

# Ukraine: Queering East European Despair or the New Postutopian Queer-Nomadism

Friday 18 November 2022, by [YAKOVLEV Vadym](#) (Date first published: 11 November 2022).

**She posted this video in the chat room in the second week of the war. When Russia attacked, Ukraine closed its borders to those with “male passports.” When the general mobilization was announced, thousands of transwomen, transmen, and non-binary individuals were trapped.**

In the video, she, tired and dirty, happily reported that she had escaped. Through swamps and forests, bypassing the transphobic militant armed border guards, she had crossed the border illegally. “A heroine,” I thought to myself.

To get out, he had to stand in line at the military enlistment office. Problems with documents had to be solved. On one of his last visits, when he, a poet and trans man, went to the enlistment office, he was beaten by the Ukrainian military. But he did manage to leave.

There are many such stories. You can read about them in the foreign, but of course not in the Ukrainian media. There you will only find out about heroic LGBTQ people, defending “European values” at the front. These heroes are also adored by Ukrainian liberal LGBTQ organizations, generously funded by Western foundations. Who cares about “traitors”?

I remember men disguised as women flocking to the border in the faint hope of getting out, taking advantage of the chaos and panic. I remember the Ukrainian media reporting about “traitors and cowards who refuse to be men in a difficult time for the motherland.” Dozens of mostly likely heterosexual and heteronormative men put on veritable anti-militaristic travesti shows at checkpoints, often falling into the hands of law enforcement and military personnel in their aftermath. Their photos were published in the media, not hiding the faces of the unfortunates, so that the militarized crowd would have a chance to make fun of the “cowards” in comments while resorting to a selection of transphobic and homophobic language.

When Russia declared a mobilization six months later, Russian trans people faced a similar plight. Nationalist patriarchal states must control your body and your life. After all, it was not to bestow us with freedom that they drew their borders with the blood of soldiers and civilians, and raped women, men, and non-binary individuals. Sometimes it takes new blood to expand or reaffirm those boundaries. Yours, certainly included.

An LGBTQ Pride march with Ukrainian organizations took place in Poland. An antiwar Russian organization was denied registration to participate. “You’re Russians, we don’t want Russians around us,” the Ukrainian homonationalists said, and were, I think, very pleased with themselves. Ukrainian homonationalism is now the calling card of our “civil democratic society.” Xenophobia is allowed because we are supported by the entire Western liberal world, and queer solidarity is unnecessary. When the war broke out, I wrote to a Russian antiwar queer writer a few words of

support and intended to suggest she read my letter, addressed to the Russian queer community, at one of her literary evenings. The idea was not safe for the writer, so I gave up on it.

A huge part of the space of what was called “Eastern Europe” during the Cold War is overrun by anti-queer regimes and steeped in anti-queer hysteria. The misogynist and LGBTQ-phobic regime in Poland, the conservative nationalists in Hungary, Putin’s fight for “traditional values” and against “homosexual propaganda.” We could also add the Ukrainian homonationalism, which is currently being partially legitimated to show Ukraine as a “democratic European country” in the Western media. Being a queer in Ukraine is sometimes allowed, and they even let you walk in Pride parades, with a few hundred police officers to protect you. The main thing is to be a patriot and tell people abroad how tolerant Ukrainians are. The reality is more complicated and unpleasant. I remember that a few months before Russia invaded Ukraine, my friends and I were attacked by neo-fascists at a queer party in Lviv. One friend filed a police report, which cops weren’t particularly eager to follow up on it. Neo-fascist groups after 2014, that is, after Euromaidan, are unofficially supported by some politicians and law enforcement agencies. Homonationalism is allowed, but in doses and only if it benefits the state in building a positive image for “our Western partners.”

Queers fleeing Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus today are a common occurrence in Europe. They are also fleeing from Poland. One German woman told me about two gay Polish men who did not want to return to Poland under any circumstances. Though I don’t really know the relevant statistics, I think they are also running away from Hungary. Escape is a queer act. You refuse to belong to your nation-state and make the transition to another state of marginality – that of a refugee, a cosmopolitan fugitive. You flee from wars, uprisings, social degradation, and reactionary regimes. This is what the space of Eastern Europe is filled with today. That is probably what Eastern Europe is today. The “New East,” as one publication’s editorial board called it.

Zygmunt Bauman wrote that the consequence of neoliberal globalization is the emergence of two classes of people in the modern world. The first are “tourists,” successful cosmopolitans who fit into the propagandistic positive image of the beneficiaries of the neoliberal system. They are eternal travelers who feel at home everywhere, with money and career prospects thanks to the neoliberal economic model. The second type is the “vagabonds.” These are the unwilling travelers, lacking economic stability and confidence in the future. Because of the victory of the neoliberal version of globalization, they cannot have a homeland, and even if they do, they feel like strangers and aliens at home, especially against the backdrop of “tourists.” Queers who leave their Eastern European nests can feel neither “tourists” nor “vagabonds.” Rather, they are nomads. They have neither the optimistic worldview of privileged “tourists” nor the apathy of the “vagabonds.” When moving to another country, it is relatively easy for a queer person to fit in with the local queer community. This is an opportunity that the “vagabonds” do not have. A queer in England once said that queers are the greatest stateless nation. If this is true, I hope we never have a state. I have rarely seen the optimistic twinkle in the eyes of Eastern European queers that is characteristic of the “tourists.” No matter where or in what country a queer lives, they will not feel safe.

Eastern European queers are rarely thrilled with utopias. I’m talking about the queers I’ve met most often. Nor do they always like the idea of revolution (I mean a real one, not merely a coup that replaces some thugs in power with others). But this does not mean that East European queers are not ready to take part in the revolution or that they cannot truly embrace a new vision of the world. This seeming pessimism is most likely due in part to what the attempt to build communism and socialism in our territories was and how infamously and quickly this attempt came to an end, what sacrifices we paid for this attempt, and how tragically wars, nationalism, authoritarianism, economic neoliberal reforms, and misanthropy came to our countries instead of communism and socialism. But I would like to conceptualize this desperate “state of mind” in Eastern Europe. This desperation is in fact a consequence of skepticism. Sometimes black (only at first glance), sometimes morose, but

skeptical. We are always a little wary and mistrustful, though prone to adventure. This despair and skepticism, especially expressed in our peculiar sense of humor, you can find, by the way, in the jokes of Žižek and the films of Kusturica. It is the “state of mind” of entire generations that have gone through the meat grinder of history, amazing discoveries and daring transformations, bitter failures and falls. It is a kind of our Nietzschean “gay science.” The kind of “gay science” that will no longer (and this is fine) produce a new Superman or allow a new Nihilism to germinate. That “gay science” that once gave us the strength to believe in communism and socialism and to survive their realization and their end. That “gay science” that makes us ask with disbelief on the one hand, and with post-utopian excitement on the other, “Do you seriously think that even if we defeat Capitalism, Patriarchy, and the State, humanity will not immediately invent a new system of oppression? Well, let’s give it a try!”

“Dada!” - Tristan Tzara shouted out with rage at the first avant-garde Dadaist exhibitions in Zurich. “Dada!” - the German artist Hannah Höch answered Tristan. “Dada!” - was echoed by crossdresser Marcel Duchamp, exhibiting urinals as works of art. Dadaism was an ultra-leftist and antiwar international avant-garde art movement, a desperate response to the absurdity and savagery of World War I. Tristan Tzara, an anti-nationalist and Eastern European, left his native Romania at a young age to become one of the founders of one of the most radical leftist movements in art. An anti-nationalist and anti-bourgeois artist, Tzara refused to participate in the war on either side, considering the First World War as madness and the greatest crime of the capitalist world order. “Dada!” - I shouted, fleeing the war to Germany. “Dada!” - “Dada!” came back to me from somewhere behind, from the left, from the right, and from the front...

Today, fleeing wars, reactionary regimes, unsuccessful uprisings, and nationalism, Eastern European queer nomads join the ranks of migrants, other nomads, the impoverished working class and precariat of the major capitalist countries of the world. The crisis of neoliberalism and the international order, global warming, the economic crisis, and the rise of the far right are all upon us. Will this lead to an anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal revolution? It’s hard to say. But there is no more hope for a revolution on the capitalist periphery, which would inexplicably grow into a world revolution. We have to start from the center. And Eastern European queer nomads, with their postutopian despair and skepticism as well as their excitement and desire for change, can play an important role in this battle. May postutopian Eastern European queer nomadism live on! We have nothing to lose and our thoughts are sullen, naïve, and horny.

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**Vadym Yakovlev** (1990) is an ukrainian independent writer and columnist. He/she is author of the first ukrainian queer novel with transgender characters “Where the territory begins” (2020). Based now in Germany. Follow Vadym on [Facebook](#).

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