and wanting to protect Ukraine's LGBTQIA+ community from the severe consequences of a Russian victory. LGBTQIA+ soldiers are fighting alongside groups like Azov with a history of [extreme homophobia](#) and have reported a mixed reception from their fellow soldiers.

Other Ukrainians have [sought](#) refuge from the dangers of war in neighboring European countries. LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians may find themselves in European countries that have a poor record on LGBTQIA+ rights, with the governments of Poland and Hungary [declaring](#) themselves [against](#) "LGBT ideology", posing further threats to an already vulnerable group. Transgender and nonbinary Ukrainians in particular face challenges when [trying](#) to exit Ukraine and seek refuge in neighboring countries because gender markers on their identification documents do not match their actual genders. There are [reports](#) of harassment and body inspections at Ukrainian checkpoints looking to enforce a ban on Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country who must instead report for duty.

Russia's war against Ukraine has reinforced and exacerbated other hardships endured by some members of Ukraine's LGBTQIA+ community, with Russia's indiscriminate [attacks](#) on healthcare facilities [contributing](#) to a shortage of vital hormone therapy and HIV medications, putting the health and lives of LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians at risk.

Across the world, at least 68 countries have national laws [criminalizing](#) same-sex relations between consenting adults, and at least 9 have national laws criminalizing forms of gender expression targeting transgender and nonbinary people. In the United States, 238 anti-LGBTQIA+ bills were [introduced](#) by state legislators in the first 3 months of 2022, compared to just 41 in all of 2018, while China is [reportedly](#) increasing censorship of LGBTQIA+ content online.

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Russia's Anti-LGBTQIA+ Campaign

Background

Domestically, Russian president Vladimir Putin has leveraged anti-LGBTQIA+ policies to rally the support of Russian audiences, from ultranationalists and hardliners to socially conservative citizens, in order to secure his regime. Putin's anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric and policies also offer a way for him to [secure](#) domestic and international political alliances. Since the [passing](#) of the "gay propaganda" law in 2013, which argued that LGBTQIA+ values were harmful to children, the Kremlin has consistently used statements on sexuality to signal its alignment with socially conservative individuals and entities in [promoting](#) the worldview that Russia is distinct as a state in supporting "traditional families" and is superior to the West.

Another set of ideas that play a role in Russia's anti-LGBTQIA+ policies are those [promoted](#) by Russian ultranationalist Alexander Dugin. Inherent within Dugin's beliefs is the support for the expansion of Russia's sphere of influence across the Eurasian continent. For that to happen, Russia's unique Asian-European character must be preserved, to stand as the pillar of a Russian civilization against the socially liberal and dangerous values of the European Union and the West. This expansionist vision draws on nostalgic sentiments to Russia's mythic past, as well as its imperial heritage, while simultaneously decrying modernity, progressivism, and multiculturalism. The war against the LGBTQIA+ community is described by Dugin as a fight to preserve Russia's civilizational integrity and defend its sphere of influence against threats from the West.

In addition to Dugin's beliefs, the homophobic narrative pushed by Putin also [shares](#) its roots with those of other fascist movements throughout history. At its essence, this is a tactic employed to engender fear among society of its civilization's decay through the emasculation of men, racial integration, and sexual depravity. The reinstatement of "traditional values" has been presented by fascist movements throughout history as a crucial step towards national rejuvenation.

Putin's extreme anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric and policies have [led](#) to devastating consequences both in Russia and abroad. According to estimates by the Russian LGBTQ Network, 22% of the hate crimes committed during 2015 were carried out against the LGBTQIA+ community. This comes only 2 years after the passing of the "gay propaganda" law of 2013. There have been cases of extreme right activists, who have arguably been emboldened by this law, luring LGBTQIA+ individuals to meetings and then attacking them on camera. This is just one example of the "homophobic vigilantism" against the community; only a small portion of these cases were reportedly investigated and brought to court.

In early 2017, reports [emerged](#) of a systematic campaign to round up and persecute gay men in Chechnya. According to some estimates by NGOs, as many as 200 individuals were detained as part of that campaign and subjected to various forms of torture, humiliation, and harassment.

Russia, LGBTQIA+ Related Phobias, and the Global Far Right

More than a way to secure domestic political alliances, the narrative of Russia as an international crusader for "traditional values" has also proved to be a powerful tool for both promoting the country's interests globally and securing alliances. In spite of Russia's aggression against America's allies and interests, prominent far-right groups worldwide have continued expressing their support of Putin, sympathizing with him or otherwise promoting his ideas.

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, prominent voices in American right-wing media organizations have [pushed](#) the idea that LGBTQIA+ rights pose a threat to America's national security interests. According to this rationale, acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ service members encouraged Putin to start a war; this same rationale also states that the focus on LGBTQIA+ issues has prevented the US from properly preparing for it. Taking this messaging even further, Russian Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill [issued](#) statements on March 6, 2022, suggesting that Putin launched his war against Ukraine as a rebuke of LGBTQIA+ pride parades: "Pride parades are designed to demonstrate that sin is one variation of human behavior. That's why in order to join the club of [the Western governments that allow them], you have to have a gay pride parade ... And in [the Eastern Ukrainian region of] Donbas there is a rejection, a fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power. ... We know that if people or countries reject these demands, they are not part of that world, they become strangers to it".

In addition to this alignment of narratives, some US media personalities are directly mobilizing support for Putin. For example, in early March 2022, Nick Fuentes, an American white nationalist commentator and participant in the 2017 Charlottesville rally, [held](#) an "America First" political rally, during which he encouraged attendants to chant Putin's name while asking, "Can we get a round of applause for Russia?" Fuentes further offered support for Russia online stating that the war against Ukraine is "the coolest thing to happen since [the January 6, 2022, attack on the US Capitol by American insurrectionists]".

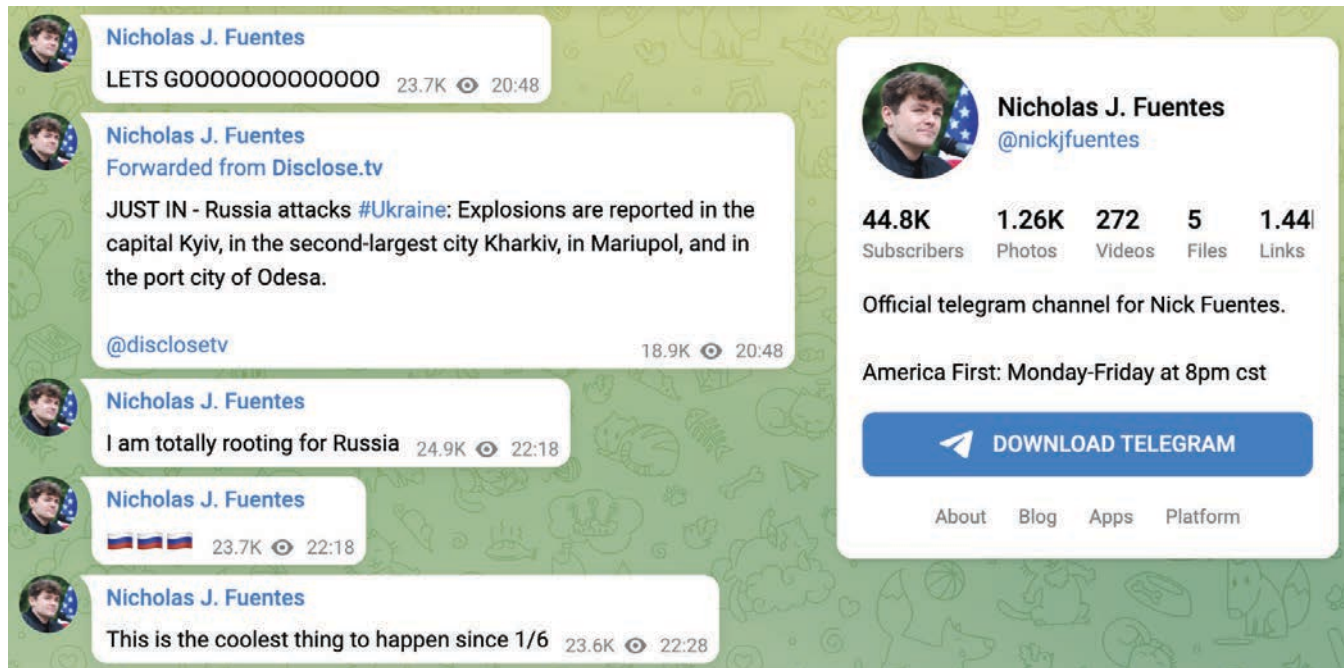


Figure 1: Right-wing media commentator Nick Fuentes stating his support for Russia in its war against Ukraine (Source: [Telegram](#))

Some far-right support of the Kremlin goes beyond ideology and rhetoric and is reflected in their cooperation with international and multilateral organizations. One prominent example is the World Congress of Families (WCF), [established](#) in Russia in 1997 by American academic Allan Carlson and the Russian intellectuals Anatoly Antonov and Viktor Medkov. The 3 were concerned with demographic decline in post-Soviet Russia, as well as the US, which they blamed on divorce, feminism, and the sexual revolution. In spite of its Russian-American Christian origin, the organization has influence in other countries, providing a forum for global anti-LGBTQIA+ forces to exchange ideas and promoting anti-LGBTQIA+ policies worldwide under the banner of protecting the “natural family”. Emails leaked in 2014 by the Russian hacker collective Shaltai Boltai showed that the WCF had [served](#) to promote the Kremlin’s interests in Europe and provided the Russian Orthodox Church with an opportunity to expand its foothold in Christian circles in the US.

Anti-LGBTQIA+ policies are also pushed by Russia and its international allies through multilateral organizations. For example, in addition to working directly with local governments and organizations, the WCF also [works](#) in a formal capacity with the United Nations (UN), having a consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In the UN, Russia has also [cooperated](#) with some states in the Middle East and Africa, as well as nationalist populist governments such as Poland and Brazil, to roll back sexual and reproductive rights.

The narrative that Russia serves as a stronghold against an ever-decaying and imperialistic West is effective for promoting the Kremlin’s domestic and international ambitions. However, the reality in Russia is inconsistent with the traditionalist ideals that they claim to uphold. For example, the country’s abortion [rate](#) is one of the highest in the world and nearly double that of the US. Additionally, any form of Christianity outside of the state-controlled Orthodox Church may be [considered](#) a cult. Prominent evangelical magazine Christianity Today, for example, [reported](#) that evangelicals have become the most-punished group under the country’s controversial “anti-missionary” laws. A 2012 survey [showed](#) that only 15% of Russians consider religion to play an important role in their lives, and only 5% have read the Bible.

Russia is also more ethnically diverse than what is [presented](#) by some global far-right commentators. 20% of Russian citizens do not even [identify](#) as Russian, but rather as Tartar, Azeri, Ukrainian, or Moldovan; while the full number of Muslim Russians is difficult to gauge, more than 6% of Russians are Muslims, as opposed to 1.1% of the US population.

Disinformation

EUvsDisinfo, a project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force, [maintains](#) an elaborate database of disinformation cases perpetrated by the Kremlin through various outlets in multiple languages. A search of the database found 204 unique cases tagged with "LGBT," "Gay," "Lesbian," "Transgender," or "Bisexual". For every case, we analyzed the target audience, taking into consideration the item's publication language, the outlet's name, and country top-level domain.

An analysis of these cases underlines certain key narratives that are prominent in anti-LGBTQIA+ disinformation by Russia:

- **Cultural War:** This motive frames LGBTQIA+ issues as a weapon used by the West to expand its global control. LGBTQIA+ rights are not a goal in and of itself, but rather a way for the West to subjugate other countries to its will.
- **LGBTQIA+ Coercion:** These stories often feature the LGBTQIA+ community as an oppressive force, denying traditional families of their basic rights and forcing its agenda aggressively on the people of the world through diplomatic coercion, legislation, education, and public pride parades.
- **LGBTQIA+ Behind Demographic Decline:** These stories portray the LGBTQIA+ movement as a force that reduces fertility across the globe. This motive [corresponds](#) with the idea of a "demographic winter", which is based on conspiracy theories that humanity is doomed due to allegedly falling birthrates. This decline, according to [prominent](#) Christian anti-LGBTQIA+ organizations such as the WCF, American Life League, and Alliance Defending Freedom, as well as more secular groups, such as the right-wing Population Research Institute, is caused by abortion, birth control, and LGBTQIA+ rights.
- **Western Decay:** The West, often represented by Western European countries or the EU, is portrayed as chaotic, and ridden with crime and depravity. Often, these descriptions would feature LGBTQIA+ issues as a leading cause to Western decline. For example, children are forced to be non-heterosexual under progressive-occupied education systems, parents are separated from children for not holding progressive views, and crime runs rampant since men can no longer defend their societies.

- **Reduce Western Liberalism to LGBTQIA+ Rights:** According to this narrative, the West is not really committed to human rights, but rather only to the LGBTQIA+ agenda. It appears to serve the idea that the US and EU are not really democracies, and that their criticism of gross violations of human rights by Russia is hypocritical.
- **LGBTQIA+ Community is Sexually Deviant:** These stories portray members of the LGBTQIA+ community as sexual deviants who seek to enable pedophilia, bestiality, and incest. Some variations portray gay men as child traffickers, while other claim that pro-LGBTQIA+ policies seek to "mutilate" kids by exposing them to LGBTQIA+ issues, or providing them access to gender healthcare.
- **Ridicule LGBTQIA+:** The stories seek to ridicule Russia's adversaries for being LGBTQIA+ inclusive.
- **Denial:** These stories minimize or outright deny allegations against Russia for violating LGBTQIA+ rights. According to these stories, the West exacerbates reports on the persecution of the community in Russia and Chechnya.

Target Audience

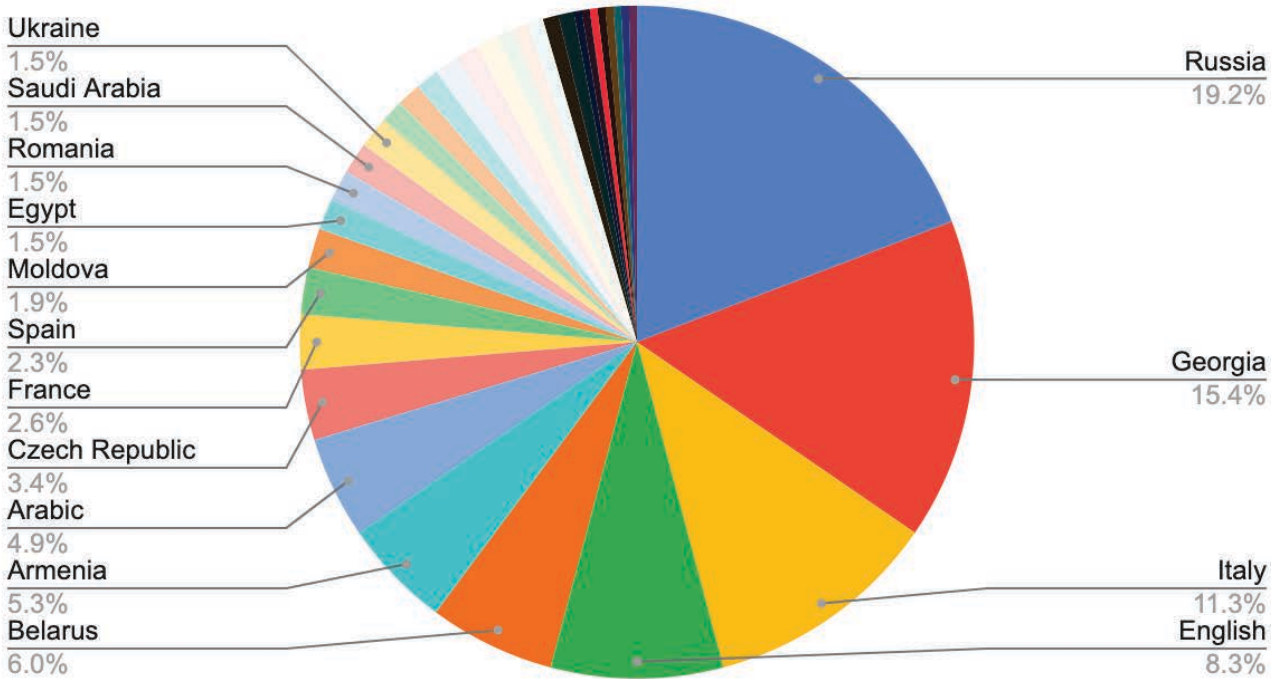


Figure 2: Target audiences of LGBTQIA+ disinformation (Source: [EUvsDisinfo](#))

These narratives are at times complementing each other; for example, Western decline is presented as a product of LGBTQIA+ coercion and a “demographic winter” caused by the LGBTQIA+ movement. Yet some of these narratives contradict each other. For example, while Russia often ridicules the LGBTQIA+ community as part of its disinformation campaigns, it also often portrays them as a powerful global force that manages to enforce its will on nations and societies worldwide. The “LGBTQIA+ coercion” and “cultural war” narratives are also contradicting. For example, the claim that the West is forcing societies to accept LGBTQIA+ rights as a goal in and of itself is somewhat contradictory to the claim that Western powers use LGBTQIA+ rights as a mere tool to increase their sphere of influence. Russia’s self-promotion as a stronghold defending “traditional values” against LGBTQIA+ rights also stands in contradiction to the country’s efforts to deny allegations regarding its persecution of the LGBTQIA+ community.

In a way, these contradictions showcase the strategy behind Russia’s disinformation efforts; more than promoting a single narrative, their purpose is to spread discord and distrust among targeted societies. The target audience also appears to be a key consideration in selecting a narrative. Narratives appear to be targeted at different geographic audiences in promotion of Russia’s geopolitical interests. For example, Western audiences would be warned against an imminent demographic and moral decline — ideas that are common among the global far-right — while domestic and near-abroad audiences would be warned against Western coercion and the alleged hypocrisy behind democratic norms promoted by the West.

An analysis of target audiences for Russian disinformation showcases that the majority of observed disinformation cases are directed internally at Russian audiences. The messaging to Russian audiences appears to depict an image of Western Europe in a state of total crisis, where LGBTQIA+ oppression is omnipresent, babies are kidnapped by gay couples, and crime is unchecked. Examples of such disinformation include:

- On March 25, 2021, a satirical item was misrepresented as real news by the website ryb[.]ru, [claiming](#) that a gay couple adopted a 5-year-old boy who had been taken away from his family for watching a homophobic movie.
- On October 5, 2019, several Russian news outlets [claimed](#) that gays from across the world had convened in Brussels to attend a market for buying children. The customers were reported to select an “item” according to its parameters: size, color of eyes, and hair. In fact, the item misrepresented “Men Having Babies”, an annual American conference for gay men looking for a surrogate mother to have a child.
- An item published by Tsargrad TV on February 13, 2019, [claimed](#) that Europeans flee to Russia, saving themselves from juvenile justice, aggressive sex education, and homosexual dictatorship. Some of them choose Crimea as their new permanent residence.

Such messaging is likely aimed at convincing Russians that it is far safer to live in Russia, in spite of the country’s worsening economic conditions under sanctions, increasing international isolation, and ever-worsening crackdown on individual freedoms. The portrayal of Europe in a state of moral decay and chaos is also likely aimed at distracting from Europe’s relative economic superiority and the freedoms enjoyed by EU residents living in democratic countries, thus serving to market the Kremlin’s rule. In the face of a decaying West, it is Russia’s role to [become](#) “an ark of civilization”, to ensure the survival of traditional values.

EU vs. Disinfo Sources for Russian Anti-LGBT Disinfo

Last 1 Year

Recorded Future

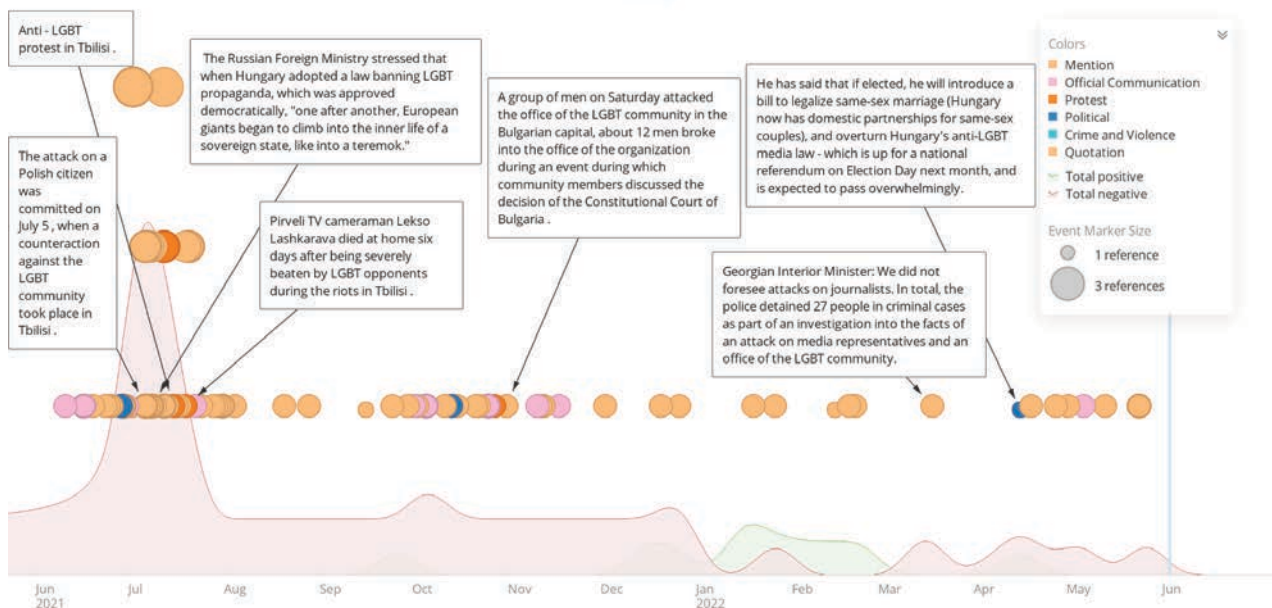


Figure 3: Timeline of reporting from websites identified by EUvsDisinfo as spreading anti-LGBTQIA+ material; this timeline displays sentiment of reporting with negative sentiment in red and positive sentiment in green (Source: Recorded Future)

Much of Russian anti-LGBTQIA+ propaganda is directed towards Russia's neighbors, primarily Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, and, to a lesser extent, Moldova. Often, the narrative in reported articles revolves around the idea that Western support is conditioned on the promotion and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ rights:

- An item published by Sputnik Georgia on September 23, 2021, [claimed](#) that the West demands obedience and gay prides for financial assistance.
- The [claim](#) that the EU-Georgia association agreement report focuses solely on LGBTQIA+ rights was published by Georgia and the World's (GeWorld's) website, on September 6, 2018. The claim suggests that EU membership would mean succumbing to EU coercion, undermining traditional values.
- Claims that Europe and the West force Georgia to "propagate homosexuality" [published](#) on June 3, 2018, by Georgian outlet Asaval-Dasavali.

Additional stories paint an extreme image of a deviant West, where all forms of sexual depravity are accepted:

- On July 25, 2018, GeWorld [published](#) an article claiming that necrophilia and bestiality are accepted norms in Sweden, Germany, and Denmark.
- On October 12, 2017, Sputnik Armenia [published](#) an article claiming that a bill to counter domestic violence would inevitably lead to "incest parades" in the country.

These stories appear to be aimed at dissuading Russia's neighbors from aligning themselves with the US and the EU, promising imminent moral decay and social disintegration to countries that do. This push of anti-LGBTQIA+ narratives to Russia's neighboring countries may [account](#), at least in part, for a wave of copycat anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation initiatives in Lithuania, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Latvia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. Russia's disinformation efforts against Eastern and Central EU members are also meant to [capitalize](#) on domestic divisions around LGBTQIA+ issues to undermine and question the EU's commitment to core democratic and liberal values.

Similar messaging is leveraged in anti-LGBTQIA+ disinformation efforts targeted at Arabic-speaking audiences. Out of all Arabic-speaking outlets referenced in the EUvsDisinfo database, a few appear to be targeted at audiences in specific countries across the Middle East and North Africa: Egypt (4 items), Saudi Arabia (4 items), Yemen (3 items), Syria (2 items), Morocco (1 item), Iraq (3 items), Libya (1 item), Jordan (1 item), and Algeria (1 item). 13 items were found on outlets aimed at Arabic speakers in general, without any specific country affiliation. The items portray the West as being in advanced stages of moral and social decay, while promoting the values that cause its demise internationally:

- An article published on several Arabic-speaking outlets on March 1, 2021, [claimed](#) that there is an effort to push "tolerance for homosexuals" to Arab children in schools to encourage them to change their sexual orientation.
- A Facebook post [published](#) by RT Online in Arabic in November 2017 claims that incest is being legalized in Europe and, like homophobia, incestophobia will also become punishable. The post claims that in 2011, in Germany, 38,500 children were taken away from their families against their will and handed over to same-sex families.

The Distribution of Russian Anti-LGBTQIA+ Disinformation Online

Using EUvsDisinfo's database, we constructed a list of 113 media outlets reported to have been used by the Kremlin to spread anti-LGBTQIA+ disinformation. To check where this disinformation is distributed most across Recorded Future's sources, we searched for any references to links from these outlets' websites along with keywords indicative of the community in the past year. In total, we identified 538 references across various sources.



Figure 4: A source map of the distribution of Russian anti-LGBTQIA+ disinformation in the past year (Source: Recorded Future)

Disinformation targeting the community is primarily being spread on social media and messaging platforms, with the Russian social media platform VKontakte featured prominently in our source map. Furthermore, there were 125 total references found on Telegram related to anti-LGBTQIA+ disinformation. These findings reiterate previous research pointing to the common abuse of messaging apps to spread disinformation targeting many minority groups across the globe. The use of messaging apps for spreading disinformation has been reported for years. It is driven by the intimate setup of group chats and direct messaging, which give users a sense of trust compared with more public social media platforms. Messages can be shared quickly between users, making the tracing of information to its sources much more difficult. These chat groups are also harder to monitor, since conversations are shared with a limited set of users, while private chats on some platforms are end-to-end encrypted. While end-to-end encryption would be hard to break without compromising the privacy of platforms' entire user base, it is possible to use conversation metadata to limit the spread of disinformation, even in messaging apps. One approach, taken by WhatsApp, is to limit the number of times that a message can be forwarded based on metadata collected.

An analysis of mainstream media sources distributing anti-LGBTQIA+ disinformation shows that disinformation is being distributed most on media outlets directed at the Russian audience. All in all, close to 210 references were identified in items published by LifeNews, Pravda, RIA Novosti, and KPRU. As our analysis of EUvsDisinfo's database has shown, Russia is also heavily targeting neighboring countries with that disinformation. The most targeted country was Georgia, with 62 references to the LGBTQIA+ community identified on Sputnik Georgia in the past year. Additional countries targeted include Armenia (6 references found on Sputnik Armenia) and Romania (1 reference published by Sputnik Romania).

LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians and the Military

Many Ukrainians, including those that [identify](#) as LGBTQIA+, have [volunteered](#) to [serve](#) in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, while others have [become refugees](#). LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians are supporting the defense of Ukraine in a number of ways. Some have [volunteered](#) to fight on the front lines with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with many having served with the Ukrainian military following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, [branding](#) their rifles with "Make Kyiv Queer Again" rainbow stickers (see Figure 5) and tweaking the national slogan "Glory to the Nation! Death to the enemies!" to "Queer to the Nation! Death to the enemies!". Others are [offering](#) medical support, gathering supplies for soldiers on the front lines, and [teaching](#) LGBTQIA+ volunteers basic combat and paramedic skills. Even those that have fled Ukraine are playing an important role, [organizing](#) fundraising, gathering emergency and military supplies, and offering support to other refugees, such as creating a database of LGBTQIA+ households in Europe who can host LGBTQIA+ Ukrainian refugees.



Figure 5: A "Make Kyiv Queer Again" sticker on the rifle of an LGBTQIA+ Ukrainian serving in the military (Source: [ABC News](#))

LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians are defending Ukraine against the Russian invasion amidst the backdrop of the US [sharing](#) credible information with the UN that Russia is compiling lists of "identified Ukrainians to be killed or sent to camps following a military occupation", including "LGBTQI+ persons". This intelligence is leading to fear of crackdowns on the Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ community under Russian occupation similar to the repeated [crackdowns](#) in Chechnya. Below are selection of quotes from LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals volunteering to serve in the Ukrainian military:

- "To defend our national identity, dignity, and freedom — and not only for Ukraine. Putin's attack is on our democratic, liberal values that are as equally important for Ukrainians, as they are for the rest of the world".
- "Supporting Ukraine's fight for freedom is a fight for LGBTQ Ukrainians ... This is a war of disinformation: against Ukraine, democracy, and the LGBTQ community. We continue to battle lies and misinformation about the LGBTQ community, both at home and abroad".
- "The LGBTQIA+ community in Ukraine is in huge danger should Russia win ... if Russia wins, it means darkness. There will be no freedom, no opportunity to be yourself, no rights for diverse communities".
- "Russia's fascist regime would kill queer people, there would be repressions, so of course we're going to fight for our freedom and the freedom of other queer people as well".
- "Protecting their own rights is one of the things motivating queer people to fight, but it's more complex because it's our home and if someone comes to your home and tries to kill you of course you're going to fight and protect yourself".
- "We're protecting our way of life, our freedom to be free".
- "[We] joined in a bid to cope with the anxiety and fear of being at war and not knowing what to do ... while we are alive, we are not doing enough ... because doing enough is to die for your country, I suppose. And while you are alive, you are not good enough".
- "We are here. We didn't leave our country. We didn't flee to the west of Ukraine or abroad, we are here to protect our country".

There are mixed reports on how accepted LGBTQIA+ soldiers have been in the Ukrainian military. One volunteer in the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Force (TDF; the military reserve component of the Armed Forces of Ukraine that [became](#) a standalone branch) [stated](#), “I do not have to act like someone I am not here. No one cares about my identity or sexual orientation ... even the most conservative team members prioritize the fight for freedom over their personal views”. Another TDF volunteer had an instructor [tell](#) them they hoped they were artistic rather than LGBTQIA+, but then added he didn’t actually care, and that the only thing that mattered was that they were here to kill the invader. A LGBTQIA+ couple who were exempt from compulsory military service but [joined](#) the TDF anyway live under the “don’t ask, don’t tell” rule. LGBTQIA+ soldiers are defending Ukraine alongside groups like Azov, the ultra-nationalist paramilitary group with a history of [extreme homophobia](#) who had been defending Mariupol. Azov reportedly [contacted](#) Ukrainepride, based in Kyiv, asking them for funds while fully expecting to not receive support from the organization. However, in response, Ukrainepride donated €9,600 to show “Ukrainian society is united at this time”. Despite the service of LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians and partial acceptance, Kyiv Pride, an LGBTQIA+ rights group based in Kyiv, had [received](#) “messages from far-right Ukrainian groups calling us undercover agents and telling us to flee the country, blaming us for not doing anything for Ukraine”.

Hostility in Places of Refuge

For many LGBTQIA+ Ukrainian refugees, fleeing the war does not immediately guarantee safety. On top of general [resentments](#) towards refugees in some hosting countries, LGBTQIA+ refugees can face physical, psychological, and legal hostilities not [experienced](#) by other communities. Not only do these hostilities pose a severe threat to an already vulnerable group, they make the flight even more complicated and burdensome. We have highlighted 3 examples of this discrimination in order to illustrate the hardships faced by LGBTQIA+ refugees.

Poland's Anti-LGBTQIA+ Zones

As one of Ukraine’s direct neighbors, Poland has been a natural choice for many Ukrainian refugees fleeing westwards. Based on estimates by the UN, over 8 million have [fled](#) Ukraine since Russia’s invasion, with over 4.1 million refugees crossing into Poland as of June 21, 2022. There is no data available on how many refugees identify as LGBTQIA+.

While Poland has generally been praised for welcoming Ukrainian refugees, at the time of writing the country was [ranked](#) 44th out of 49 European countries by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) for its legislation and policies on LGBTQIA+ rights. This situation has [become](#) worse in recent years with the ruling right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) government cracking down on the LGBTQIA+ community (for example, members of the lower house of the Polish parliament [passed](#) a law banning “homosexual propaganda” in schools in January 2022), and any progress with regards to LGBTQIA+ rights appears unlikely under the current government. Furthermore, so-called “LGBT-free Zones” started [appearing](#) across the country in 2019, with almost 100 municipalities (or [roughly a third of Poland](#)) declaring themselves free of LGBTQIA+ ideology (such as by banning equality marches), many of which are close to the border with Ukraine.

Due to Poland’s reputation on LGBTQIA+ rights, Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ refugees have reported fear of fleeing to or passing through a country where their identity might be [“ridiculed”, not recognized, or physically threatened](#). While LGBTQIA+ people [face](#) discrimination in Ukraine as well ([ranked](#) 39th out of 49 European countries at the time of writing according to ILGA), they can often [rely on](#) communities and networks they have built up over time. Some are thus confronted with the trade-off between fleeing to a foreign, potentially hostile place and staying in war-torn Ukraine.

Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ refugees who still choose to migrate to Poland are often highly dependent on informal, non-state support from queer activists, NGOs, and volunteers. This includes facilitating access to safe housing, transportation, medical care, and teaching them how to cope with the new social, political, and legal environment. For instance, activists helped to [transport](#) LGBTQIA+ refugees out of Ukraine to protect them from potential mockery at the Polish border. Others [walked](#) from checkpoint to checkpoint at the Polish border for days to distribute pamphlets with information on how LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians can find safe refuge in the country. In the end, however, many refugees reportedly [regard](#) staying in Poland as a temporary solution and want to quickly move to other countries such as Germany.

Hungary's Traditionalist, Anti-LGBTQIA+ Laws

Sharing a border with Ukraine, Hungary has been one of the first destinations for many Ukrainian refugees. According to the UN, 649,352 refugees have [fled](#) to Hungary as of May 23, 2022; there is no data on how many of them identify as LGBTQIA+. Although the country [played](#) a major role in welcoming and supporting Ukrainian refugees, the environment is more hostile for LGBTQIA+ refugees.

Similar to Poland, the environment for the LGBTQIA+ community in Hungary has been getting more hostile in recent years with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban officially [casting](#) himself as the defender of traditional Hungarian values against "LGBT ideology". As of the time of writing, the country [ranks](#) 30th out of 49 countries by ILGA for its LGBTQIA+ rights.

Hungary's right-wing party Fidesz [secured](#) more than half of the votes in 2022 and was able to pass several highly discriminatory laws despite regular pleas by EU officials and human rights organizations. These measures have included a [ban](#) on gay people from being featured in school educational materials or TV shows for anyone under 18, and a constitutional [redefinition](#) of the legally defined "family" as a heterosexual union, effectively banning same-sex adoptions. In addition, an appeals court in 2022 [ruled](#) against the Labrisz Lesbian Association (an LGBTQIA+ women's rights group), [arguing](#) that likening them to pedophiles did not injure the group's reputation, potentially serving as a precedent case for future decisions. Hungary also [passed](#) a law in March 2020 ending legal gender recognition for transgender and intersex people, putting them at risk of harassment, discrimination, and even violence in daily situations according to Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The consequences are similar to those in Poland: Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ refugees are skeptical or afraid of heading to Hungary due to reported resentments and the uncertain societal and political landscape. Their situation is further [exacerbated](#) because they leave behind communities, lack language skills, and are unfamiliar with Hungary's legal systems and political environment. As a result, LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians in Hungary face the choice of remaining in the country with a poor stance on LGBTQIA+ rights, moving back to Ukraine in the midst of a war, or trying their luck in countries farther to the West.

Discrimination in Western European Countries

While Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ refugees in Poland and Hungary face direct, state-motivated threats from conservative governments, they are likewise not spared from political uncertainties and discrimination in places commonly perceived as "safe havens", such as Germany or the UK.

For example, various forms of hatred towards Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ refugees have been [reported](#) in Germany, such as homophobic, anti-Ukraine graffiti on schools in Berlin. The lack of LGBTQIA+ specific housing for refugees has not been properly [remedied](#), even though the issue has been recognized ever since the migrant crisis in 2015. Providing LGBTQIA+ housing is key to ensure that the most vulnerable LGBTQIA+ members are not forced to be housed with people who have homophobic or transphobic views; failure to do so can [result](#) in refugees being harassed, assaulted, and even raped. Charities such as Micro Rainbow in the UK have tried to [tackle](#) the problem by setting up queer refugee facilities. In many cases, however, the logistics and financing of queer housing for refugees is still almost completely [reliant](#) on networks of volunteers as seen in Berlin, one of the main destinations for Ukrainian refugees.

The UK government has recently [reached](#) an agreement with Rwanda to send "illegal" asylum seekers there before their applications are processed. The bill, originally [proposed](#) by UK's Home Secretary Priti Patel and commonly [dubbed](#) as "anti-refugee", restricts protections to refugees who arrive through difficult-to-access "official" routes (such as refugee resettlement programs or on a visa), among others. Refugees arriving through other routes, passing through "safe" countries, or not applying for asylum upon arrival may be criminalized, considered "inadmissible", and possibly relocated.

While Priti Patel [argues](#) that the new bill would not affect Ukrainian refugees, there are [concerns](#) that the situation could be different for undocumented Ukrainian refugees, and activists have also warned that the bill, if passed, would make the asylum seeking process for LGBTQIA+ refugees even harder. LGBTQIA+ refugees have to [disclose](#) their identity immediately upon arrival and provide evidence. In addition, refugees need to know that they can [apply](#) on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity instead of the ongoing conflict. Even if the application is made on the basis of LGBTQIA+, based on data from 2018, 4 out of 5 LGBTQIA+ claims were [refused](#).

LGBTQIA+ Hardships Reinforced by War

While war has caused hardships for all Ukrainians, Russia's war against Ukraine has [exacerbated](#) hardships unique to the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly to transgender and nonbinary individuals.

Limited Access to Vital Medication and Healthcare Facilities

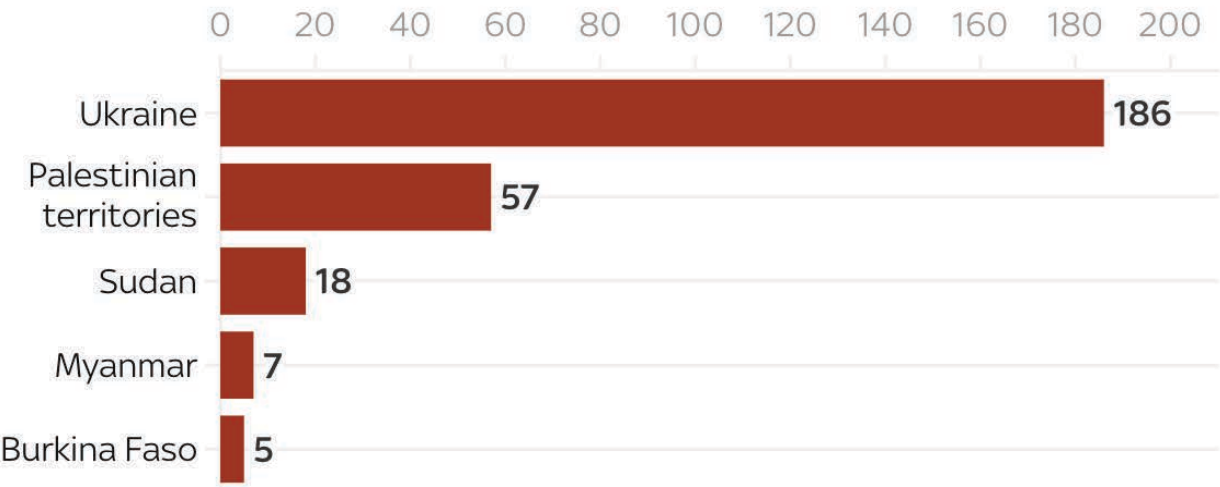
Since the beginning of the war, Russia has indiscriminately [attacked](#) hospitals, pharmacies, and other healthcare facilities in Ukraine, causing a shortage in healthcare services and medication for Ukrainians. The World Health Organization (WHO) [estimated](#) in 2022 there have been 186 [attacks](#) on Ukrainian healthcare services, with 82 attacks on hospitals, ambulances, and doctors in Ukraine since the war began. Nearly 50% of Ukraine's pharmacies are presumed to be closed, and many health workers are either displaced or unable to work. Attacking civilian hospitals is [prohibited](#) under international law.

The [disruption of medication supply chains](#) has created a shortage of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and HIV medications. Aid groups have been [working](#) to deliver various medications into Ukraine and to refugees who have fled, but there has been less urgency [placed](#) on HIV and hormone therapy. This remains a major problem for transgender individuals receiving their hormone therapy. Many transgender people have had to [pause their treatment](#) due to the limited supply. Pausing hormone therapy can [cause](#) thyroid issues and harm an individual's mental health.

There are an [estimated](#) 260,000 people living with HIV in Ukraine, 152,000 of whom are taking daily medication. Ukraine has the second-largest HIV epidemic in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Regional NGOs [received](#) reports from shelters in Western Ukraine that they had run out of HRT medication and antiretroviral therapy (ART) medication for HIV/AIDS in the early weeks of the conflict. Without [access](#) to medication, individuals living with HIV are at higher risk of developing AIDS.

More than 60% of all attacks on healthcare services globally have occurred in Ukraine in 2022

Number of attacks on health facilities, workers and vehicles, according to WHO.



SOURCE: World Health Organization • Data available up to 24 April
Only territories with more than five attacks this year have been visualised. Nigeria, Syria, South Sudan, Libya, DR of Congo, Afghanistan and Somalia all recorded attacks on healthcare services.

Figure 6: Number of attacks on health facilities, workers, and vehicles in 2022 (Source: [WHO](#))

Many individuals in neighboring countries have taken it upon themselves to [collect](#) and send prescription HRT and HIV medications to Ukraine. NGOs such as UNAIDS have been [working](#) to procure funds to support people living with HIV and key populations with access to HIV services and basic humanitarian needs including the uninterrupted provision of HIV treatment and harm reduction services. Nonprofit cohorts such as Kyiv Pride and Trans Generation [provide](#) shelter, financial aid, and medical help to LGBTQIA+ people in Ukraine.

Transgender Discrimination and Asylum Seeking

There are several [reports](#) of transgender and nonbinary Ukrainians being turned away while crossing borders to seek asylum because gender markers on their passports or identification documents (ID) do not match their actual genders. While many neighboring countries will accept Ukrainian refugees without any identification (ID), there are still several military checkpoints Ukrainians need to [pass](#) to make it to the border. These checkpoints are managed by Ukrainian police and military, looking to [enforce](#) the mandate that men ages 16 to 60 are banned from leaving the country. These checkpoints are organized to process individuals as either “male” and “female”. Many transgender and nonbinary Ukrainians do not [have](#) forms of ID that match their name or gender.

Ukraine does offer a procedure for transgender and nonbinary individuals to apply to have their identity recognized, but the procedure has been [criticized](#) as “abusive” and “violating the privacy of the individual” by human rights groups. The process has many steps that include a psychiatric evaluation, invasive physical body examination, expensive surgeries, and lengthy paperwork. Ukraine’s gender affirming process ultimately leads to obtaining a passport with the person’s true name and recognized gender, but Ukrainians have [described](#) the process as “humiliating” and with some people having to “stay in mental institutions for months, with psychological and physical tests to prove their gender”. Many transgender and nonbinary Ukrainians opt out of the gender affirming process and choose to “lay low” and “blend in with the rest of society”.

Not having a valid ID limits travel options for many transgender and nonbinary individuals seeking asylum. There have been [reports](#) of harassment and body inspections at checkpoints run by Ukrainian authorities, particularly targeting transgender women and nonbinary individuals. One transgender woman said “that even though she had ‘female’ on her birth certificate, Ukrainian guards strip-searched her, incorrectly labeled her as a man and prevented her from crossing”. Another transgender woman recounted: “There were three officers in the room. They told us to take off our jackets. They checked our hands, arms, checked my neck to see if I had an Adam’s apple. They touched my breasts. After examining us, border guards told us we were men. We tried to explain our situation but they didn’t care”.

Many organizations have [provided](#) guidance on how to safely support transgender and nonbinary individuals evacuating Ukraine. Transgender individuals who do not have gender markers on their passports that match their gender have been advised by LGBTQIA+ campaigners and other pro-LGBTQIA+ organizations to “lose” their passport before speaking with Ukrainian officials when going through checkpoints.

Global Situation: Laws, Education, and Censorship

Anti-LGBTQIA+ Laws

According to data [published](#) by HRW in 2021, at least 68 countries have national laws criminalizing same-sex relationships between consenting adults, and at least 9 countries have national laws criminalizing forms of gender expression. HRW provides an interactive map of which countries practice these anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, as shown in the Figure 7 below.

HRW also notes that some countries only punish specific sex acts, have vague laws open to interpretation, or have criminal sentences that can range from fines to the death penalty. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies in some countries actively search for and prosecute queer individuals.

As of March 2022, US state lawmakers introduced [238 anti-LGBTQIA+ bills](#) in 2022, some of which were introduced in the 2021 session but were later approved in 2022, compared with only 41 bills in all of 2018.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) [notes](#) that while more states are displaying efforts to pass laws protecting LGBTQIA+ individuals each year, the US also continually sees state legislatures pushing for discriminatory bills, especially those that target the transgender community. Anti-transgender bills, which largely target trans youth, reduce access to healthcare and appropriate restrooms and the ability to participate in school sports. The ACLU keeps track of these laws, routinely updating its list, organized by state, which can be found [here](#). A heat map produced by CNN is shown in Figure 10 below. A second heat map that focuses on anti-trans legislation in the US is shown in Figure 11.

As [noted](#) by HRW, even in regions where such laws are not heavily enforced, the stigma fostered by these laws exacerbates discriminatory practices and social interactions. The following section provides additional insight into the effects of such laws and stigma on education and censorship.

In China, President Xi's agenda [emphasizes](#) adherence to "traditional values" as the basis for national strength and independence. This has resulted in significant attrition of the LGBTQIA+ space in the country's public sphere. Under increased pressure from Beijing, China's technology companies participate in the censorship of LGBTQIA+ content online. References to LGBTQIA+ issues have also been [cut](#) out of popular American TV shows on online streaming services in the country. In September 2021, China's National Radio and Television Administration [issued](#) guidance to TV companies, warning them against featuring "sissy

men", a slur targeting gay men in the country. The embrace of this homophobic rhetoric in official government communications for the first time might mark a [shift](#) towards more coordinated efforts by the CCP to establish social cohesion at the expense of already marginalized minority groups, omitting them from public spaces. In November 2021, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, an advocacy group that had led many legal cases across the country in the promotion of LGBT rights, [announced](#) it was ceasing all activities and shutting down its social media accounts.

Education and Censorship

Within the past year, new restrictions on LGBTQIA+ students and youth have been introduced in the US, while historical laws and policies in other countries illustrate how such practices continue to marginalize queer individuals. These laws [target](#) educators' freedom to discuss sexual orientation or gender identity and [transgender athletes'](#) ability to [participate](#) in school sports, and they seek to [ban](#) queer content in schools and educational TV programs.

For example, in March 2022, Florida [passed](#) the Parental Rights in Education (also known as "Don't Say Gay") bill, which bans instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity from kindergarten through third grade and restricts such lessons for older students.

Anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment and policies in academia is not new. A BBC article [published](#) in November 2021 showcased how the United Kingdom's historic [Section 28 clause](#), a series of laws across the UK prohibiting the "promotion of homosexuality" by [law enforcement and local councils](#) (for example, social support services, teachers, and other public sector services), harmed school-aged individuals in the region. For example, a former student [recalls](#) that in the late 90s and early 2000s, there was a purposeful avoidance of discussing same-sex relationships or transgender identities in the classroom. The former student, who identifies as a lesbian, recalls feeling isolated and gaslighted, as if homosexuality did not exist elsewhere. Despite Section 28 being [repealed](#) entirely by 2003 (Scotland was first to repeal Section 28 in 2000), there are recent and current students who report feeling its lingering effects. For example, a recent graduate who identifies as nonbinary [remembers](#) feeling isolated in school settings where teachers "did not have the time" to engage their students in discussions about LGBTQIA+ families. The effects of Section 28 reportedly impacted the educational system the hardest, with many still experiencing "othering" (a sense of "us versus them") in their communities.

- laws that outlaw same-sex relations
- laws that criminalize forms of gender expression



Figure 7: Countries that outlaw same-sex relations between consenting adults or criminalize gender expression (Source: [Human Rights Watch](#))

- 0-10 years
- 10-years to life
- the death penalty
- lashes / corporal punishment
- unspecified sentences

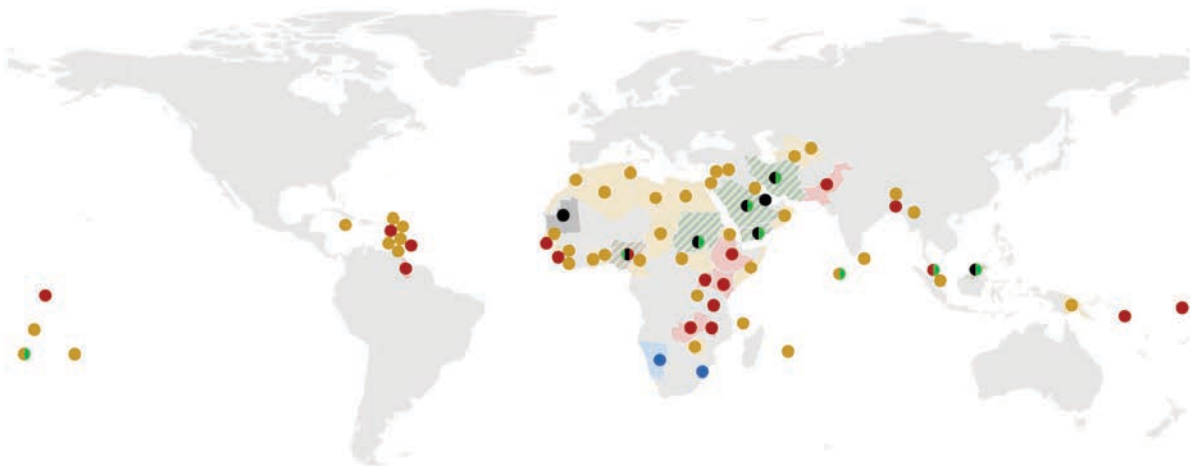
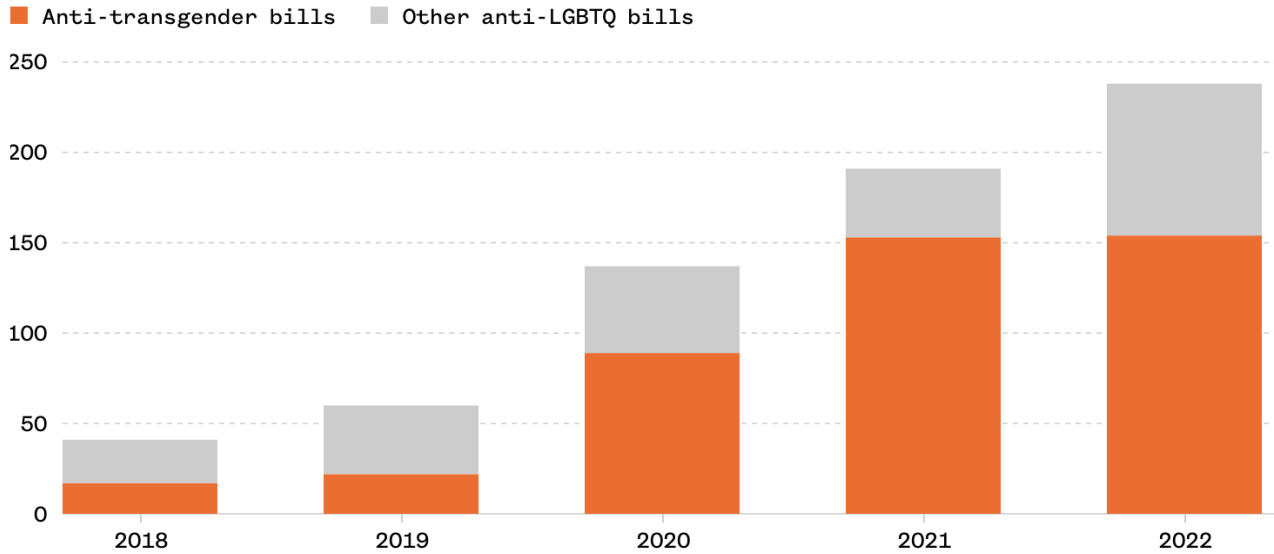


Figure 8: Sentencing by country for consensual same-sex relations (Source: [Human Rights Watch](#))



Notes

2022 totals are as of March 15

Sources: American Civil Liberties Union, Freedom for All Americans

Graphic: Elliott Ramos and Nigel Chiwaya / NBC News

Figure 9: Anti-LGBTQIA+ laws over the past 4 years in the US (Source: [ACLU](#) and [NBC News](#))

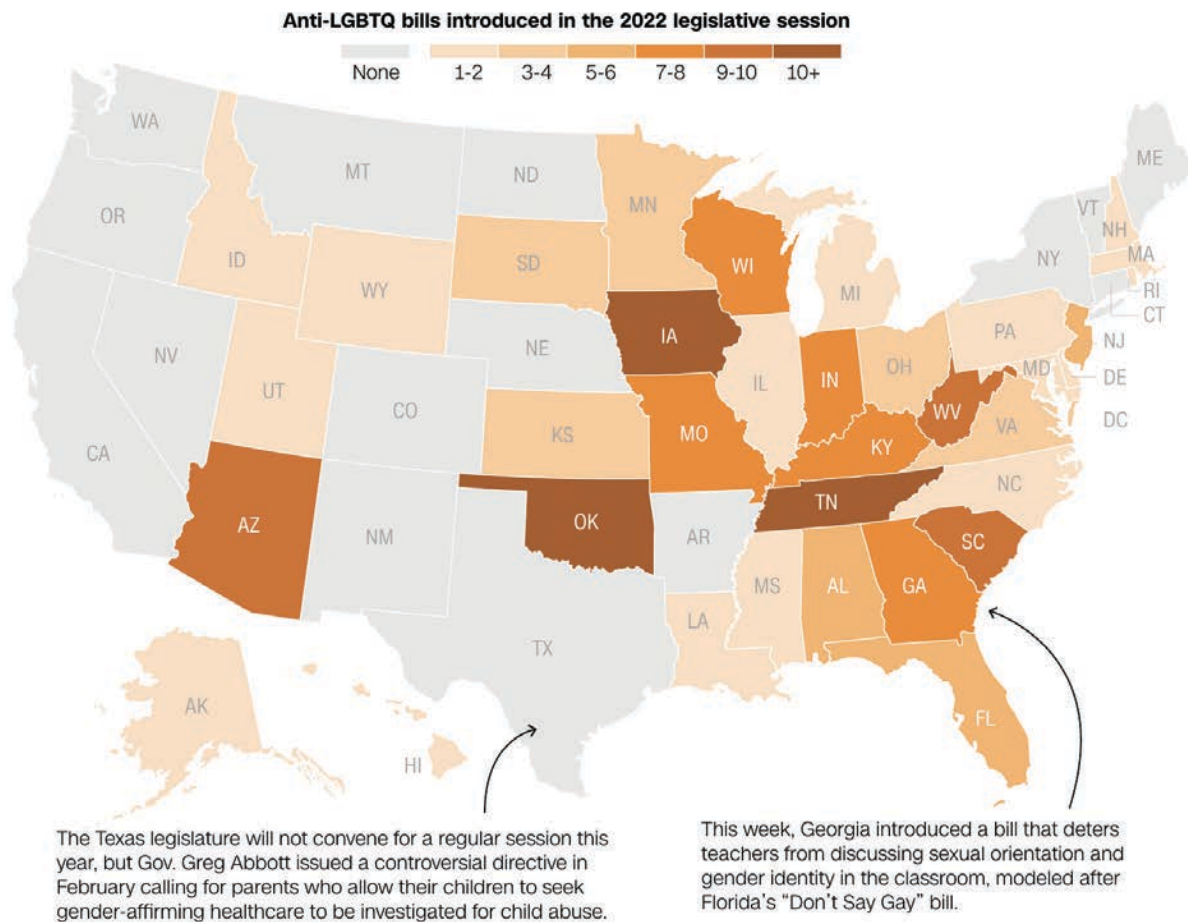
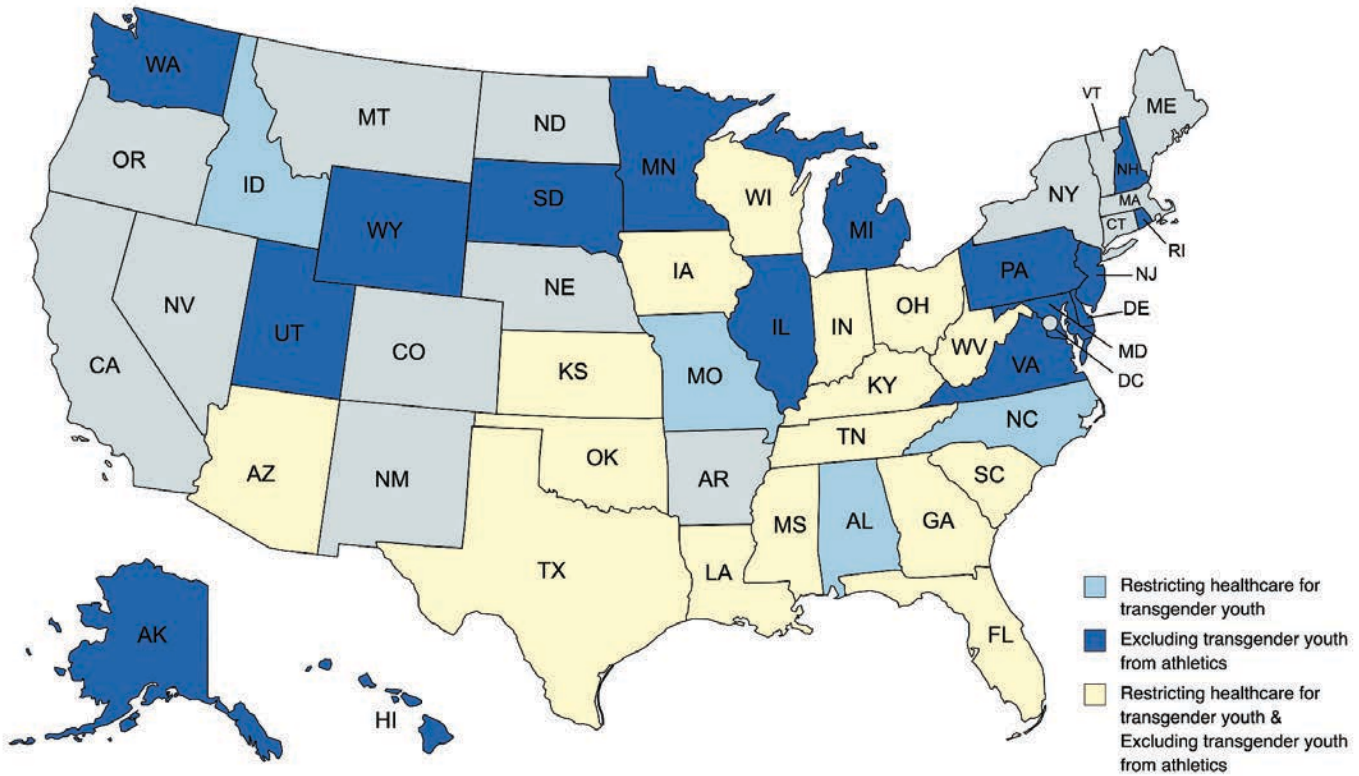


Figure 10: Anti-LGBTQIA+ laws introduced into US legislation (Source: [ACLU](#) and [CNN](#))



Created with mapchart.net

Figure 11: Anti-transgender legislation introduced in the US in 2021 and 2022 (Sources: [ACLU](#), [Freedom For All Americans](#), [Equality Texas](#))

Anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment in educational systems goes beyond explicit laws. For example, in August 2021 it was [reported](#) that Shanghai University (SHU) required its schools and colleges to report LGBTQIA+ students. The purpose of this instruction, and whether it was ordered by authorities, is unknown. LGBTQIA+ alliances in the region have raised their concerns online, fearing queer students will face unfair discipline and other unknown repercussions. According to a post made to Weibo (shown in Figure 12), a Chinese blogging website, school officials at SHU were disseminating a document titled “Campus Survey” that stated “in accordance with relevant orders,” SHU needs all of its schools to investigate and report “non-heterosexual” students. Requested details about such students included political ideologies, social relationships, life plans, and mental health. Weibo users noted that the wording of the document appears to imply that survey participants not only have to disclose their own sexual orientation but are also encouraged to out their classmates.



校园调研

根据有关要求，现须对学校开展相关调研：请学院反馈所掌握的LGBT学生信息。

彩虹族群（LGBT），是女同性恋者（Lesbians）、男同性恋者（Gays）、双性向者（Bisexuals）、跨性别者（Transgender）等性少数族群的合称。“LGBT”一词十分重视性倾向与性别认同文化多样性，除了狭义的指同性恋、双性向或跨性别族群，也可广泛代表所有非异性恋者。

1.反馈方式：如有该类学生，请填写相关信息至附表

附件

序号	性别	学历	思想状况	心理状况
例	男/女	本科/硕士/博士	从政治立场、学习科研、日常生活、人际关系、人生规划等方面描述	健康状况/不良状态/心理障碍/心理疾病（请描述具体表现）



Figure 12: Document allegedly disseminated by SHU. Titled “Campus Survey”, the document states that SHU needs all of its schools to investigate and report “non-heterosexual” students (Archived Source: [Archive.ph](https://archive.ph))

A few months earlier in March 2021, the South China Morning Post [reported](#) that Chinese educators were actively turning a blind eye to LGBTQIA+ students being bullied, which in extreme cases included sexual assault. For one such student, they were told by their teachers to endure the abuse or drop out of school. The Rainbow Anti-Gender-Based-Violence Center, a nonprofit providing legal and social services to queer individuals in China, [stated](#) that they have been dealing with similar cases since at 2016. In July 2021, WeChat, Tencent’s popular social media app, was [reported](#) to have deleted dozens of LGBTQIA+ accounts run by university students, claiming they had broken rules concerning information on the internet. According to Reuters, the Communist Youth League, a department in charge of student affairs on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party, had questioned the loyalty of LGBTQIA+ student groups to the Party in a meeting held several weeks prior to the decision.

Outlook

Russia will very likely continue to position itself as a defender of traditional values and use its anti-LGBTQIA+ stance, narrative, and disinformation to contrast its ideology from that of the West. As LGBTQIA+ rights become a more divisive topic within and between countries, such as within the US, or between “anti-LGBT ideology” countries such as Hungary and to most of the European Union, it is likely that Russia’s influence ecosystem (state-controlled media, known covert intelligence outlets, and known disinformation and propaganda amplifiers) will increasingly produce anti-LGBTQIA+ disinformation. By doing so, Russian influence actors will seek to exacerbate divisions and polarize opinions on LGBTQIA+ rights, spreading discord domestically and undermining existing relationships between countries.

LGBTQIA+ rights in Ukraine are unlikely to change in the near future while the Ukrainian government focuses on defeating the invading Russian military. Russia’s war against Ukraine will likely continue to pose challenges specific to the LGBTQIA+ community, such as those covered in this report.

The significant increase in US state legislators introducing anti-LGBTQIA+ bills so far in 2022 compared to 2018, while other states are making an effort to promote laws protecting LGBTQIA+ people, suggests that LGBTQIA+ rights, and in particular transgender rights, are an increasingly divisive topic ahead of the US midterm elections in November 2022. Further research is required in order to analyze whether this trend is specific to the US, or whether LGBTQIA+ rights are becoming an increasingly divisive topic throughout the world.

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