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TWO POSITIONS OF UKRAINIAN PROTESTANTS ON THE QUESTION ABOUT THE LGBT COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The relevance of the study of protection-traditional Protestant positions regarding the promotion of the ideas of LGBT communities in Ukraine is due to the European integration processes, which have become a strategic guideline of Ukrainian aspirations for transformation, for which they have been carrying out reforms. The main task of the article is to display the Ukrainian evangelicals' uncoordinated realities. These realities, on the one hand, seek to obtain various advantages from the European Union in the context of Ukraine's European integration, and, on the other hand, are not ready to fully implement European guidelines. In Ukraine there are three main positions of the protective measures of pro-family movements: categorical non-acceptance, the development and promotion of preventive measures, and a condescending recognition of the other gender variations of a person. Conclusions: the transformational processes of the family institute in Ukraine have prompted pro-family activists to stand up for the rights of the heterosexual family, despite the diametrical nature of protective measures, the motivational common lever of which was the dissonance between Biblical commandments and alternative forms of family.

Keywords: LGBT community of Ukraine, pro-family activists, protection measures, Protestants.

Introduction

Ukrainian Protestants who joined the denomination during the period of independence of Ukraine (1991-2021) usually have Orthodox family roots. Consequently, the majority recognize the exclusively traditional forms of the family in which the husband is a man and the wife is a woman. Due to the influence of Western trends and LGBT marches in the center of Kiev, Ukrainian Protestants, who usually did not engage in public actions, actively spoke out in defense of traditional family values. The apogee of the public confrontation between the

LGBT community of Ukraine and Ukrainian Protestants, including the Orthodox Christians who are not indifferent, came in 2018. Viewed from the outside, this confrontation was like a boxing ring. As soon as the LGBT community organized a public action to protect their rights, Ukrainian Protestants responded by organizing dozens of actions in different cities of Ukraine for the protection of the traditional family form. However, in this confrontation it is necessary to highlight the following interesting tendencies. There is actually an ambiguous position in relation to the LGBT community among Protestant intellectuals and theologians. In this regard, we propose to analyze the positions of Ukrainian Protestants in relation to the LGBT community.

The Main Results of the Study

Activists for the protection of the traditional family form (including Protestants), are divided into two groups. The first group is the community of radical activists who take a cardinal position at the political and social level. The position of the radical defenders of the family is expressed in the following statements: When Ukraine promotes the issues of cooperation and integration in the EU and NATO alliances at the political level, such alliances require the embodiment of some special principles in the current politics of Ukraine, including the promotion of the LGBT issue in the educational and public space. Consequently, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine proposed ethics textbooks for schoolchildren for consideration. Such textbooks included illustrations of families with two mothers or two fathers. As a result, Protestants wrote an official petition against the distribution of such textbooks in schools.



Figure 1. Illustration from a school textbook

To be considered in the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine, a petition must collect more than 25,000 signatures. However, before the signature collection process ended, the petition was removed from the Presidential Administration's website. Therefore, in their public actions activists constantly pointed out the illegality of the actions of Ukrainian officials to remove the petition, which had already collected 24,000 signatures by the time of removal.

The second important argument, which was constantly popularized by activists for the traditional family, was the emphasis on the police inflicting bodily harm on the activists during the LGBT march in the center of Kiev, which took place on June 17, 2018. As a result, many news programs about this event proclaimed that Christians in Ukraine became martyrs for the first time as the police beat up peaceful activists who came out against the gay pride parade.



Figure 2. Detention of a family activist during a gay pride parade in Kyiv

A third and equally important argument of radical activists is that the concept of "fatherhood and motherhood" may disappear from the education system. The reason for such anxiety may lay in the anti-discriminatory examination of school textbooks, which has already been accepted ambiguously by the Ukrainian community. The information focused on the editing and reviewing process of textbooks which occurred in June 2018. The informational reaction of the family defenders consisted of the following slogans and publication: "The entire institution of the family is under threat," "The family is being slaughtered in Ukraine," "A knife is already hanging over the family," "What should we do to protect the family?" "Why does the minority dictate to the majority how to teach their children?," etc. The reason for the outrage

was that the LGBT parade was guarded by more than 5,000 police officers. At the same time, pro-family activists were not protected during their actions, but, on the contrary, were dispersed like animals.



Figure 3. Gay pride parade in the center of Kyiv under the protection of police (2018)

As a result, leaders and activists for the traditional family form proposed to unite together to protect family values at the public level of social discourse. Not only did Christians from different churches come together, but even those who present themselves as persons outside the church united in such initiatives. In other words, it was decided to mobilize as many citizens as possible in the struggle for the traditional family form, and this fact shows the will of the Ukrainian people.

The second group of family defenders are Protestant theologians and educational representatives. This group took the middle position. Aleksey Gordeev divides the position of the second group into two parts: the first part belongs to representatives with tertiary or advanced higher education who have already achieved some academic goals, and the second belongs to theologians who prefer systematic work rather than a bright light of public actions.



Figure 4. The symbol of gender equality (example of the logo of the LGBT community of Ukraine)

Both of those groups share the following positions in relation to radical activists: The first group sees the danger in the lack of critical thinking and mentions that radical activists have a naive attitude towards politicians, because politicians easily manipulate Christians when they use slogans or promises in their election campaigns in defense of the traditional family form. The second position of Protestant intellectuals is that domestic political theology is not yet properly formed. This means that priority is given to quick public action rather than a careful analysis of the situation. They claim that Protestants act first, and then they think. As a result, a fundamental intolerance manifests itself, which is clearly visible in the pro-family movement. Therefore, the position of the second group of “Protestant intellectuals of the defenders” can be expressed in the following statement: Fight not against darkness, but, on the contrary, multiply the light in your life, your family, your church, and your environment. Moreover, a conversation in society by using radical biblical language will lead nowhere, because secular society does not accept the Bible.

Analysis of the Actions of Ukrainian Protestant Activists

Due to radical public appearances, Ukrainian Protestants began to be accused of intolerance and to lack Christian love for the LGBT community. In general, pro-family Protestant activists reject allegations of intolerance against representatives of the LGBT community. While opponents point to the fact that “in times of intensifying conflicts with LGBT supporters, as it was recently, Christians, especially social networks, were far from Gospel slogans (sayings).”¹ The leaders of the family movement do not deny these facts, but

¹ Merenkov, Gnat. 2018. “‘Nam Ne Varto Rozrahovuvati Na Politichni Vazheli Dlya Poshirennya Evangelija’ – Roman Solovij.” RISU. 2018. https://risu.org.ua/ua/index/expert_thought/interview/72869/.

they do not wish to identify the point of view that is poorly stated by some people within the general position of their movement. They emphasize that protest actions that are organized by evangelical Christians do not welcome individuals inclined to violent actions.

As a rule, in post-Soviet countries, homosexuals see in the public actions of pro-family activists only a condemnation of their personal lives. This is understandable because family supporters are usually religious people who see practicing sinners in an LGBT society. Famous activist Taras Dyatlik emotionally speaks about this attitude towards Ukrainian LGBT Protestants: You looked into the eyes of a mother whose son hanged himself because he was not offered help in solving his homosexual attraction. On the contrary, you put pressure on such a person with Christian principles and by such actions brought him to suicide. Thus, Christians deprive homosexuals of the hope for the healing of his personality by Christ and, as a result, the hope for eternal life.²

It should be emphasized that pro-family “fundamentalist” movements (precisely in the sense of their protection of fundamental religious and moral principles) are always tempted to use forceful methods of struggle, not in the sense of physical pressure or coercion, but in terms of uncompromising statements. We see a fine line, a line that is very easy to cross, leading from tolerance and what family activists consider as evil (the tolerance for the demands of the LGBT lobby) to the uncompromising and harsh treatment of LGBT minorities. There is a temptation to defend one's point of view to prove its correctness and force society to reckon with it, thereby proving one's personal power to influence that society. Some Protestant pastors warn believers against this and point to the potential threat. In a sincere urge to defend traditional family values, one can become an uncompromising fanatic who forgets that the goal of all Christian activity is, first of all, to love one's neighbor—and only then the condemnation of that person's sins. There is no need to confuse the notion and to pass “moral death sentences” on certain people and thereby condemn them to deprivation and lack of support in the fight against their sins.

Speaking about searching the methods of church influence on the LGBT community, Roman Solovii proclaims: “It is necessary to work with the members of the Gospel churches

² Dyatlik, Taras. 2016. “Mrak I Svet, LGBT I Hristianstvo.” Nazva Z Ekranu. 2016. <http://taras.dyatlik.net/mrak-i-svet-lgbt-i-hristianstvo/>; Dyatlik, Taras. 2016. “Mrak I Svet, LGBT I Hristianstvo.” Nazva Z Ekranu. 2016. <http://taras.dyatlik.net/mrak-i-svet-lgbt-i-hristianstvo/>.

in order to be prepared to accept LGBT representatives with love, as well as any other person being corrupted by sin.”³

Igor Plokhoy agrees that Christians should carry out work on the rehabilitation of people who suffered from sexual identity disorder. While recruiting some organizations or projects that work in this direction (the “Land of Liability” pro-family movement linked with the Emmanuel Association), the activist admits that the church “in its entirety does not have too much experience in work with such a contingent ... Therefore, it is a lie to say that every Gospel community, even in the most remote village, is ready to accept people with LGBT-orientation, and, most importantly, is ready to serve them effectively in [a] professional level.” From his point of view, churches need to make further efforts in this direction and “master the necessary areas of knowledge for the successful and effective assistance to people with specific problems.”⁴ Which churches are aware of this challenge and that are trying to develop this kind of mission, and which are not yet, is a question for each individual community.

Taras Dyatlik offers Christians one of the methods of solving the problem of dealing with LGBT, which does not require professional knowledge, but only requires the correct motivation: “Find several LGBT representatives, get acquainted with them and share your lives and the Gospel with them. Find a homosexual and tell him/her everything you think about him/her, but looking into his/her eyes, listening to his/her story, telling him/her about Christ ... You should remember that the salvific change of the sinful nature of human is not made by a human, not by the evangelist, but by Holy Spirit.”⁵

Therefore, despite a number of contradictions between the two groups of family defenders over methods of counteracting the onslaught of “gender” or “neo-Marxist ideology,” as activists call it, it can be concluded that family activism among Protestants, including the street family movement, is still a landmark manifestation of civil society in Ukraine. Many citizens of other countries are ready to give up their rights to the authorities and sacrifice their freedom to protect themselves from geopolitical threats. In Ukraine, the situation is different. For most Ukrainians, the government is not perceived as a guarantor to which they must surrender their freedoms in exchange for a sense of security. After Euromaidan, the government

³ Merenkov, Gnat. 2018. “‘Nam Ne Varto Rozrahovuvati Na Politichni Vazheli Dlya Poshirenniya Evangeliiya’ – Roman Solovij.” RISU. 2018. https://risu.org.ua/ua/index/expert_thought_interview/72869/.

⁴ H. Myeryenkov, “Ihor Plokhoy: Sformuvaty Sotsial’nu Doktrynu Dlya Tserkvy Povynni Bohoslovy. Aktyvisty Dopomozhut!”, Novosty khrystyanskoho myra, 2018, <http://prochurch.info/index.php/news/more/53570>; H. Myeryenkov, “Ihor Plokhoy: ‘Sformuvaty Sotsial’nu Doktrynu Dlya Tserkvy Povynni Bohoslovy. Aktyvisty Dopomozhut!’ (Ch.2),” Novosty khrystyanskoho myra, 2018, <http://prochurch.info/index.php/news/more/53571>.

⁵ Dyatlik, Taras. 2016. “Mrak I Svet, LGBT I Hristianstvo.” Nazva Z Ekranu. 2016. <http://taras.dyatlik.net/mrak-i-svet-lgbt-i-hristianstvo/>.

is now perceived by society (including Protestants and family activists) as one that should serve the people, not rule over them. The people want to feel like a full partner of the government, a subject, not an object of influence.

Thus, in 2018 in Ukraine, the criticism of the gender expertise of school textbook writers arose among Protestants. It took place not because people were frightened of propagandists by geopolitical factors, but because people did not want to be the cogs in the system; they wanted their opinion to be taken into account. For example, Ruslan Kukharchuk emphasizes that “All Together: movement has no position on whether or not European integration is needed. After all, the family needs to be protected in either case, and this movement unites both supporters of European integration and Eurosceptics.”⁶ Igor Plokhoy emphasizes that activists are not guided by propaganda rumors, but by verified information directly from educators themselves about the latest trends in education.⁷

Thus, such a response does not look like an initiative from above or by some political forces, but rather as a grassroots initiative by citizens. This is fully in line with the paradigm of the church's rethinking of its role in society after the Maidan in the direction of greater patriotism, greater socialization, and openness of the church. The experience of Maidan taught that the government should take people into account, perceive them as partners, not as a resource. Therefore, parents must decide for themselves what should be in the textbooks, rather than someone else. It is not someone's political will that is glorified here as an order of the party that suppresses the will of all others, but the value of each individual, of which the people are composed. Ruslan Kukharchuk stated: “The church in the legislative sense is a public institution, and the largest one. Therefore, it has the right to influence social processes in the state. This right must be defended and fought for. Christians need to defend their natural rights to freedom of speech, religion, and free expression of their Christian positions in a non-church context (at work, at school, on the street, in politics).”⁸ According to theologian Lyudmyla

⁶ H. Myeryenkov, “Ihor Plokhoy: Sformuvaty Sotsial’nu Doktrynu Dlya Tserkvy Povynni Bohoslovy. Aktyvisty Dopomozhut’!,” *Novosty khrystyanskoho myra*, 2018, <http://prochurch.info/index.php/news/more/53570>; H. Myeryenkov, “Ruslan Kukharchuk: ‘My Fundamentalisty U Tomu Sensi, Shcho Zakhyschayemo Fundament Demokratiyi – Prava Lyudey I Simey,’” *Relihiya v Ukrayini*, 2018, <https://www.religion.in.ua/main/interview/41116-ruslan-kuxarchuk-mi-fundamentalisti-u-tomu-sensi-shho-zaxishhayemo-fundament-demokratiyi-prava-lyudej-i-simej.html>.

⁷ H. Myeryenkov, “Ihor Plokhoy: ‘Sformuvaty Sotsial’nu Doktrynu Dlya Tserkvy Povynni Bohoslovy. Aktyvisty Dopomozhut’!’ (Ch.2),” *Novosty khrystyanskoho myra*, 2018, <http://prochurch.info/index.php/news/more/53571>.

⁸ H. Myeryenkov, “Ruslan Kukharchuk: ‘My Fundamentalisty U Tomu Sensi, Shcho Zakhyschayemo Fundament Demokratiyi – Prava Lyudey I Simey,’” *Relihiya v Ukrayini*, 2018, <https://www.religion.in.ua/main/interview/41116-ruslan-kuxarchuk-mi-fundamentalisti-u-tomu-sensi-shho-zaxishhayemo-fundament-demokratiyi-prava-lyudej-i-simej.html>.

Filipovych, the protection of the family and the protection of democracy for Protestants are interrelated. "The vast majority of Protestants want to be an active force in Ukraine, asserting their civil rights and realizing their civic responsibilities." Protestants "consistently oppose the LGBT community ... consistently defend democracy and freedom."⁹

In the way pro-family activists and Protestants declare the purpose of their activities, we also see an attempt to defend natural law (God-given to humans from birth) as the basis of any other state law. Protestants try to protect natural law from distorted positive law (the subjective view of laws by governments or political forces). "Fundamental rights are given to human by God and are therefore inalienable. The role of the government is to ensure the observance of these inalienable rights."¹⁰ This is how family activists understand the role of laws and political mechanisms in civil society when talking about their commitment to the ideals of democracy. Natural law determines not only people's rights, but also their responsibilities and duties. Civil society is a freedom that is not identical with permissiveness. Therefore, Protestants appeal to the historical tradition of those democratic constitutions that were based on natural law. The LGBT lobby in this case is perceived as neo-Marxism, one of the features of which is not just subjectivism in what is right and useful for society and what is not, but also the tendency to commit the totalitarian massacre of opponents and suppression of dissident's opinion which is expressed in the article by Alexander Turchinov ("Neo-Marxism, or a journey into the abyss").¹¹ Thus, protection against neo-Marxist ("leftist") influences on the law is perceived by Protestants as a defense of true freedom and the foundation of democracy.

Therefore, in our opinion and in the Ukrainian reality, the pro-family activism of Protestants is a manifestation of civil society, despite the fact that certain forms and methods of this manifestation or categorical statements of some activists leave something to be criticized. After all, civil society is people who are not safe from wrongdoing or misunderstanding. But the peculiarity of such a society is that people, whoever they may be (even opponents), are perceived as a value. Activists emphasize, at least declaratively, that even

⁹ M. Balaklyts'kyi and V. Yefimenko, "Ekspertne Opytuvannya '2017 Ta 2018 Rik Ukrayins'koho Protestantyzmu: Aktyvnist', Masshtab, Zavdannya, Opozytsiya, Rezul'taty,'" Ukrayins'ka unionna konferentsiya. Tserkva adventystiv s'omoho dnya. Ofitsiynyy sayt., 2018, <https://uuc.adventist.ua/ekspertne-opytuvannya-2017-ta-2018-rik-ukrayinskogo-protestantyzmu-aktyvnist-masshtab-zavdannya-opozytsiya-rezultaty/>.

¹⁰ Serhei Holovyn, *Po Obrazu Y Podobyiu. Proyskhozhdennye, Sushchnost Y Prednaznachenye Cheloveka, Bybleyskyi Podkhod* (Kyiv: Knyhonosha, 2017).

¹¹ Aleksandr Turchinov, "Neomarksizm Abo Podorozh U Bezodnyu," Nazva z ekranu, 2018, https://turchynov.com/news/details/neomarksizm-abo-podorozh-u-bezodnyu?fbclid=IwAR1gUL5yF13-0qLnkIoNuQ_YJ0RPhWEu72oZELjJXzrUvKlHxz5PARefr8k.

sinner should be valued as people and wished well. Do not tolerate violence against them. Sometimes this does not go unnoticed—in 2016, the National LGBT Portal of Ukraine reprinted a statement from the Adventist Church's website, which said that: "The Church does not approve of forceful scenarios of confronting the sick phenomenon of same-sex 'families,' because we want to see Ukraine as a state governed by the rule of law. Where all issues are resolved within the law ... hatred and violence are not the way that will lead Ukrainian society to the embodiment of eternal moral values – only love can open people's eyes to their position before God."¹² Peaceful and legitimate mechanisms for resolving controversial issues must operate in civil society, among which is dialogue, public discussion, and openness to each other. Today, among opponents—despite moments of misunderstanding—there is also the ability of dialogue. (For example, in the interview of the public activist, Igor Plokhoy, there is a willingness to hear not only himself but to admit problems, agree with potential opponents, and call for joint work). Is there an ability of dialogue in all manifestations of activism? Hardly, but it is estimated that here we can talk about a "glass," which is both half empty and half full.

Undoubtedly, there is a danger of the black and white perception of each opponent. Family activists and LGBT communities participating in public actions relate to each other based on labels and stereotypes of each other that have developed in the process of mutual confrontation. When talking about each other, they can use labels and expressions such as "left liberals (or left radicals)" and "right radicals." These statements only exacerbate the situation and the conflict. Woodpecker Taras asks a fair question: "But on what issue and for what reason have we, Ukrainian Christians, not yet quarreled and divided? ... And I'm 100% sure that some of you have now read these words and decided that I am defending the ideology or promotion of LGBT people, or as one of my colleagues said today: a Christian LGBT lobbyist. And you are deeply mistaken."¹³ Thus, the family defenders are in danger of losing sight of the expression of love. Without it, Christians will not be able to show their faces to society, including LGBT people, without distortion.

What are some recommendations for Christian family defenders? First of all, the need to develop an adequate response from the church to the modern challenge is obvious. There is a need for a combination of outward (activism) and inward (reflection, rethinking of its social mission) actions. This requires a dialogue of theologians, activists, and church leaders bringing

¹² "Adventisty Sed'mogo Dnya Ne Odobryayut Ni LGBT-Kvest, Ni Napadenie Na Nego," Nacional'nij LGBT-portal Ukraïni, 2016, https://www.lgbt.org.ua/ru/news/show_4060/.

¹³ Dyatlik, Taras. 2016. "Mrak I Svet, LGBT I Hristianstvo." *Nazva Z Ekranu*. 2016. <http://taras.dyatlik.net/mrak-i-svet-lgbt-i-hristianstvo/>.

the discussion into the church space before taking it to the public level. As we have already pointed out, society would like issues such as changes in textbooks to be considered by the whole society and not only to be accepted behind the scenes. But it is impossible to reach out to all of civil society without building partnerships within the church.

All Protestants need to develop critical thinking, but it is important to be more critical of situations and problem-solving methods than of each other. It is important that Christians who are different parts of the Body of Christ, the Church, to feel each other's support. After all, it is not enough to light a candle if its light is hidden from the general public. According to the Gospel principle, it still needs to be placed in a prominent place. Not only is a candle needed, but there are also hands that need to carry it through the streets of the city.

Conclusions

The creation of platforms for how to deal with the LGBT issue is a discussion that is urgently needed by Protestants now. A positive consequence of such a discussion can be the development of not only a common position but also a language that society is better able to understand as opposed to the "incomprehensible" biblical language of the churches. Protestants once again need to rethink their own mission and see for themselves how their vision of the state can coincide with reality and be functional, given the different models of society—secularity and Christianity. And, finally, discussion and rethinking could bring together the proclamations of the Reformation with the real reformist potential of the churches, which the Protestants are so eagerly awaiting.

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