

GENDER CONSERVATISM AND HOMOPHOBIA AS STRATEGIES OF MORAL SALVATION IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE

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Abstract: The paper discusses a promotion of discourse of corrupted morals and legitimation of its stricter control and regulation by the Ukrainian state and the church in recent years. It considers this situation as purposeful creation of moral panic, which affects the most vulnerable categories of citizens – women, homosexuals and children. The paper examines the concrete state and church initiatives on the control of morals and sexuality and considers their political and social implications.

Keywords: Morality, Sexuality, Panic, Homophobia.

ГЕНДЭРНЫ КАНСЕРВАТЫЗМ І ГАМАФОБІЯ ЯК СТРАТЭГІІ МАРАЛЬНАГА ВЫРАТАВАННЯ Ў СУЧАСНАЙ УКРАІНЕ

Анацыя: У артыкуле абмяркоўваецца стварэнне ў апошнія гады ўкраінскай дзяржавай і царквой дыскурсу пашкоджанай маралі і легітымацыі больш пільнага яе кантролю і рэгулявання. Аўтар разумее такую палітыку як наўмыснае стварэнне маральнай панікі, якая ўплывае на найбольш уразлівыя катэгорыі грамадзянаў – жанчын, гомасэксуалаў і дзяцей. Артыкул разглядае канкрэтныя ініцыятывы дзяржавы і царквы ў сферы кантролю маралі і сэксуальнасці, і аналізуе іх палітычныя і сацыяльныя наступствы.

Ключавыя словы: мараль, сэксуальнасць, паніка, гамафобія.

A growing deterioration of standards of life, impoverishment, democratic regression and political crisis in recent years, despite having an urgent and deeply problematic character, often remain on the periphery of political agenda in current Ukraine. At the same time, one can observe an increasing concern of the government with creation and 'solving' discursive problems, such as the corrupted public morals and sexuality, which have become a subject of growing state control and regulation. According to the dominant national discourse, corrupted morality is seen as a reason for many misfortunes faced by the Ukrainian society. Thus, its improvement allegedly can help to tackle these social, economic and political problems. Apart from its obvious groundlessness, this discourse is highly problematic for many other reasons. It affects privacy and contributes to limitation of human rights. It distorts reality and becomes a way to displace responsibility from the state to a more abstract evil. It is used for manipulation of people's values and beliefs. Appeals to morality, spirituality and traditions, which are a part of right-populist discourse, do not only serve to distract people's attention from acute social problems, but they also allow to gain symbolic capital by those, who promote enhancing morality in current Ukraine. The aim of this study is to examine the initiatives on regulation of morality and sexuality and their implications in contemporary Ukraine.

The current state regulation of public morals in Ukraine is based on the law *"On protection of public morals"* (2003) and *National Expert Commission on issues of protection of public morals (NEC)* – a state organ that was created as a result of this law. The law mostly concerns regulation of circulation of pornography and products of erotic character, while the main task of the NEC's identification and banning of such products. Although the work of NEC has been rather inefficient so far, the creation of such a regulation body was met with high criticism and interpreted as a legitimization of the growing state's control of privacy. In recent years, a resurgence of interest in morality and demands of its control and enhancement is witnessed in several project laws – *"On protection of public morals"* (2011), *"On changes to some legislative acts of Ukraine as to banning of artificial termination of pregnancy (abortions)"* (2012), *"On protection of children's rights on secure informational space"* (2011) and *"On the Prohibition of propaganda of homosexuality aimed at children"* (2012). Although these project laws attempt to regulate different issues, they have remarkable commonalities. In all of them the strengthening of spirituality and morality is closely related to controlling and restricting sexuality. All of them suggest regulation of sexuality of the most socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups – women and homosexual people. All of them legitimize the promotion of such restrictions by the need to protect children. Such claims are not grounded on reliable evidence and academic research, but they

rather manipulate with common stereotypes, misconceptions and beliefs. All these legislative initiatives have received a strong support of the church and numerous religious organizations in Ukraine. Hence, although the state is the most powerful agent, which promotes discourse on moral corruption of the Ukrainian society and justifies the need of regulation of public morality, the church is another significant actor in popularization and normalization of this belief.

One of the most detrimental impacts on shaping public opinion on sexuality and gender issues is accomplished by the numerous and highly active “anti-gender” organizations. Most of them have a strong Christian and/or nationalistic basis. *Movement of Clear Hearts* (Рух Чистих Сердець), *Love against homosexuality* (Любов проти гомосексуалізму) and the sect *Ukrainian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church* (Українська Правовірна Греко-Католицька Церква) are some of the most active organizations. Notable is that these organizations openly demonstrate their gender ignorance and identify themselves not as anti-feminist, but as anti-gender ones. One of the most common of their appeals is “Stop gender!”. They explicitly or implicitly attack homosexuality understood as a deviant and highly dangerous, especially for children, form of behaviour. Campaigns, slogans and propaganda materials of these anti-gender movements are directed to subversion of achievements of national gender policy, blocking state promotion of gender equality as well as inhibiting the work of gender NGOs, which according to them contribute to spreading homosexuality and molestation of Ukrainian children.

The current situation can be characterized as a moral panic, i.e. a state when condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges as a threat to societal values and interests (Cohen, 1972). It is important to understand that although moral panics deal with irrational fears, which the term “panics” implies, they seem to be increasingly media orchestrated and purposeful or planned. Often moral panics are formally justified by the need of protection of children and minors. However, in fact they leave children more vulnerable than ever and claim for legalization of discrimination and violation of human rights. The panics provoke a cultural anger in the service of moral regulation that targets the vulnerable in societies. Sexual panics are most often antiwoman and antigay. In the worst cases, the rights of these persons are qualified as those, who undermine citizenship and threaten social order and well-being. This “othering” dehumanizes and deprives individuals and whole communities of sexual and reproductive rights, creating conditions for structural discrimination and violence. Intensification of moral panics reflects a rise of neoconservative ideology, religious fundamentalism and strengthening totalitarian system, according to which sexuality becomes a subject of state or religious regulation and control. The state of economic

and political failure may stir up fears, anxieties and fantasies of a broad range of people. In this situation, moral panics can be explicitly used to produce coherent and incoherent ideological platforms and strategies to achieve political hegemony. The current situation of spreading moral panics in Ukraine and in other Eastern European countries is rather alarming. The more serious they are and the longer they endure, the greater is the likelihood that societies will deal with them through the production of the reactive mechanisms of surveillance, regulation, discipline, and punishment.

Bibliography

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