

# "GAYS MENTIONED"<sup>1</sup> – THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

## Queer Feminist Analysis of Finland's Foreign Affairs Doctrine Value-Based Realism and Support of Ukraine Recovery and Development Plan

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Commentary

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### Introduction: SOGI in Global Politics

Negotiation around heteronormativity and SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) questions has been politicized in the global politics at least since the mid-1980s. When the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1985 adopted UN member states' first formal commitment towards the promotion of gender equality, number of UN member states made reservations of the use of the word *gender* – by demanding it to be square-bracketed, which in UN protocols means it is a disputed concept. To these states, and to the conservative religious civil society lobby present in the parallel NGO forum, the term *gender* was considered a code for accepting homosexuality, fluid sexuality, the destruction of family, and questioning of binary anatomical sex (Baden & Goetz 1997; see also Butler 2004, 181–184). Since then, similar battles and conservative lobbying

have been seen in relation to World Bank loans (Lind 2005), and anti-homosexuality laws (Rao 2020). More generally, such battles can be seen to be aligned with wider anti-gender movement, and opponents of so-called gender ideology (Paternotte & Kuhar 2018) affecting LGBTIQ+ people globally in intensified manner (Honkasalo 2020).

This commentary focuses on how queer crises and responses to them entered the core of right-wing populism in Finland in 2024 and stirred the foreign affairs and security leadership of the government. This historical momentum was shaped in the aftermath of a decision by Minister for Trade and Development Tavo in charge of the support for the reconstruction of Ukraine, to decline the Finnish government's participation in the Alliance for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery of Ukraine due to the LGBTIQ+ reference in the Alliance's formation documents.

Up until 2024, the main public attention in Finland for the past 2.5 years has been on the military aspects of the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The war accelerated the government's application to join NATO in 2022, and Finland became a member less than a year after. The Finnish media follows – with military and war studies dominated expert commentary – on a daily basis both the war effort of Ukraine and Russia

<sup>1</sup> Name of the episode of "Hard week's evening" weekly satire aired by the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE on 28 September 2024. The episode focused on the political stir that was caused within the foreign affairs and security leadership of the government in the aftermath of a minister declining Finnish government's support for the Alliance for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery of Ukraine due to LGBTIQ+ reference.

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as well as the military support extended to Ukraine from its international alliance, including Finland. Unlike right-wing populist parties in other European countries and the US, Finns party is formally in favour of the military support of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

Much less focus is on the economic and social recovery plan of the Ukraine, although, the Recovery and Development Plan (RDP) of Ukraine was already drafted and endorsed at the international Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC) in Switzerland in July 2022 with representatives of 41 countries, Council of Europe, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, European Commission, European Investment Bank, and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The conference reiterated the adherence to transparency, accountability, the rule of law, democracy, gender equality, and inclusion as their guiding principles for the recovery process (Lyubchenko 2022, 21).

The Alliance for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery of Ukraine was formed in 2024 at the Berlin Ukraine Recovery Conference, with the leadership of UN Women Ukraine in collaboration with the Platform for Gender Mainstreaming and Inclusive Recovery, led by the Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. According to the UN, the alliance has been joined by 15 governments, major international financial institutions, UN agencies, the EU, and civil society and private sector organisations. (UN Ukraine 2024.) UN website reiterates the aims of the alliance:

Members of the Alliance are encouraged to support initiatives that promote gender equality, women's protection, and empowerment;

2 Recent investigative journalism suggests that the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service Supo had warned the party leadership over ten years ago of the too close relations between certain members of the party and Russian government agents (Teittinen 2024).

and to prioritize the needs of displaced women, returnees, disabled women, veterans, rural women, and LGBTIQ+ persons, ensuring their participation in recovery decision-making processes. (ibid.)

The Finnish government supports the RDP with its own austerity economic order, which has led to a major downsizing of its development aid, but also its diplomatic forces at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs: support for Ukraine was shifted from the Political Affairs Department to that of the Development Policy Department – and Ukraine was declared as the number one partner in Finnish development aid (Government of Finland 2023, 185). All in all, the government, and the newly appointed president, have launched their new foreign affairs and security policy doctrine “value-based realism”, alongside an increase in military spending due to Finnish NATO membership. Value-based realism, as the government defines it, refers to “we stand by values we consider important and central to us, such as democracy, the rule of law, international law and human rights, peace, equality, and non-discrimination. At the same time, we are also ready to engage in dialogue with countries that do not share our views and values.” (Government of Finland 2024, 8.)

### The queer crisis of the foreign affairs and security leadership

In September–October 2024, the question of gender equality and support for SOGI inclusive policies in support of reconstruction of Ukraine shook for several weeks the foundations of the Finnish government foreign and security policy – for which negotiated consensus has dominated since the cold war.

Throughout the episode, Prime Minister Orpo and Minister for Foreign Affairs Valtonen appeared in the media emphasising the Finnish foreign and security policy is crystal clear and that “mountain was made of a

molehill” (Yle Areena 2024b). President Stubb, however, took a more openly critical stand stating that “foreign affairs should not be used as a weapon of domestic politics in any form” (Närhi 2024) hinting towards an internal conflict within the government but primarily criticising the bureaucrats of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, rather than the minister in charge. In Finland, as per the constitution, foreign and security policy is directed by the President in co-operation with the Government. Currently all three key positions of foreign and security policy matters – the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs – are held by one party, National Coalition Party.

At stake was the decision made in June by Minister for Trade and Development Tavio, from the populist the Finns Party, that Finland would not take part in the Alliance for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery in support of reconstruction of Ukraine as the alliance referred to SOGI/LGBTIQ+ and ‘inclusiveness’ in its founding document. This decision was made despite the official government stance, also published in June 2024, which states that “[w]e stand by values we consider important and central to us, such as democracy, the rule of law, international law and human rights, peace, equality, and non-discrimination” (Government of Finland 2024, 8).

The decision not to join the alliance was made in the middle of Finnish summer holiday season and was leaked months later, in September, by a national media outlet drawing from sources from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Once it became public, it led to a strong announcement by President Stubb from the UN General Assembly week in New York that he will personally rectify the matter with the Ukrainian President Zelensky the following day and ensure that SOGI concerns will become a central element of Finnish foreign affairs (Tikka 2024).

After the Ministerial Committee on Security and Foreign Affairs had met with President Stubb in early October, formal press conferences held by both Prime Minister Orpo and President Stubb both reiterated that the core of the Finnish security and foreign policy line stays intact – the government stands for gender equality and support of minorities such as LGBTIQ+ people. The Prime Minister emphasised that “ministers make hundreds of individual decisions” (Närhi 2024) yet such decisions such as the one made by Minister for Trade and Development Tavio in June, do not shake the line of the government. He went on to describe how the said Minister for Trade and Development, together with the Minister for Social Security – a member of the Prime Minister’s party and who is in charge of gender equality policies – will oversee the preparation for Finnish support for Ukraine’s reconstruction program with a gender equality and non-discrimination dimension. President Stubb, furthermore, in his address to the media, emphasised how Finland continues to support SOGI concerns in multilateral relations of Finland between the UN, European Council, and the OECD.

All in all, the message from the President and the Prime Minister emphasized that one such decision does not change the foreign and security policy of the government. Yet, the debate in the national media persisted for several weeks, raising questions such as: Is there a crisis of government? Is there a crisis of foreign affairs and security policy leadership? The opposition parties joined in critiquing the June decision and demanded parliamentary interference. A vote of no confidence was tabled in Parliament less than a week after the President’s and Prime Minister’s press conferences. Despite this, both Minister Tavio and the government retained the confidence of the parliament.

## Sexual Politics of Crises – A Queer Feminist Analysis of “Tavio gate”

How to make sense of this ‘queer crisis’ from the perspective of feminist and queer international relations? Firstly, the politicization of sexuality, also called sexual politics of crisis, has been studied for decades across the globe. Crises are often seen as potential catalysts for major social and political transformations. However, it is common also that a normative backlash against sexuality and gender norms, and the focus of the symbolic value of men as protectors and women in need of it, pushes societies in recovery towards heteronormativity and reproductive essentialism. In this backlash gender binary embodies symbolic national border in justifying, for instance, gendered and sexualised violence towards all genders (Yuval-Davis 1997; for the Finnish foreign affairs context, see Jauhola 2016). President of Russia Putin’s announcement of a full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022 was justified by the need to defend the region – historical Russian lands – from Western influence that would lead to degradation, being against human nature and with this referring specifically to LGBTIQ+ rights. Instead of gaining support for this norm conservatism from Ukrainians, popular support in Ukraine for the LGBTIQ+ community has increased since the war began. Ukraine’s parliament ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) almost unanimously in 2022 after many years of resistance and opposition from conservative politicians and the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations (UCCRO). The opposition in Ukraine had seen the convention, which uses concepts of gender and sexual orientation, to be a threat – driving Ukraine towards equal marriage rights. (Shevstova 2022, 9.) Thus, the Finnish president’s strong message in support of Ukrainian LGBTIQ+ people at the UN week can be seen as a strategic message directed at the same time to Zelensky, Putin, and to the coalition government parties in Finland.

Secondly, Minister Tavio, in his media interviews, clarified that despite declining the participation of Finland in the Alliance, as a parliamentarian, he had in fact previously voted for the rights of LGBTIQ+ people in Finland as a strategy to combat “Islamization” (Muhonen 2024). This statement functions as a form of racist homonationalism – support of LGBTIQ+ concerns combined with nationalist, racist, and Islamophobic attitudes (Puar, 2007) – a clear message sent out to his party and voters. However, this is not the first time when a populist minister in charge of foreign affairs uses populist doublespeak – i.e. taking a formal government line but continuing addressing their primary public with their populist stands: similar message was earlier sent by Minister for Foreign Affairs Timo Soini few years earlier with a well-known Swedish feminist Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wahlström (Jauhola & Lyytikäinen, 2020).

Thirdly, the security and foreign affairs leadership’s reluctance to admit a disconnection between government policy principles (values) and concrete implementation of such policies (budget decisions) reiterated the hierarchy between foreign affairs “hard” and the “soft core” (Yle Areena 2024). The “hard core” requires unanimity within government – whereas the “soft” does not. Thus, while NATO membership and military support for Ukraine are considered examples of the “hard core” requiring consensus, the decisions to support the Alliance and SOGI are considered to belong to the other end of the binary. In sum, one could claim that this reveals the true nature of the hierarchies within the value-based doctrine, and it falls within so-called “realism” – a dominant doctrine in international relations that sees world politics through the eyes of competition, power, security, and use of military force to balance the power. As earlier feminist analysis of Finnish foreign affairs has suggested, such a positioning continues a decade long history of how gender equality principles have, or as a matter of fact, have not been, implemented in Finnish foreign affairs (Jauhola & Lyytikäinen 2020) and development policy also referred as



“strong rhetorics – weak implementation” (Koponen et al. 2012). Thus, it underlines the lack of the government’s commitment to mainstreaming gender and non-discrimination principles across all government policies, except at the diplomatic level – although these are legal obligations in the Finnish legal context.

To come out from the crisis, at the press conference, Prime Minister Orpo announced Finland’s role in supporting gender equality and non-discrimination of Ukraine’s reconstruction programme. Thus, it was an attempt to rectify one of those “hundreds of decisions” that Minister Tavio had made – not openly criticizing him but assigning him to collaborate with the Minister in charge of gender equality on another programme for Ukraine that would support both gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights in Ukraine – as an attempt to save face of the coalition government consensus.

Fourthly, I suggest that commitment to equality and non-discrimination, as well as support for LGBTIQ+ people pinkwash both the Finnish government’s own austerity measures and its participation in the neoliberal reforms taking place as parts of the reconstruction and development planning for Ukraine. In the Finnish context, the government has announced, and partly already implemented, major restrictions on asylum-seeking and migration policies, cuts to social and healthcare provision, and confirmed a total of 1.2 billion euros in cuts to the Finnish development policy. Having dropped several key long-term development policy partners from the Global South and replacing them with support to Ukraine can be further seen as a form of racist whitewashing. All in all, the direct development policy budget support for SOGI questions between 2006–2022, before the 1-billion-euro cuts to development aid, was just 11.6 million Euros – consisting of a total of 25 projects – none of which directly targeted disaster or post-conflict reconstruction recovery or humanitarian aid commitments.

Finally, let’s turn to a critical analysis of the economic reforms in Ukraine. Just weeks after the first RDP conference in Lugano in 2022, Ukraine had passed labour laws that dramatically withdrew protections from previous labour laws, and austerity measures with major cuts to education, health care, and social protection (Lyubchenko 2022, 21–22). In her analysis of these reforms, specifically focusing on their racialised and gendered impacts on social reproduction, Lyubchenko (ibid., 22) suggests that the reforms, recovery plan included, are fundamentally changing the relations between production and social reproduction, and thus accelerating capital accumulation in Ukraine. Understood as part of these economic reforms, support for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights, thus, “rely on and reproduce racialized citizenship and economic neoliberalism, which are structural conditions of capitalist accumulation” (ibid.) and “[d]ispossession at home has generated a reserve of cheap, feminized labour power for the European labour market, mediated through a specific conceptualization of race, class, gender, and sexuality in its proximity to Europe” (ibid., 23) – suggesting that what is at play in Ukraine is what Naomi Klein (2007) has famously referred to as *Disaster Capitalism*, i.e., using war and instability to introduce financial reforms in service of global capitalist interests.

## Conclusions

It is still too early to see what form the support of the Finnish government will take in Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in Ukraine. However, the “Tavio case” illustrates at least two things: First, how value-based realism, and the debates in Finland on the support for gender and inclusivity are intimately entangled with the austerity government, security and foreign policy leadership, and how the populist right-wing government pushes the global gender and SOGI policy of

Finland towards questions of homonationalism, pink and white washing, and finally depletion of social reproduction in Ukraine. Second, it raises the question of the price to be paid for the political consensus in foreign and security policy. As Hanna Ojanen (2024) suggests, consensus can obscure the politicisation of foreign and security policy – but also gaining quick political wins in the context of intensified attacks on LGBTIQ+ people, gender and queer studies, feminism and antiracism.

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