

What we talk about when we talk about gender in Armenia

Wednesday 19 December 2018, by [ROACH Anna Bianca](#) (Date first published: 8 December 2018).

As Armenia votes in a new parliament after the revolution earlier this year, it seems the new authorities' political opponents are uniting in an anti-LGBT campaign.

"I'm asking you a simple question: Do you have any responsibility towards the LGBT community?" This was one of many inflammatory questions addressed to Armenia's acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during a [historic televised debate](#) this week ahead of Sunday's parliamentary elections. Pashinyan and Vigen Sargsyan, the first deputy president of the former ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), engaged in a vitriolic exchange about national values.

The conversation touches on one of the election's hot-button issues: gender. The term "gender" does not refer to an identity marker, but rather acts as a dog whistle for anything that falls outside of gender norms. The prospect of liberalising gender norms, which for Armenia's militaristic and traditionalist culture is seen as an [existential threat](#), has caused some hand-wringing in the lead up to elections. A homophobic attack [that left nine people injured](#) in August and [draft legislation to ban "homosexual propaganda"](#), put forward by the RPA, are but a few of the events that have catapulted the issue to the forefront of the political conversation.

Nikol Pashinyan's stance remains ambiguous, but he has found himself associated with the LGBT movement. Many of Armenia's human rights activists [report](#) that this association was fabricated in another instance of the RPA and other powers using the fear-mongering power of "gender" to manipulate public opinion. Meanwhile, the anti-gender stance often depicts queerness as something wholly un-Armenian, an import from the West to undermine the country.

But while politicians argue over their positions in front of a largely conservative electorate, the threat of violence and stigmatisation that LGBT+ Armenians face is all too real.

Gender and politics in Armenia: a troubled past

The recent history of Armenia's organised anti-gender movement starts in 2012, with [the bombing of Yerevan's DIY Rock Pub](#) just two days before parliamentary elections in May that year. It was targeted because its owner, Armine Oganeseva, was a lesbian and an active member of the LGBT community.

Discussions surrounding the attack immediately entered the theatre of politics when two MPs of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) bailed out the assailants. The days and weeks following the bombing saw a flurry of discussions about homophobia and national values that was capitalised on by members of all parties, including the RPA. Among the politicians who justified the attack was Republican Party spokesperson Eduard Sharmazanov, who [called](#) the bombing "completely right and justified". Many of those who spoke up in support of Artsvik Minasyan, the ARF MP who bailed out

the assailants and called LGBT people “destructive to Armenian society”, suddenly received a great deal of [popular support](#) on social media. The assailants were [given](#) full amnesty later that year.

The following year saw another bout of “gender hysteria”. In May 2013, the Armenian parliament held hearings for [Law no. 57](#) about “Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women,” which was to institutionalise additional mechanisms to ensure gender equality. The bill was a slightly adapted version of a law proposed in 2009, which [came up](#) again regularly throughout following years. It provoked no backlash until its reintroduction in 2013.

In July 2013, Armenia [completed](#) technical talks over a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, paving the way towards an Association Agreement. But in September 2013, then-President Serzh Sargsyan drastically altered the course of negotiations when he [announced](#) that Armenia would instead join the competing Russian-led Customs Union. “It basically dooms projects for greater economic integration with the European Union,” Caucasus analyst Thomas de Waal [told](#) RFE/FRL at the time.

It is within this context that Arman Boshyan co-founded the Pan-Armenian Parent Committee (PAPC), an anti-gender group which organised a public campaign in support of national values in 2013 — just as Armenia’s leadership were occupied with geopolitical choices. The Parent Committee is no longer active, but Boshyan explains that it has left a legacy. “We created the Pan-Armenian Child and Parent Coalition in 2015,” says Boshyan, referring to a network of NGOs in Armenia committed to fighting LGBT activism and promoting traditional values.

“I understood that gender identity norms were going to be implemented in Armenia, and I wanted to stop that,” says Boshyan on his reasons for founding the PAPC, referring to the 2013 equal opportunities legislation. Boshyan, a software developer, describes himself as “not pro-Russian, but pro-Armenian” – but for him, the safety of Armenia can only be provided by Russia. Outside of his involvement with the anti-gender movement, Boshyan has [written](#) extensively about “homosexual propaganda” spread by western agents, including for the Russian government-owned news agency Sputnik. The [Yerevan Geopolitical Club](#), which Boshyan also founded, is a Russian-language platform that hosts a staunch, if conspiratorial criticism of Europe and the United States in favour of Russia. “In the world today, there is a clash between two geopolitical poles, one is the west and the other is the Russian Federation with its allies [...]. Today, only this eastern bloc has in this or that way presented a challenge to the values of dehumanisation,” he [told](#) TV channel Poznavatelnoe TV in 2015.

Boshyan claims that the PAPC was always entirely self-funded, contradicting the [assertions](#) of many gender activists, like FRIDA board member Anna Nikoghosyan, who strongly believes that it is backed by the Russian government. It was modelled off of the All-Russian Parental Resistance started by Sergey Kurginyan, a Russian public figure and founder of the nationalist [Essence of Time movement](#) who spoke with anger about [Russia’s lack of control over Armenia’s Velvet Revolution](#) earlier this year. Mamikon Hovsepyan, the Executive Director of PINK Armenia, says of the founding of the PAPC in 2013: “We found the same information, the same statements and articles [posted by the PAPC] in Russia. [...] Then we found similar groups in [Ukraine](#), Moldova, [Belarus](#) – all with the same logos and the same information.”

In all these different countries, like in Armenia, local variations on the All-Russian Parental Resistance have popped up at times of critical negotiations with the EU. For Armenia in 2013, this meant that by the time Sargsyan unexpectedly [rejected](#) the free trade agreement in favour of the Customs Union, the gender discussion had taken the forefront in political conversation. According to Hovsepyan, “very few people” were involved in protests against Sargsyan’s decision to go against the EU agreement in 2013. “We were 14 people and six or seven planners. [...] The rest of society

was not paying attention.”

A New Armenia: hope at last?

Armenia’s gender turmoil has not disappeared after 2013: public homophobic sentiment [persists](#), and there have been periodic outbursts of violence against queer people. In February 2018, a trans woman was [brutally attacked](#) in her Yerevan apartment, which the assailant then locked her in and set on fire. In another case in April 2018, a man who [confessed](#) to stabbing a teenage boy who he believed to be gay. Both attackers have been [released](#).

The organised anti-gender movement in Armenia, however, has remained mostly stagnant until the Velvet Revolution this year. Since the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan, Anna Nikoghosyan says, violently homophobic sentiments have grown more common on social media, often linking homophobia to a nostalgia for Republican Party rule. “I’ve seen so many comments saying: ‘Of course I hated Serzh Sargsyan’s regime, but at least during his time nobody would dare to talk about LGBT rights.’”

of demonstrators, who held posters reading “We Demand a Fair Investigation,” “No to Discrimination” and “Hatred Kills” gather outside the Armenian General Prosecutor’s Office in Yerevan to demand unbiased and comprehensive investigations into hate-motivated crimes and incidents. Source: [epress.am](#). As the revolution gained traction in April, and finally ended in a regime change in May, many queer Armenians had hope for a more egalitarian society. Yet the promise of a newly progressive society was definitively broken on 2 August, when roughly 40 residents in the southern village of Shurnukh broke into the home of queer activist Hayk Hakobyan. They then proceeded to [violently attack](#) Hakobyan and his guests, injuring nine people and sending two to the hospital. Police arrived an hour and a half later. “It seemed we would not survive,” Elvira Meliksetyan [told](#) Epress.am. “It was the first time that a big group of people were beating up LGBT people, and were not allowing them to escape,” says Nikoghosyan.

Hakobyan, who, like Armine Oganessova, has left Armenia after the attack, sees political motives behind the attack. He reports that the main assailant throughout the attack was Hakob Arshakian, the RPA-aligned village mayor, and his immediate relatives. Hakobyan’s family, a well-known family that had long opposed the RPA in Shurnukh and its surrounding region, had filed a complaint against Arshakian for corruption.

This was not the first time that Arshakian attacked Hakobyan. During the revolution earlier this year, Hakobyan and several other gender activists had organised a talk at the nearby Goris Press Club, where they previously held events featuring LGBT activists and representatives. The Press Club cancelled unexpectedly after Hakobyan posted a Facebook status calling his friends to the city around that time to protest against Serzh. At the same time, Hakobyan’s father and other relatives started receiving phone calls from Arshakian, who threatened them to stop Hakobyan from holding the rally. It was later revealed that the Goris Press Club had been threatened as well. The assailants from both the Shurnukh and the Goris attacks have since then been given collective pardon, and the investigation has been [closed](#). Pashinyan has not spoken about the attacks.

Following the attacks, on 12 August, a rally was held in support of the villagers of Shurnukh, organised and attended by many supporters of the RPA. “I know it was an RPA event,” says Hakobyan, “because they were all there. Hakob [Arshakian], Pigh [conservative blogger Tigran Kocharyan], Artur Danielyan and Narek Malyan [both from the RPA-aligned online programme [Adekvad](#)] – they were all there.”

Throughout fall 2018, Yerevan has also witnessed several different protests that drew the link

between the gender movement and Pashinyan's government. "There were two," says Women's Rights Centre director Lara Aharonian. "There was one at Republic Square," of about 50 people, including members of the Church, "and then a smaller one," of around 30 or 40 people. A large anti-gender protest was planned for 15 November, the day that a Christian LGBT forum was to be held in Yerevan. The forum was cancelled when the Chief of the Police [announced](#) that he didn't "consider it appropriate" to host the summit in Armenia, and the police released an official statement that it was not prepared to guarantee the security of the event. Only then was the anti-gender protest cancelled.

November also saw the appearance of rainbow stickers featuring Pashinyan's face throughout Yerevan, with the slogan: "The gays support Pashinyan." These stickers linked the viewer to the very scant website of an organisation called [Noah Pride](#), which boasts the [organisation of a pride parade on 17 November](#).

Investigating for Media.am, journalist Gegham Vardanyan [uncovered](#) that Noah Pride's website was made on 1 November 2018, despite claiming to be founded in 2016. Neither PINK Armenia nor USAID, which the organisation lists as partners, have any existing links to it. It lists no names of team members or employees, and does not have any social media. It quotes an unnamed Noah Pride activist: "It is difficult to cope with a radically homophobic society, but there is no other way except a consistent and persistent explanation, appealing to the mind and sense of justice. [...] I am very pleased that the new head of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, perceive and implements this." Activists and members of the LGBT community are highly suspicious of the organisation, which has had no history until now, and which nobody had heard of.

The anti-gender movement united against Pashinyan

"In Armenia, whenever there is an intense political situation, it is always the issue of gender and LGBT that are rising," says Anna Nikoghosyan, and this has certainly been the case as the country leads towards elections. Though "gender" (and its anti-Armenian ramifications) have come up many times over the months since the revolution, they can be tied back each time to a party that benefits from discrediting Nikol Pashinyan. "It's the same people who are leading [all the anti-gender movements], ever since 2013," says Lara Aharonian.

In recent months, [Nikol Pashinyan](#) has made statements that have ruffled feathers on both sides of the debate. "The LGBT issue is always a headache for a government," he [said](#) in a recent speech. Pashinyan acknowledged the existence of LGBT Armenians, a radical step for those who consider queerness inherently unnatural to the country. Then, just a few minutes later, he also spoke about the USSR, referring to "sending [queer people] to prison," or having them "hanged or shot" as at least "a solution" – as opposed to Armenia's current atmosphere of denial.

"I'm not against minorities having rights," says Boshyan, referring to gender and sexual minorities. "If you ask [them], if they are truthful, they will say that they are not oppressed, because the Armenian Constitution protects them." Yet a deeper look at the various gender scandals throughout the years, and especially leading up to the elections, demonstrates both a great deal of homophobic violence, as well as a consistent trend of impunity for attackers.

Vigen Sargsyan's question to the Prime Minister during this week's pre-election debate hit on a sensitive issue. "Gender" has been ramped up to appear a serious threat to what many people consider to be defining Armenian values. In discussing the use of gender as a political tool, we must ask: Who is responsible for violence and impunity? Who has the most to gain from pulling the strings behind the hate?

ANNA BIANCA ROACH

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Russian and Beyond

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anna-bianca-roach/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-gender-in-armenia>