“Rise like a Phoenix”

LGBTI Activists and Geopolitics in Armenia

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Cover photo: Picture taken during the march on International Women's Day on the 8th of March 2016.
LGBTI activists in Armenia have been working for dozens of years to improve the situation for LGBTI people in the country. Misconceptions of LGBTI people, violent attacks, little protection by law and discrimination in almost every sphere of life are part of the daily routine of LGBTI activists. The activists fight for equality and non-discrimination as well as better protection and a better understanding among the society of what LGBTI actually means. Though, these activists are fighting for their rights in a country which has a complicated geopolitical situation, which does not make their work easier as well. Armenia, as a post-Soviet country, knows an interesting history regarding its territory. This history still prevails in people's minds such as the Armenian Genocide in 1915 and the time between 1922 and 1991 when the Soviets took over control of Armenia. Not only historic events but also the present-day geopolitical situation constructs the national identity of the Armenian society. The conflict with Azerbaijan and the position of Armenia in a shared neighbourhood between Russia and the EU are creating insecurity which also affects the discourse of an Armenian national identity.

This study explores how LGBTI activism is influenced by Armenia's geopolitical situation. First, it builds on fieldwork in Armenia and multiple interviews with LGBTI activists in Armenia. Furthermore, this explorative study builds on reports and studies on LGBTI issues carried out by national and international LGBTI organizations. Finally, it elaborates on existing literature about the geopolitical context of Armenia and sheds another light of the situation of LGBTI activists in this country.

LGBTI activists face major difficulties because of the insecure situation of Armenia. This insecurity is a result of conflicts with neighbouring countries and Armenia's position as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and as a partner country of the European Union. This complicated position affects the construction of a national identity which is mainly narrated through media, politics and education. Dominant ideas about a national identity might exclude people who do not fit in these dominant narratives. LGBTI activists who strive to change these dominant narratives, are labeled as foreign threats and as agents from the West. LGBTI activists are somehow stuck in these narratives. Help from the European Union remains limited because it is funding the Armenian government which is violating LGBTI rights at the same time. Furthermore, with Russia as its most important ally in the conflict with Azerbaijan, Armenian officials are more concerned with having good ties with Russia. The balancing of Armenia between Russia and the European Union seems to complicate the work of LGBTI activists even more and a solution to this problem seems rather far away.
Preface

First of all, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, dr. H.J. Swedlund, of the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management (CICAM) at the Nijmegen School of Management, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Whether we used Skype or we sat in her office, I always had the feeling she was genuinely interested in my subject. Though it took a long time for me to finish my thesis, she always reminded me of what my initial idea was and ensured that I was fully prepared to go into ‘the field’.

I would also like to thank PINK Armenia NGO for hosting me in their office and providing me with everything I need during my stay in Armenia. In the beginning, I had a hard time staying in a country where I did not speak the language and did not know anyone. Soon enough, I met a lot of wonderful, diverse, brave and interesting people who will always have a special place in my heart.

Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to my friends and family for providing me with infinite support and for having endless patience when listening to my complaints, insecurities and stories about Armenia. My accomplishment would never have been possible without them.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Brussels, Belgium, April, 2015: Just a normal day at the office of the European Delegation of the Dutch political party D66 in the European Parliament. I was working at my desk during my internship when my supervisor came in. She asked whether I would like to join her and the Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for whom we were working, to go to the Europride in Riga, Latvia. Naturally, I said yes and we immediately started to schedule meetings with human rights activists from Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia and Armenia for when we would be in Riga in June.

Riga, Latvia, June 20th, 2015: In our hotel, we finally got the opportunity to meet the human rights activists with whom we had been in contact with for some months now. During the meetings it became clear that the Eastern part of Europe and along its eastern borders, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights were repeatedly violated. Although the situation for LGBTI people was slowly improving in most countries, there was one country in which improvement regarding LGBTI rights was hardly noticed: Armenia. Maybe the general acceptance of the Armenian society towards LGBTI people had slightly improved, but developments regarding legislation or political willingness to improve the situation for LGBTI people had still been lacking. The Pride Parade through the city of Riga had a special place for LGBTI activists from former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) who are sometimes not able to march in their own countries. The activists all agreed that recent developments in Russia regarding anti-LGBTI legislature have had a major influence in their own country. However, at the same time, the West demanded from these former USSR countries to improve their human rights records. I saw a problem and I wanted to see how this problem affected these LGBTI activists. I decided to go to Armenia: a country which was completely unknown to me but somehow drew my attention.

Yerevan, Armenia, March 1st, 2016: Quite scared I arrived in an alley where the office of my host organization should be located. When I arrived at the correct building, security cameras and unknown eyes behind bars were fixed on me: a tall, blonde guy, who didn’t speak Armenian and who was not familiar with the habits of the community. ‘Barev’;¹ some shy young people said and immediately afterwards they started talking about me, as I was walking to the back of the building where the staff members were working. Rainbow flags decorated the walls, while a magnet with “Putin Kaput” decorated the refrigerator.

One of the staff members showed me the other rooms of the building including a ‘community room’ as well as the room for the psychologist and social worker. The community room is a small room intended to provide space for the LGBTI community and its allies to relax and to organize all kinds of activities. A piano, some board games, a projector for screening movies,

¹ Barev means Hello in Armenian.
and a laptop were available for anybody visiting the room. I immediately saw it as a room where visitors were able to be themselves without having to care about what others thought about them. The room for the psychologist and social worker consisted of some desks and two chairs facing each other, with a box of tissues on the desk next to the chairs. Behind the festive rainbow flags and smiling faces, I recognised that I never fully understood the true meaning of the rainbow flag. In my experience, I mostly saw rainbow flags together with massive gay pride parades or happiness. Of course, I was aware of problems surrounding LGBTI rights, but I never experienced them myself in this way. Here, I saw the rainbow flag in combination with a box of tissues.

I felt like an ignorant intruder, entering their safe space only to collect data for my research on LGBTI activism and leaving after my job was done. This feeling, however, immediately changed when I got to know the staff members, the members of the organization, and all their friends and allies. After a few weeks, I discovered that behind the bars, a vast amount of work has been carried out by a courageous group of people under sometimes dangerous and risky circumstances. I could never have imagined to organize a farewell party in an underground gay bar in the city center of Yerevan, including a belly-dancing drag queen, four months later. But what has happened in those four months? And why did I decide to write about the Armenian LGBTI community, one of the most vulnerable groups in this country? In this thesis, I aim to shed light on LGBTI activism in a country with a highly complicated geopolitical situation and how that situation influences on activists working in a country where the majority of citizens are not on their side.

In this introduction, I will initially present the research question and subquestions which have formed the base of the study. Also, I will provide a short summary of every chapter. Next, I will describe the academic and societal relevance of this thesis. Finally, I will turn to how this thesis is structured. After this chapter, hopefully I won’t be asked again: “Why Armenia, Daniel? Just choose something safe and familiar!” I am glad I did not listen, because now I am able to present a study on a case that is undeservedly unknown to so many people.

1.1. Introduction to the research

This section will introduce the research that has been carried out for this thesis. First, I will provide the research question and objective of this thesis. Secondly, I will shortly summarize all chapters of this study: the theoretical framework and its concepts, the methodology and methods, and the analytical chapter in which I analysed the gathered data of my fieldwork period.

1.1.1. Problem Statement and Research Aims

In this study, I will focus on the geopolitical context of Armenia and how it influences LGBTI activism in the country. The central aim of this study is to get insight in how LGBTI activism in Armenia is influenced by geopolitical influences of the so-called 'shared neighbourhood'. The idea of a shared neighbourhood is used to denote the Soviet successor states covered by the European
Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the launched Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 (Averre 2010, 1689). To be able to achieve the research aim, I will answer the following research question:

**How does the geopolitical context of Armenia influence LGBTI activism in the country?**

To answer this question comprehensively, multiple subquestions have been formulated:

1. What forms the geopolitical context of Armenia?
   a. The Russian influence on Armenia.
   b. The influence of the European Union (EU) on Armenia.
   c. The influence of the conflicts with Turkey and Azerbaijan on Armenia.

2. How is LGBTI activism in Armenia constructed?

By answering this research question, a gap in the literature will be filled. There is hardly any theory on how local LGBTI activists are influenced by international powers. Furthermore, studies that solely focused on Armenia and activism and are not meant as an annual review, are hardly traceable, which makes this study an important supplement to existing NGO reports. Important to notice is that my study focuses on how LGBTI activists experience influences from geopolitical forces and not just on the facts and incidents of LGBTI activism which occurred throughout time.

### 1.1.2. Concepts and theories

In this thesis, two concepts will be linked to one another. The first concept is 'the geopolitical context of Armenia'. To get a grip on this broad concept, the focus will solely be on the following three sections: the EU, Russia and the conflicts at the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The focus will be on these countries, because Armenia is part of the ‘shared neighbourhood’ between the EU and Russia and it is subject to pressures from both sides as well as mutual exclusive policies. Competition between Brussels and Moscow has crystallized in the region around two mutually exclusive integration projects, the Eastern Partnership and the Eurasian Customs Union (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014). These three geographical elements are filtered out of the literature on the geopolitical situation of Armenia in which it is often mentioned that these three elements have a major influence on Armenia (Ademmer 2015; Averre 2009; Companjen 2010; Delcour 2014; Kempe 2013; Paul 2015; Popescu 2013).

The second concept is ‘LGBTI activism in Armenia’. This concept encompasses a broad range of activities, opinions and, explanations too. Therefore, I structured this concept by using three sections as well, namely: knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. The level of knowledge people have regarding LGBTI issues determines for a large part how people’s attitudes towards LGBTI people develop. Furthermore, peoples’ attitudes determine ultimately how these people act towards LGBTI people and LGBTI-related issues. NGOs and political bodies write many reports
about LGBTI issues in Armenia, though research on the work of LGBTI activists themselves remain underexposed.

The two concepts – the geopolitical situation of Armenia and LGBTI issues and activism in Armenia - have hardly ever been brought together in academic literature. Combining these concepts with a large amount of data gathered from fieldwork, required a structured approach and a theory on how certain values could either be in accordance with or opposing each other. Therefore, I will first theorize generally how identity and geopolitics are tightly linked to each other and what this could mean for foreign and security policies.

A final remark is that it should be understood that the different categorizations are all connected to each other. The geographical categorization is the result of analyzing the literature and determining which geographical forces have a major influence on Armenia’s geopolitical situation. Finally, this connection will be analysed through the Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviour-model. In this case we could apply this model to see how knowledge influences attitude and which ultimately determines behaviour regarding LGBTI activism. This approach of using three different steps to structure this thesis will ultimately provide a clear insight in the geopolitical influences on the situation of LGBTI activists in Armenia.

1.1.3. Methodology and methods
This study could be described as an empirical, exploratory research based on existing literature, reports, and in-depth interviews. I collected my data from my fieldwork in the period between March 2016 and July 2016 in Yerevan, Armenia. I was hosted by the NGO PINK Armenia. They provided me with a place to work, and access to most of my respondents. Besides these respondents, I also interviewed people by using snowball techniques and by engaging in the community. I mostly used semi-structured interviews and more informal techniques to collect my data. I interviewed 24 LGBTI activists and allies. All of the interviews were recorded and afterwards literally transcribed and anonymized. Due to sensitivity reasons, I had to be very clear about issues such as anonymizing, consent from the interviewer, and confidentiality.

Through participant observation I was able to meet many people from the LGBTI community and their allies in Armenia. Everyday practices, such as talking to visitors, writing comments on Facebook, just being at the office, which were hardly noticed by the activists themselves, were interesting to me as an outsider to record because without knowing, the activists carry out more work than they actually know. My personal development from an outsider to an insider also enabled me to understand the social context from different perspectives. In the beginning, I was mainly exploring my new environment and trying to understand everything what was happening, both inside and outside the office. Through better understanding of my environment and feeling mostly at ease with it, I was able to ask questions about why things were
happening and why people did what they did. This way, my focus developed from a descriptive view to a more critical view when I became able to question what was happening in my new social context.

1.1.4. Analysis

I will start with analysing how the geopolitical situation is influencing knowledge of LGBTI issues and – activism based on the interviews I conducted. After this, I will do the same for attitude and behaviour. I will analyse how different values are in conflict with each other, which results in intensifying problems for LGBTI activists in the country. LGBTI activists in Armenia find themselves in a country which has chosen a path towards the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and not the European Union (EU). These two regions both have a different view on how LGBTI rights should be ensured, which also has its influence on a country as Armenia which lies in between these two regions.

1.2. Scientific Relevance

LGBTI issues in Armenia have largely been underexposed in scientific research. Several NGO articles exist, in which comparative cross-national research is applied on Eurasian countries to research the state of LGBTI rights in those countries (Itabohary and Zhu 2013; Habdank-Kolaczkowska 2014). These reports are mostly quantitative and they hardly take the international context into account. Actual qualitative, empirical research on this subject is still untraceable. Especially the international context is of great importance because of its influence on national policy. This thesis deals with the international perspective of Armenia. Never did someone publish a research on LGBTI activists in Armenia based on a broad variety of opinions and experiences of activists themselves and how their daily work is influenced by geopolitics.

Theoretically, this study also contributes to the field of conflict studies in a sense that violation of LGBTI rights in Armenia causes major problems within the country, though these problems are hardly ever brought to the center of attention in scientific studies. Galtung (1969, 170-173) introduces a distinction in types of violence in which personal violence is seen as violence when a clear actor commits the violence, and structural violence when there is no such actor. The violence is institutionalized and causes a situation where no distinct person could be traced back as actor.

“Structural violence is silent, it does not show - it is essentially static, it is the tranquil waters. In a static society, personal violence will be registered, whereas structural violence may be seen as about as natural as the air around us.” (Galtung 1969, 173).
Violations of LGBTI rights in Armenia have also become institutionalized within the country. According to reports of PINK Armenia, a system is created where LGBTI people face methods of silencing, exclusion and inequality in order to prevent them from claiming their rights (PINK 2013, PINK 2014). In this study, I try to find out how geopolitics of Armenia contribute to structural violence and what this means for LGBTI activism.

1.3. Societal Relevance

Homosexuality has been legal in Armenia since 2003 and the age of consent is equal to that of heterosexual sex. Besides this, Armenia has a negative record regarding LGBTI rights. Changing your gender is illegal, adoption by same-sex couples is forbidden, the ability to donate blood by homosexuals is banned, conversion therapy remains to exist and there are no rules or legislation protecting LGBTI people from discrimination. Furthermore, activists and human rights defenders are reportedly attacked on the streets ("Hate Crime Targets LGBT Activists in Yerevan", 2016) and it is not rare that activists choose to leave the country due to the unsafe environment in which they are living ("LGBT-activists flee Armenia", 2013).

The Armenian government does not condemn these forms of human rights violations. Instead, government officials publicly express their hatred towards LGBTI people and Armenia’s representatives appear to be ignorant towards these previously described events. This ignorance is mainly the result of the hazard to lose votes once they express sympathy with LGBTI people.

In 2012, the gay friendly DIY Bar in Yerevan was fire bombed by ultra-nationalists. Often LGBTI people visited the bar and it was run by a human rights activist. After the attack, the bar was vandalized with anti-LGBTI graffiti. Politicians did not condemn the attack. Instead, they applauded the actions and bailed out the suspects (Armenia: A Blurry Line in Yerevan Between Hate Crime and Defense of “National Interests", 2012).

On the 21st of May, 2012, the LGBTI community was once again the target of anti-LGBTI violence. Civil society organizations organized a Diversity March in Yerevan in order to demonstrate and value cultural, ethnic, human and fauna diversity in Armenia. Due to misinformation, which was spread on social networks, people stated that the hidden motive of this march was a gay parade (PINK 2013, 38). Extremists did everything to obstruct the march by terrorizing the participants and by continuing their illegal attacks and actions. Diversity, in Armenian society, has become a word linked to homosexuality.

These events cannot be seen apart from each other. These attacks and human rights violations are the result of an intolerant society in which a negative attitude towards LGBTI issues is rather a general shared idea than an exception. LGBTI activists in Armenia seek to improve the situation for one of the country’s most vulnerable groups. This also causes that they tend to forget themselves and neglect their own specific situation because of their work for the broader community. By conducting research about activism and how activists' work gets influenced by
foreign powers, activists become my research group, who, through my research, were able to talk about their own lives.

In the next chapter, I will present a theoretical framework based on the two subquestions. After presenting the conceptual framework, I will turn to the methods I used during my research in Armenia. Based on my fieldwork, I will present the analysis, which is split into three parts according to the three sections of the conceptual framework: Russia, the West and the conflicts with Turkey and Azerbaijan.
Chapter 2 - Theoretical Framework

In this chapter there are two central concepts which are broad, multi-interpretable and which require a clear operationalization in order to answer the research question of this study. The first concept 'the shared neighbourhood' is complex and will be split up into three sections: a) Russia, b) the EU and c) the conflicts with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The second concept 'LGBTI issues and activism in Armenia' will also be split up in three sections: knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. These two concepts are hardly ever brought together in academic research. Before digging into these two concepts, I will explain the background theory on identity in geopolitics and why this theory is applicable on this subject. It will ultimately make clear why it is important to take the geopolitical situation of Armenia into account when you discuss issues around LGBTI activism in Armenia.

2.1. Theorizing security and identity in geopolitics

Theory on values and identity in geopolitics is of major importance for this research due to conflicts between LGBTI activists and the majority of the Armenian society regarding LGBTI issues. This research is dealing with different geopolitical processes, thus it makes a distinction between different power blocs within this geopolitical scene. These different geographical categories will be discussed against the backdrop of LGBTI issues, so this research will focus on what these geographical categories have incorporated as their identity regarding human rights.

Identity in geopolitics lies at the core of this research, thus it needs further elaboration on how this topic is discussed in academic literature. As will be discussed in this chapter, Armenia is subject to multiple security threats to the community's identity caused by external as well as internal factors. Kuus (2007), discusses how security threats in geopolitics could influence a community's identity. Discussing identity requires a nuanced approach and an understanding of how an identity of a particular state is constructed. Therefore, I will present some assumptions which seem to be relevant for this research. After this, I will link these assumptions regarding national identities to geopolitics in an insecure environment.

First, when discussing identity, it should be seen as something which is discursively constructed. Discussing identity could be problematic because the risk of generalization is present throughout the discussion. Writing about an Armenian identity or a European identity implies that there is a certain common identity among them which excludes groups that are not part of this territorially defined existence. However, stating these identities does presume, but in so doing only constructs such an identity (Diez 2004, 321). The discursively produced, transformed, and destructed identities are the result of the usage of language and other semiotic systems. The ideas become reality when they are repeatedly emphasized through politics, academics and media. These beliefs could be disseminated through education, schooling, mass communication,
militarization and national events such as sports matches or national celebrations (De Cillia et al. 2011, 153). By stating that there is a common identity, it implies that people within this territory can mostly relate to this identity and they live up to the expectations which are prevalent in that society.

This leads to my next assumption, namely that expectations and identities are never entirely fixed as Foucault (1977, 1987, 1988) stated in his works, mentioned in (Diez 2004). He rejected the essentialist view that people have a certain identity within themselves and the view that identity is a transhistorical human nature. Though a common national identity could be relatively stable, still people can construct alternative ways of this identity. These alternative constructions are challenging the dominant identity within a country, which could lead to either a rejection of changing the dominant identity or an acceptance of changing the dominant notions of identity (ibid, 322). Furthermore, the constructions that form a dominant identity are in themselves flexible and subject to change as well. Although discourses could narrate an essentialist history of an identity, this identity had been exposed to contestation and diverse influences at any given point in time (ibid.). Identities as Foucault argues, are produced through historically constituted acts of performance; through conditions, and at moments, these construct unique parts of an identity.

Following my argumentation and connected to the previous assumption, the presence of a dominant identity does not mean that there is only one national identity. On the contrary, multiple identities are constructed in a way which accord with the context of a situational setting of a discursive act (De Cillia et al. 2011, 154). Some of these constructions could be related to other identities but some identities would deal with specific situational acts in a different way. However, in a society, the emphasis on certain aspects of identity could be shifted by those who have power to disseminate and to offer images of their assumed national identity. Politics, media, education and everyday discourses which are normalized and considered as self-evident, could all contribute to a dominant national identity with its own do’s and don’ts. This identity only applies for those who are considered as being a part of the group.

But what exactly is this group? Anderson (1988) defines a nation as a construct that is represented in the mind and memory of the nationalized subject. The so-called ‘imagined communities’ consists of different nationalized subjects that are political units as well, limited by the space a nation might give you. The group, which in this study is often a nation, extends beyond face-to-face interaction though in people’s minds an imagined bond is created outside the realm of daily experience (Anderson, 1988). People belong to this imagined community or the so-called in-group or they do not belong to it, the out-group. National dominant identities are mostly limited by geographical borders, but they could also exclude identities which are located within the geographical borders. Depending on the freedom you are given by those in power to construct
your identity and depending on the coherence with their assumed dominant identity, people can either change or create a conflict between these identities (De Cillia et al., 2011; Diez 2004, 323).

The creation of in-groups and out-groups together with their constructed distinctiveness and uniqueness might create group-internal homogenization. In other words, creating identities for groups include differentiating oneself from what the people in the group are not. Identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference (Benhabib 1996 3ff. in De Cilia et al. 2011, 154). Creating differences is not inherently wrong, because people need to identify themselves by defining what they are and what they are not. However, the belief that group identities can only be maintained and secured by eliminating differences with those who do not or cannot belong to the group creates serious problems.

The five preceding assumptions are mentioned because I assume that dealing with LGBTI issues in the shared neighbourhood is heavily influenced by identity politics. As Casier (2016, 13) states:

"The Union (red. EU) and its member states redefine the identity of Russia, aggrandise differences between perceived ‘European’ and Russian identities and eventually — in a context of rather acrimonious relations — read bad intentions into Russia’s behaviour. (...) Russia is primarily led by the images it holds of the EU. It redefines the EU’s identity up to the point where any move is understood negatively as aimed against Russia. Identities of both actors are not given, but change in the process of interaction itself. Over roughly the last decade this process has resulted in a competitive logic between the two big neighbours over their respective roles and policies in the overlapping neighbourhoods".

The competitive logic is a matter of identity politics where both Russia and the EU try to influence nations in the shared neighbourhood with their rhetoric and ways of dealing with security issues such as the conflicts at the borders. Both Russia and the EU have their own reasons to influence these nations, which will be discussed later on in this chapter. These influences contribute to an awareness among the countries in the shared neighbourhood that, for strategic reasons, they could comply with either Russia or the EU regarding political choices in foreign and domestic policy. Not necessarily every policy decision implies that a country like Armenia chooses the Russian or the European way. But due to the location of Armenia in overlapping neighbourhoods, foreign and domestic policy choices are often seen as aligning with one neighbourhood or the other. The five assumptions regarding national identities and identity building have major consequences for security issues and geopolitics.

The fifth assumption regarding othering and distinctiveness stated that the own identity is foundationally linked to the other because the other means something which the own identity is not. Othering could be problematic and violent when a territorial state links identity to a specific territory and therefore imposes centralization of identity (Diez 2004, 322). This centralization of
a national identity involves in violence of imposing a national identity within the borders of a 
nation, and the violence of imposing its borders and maintaining the difference between national 
self and the other side (ibid., 323).

National identities that are discursively created and promoted by politics, media, 
education and everyday discourses, are heavily influenced by geopolitics (De Cillia 2011; Diez 
2004; Kuus 2007). These discourses are based on a separation between those peoples 'inside', 
who pursue universal values and those 'outside', who allegedly practice different values (Kuus 
2007, 12). The geopolitical discourse divides the space into ‘our’ place and ‘their’ place and sets 
boundaries to whom is involved into these places. In security studies, it is widely shared that "even 
if threats are domestic, among 'ourselves', they are still conceived as foreign in origin, and it is 
their outside quality that makes them suspect or dangerous" (ibid.). Thus if something is 
considered as a threat to the nation, though the threat resides within the nation's territory, the 
nature of the threat is labeled as foreign or as something which does not comply with a 
discursively constructed national identity.

Foreign and security policies, become a product of promoters of this national identity, the 
creators of boundaries, who constitute the moral self and the evil outside other. They are not only 
determining what is considered as foreign and threatening on the outside but also what is 
considered as normal on the inside. Threats from the outside serve as a precondition for a more 
stable national identity, rather than it is considered as a threat to national identity (ibid.). An 
insecure geopolitical situation such as conflicts with neighboring countries and being part of 
overlapping neighbourhoods of two power blocs only reinforces national identities. This is 
namely the result of the legitimization of the state which is increased because the state can identify 
whether something is a threat to security or not.

Cooperation between EU, Russia and Armenia is based on goals with underlying values. 
Values are desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding 
principles in people's lives (Schwartz 2012, 122). I chose to study LGBTI activism in Armenia 
because I think that LGBTI activists in Armenia pursue goals that are different from the goals that 
the Armenian officials are pursuing. Furthermore, Armenia is a Soviet successor state which is 
also covered by partnership programs of the EU. In relation to the assumptions described above, 
both the EU and Russia have different discourses regarding human rights, which are subject to 
change and have resulted in a competitive logic for the countries in their shared neighbourhood.

An instrument for the EU to promote goals outside the EU borders are Association 
Agreements and Partnership Programs (see chapter 2.3). In the Joint Declaration of the Eastern 
Partnership Summit in Riga 2015 the protection of fundamental rights is assured as follows:
“Summit participants recommit themselves to strengthen democracy, rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the principles and norms of international law, which are and have been at the heart of this Partnership since it was launched as a common endeavor of the Member States of the European Union and their Eastern European partners”.

In Armenia, LGBTI activists are individuals, sometimes organized in groups, who also pursue their goals of respect, equality and tolerance. They have to challenge societal norms on sexuality and normality in order to achieve these goals.

Russia’s cooperation with Armenia is different than the cooperation between the EU and Armenia, because Armenia and Russia are part of the same union. This cooperation is mainly based on creating security and collectivity. External borders of the EEU need to be protected and internally countries need to conserve the status quo. Protests and diversity are often linked to commotion and an instable domestic situation, so conformity needs to promoted.

In contrast with the EU, Russia and the EEU do not set legal requirements to join the EEU. It does not legally enforce LGBTI policy in Armenia, but it could inspire Armenia in a political way to adjust to Russian anti-LGBTI laws.

In 2012, Russia adopted a law that required NGOs to register as foreign agents with the Ministry of Justice if they engage in political activity and receive foreign funding. Since June 5, 2014, 115 groups were labeled as foreign agents and 14 groups had to shut down. Attempts were undertaken by NGOs and the Russian Ombudsman to contend the term foreign agents as negative and that it discredited NGOs. At least 13 groups chose to close down rather than wear the shameful foreign agent label (“Russia: Government against Rights Groups”, 2016). NGOs that promote gay rights often receive money from the EU or the US. Some of these NGOs had to close down or received a fine of thousands of US dollars. The Russian ambassador in Armenia has recommended such a foreign agents law, especially to protect Armenia from foreign pressures which are incompatible with Armenian principles (“Gay rights fall victim to EU-Russia geopolitics”, 2015).

In 2013, a law banning propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors went into effect in Russia. This law has become a chief Russian export to other countries in its neighbourhood (“Spread of Russian-Style Propaganda Law”, 2014). In Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan similar laws are pending, in Armenia, Latvia and Ukraine the proposal was rejected.

Not only the EU and Russia have its influence on Armenia regarding LGBTI issues and activism. Also the conflicts at the borders of Armenia with Azerbaijan and Turkey are affecting what people value in Armenia. When there is an insecure situation at the borders of a country, people tend to prioritize security and safety. A strong nation is needed in order to be a strong opponent in the conflict and to be a credible country for eventual allies. Russia is Armenia’s biggest ally in the conflict against Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Russia would benefit more from Armenia if it is a homogeneous country without many internal struggles because that makes Armenia a stronger ally in the conflict. Conformity and security restrain actions that could upset social
expectations and emphasize harmony. Also the respect of these social expectations and the customs in one's culture could contribute to this conformity and conservation of calmness.

The respect of social standards and customs of one's culture blocks what LGBTI activists are meant to do. They try to change the social norms on LGBTI issues. By doing this, they emphasize on individuality, being not satisfied with the current status quo for LGBTI persons.

In order to properly answer the formulated research question, I will first shortly describe the historical, economic and social situation of Armenia. This is meant as a sketch to understand the country slightly better. After this, I will turn to the concepts 'the shared neighbourhood' and 'LGBTI activism in Armenia'. At the end of this chapter, an analytical framework is presented where I will combine the two major concepts based on the preceding theoretical framework.

2.2. Introduction to the historical, economic and social background of Armenia

History

The Republic of Armenia is a landlocked country in the Southern Caucasus, which has been subject to geopolitical tensions in this region for a long time. Officially, The Republic of Armenia was established on September 21, 1991, together with the ongoing dissolution of the Soviet Union, which formally occurred on 25 December, 1991. However, before this established independent state, Armenia had undergone multiple historical challenges, which are still vibrant within the Armenian society.

![Image 1: Greater Armenia – The Modern Concept of the United Armenia (Harutyunyan, 2009)](image1)

The borders of Armenia have changed multiple times, which ultimately resulted in the Republic of Armenia within the grey lines, as can be seen on image 1. In the Early Modern Era, the
16th century, Armenia was divided by the Ottoman Empire and the Iranian Safavid Empire into Western and Eastern Armenia. After the wars between Imperial Russia and Qajar Iran, Eastern Armenia would fall under the rule of Russia, Western Armenia remained under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were discriminated and classified as second-class citizens, which motivated them to push for more rights within the Empire. As a response, massacres against Armenians were held, which continued to happen after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 had overthrown the government of the Ottoman Empire (Payaslian 2007, 103-125).

When World War I broke out in 1914, the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire were confronting one another in the Caucasus Region. The Russian Army established a contingent of Armenian volunteers, which led to mistrust of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire. As a result, approximately 600,000 Armenians died due to state-sponsored genocide by the Ottoman authorities between 1915 and 1916 (Payaslian 2007, 125).

During World War I, most of Western Armenia was reoccupied by the Russian Empire, and the government in Armenia took its chance to declare independence on 28 May, 1918. The First Republic of Armenia had to cope with thousands of refugees from Western Armenia who could finally return to their homeland. This independent republic remained to exist for two years when Turkey captured large parts of the Armenian territory from the west and the Soviet Union forces invaded Armenia from the east (Payaslian 2007, 145-170; Hovannisian, 1971).

Under Soviet rule, the Republic of Armenia became the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic where a period of relative stability and calmness was experienced. However, under the rule of Gorbachev and his reform of Glasnost, the drive to become an independent grew among the Armenians. People obtained more space to make demands for their country and to decide what should happen to their territory. On 23 August 1990, Armenia declared independence after a boycott of a referendum on the retention of the Soviet Union in a reformed form, and soon after the Soviet Union was dissolved (Payaslian 2007, 171-201; Hovannisian, 1996).

Economy
The economic dependency on other countries contributes for a large part to geopolitical and national tensions in Armenia. Armenia is a small, lower-middle-income country, which is mainly dependent on its knowledge-based economy focused on information technology, manufacturing, mining and agriculture (World Bank, 2016). In 2008/2009 the global financial crisis had a significant effect on Armenia and economic growth slowed down from double digit growth rates to 2%-2,5% for the next years. Furthermore, Armenia had to deal with the recession of the Russian economy on which Armenia is strongly depending. Remittances to Armenia sent by Armenians working in Russia, which make up to approximately 17% of Armenia's gross domestic product
(GDP), dramatically decelerated after Russia’s constrained demand for the import of consumer goods. As a result, the large-scale return of migrant workers from Russia causes limited job creation and an increasing unemployment rate in Armenia (World Bank, 2016).

The key challenge for the government, according to The World Bank, is to sustain growth in an unfavorable external environment within the constrained fiscal space (World Bank, 2016). This unfavorable external environment is the result of the recent oil price shock, the declining global demand and prices for base metals and western sanctions that have hit the Russian economy hard. Also, the deterioration of Russia's economic outlook affects Armenia through foreign trade, remittances and foreign direct investments (FDIs). Russia, after the EU, is Armenia’s second largest trading partner and bilateral trade accounts for 24 per cent of the total bilateral trade of the country (European Commission, DG TRADE, 2016). The EU has multiple arrangements with Armenia, for example the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP+). This special incentive for good governance and sustainable development offers Armenia exports to the EU at a zero duty rate.

Armenia has been repeatedly warned by The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that its oligopolistic structure of the national economy prevents Armenia from reaching further economic growth (“Armenia Warned to End ‘Oligopoly’, 2009”). This warning came as a result of the existing monopolies in Armenia which include natural gas import and distribution (controlled by Russian monopoly Gazprom), Armenia’s railway (controlled by the Russian-owned South Caucasus Railway), oil import and distribution, import of basic food products and the distribution of newspapers. The abolishment of existing monopolies together with a zero tolerance towards corruption should be top priority within Armenia. Currently, Armenia is ranked 95th of the 168 countries on the corruption perceptions index by Transparency International (Transparency International, 2016). However, former equity-for-debt swaps, where ownership by Russian-owned companies is granted by writing off Armenian government’s debts to Russia, solely encouraged and sustained large-scale corruption.

A short description of the economy of Armenia clearly exposes how national and international economic policies are intertwined with one another. In the conceptual framework these policies are further elaborated in order to uncover the comprehensive geopolitical context of Armenia.

Social Issues
Throughout the years, serious concerns related to Armenia’s fundamental rights record remained uneven. Regarding the Freedom of Assembly, Human Rights Watch recorded that multiple peaceful protests had been violently dispersed with water cannons and the detainment of numerous reporters (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Media pluralism and impunity for attacks on
journalists, including by the police, remains a serious danger for the Freedom of Expression. Also the law on television and radio, which took effect in January 2016, limited each region to one television state, forcing at least 10 stations to close. Furthermore, torture and ill-treatment in custody are reported by human rights groups. Especially in pre-trial and post-conviction facilities, victims face problems regarding torture and ill-treatment, to coerce confessions (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Discrimination and violence against groups remain one of the key problems regarding human rights. Discrimination and violence against religious minorities, people with disabilities, women and LGBTI people are often reported without any consequences for the perpetrators. The Armenian Apostolic Church has a major influence in Armenia with almost 92,6% of the Armenians considering themselves as part of this religion. The Armenian government has reportedly harassed Jehovah's Witnesses by preventing them from registering and imprisoning them for not doing their military service.

People with disabilities are sometimes confined in institutions without their informed consent. There is no mechanism to prevent that persons with psychosocial disabilities are not arbitrarily detained in psychiatric institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Women are subject to domestic violence and driven back to traditional roles in the private sphere. Gender discrimination prevails in every sphere including political participation and economic processes (Social Watch, 2010).

In the next three sections I will turn to the three most influential geopolitical pressures regarding Armenia. The research question of this study implies that Armenia’s geopolitical situation is affecting local LGBTI activism. So, I will describe how these geopolitical pressures use different mechanisms to get a grip on Armenian national policy and attitudes. In the analytical chapter, I will analyse whether these different mechanisms indeed are affecting local LGBTI activists.

2.3. Operationalization of ‘the shared neighbourhood’

The impact of the shared neighbourhood on domestic change has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, especially with a view to democratic transformation in the ‘shared’ and post-Soviet neighbourhood (Ademmer 2015, 672). However, hardly any empirical study can be found in which the influence of this neighbourhood on LGBTI activism in a specific country is researched. The ‘shared neighbourhood’ of the EU and Russia consists of Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The idea of a shared neighbourhood is used to denote the Soviet successor states covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the launched Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 (Averre 2010, 1689).
Russia and the EU are often framed as two opposite power blocs exerting structural and normative power with incompatible rationalities (Ademmer 2014, Paul 2015, Dragneva and Wolczuk 2012). Although much research has been done on this incompatibility of approaches, it is still a dangerous assumption. To frame Russia and the EU as incompatible, a certain inflexibility is created. This could even make it more difficult to find a solution regarding the problems prevalent in the shared neighbourhood. A subtler conceptual framework is needed which recognises structural and normative elements in the policies of both the EU and Russia towards the shared neighbourhood. The relationship between the EU and Russia is rapidly changing and ongoing conflicts remain unsolved, which demands another joint approach by Russia and the EU (Averre 2010, 1709).

Rather the competitiveness instead of incompatibility between Russia and the EU concerning this region has created a region in which Soviet successor states face difficult policy choices on energy, trade and domestic policy (Delcour, 2014). Armenia is for example highly sensitive to a gas price hike imposed by Russia because Armenia is a major importer of Russian gas and it has little alternatives to this interdependence. As a consequence, Armenia could change its policy, such as their energy mix, to reduce costs in the future. This could be an adjustment to EU-demanded policies by coincidence or on purpose (Popescu, 2013). This indirect, unintentional effect of Russian policy change could positively work for the EU which improves bilateral relations with Armenia. Besides energy interdependence, Armenia’s position in the shared neighbourhood is subject to other external pressures as well.

The divergence between the EU and Russia regarding the shared neighbourhood has become even more tense with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, on top of conflicts in South-Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Though regional stability is desirable for both EU and Russia, it seems that a solution to this geopolitical competition has never been more difficult to find.

According to Korosteleva, the deeply destabilized and evidently contested eastern region is a result of self-centric ‘politics’ of boundary expansion rather than ‘the political’ contest of their rationale and prospects for cohabitation and reciprocity (Korosteleva 2016, 5). In other words, the EU and Russia are merely focused on their own demands for boundary expansion instead of finding complementarity and dialogue. Treating the outside as an extension of your own territory may lead to a natural over-estimation of your own worth. Instead of knowledge and learning about the other countries, the established regimes produce their own ‘truth’ for the promotion of their own vision within the region which causes contestation rather than cohabitation. Armenia could serve as an example in this case:

In 2013, Armenia was just one signature away from starting an Association Agreement with the EU in which a cooperation is made possible between the EU and a third country in the field of economics, politics, trade, culture and security. However, the U-turn of Armenia in 2013,
showed that the President of the Republic of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, rather wanted to join the EEU instead of signing the Association Agreement with the EU (Delcour, 2014).

Armenia has moved further away from the EU because an important part of the Association Agreement, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) with the EU and the membership with the EEU are mutually exclusive. These agreements make it possible for third countries to trade with the EU without any obstacles concerning import tariffs, export tariffs etc. Armenia and the EU have started new talks regarding their bilateral relation and what could be their following steps. A two-tier eastern partnership could be one of the possibilities. The top layer should include Association Agreements, free trade areas and visa-free travel, such as Georgia. The second layer, such as Armenia, would be much more modest in scope (Popescu 2013). In the next three sections, these methods of Self-centric politics are further elaborated.

2.3.1. Russia
‘A sphere of influence’

Russia, as one of the key players within this shared neighbourhood, is mostly perceived as "seeking to maintain or recreate a traditional, realist ‘sphere of influence’ by manipulating a range of hard and soft instruments to exploit its predominant structural power in the post-Soviet space" (Averre 2010, 1690).

Concerning the usage of hard power of Russia on Armenia, Russia has multiple tools to improve their influence on the domestic situation in Armenia. In the first place, Russia is an important safety guarantor concerning the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia provides Armenia with weapons, and exceptional in the region, a Russian military base is situated within Armenian borders. Second, Russia manifested a steady acquisition of essential sectors for the economic security of Armenia by controlling or securing a dominant position of energy and telecommunication sectors as well as the railway network and the mining industry ("Soft power in Armenia: Neither soft, nor powerful", 2015).

Besides these tools of hard power, Russia has developed a toolbox for soft power measures as well. Although Armenia is in the same economic union with Russia, a sense of frustration regarding Russian arrogance is growing among Armenian citizens. Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan only exacerbated this perception ("Azeri-Russian Arms Trade $4 Billion Amid Tension With Armenia", 2013). Furthermore, major protests were held throughout the country when the President of Armenia denounced a price hike for electricity tariffs by more than 16%. The electricity network is owned by a large Russian energy company ("Armenia protests: Electricity price hike suspended", 2015). After a meeting with the Russian Transport Minister, President
Sargsyan announced a suspension of this price hike, but it set a rather negative tone among Armenian citizens towards Russia.

Russia’s hard power tactics, described above, created a lack of confidence between Armenia and Russia. Because Russia has a major influence in the country, Armenia has to act, to a larger extent, according to the wishes of Russia. Armenia could count on Russia as a security provider, but only when Russia considers it worth helping. The asymmetry and lack of balance between these countries should be restored, according to Russia by using different soft power tactics. To a large extent, Russia applies its own normative approach as well by focusing on a shared language, a shared history and its ties with its compatriots.

The most important organization is Rossotrudnichestvo – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (“Can Russia exercise soft power as well as hard power?”, 2014). The organization funds projects for “the promotion of Russian language and recurrent commemoration of the glorious Soviet era by drawing upon feelings of fraternity and nostalgia”. Also, Russia uses well-equipped and Kremlin-aligned media outlets to spread Russia’s view in neighbouring countries or among compatriots living elsewhere. Compatriots are important in Russia’s soft power tactics because the alleged defense of their interests has often served as an excuse for the Kremlin to meddle in other states’ internal affairs (“Can Russia exercise soft power as well as hard power?”, 2014).

Still, Russia’s focus on soft power, which should create attractiveness towards its region is questioned because of the prevalence of hard power used by Russia as well. Sometimes overreliance rather than attractiveness is the reason why countries engage with policies of Russia and in particular the EEU. Sometimes a country becomes engaged with policies of Russia because it has no other choice due to geographical, militaristic and trade reasons. Russia is not helping other countries around it without a reason. Russia has a drive to maintain a stable region around itself over which it can exercise power. Countries in this region who choose to join Russia’s EEU, are drawn into obligations to Russia on account of Russia’s help to those countries. In other words, maybe it is more attractive for Armenia to join the EU instead of the EEU, but Armenia’s geopolitical situation makes this choice out of the question. Instead, Armenia’s overreliance on Russia is the reason that the country engages with Russian policies. This is also the result of Europe’s neglecting stance towards Armenia.

Armenia has become more isolated and dependent on Russia, especially after Armenia decided to join the EEU. The EEU is a cooperation between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Although, there are many speculations about to what extent it actually was a free choice for Armenia to join the EEU, because of its dependence on Russia concerning security and energy, still it was a strategic move for multiple reasons (Delcour, 2014).
The EEU has been officially launched in January 2015 but is already facing multiple centrifugal and centripetal tendencies (Dumitru 2015, 96). The recession in Russia, following the EU-backed sanctions and the falling oil prices has caused economic and monetary uncertainties throughout the whole EEU. Furthermore, as a result of the extension towards Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, the union’s coherence worsened resulting in centripetal tendencies. Armenia does not share any borders with the EEU, which makes it dependent on Georgia for the free movement of capital, goods and services (Dumitru 2015, 97). Also Kazakhstan shares similar opportunities and challenges with Azerbaijan, resulting in a bilateral trade with Azerbaijan of $430 million dollars, compared to $7 million dollars with Armenia. Kazakhstan refused to incorporate the Armenian occupied region in Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, in the agreements. However, the borders between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh remain open (Dumitru 2015, 96).

2.3.2. The EU

‘A ring of well governed countries’

Through its ENP, the EU works with its southern and eastern neighbours to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration. This goal builds on common interests and on values: democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion. Partner countries each have their own agreement with the EU on an ENP action plan.

In the beginning of the ENP-project, the vision of the EU lacked a purposeful and, more importantly, reciprocated strategy to support its intentions of starting a partnership with its eastern neighbours (Korosteleva 2016, 7). This vision of the EU has made some improvements throughout the years in order to make its policy more adaptive and its governance more effective. It adopted a set of highly technocratic road maps, action plans, associations agendas and the association agreements. These agreements showed that the EU had a purpose to converge the region to EU standards.

The EaP is a joint initiative involving the EU, its member states and six eastern European partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It is based on the same fundamental values as is core in the ENP. It encompasses multilateral cooperation to enable prosperity and stability in the region and to promote cooperation and the exchange of best practices between these countries.

The policies of the EU and its approach to the EaP are based on norms and values which place good governance, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as well as an attractive economic model for modernization at the forefront. As also could be derived from its policies

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2 http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/
3 http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/
towards LGBTI rights, the EU seeks to establish stability and prosperity on its periphery (Averre 2009, 1694). However, the normative approach of the EU is often criticized as being vague on priorities and concrete actions in the ENP, as being a unilateral actor aimed at changing the environment to their advantage (Averre 2009, 1695). Moreover, in a study conducted by Youngs (2008 in Averre 2009), the EaP risks a further widening of the gap between the EU’s promised deeper engagement with its partners and what it is able to deliver. There is an absence of political will among European governments to revise approaches to democracy support in many third countries. While governing elites of the Eurasian countries keep the door open to Europe, their commitment to political pluralism and good governance in a volatile domestic and regional security environment is highly uncertain (Averre 2009, 1695). International European and national NGOs have been criticized because of their value-based agendas originating from European norms. They now face the risk of being seen as interfering parties in the domestic affairs of Eurasian countries (Cooley 2008 in Averre 2009, 1695).

2.3.3. Conflicts at the borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

In 1991, Armenia, which had been part of the Soviet Union since 1922, became an independent state. This process of independence was not without problems. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a major conflict arose regarding the autonomy of the region called Nagorno-Karabakh. This region is inhabited by an Armenian majority, but being part of Azerbaijan lies at the core of the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Whether the origin of ownership of the region was either Armenian or Azeri is defined differently. When the area fell under authority of Russia after winning the war against Persia, Stalin decided that the region belonged to Azerbaijan’s Soviet Socialist Republic. Though, the Armenians referred to ancient history and to the first decision of Russia to give the region to Armenia before giving it to Azerbaijan. It was a time of confusion, with decisions being made and retracted without clarity on who was formally and legally in charge (Companjen 2010, 3).

Unrest grew during the policies of glasnost and perestroika, earlier described. The Assembly of Nagorno-Karabakh asked Moscow to be reunified with the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia, but according to the Soviet Constitution, it was not allowed to change the borders. This decision resulted in immediate violent actions. Armenians were killed during pogroms in the capital of Azerbaijan and Azeris were expelled from the Nagorno-Karabakh region.
After the declared independence of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, a referendum was held in Nagorno-Karabakh for independence of Azerbaijan, which was formalized in 1992. Again, extreme violent actions between Armenians and Azeris forced both parties to flee which resulted in an enormous amount of internally displaced persons. Finally, Armenia, with the help of Russia, conquered the territory together with a zone connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh.

The region of Nagorno-Karabakh, as de jure part of Azerbaijan, consists of mainly Armenian people, which caused Armenia to conquer several territories of Azerbaijan (image 2). The war between Azerbaijan and Armenia caused 20,000 deaths and more than a million people were displaced on both sides due to forced migrations. In 1994, the three disputants (Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) with Russia as their external intermediary, signed a ceasefire agreement. This agreement could be seen as a start of a relatively calm period in which some outbreaks of violence are known along the ‘Line of Contact’ (Hirose and Jasutis 2014, 10).

Although these disputants in the Southern Caucasus have signed a ceasefire agreement 22 years ago, the conflict has still not been resolved, and has reached the situation of a stalemate. One of the main reasons why finding a solution is so difficult is that the negotiation outcome is viewed by the disputants primarily as zero-sum (Milanova 2003, 14) and that parties’ demands and objectives are seen as irreconcilable (Milanova 2003, 21). The principle of territorial integrity claimed by Azerbaijan and the right to self-determination claimed by the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic are subjectively interpreted in a way that they seem mutually exclusive in the mediation process.

Azerbaijan and Turkey both closed their borders because of the occupation of Azerbaijani territory by Armenia. Therefore, any movement from these countries to Armenia and vice versa is made impossible. Also, the backing of Armenia by Russia has sparked efforts between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey to strengthen political, economic and security cooperation (Paul 2015, 40). The closure of the borders has resulted in slow economic growth in Armenia and the country is fully dependent on Georgia and Iran for the export and import of goods. Formal and informal talks
between Armenia and Turkey about opening borders have not resulted in any ratification of border protocols. At the same time, Azerbaijan sees Turkey as one of their allies in their conflict with Armenia and is not too enthusiastic when Turkey is talking about improving ties with Armenia (Companjen 2010, 2). The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is not the only major issue influencing Turkish-Armenian relations. The issue of the genocide lies at the core of problematized ties between Armenia and Turkey.

The Issue of the Genocide

As told before, in 1908, a new government came to power in Turkey. The Young Turks, who had overthrown the government, established a more modern constitutional government which caused hope amongst Armenians, who would be considered as more equal citizens in this new state. However, the nationalistic Young Turks wanted to ‘Turkify’ the empire, in which there was no room for Christian non-Turks.

When World War I broke out, the Turks joined the side of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire and Armenians were seen astraitors because they organised volunteer battalions to help the Russian army fight against the Turks in the Caucasus region (History.com, 2010). According to the Turks, the Eastern Front needed to be free of Armenians, so the removal of Armenians rapidly begun. In 1915, when the genocide formally began, hundreds of Armenian intellectuals and community leaders were executed. Moreover, thousands of Armenians were sent on death marches through the deserts and Turkish killing squads carried out the liquidation of the Christian elements by killing Armenians. Armenian children were kidnapped, converted to the Islam and given to Turkish families and Armenian women were raped and forced to join Turkish harems to serve as sex slaves (History.com, 2010).

Nowadays, the recognition of the genocide against Armenians is a heated discussion between Turkey and Armenia. Little forget-me-not flowers are covering the streets of Yerevan to commemorate the genocide of 1915. Especially Armenia’s huge diaspora, which was largely a result of the Armenian genocide, are lobbying intensively for the recognition of the Armenian genocide by their governments, resulting in more and more countries and international organizations recognizing the genocide.

A solution to this long lasting debate seems rather far away. Turkey does not want to speak about opening borders unless the border protocols are linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. And mistrust existing between both parties results in anti-Turkish voices in the diaspora and within Armenia which stimulates nationalism even more. This also has its consequences on national attitudes towards minorities in Armenia itself. In order to give a proper analysis on this issue, I will first turn to the second concept in this study.
2.4. Operationalization of ‘LGBTI issues and activism in Armenia’

I will first describe the current situation for LGBTI people in Armenia in order to understand under which circumstances LGBTI activists carry out their work. In multiple studies conducted by social scientists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) you can find that public awareness and social perceptions about LGBTI people is very limited and not based on scientific explanations. Furthermore, knowledge about LGBTI people is often stereotypical and the Armenian society could, for a greater part, be labeled as intolerant and hostile towards LGBTI people (PINK 2012; PINK 2013; PINK 2014; PINK 2015). Furthermore, no clear progress has been made regarding increasing equality for and tolerance towards LGBTI people: “Moreover, in 2013, Armenia clearly slid backwards as intolerant views were voiced extensively, and indeed prevailed during a national debate around gender equality” (PINK 2014, 13).

On the ILGA Rainbow Map 2016, reflecting the national legal and policy human rights situation of LGBTI people in Europe, Armenia, just as in 2014 and 2015, is ranked 47 out of 49 countries for LGBTI rights with Russia and Azerbaijan on the 48th and 49th place (ILGA Rainbow Map, 2016). ILGA is divided in different regions including Europe. 49 countries are considered as the ‘European Region’, as defined by ILGA. In these countries, not-for-profit organizations may become members of ILGA-Europe (ILGA-Europe Constitution).

In this part, I will first deal with different topics to illustrate the situation for LGBTI people in Armenia. I will mainly use country reports conducted by NGOs as ILGA-Europe, PINK Armenia, Freedom House etc. from 2009 till 2016. This section is meant to illustrate in which environment LGBTI people are living and explain why LGBTI activism is clearly needed in Armenia. To structure this part, I will use three main components which are also used in the latest research of PINK in 2016: knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour towards LGBTI people. The level of knowledge people have regarding LGBTI issues determines for a larger part how their attitudes develop towards LGBTI people. Furthermore, their attitude determines ultimately how people act towards LGBTI people and LGBTI-related issues.

A Knowledge, Attitude, Behaviour-model is often used in education processes to change people’s behaviour. Also in this case we could apply this model to see how knowledge influences attitude and which ultimately determines behaviour. In the analysis we will look at how these three steps are experienced by LGBTI activists. Also we will see how a malfunction of the model could have dangerous behavioural implications for individuals and groups. A malfunction of this model could be the result of which values people prioritize. In the analysis chapter, a step-by-step explanation will show whether different values in the shared neighbourhood have an influence on the Knowledge, Attitude, Behaviour-model.
Model 1: Development of social actions regarding LGBTI issues

2.4.1. Knowledge of LGBTI issues and – activism

The level of knowledge in Armenia regarding LGBTI issues is very limited. In the survey conducted by PINK and Socioscope in 2011, it became clear that people especially lack knowledge on bisexuality and transgenderism. In a mutual exclusive question on how people regard non-traditional relationships, 18.6% regard homosexuality as a disease, 12.7% regard it as a negative influence of Western countries and 10.8% regard it as a result of upbringing. Other answers were that non-traditional relationships are the result of communication through internet (9.9%), that they are acquired (8.7%) and that they are the result of the propagation of freedom (7.8%) (PINK 2012, 8).

It is necessary to take a further look into where this lack of (correct) information is coming from and how this incorrect information could transform into a societal norm. And also, how this societal norm could be changed by LGBTI activists and other actors. According to reports of PINK (2013, 2014, 2015), the main sources of information and education are educational institutions such as schools and universities, mass media, religious institutions and peer- and self-education.

Model 2: Sources of knowledge regarding sexuality and sexual relations

However, in Armenia, there is a lack of sex education and sex education is mostly taught informally by parents or friends (Sex Ed a Taboo in Armenia: If Taught at All, It’s by Phys Ed Teachers, Some 80 Years Old, 2015). This lack of sex education is due to society’s perception of
sex, these matters are considered private and, besides that, the Ministry of Education does not seem to be interested in offering formal and structured sex education lessons. This lack of interest implies that people should get their information about sexuality somewhere else.

Mass media could play an important role as a source of information and of educating people. According to the study of PINK 2011, 53.6% of the respondents got information on LGBTI people via television. Only 15% received information on LGBTI people via internet, which is quite an interesting outcome. Mass media could correct the prevalent stereotypes on sexuality and it could also raise social awareness of the situation of LGBTI people in Armenia. The lack of public awareness is, as explained by LGBTI people in Armenia, the cause of their own vulnerability (PINK 2013, 30).

Mass media could contribute to promote LGBTI rights and frame a positive view on LGBTI people. However, LGBTI people are mostly excluded from mass media channels. But there have been certain events worth mentioning.

The first example is that of the X-Factor TV Show in Armenia. Participant Sevak Kirakosyan devoted his performance to all victims of homophobia and transphobia. Jury members reacted with hostile expressions as “Conchita, what have you done to this country?” and a jury member admitted that he supported violence as a militant homophobe (PINK 2015, 11). Also, the broadcaster was accused of allowing the “propaganda of homosexuality”.

The second example of the important role of media, is the lawsuit against the ‘Iravunk’ Newspaper. This newspaper published an article titled: “They serve the interests of the international homosexual lobby: The black list of enemies of state and nation”. A list of 60 individuals was presented with links to their Facebook profiles. The editor called upon the readers to express zero tolerance towards them, not to hire them for jobs and not to greet nor socialise with these people (PINK 2015, 13). The lawsuit started by sixteen citizens mentioned on the list was denied by the Armenian National Court solely on grounds of insufficiency, and it obliged the citizens to pay a reimbursement to the newspaper. The grounds of suing were damage caused by honour and dignity, discriminatory statements against the activists, defamation and slander. Furthermore, the President of the Republic of Armenia granted three Medals of Honor to the editorial board of the Iravunk Newspaper.

A third source of information on sexuality and sexual relations in Armenia are religious institutions. In the study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2013), people of 39 countries are surveyed on attitudes towards homosexuality. In this research it is stated that there is a strong relationship between a country’s religiosity and opinions about homosexuality. The study states that there is far less acceptance of homosexuality in countries where religion is central to people’s

4https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpzh9RygHFw
lives – measured by whether they consider religion to be very important, whether they believe it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral, and whether they pray at least once a day (Pew Research Center, 2013). According to The World Factbook of the CIA, 92.6% of the Armenian people are Armenian Apostolic. Despite the formal separation of Church and State in Armenia, the Armenian Apostolic Church is often criticized by protesters for their privileged role in the state (Freedom House, 2015).

Examples of these privileges are: mandatory courses on the History of the Armenian Apostolic Church in public schools, the ability to obtain building permits for churches easier and the constitution recognises “the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Church as a national church in the spiritual life, development of the national culture, and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia” (US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report Armenia, 2013). Religion plays a big role within the Armenian society and many Armenians can identify themselves with it. Often, the Armenian Apostolic Church is considered as something which is part of the Armenian identity for example in the speech of President Serzh Sargsyan at the opening of the Bishop’s synod of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church:

“Taking this opportunity, I would like to say that I am well aware of your patriotic undertakings aimed at the preservation of the national identity and I thank you for them. (…) As any son of our nation, being present here I deem it necessary to once again express my filial affection, devotion and support to the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church.

(…) Through the power enshrined in our Constitution, the Republic of Armenia recognizes the exceptional mission of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church in the spiritual life of the Armenian nation, development of our national culture and preservation of the national identity. It is with great pleasure that I state close cooperation between the State and the Church and our ability to complement each other in the resolution of our national issues” (Armenian nation says “No” to crimes against humanity – President, 2013).

The Armenian Apostolic Church has a certain view on sexuality that rejects and continues to reject homosexuality as immoral, a sin and an attack on Armenia’s traditional values (ILGA 2009). This is important, because this view is often shared amongst the majority of society and state officials.

Finally, people can be educated by peers or by themselves. Without acquiring proper sex education, the adolescents often turn to peers for information or they will find out themselves on the internet. However, most of the time this leads to receiving precarious, incorrect and dangerous information for adolescents (“Is there Sexual Education in Armenia?”, 2016). Especially on sexual relations and homosexuality, information received by peers seemed incorrect because the peers themselves did not receive proper education on these issues. NGOs try to fill this gap by offering
trainings and educational programs, however these programs are often discredited or accused of spreading immorality and destroying Armenian values and norms (ibid.). Armenians are more often able to speak Russian in contradiction to the English language. However, the popularity of English is growing in Armenia and more people tend to learn English. More information and academic writing is available in English, which makes it important for youngsters to be able to read, speak and write English as well (Kempe, 2013).

Finally, enhancing visibility of LGBTI issues could improve the level of knowledge. However, one could question whether visibility is always desired. In 2014, the level of hate speech against LGBTI people in Armenia increased, especially after the Eurovision Song Contest was won by Conchita Wurst, a transgender person, who performed as a woman with a beard on stage. This led to anti-LGBTI marches and the persecution of LGBTI human rights defenders in Armenia (PINK 2015) after state and showbusiness figures began to berate the Austrian performer. One of the most famous singers and representative of the same contest for Armenia, Aram Mp3, stated that Conchita’s way of life “is not natural” and he joked that his team would help her to decide whether she is a man or woman (“Conchita Wurst Offers to Educate Aram Mp3 After Gay Comments”, 2014). Political figures and newspapers began to call activists in Armenia ‘Conchita’s Witnesses’.

Another factor contributing to the invisibility of LGBTI people is the increasing emigration of LGBT people from Armenia. More and more young LGBTI people sent letters to NGOs in order to help them to get out of Armenia and obtain information about granting asylum in other countries (ILGA Europe Annual Review 2013). Rather than staying in the center of attention, LGBT people and –activists choose to leave the country and find their way in Europe or the United States of America. By leaving the country, the visibility of LGBTI people becomes even more limited.

2.4.2. Attitudes towards LGBTI issues and –activism

In the previous part, we saw that knowledge of LGBTI issues and –activism is limited in Armenia but this level of knowledge also influences attitudes towards LGBTI issues and –activism.

Homophobia is embedded in almost every part of the social domain according to a survey of PINK Armenia in 2011 among 1156 Armenian respondents. One of the questions on how people regard non-traditional relationships, 97,4% of the respondents saw homosexuality as a deviation and 70,9% saw LGBTI people as strange people (PINK 2011, 8). Traditional values and understanding of morality and family, often promoted by the State and Church, should lie, according to state authorities, at the core of the Armenian national identity. For example, in an interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Armenia, he stated that the Government has much more urgent matters to address and that there are very few people with an untraditional sexual orientation (COWI 2011, 5).
According to Schwartz (2012) attitudes are evaluations of objects as good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Values underlie our attitudes; they are the basis for our evaluations. We evaluate something as positive if it promotes or protects attainment of the goals we value. We evaluate something as something negative if it hinders or threatens attainment of these valued goals. In the before mentioned large-scale survey, PINK states that Armenia is in a process of transformation regarding conservatism and traditionalism. Together with this transformation, its societal value system is transforming as well (PINK 2011 in PINK 2016). This transformation does not mean that suddenly people accept homosexuality or accept LGBTI activism. This is a process which will take many years.

Attitudes can be either negative, positive or somewhere in between on this scale. “The 2011 Caucasus Barometer conducted by CRRC Armenia also measured attitudes towards homosexuality. The results showed that 96% of respondents believed homosexuality “can never be justified” (PINK 2016). It is more important to investigate why 96% of the respondents believe that homosexuality can never be justified because these attitudes determine ultimately how people act towards LGBTI people. Based on the interviews and participant observation, I will be able to answer this question in the analysis. This question will be answered in the light of the geopolitical situation. Russia, the EU and the conflicts at the borders each have their own influence on the attitudes towards LGBTI activism in Armenia. In the next part it will become clear how conflicting attitudes towards LGBTI issues result in certain actions by the Armenian society as well as LGBTI activists.

2.4.3. Behaviour towards LGBTI issues and –activism
LGBTI people have been excluded as fundamental rights possessors within Armenia for many years. Here, fundamental rights could be seen as universally recognised rights and which are included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. Freedom of movement, freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of non-discrimination are examples of these fundamental rights. The mechanism of excluding LGBTI people is silencing (Kondakov 2013, 404). By silencing people who stand up for LGBTI rights, these fundamental rights claims will not come to the forefront, and are thus easier to neglect in formal policy negotiations.

The described invisibility, lack of knowledge, homophobia and media coverage have led to various violations of human rights in Armenia. In 2009, ILGA-Europe presented two figures regarding discrimination and types of abuse that occurred to LGBTI persons in Armenia to show that discrimination remains prevalent in almost every location.
Only 23% of the respondents had experienced no discrimination at all. However, this could also be attributed to the fact that they haven’t told anyone about their sexual orientation, as this is not further examined in the questionnaire. Especially institutional discrimination is omnipresent; the police, the army and schools are known for violating fundamental rights of LGBTI people. Police officers are known to arbitrarily arrest LGBTI persons and take them to the police station. LGBTI persons are then forced to pay a ransom in order to keep the police from telling about their sexual orientation (ILGA 2009). Also, the police remains mostly inactive in cases of harassment of LGBTI people in everyday life.

Armenian state authorities frequently use derogatory language and even hate speech against the LGBTI community. Members of the Armenian Parliament (MPs) are known for their negative framing of LGBTI people in order to be favored by Armenian citizens and to win elections. MP Minasyan of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), endorsed attackers of a gay-friendly bar in Armenia by saying that the young men “acted in accordance with our society’s values and national ideology. Also, MPs of the ruling Republican Party sided with the alleged attackers by calling the attack completely right and justified. (“Armenia: A Blurry Line in Yerevan Between Hate Crime and Defense of National Interests”, 2012).

Military service is compulsory in Armenia for male citizens. GBTI people (not female persons) must serve in the military as well, however they are often exempted from military service when their sexual orientation is known. As a reason for exemption, mental health problems are mentioned and they are sent to a psychiatrist (PINK 2013). GBTI people often choose to not serve in the military anyway because of the fear that they will be discriminated and bullied by their leaders or fellow soldiers. By excluding GBTI persons from the military, the military remains a heteronormative institution. Also, GBTI persons are considered as subordinate to others and they will differentiate from their friends because they all have comparable experiences in their military service. So exclusion could create social isolation and psychological problems to GBTI people.
To complete this section on behaviour towards LGBTI issues and activism, the legislative framework needs to be addressed as a form of action. Armenia has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and is therefore obliged to follow the precedents of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Regarding the ILGA Europe Rainbow Map 2015, Armenia has not signed any laws on equality and non-discrimination for LGBTI people. Sexual orientation is hardly ever mentioned in the law, which enables the Court to interpret the law in their own view. For example, the constitution states that hate crime is forbidden in cases of national, racial or religious hatred, or religious fanaticism, however hate crime regarding LGBTI people is not mentioned. The only references to homosexuality in the Armenian legislation is in the context of criminality; in the case of rape and sexual harassment (ILGA 2009).

In 2011, Armenia belonged to the member states of the United Nations (UN) that have signed a General Assembly declaration of LGBTI rights and/or sponsored the Human Rights Council’s 2011 resolution on LGBTI rights. However, according to the yearly country reports, not much progression on LGBTI rights has been made.

Armenia has no law prohibiting hate speech or hate crimes and this allows members of the parliament and media to spread anti-LGBTI speech. Finally, the Ministries of Health and Justice in Armenia responded on letters sent by PINK, one of the few LGBTI NGOs in Armenia, on LGBTI discrimination. It was stated that the Armenian Government adopted the Armenia Gender Policy Strategic Program 2011-2015 and that there was no further need to adopt a separate piece of legislation to combat discrimination in any other way. However, discrimination still prevails and the Armenia Gender Policy Strategic Program has finished. According to PINK, this was the consequence of Russian anti-EU outburst (PINK 2015, Armenia president’s administration, ministries respond to LGBTI rights letter). Namely, this period was decisive for Armenia to either join the EEU or sign the Association Agreement with the EU. An outburst of Russian rhetoric on gender and sexuality emerged throughout Armenia at the hands of Russian and Armenian

Figure 2: Types of abuse experienced (ILGA Survey 2009).

5 http://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/side_b-rainbow_eurpe_index_may_2015_no_crops.pdf
politicians. They presented the dangers of laws on gender and sexuality in words of Mr. Boshyan, the head of Pan-Armenian Parental Committee in 2014:

“The term “gender” should be totally eliminated from the law on “Providing equal right and opportunities of women and men”. Gender, as formulated in the law, is obtained and socially attributed behavior of persons of different sex, which according to Boshyan’s interpretation means “the male can obtain a behavior of a female and vice versa”. This is a very expression of transvestites, it is not written that such thing cannot happen, it is written ‘any type of behavior that a person can obtain’. Homosexuality is an acquired behavior. I am against the transvestite teaches underage, and this law allows it” (Woman&Society, 2014).

2.4.4. LGBTI activism in Armenia- from knowledge to action

After reading these previous sections, the current situation regarding LGBTI issues is clear and it provides the background for activists who try to improve the situation for LGBTI people. In order to analyse how LGBTI issues and -activism are influenced, I will finish this chapter by describing how activism in Armenia is constructed and how activism could deal with problems as described above.

There are different ways in which NGOs could deal with silencing mechanisms used by state authorities in activist ways. 1) NGOs could choose to tolerate this silence and to work within the space they have in order to achieve their goals. Or 2) NGOs could strive to challenge the silence and step to the forefront (Kondakov, 2013). This could be best explained by using same-sex marriage as a case. Marriage in Armenia and many other countries is considered as something between a man and a woman.

The first way of activism in this case will focus on desexualizing marriage by turning it into a set of contractual agreements on sharing property rights and responsibilities. Other laws make it possible, just like a marriage, to share these rights and properties between two men or two women. Also possibilities for adoption and name changings are created, but only as long as your sexual orientation remains hidden. A same-sex marriage is created without mentioning homosexuality. In other words: LGBTI people should tolerate the legal space they have and tolerate their subordinate status (Kondakov 2013, 420).

The second way of activism will strive for equality in an unequal society. In case of a same-sex marriage, they will challenge the ruling norms on heteronormativity and argue their position compared to LGBTI people elsewhere in the world. Homosexuality is the ground on which equality is denied, so they will resist the ruling political and societal powers. By doing this, homosexuality becomes politicized because there is a strive for changing political norms. Marrying abroad, where same-sex marriage is recognised, and claim it in the country where they originally come from is an example of this kind of activism. If this same-sex marriage is not recognised, they could present
it the European Court of Human Rights. Besides same-sex marriage, other inequalities could be challenged by gay prides, rallies and seeking international support and pressure.

2.5. Analytical framework

The analytical framework combines two different divisions in order to give a structure to the analytical chapter. First, a geopolitical dimension is added which is operationalized in this chapter. Secondly, the development of social actions is added to see how this development is influencing LGBTI activism in Armenia. These three parts (knowledge, attitude and behaviour) are the three sections in the analysis chapter. I applied wavy borders between the geopolitical dimensions to indicate that they constantly overlap in each part of the development of social action. Thirdly, I added the questions and values in the boxes to give a direction to the different sections of the analysis.

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<td>Russia</td>
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<td>How do conflicts at the borders influence attitudes towards LGBTI issues and –activism?</td>
<td>How do conflicts at the borders influence behaviour towards LGBTI issues and –activism?</td>
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Chapter 3 Research Methodology

In this chapter I will outline the methodology and research methods which were used in order to conduct my research on the influence of Armenia’s geopolitical situation on LGBTI activism in the country. As already explained, this subject is rather new and unexplored, so I used a qualitative, exploratory approach to study this phenomenon. Furthermore, I picked the case of Armenia in order to illustrate a specific case that remains unfamiliar to most readers. By using an illustrative qualitative case study, I could make the unfamiliar familiar and answer the research question in a comprehensive way. I interviewed 24 LGBTI activists, in a confidential and casual setting about their opinions on the influence of Armenia’s geopolitical situation on their daily life as LGBTI activists.

3.1. Participant Observation

I have been doing fieldwork from March 2016 until July 2016 in Yerevan, Armenia. During my internship at Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO (PINK) Armenia, I was able to meet many different activists and experts in the field of LGBTI activism and LGBTI rights. Because there are not many LGBTI organisations in the country, the organisations are often working together. Furthermore, the community seemed really solid, well-informed and above all really cooperative in helping me with my research. During my first days, I received a list with names of all the staff members of PINK, the members of PINK and their allies and affiliates. The list encompassed names of LGBTI activists as well as women’s rights activists, political activists and environmental activists who are active in the same movement together with LGBTI activists.

I selected my interviewees based on a few criteria. First, they should know something about Armenia’s geopolitical situation; this meant that they are so-called frontliners and not just affiliates of the movement. Beforehand, I discussed with my supervisor in Armenia, Kolya, whether the person was still an active member of the movement and if the person could contribute anything to my research. When I was finally planning my interviews, I could also decide who I wanted to interview, apart from the list Kolya provided me. I immediately saw who was truly engaged with the movement due to their attendance at several meetings, their frequent updates on Facebook and other people who were talking about certain activists. The more I heard a name of a certain person, the more likely they were actively engaged. Secondly, I wanted to gather opinions on the issue by interviewing people from different organisations and not only from PINK Armenia. By interviewing people from every corner of the movement, I could see whether the different organisations or individual activists have different insights. This ultimately gave me 24 interviews, most of which were held with PINK staff- and boardmembers. Besides PINK staff members, I talked with activists working at the Women’s Resource Center (women’s rights), Real
World Real People (people living with HIV/AIDS), New Generation NGO (LGBTI rights), individual political activists and experts such as lawyers and the Honorary Consul of Norway and Finland.

Besides these interviews, I was able to directly experience the movement because I was working in the office of PINK Armenia for four months. By working at PINK, I got to know many people from the LGBTI community. Not only activists, but also younger people who had interesting stories that they wanted to tell me. PINK organised many activities, which I often visited or participated in. Most of them were in Armenian, but luckily there were always people willing to translate. People from the community took me to gay-friendly bars and they accepted me into their lives. Besides interviewing, being present at those events and locations was a big advantage because informants said much more while chitchatting than during ‘formal’ interviews. These stories, told by the youngsters from the community are also added to my gathered data as well as activities and events which occurred during my stay.

During my stay, I wrote a journal about my experiences and about the events I participated in. Though most information was gathered during informal small talk in bars and Facebook, also more formal meetings contributed to gather data about the current situation. Facebook functions as a platform where people communicate for different purposes. Because of the sensitivity of certain Facebook groups, I cannot enlarge too much on their purposes and their content. They are mostly used to bring people together and to share ideas, events and fake profiles used on dating apps and Facebook. Fake profiles are sometimes used in order to find out if people are gay or they are used to write hate speech on social media. By sharing these profiles, LGBTI people are aware of them and are warned.

Some highlights from the journal, which I also use in my analysis chapter: On the 4th of March we visited the opening of the newly established ‘Colourful House’. A project which was undertaken by some in order to provide extra space besides the community room of PINK Armenia. During the opening, mostly younger LGBTI persons visited the apartment. They were talking about what everybody could contribute to the project and what the house rules were. Also, there was a bedroom where people could pay a small amount of money in order to sleep here with his or her boy- or girlfriend. It came as a surprise that there was no attention for security measures compared to the secured office of PINK Armenia. The project should be based on a crowdfunding program. However, after a few weeks the apartment was closed due to insufficient income.

On the 8th of March, on International Women’s Day, I participated in a march organized by multiple NGO’s to protest against violation of women’s rights throughout the country. The march itself went well. There were around 70 people walking in the March. At the front, a girl screamed sentences through a megaphone and the rest of the people repeated them. People were wearing t-shirts with rainbow flags and words as solidarity, equality, difference and information on it. After the march, people gathered in a park where people were performing. Reactions of people on the
streets were mainly positive, also due to the choices which were made in the meeting on the 4th of March. During this meeting they had been talking about the framing of the march. Because these marches are often framed by outsiders as an LGBTI pride, which is more dangerous. That is why the focus had to be on ‘different women’. The word ‘diversity’ is in this sense not used because it is linked to LGBTI issues.

On the 22nd of March, we went to a gay-friendly bar and after that to a ‘secret’ gay bar in downtown Yerevan. The gay bar is dark and hard to find and recognise from the outside. After receiving free champagne, because we were newcomers to the club, I had the opportunity to look around. The music was mostly traditional and very loud and it was rather dark inside. Approximately 15 people were in the small club. According to a friend, these men were homosexual but lived in the closet. In the night they find these places but during daylight they are considered as homophobes and conservatives. Men mostly wore dark clothes and caps and they were mostly together with one other man.

In April, the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia about the Nagorno-Karabakh region reemerged. The clashes, labeled as the Four-Day-War, were defined as the worst since the 1994 ceasefire. Approximately 350 people, both military and civilians died. Interestingly, all activities organised by LGBTI activists were postponed. They said that other human rights are put in the first place in Armenia now, and that it is not safe to go to meetings abroad for them. If Armenians find out, they could be labelled as enemies of the state by putting their own agenda first in times of war. Also, the borders are not safe for LGBTI activists because when they want to go to Georgia for example, guards at the border could recognise them and blame them for leaving the country. Also, the war effects LGBTI people in Yerevan. LGBTI people feel that they cannot contribute to their countries’ safety, because they are not allowed in the army. According to some boys whom I spoke to, saying that you are gay means that you tend to choose for yourself instead of choosing for the safety of the country. People in the office are more aware of how they behave outside the office.

3.2. Interviews

Most interviews were held in the room of the psychologist at the office of PINK. Also, some people preferred to be interviewed at home, in a bar, at their work or just somewhere outside. Also, one interview was conducted via Skype because the person I spoke to had fled the country and has been living in The Netherlands ever since. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, dependent on the interviewee and what the person wanted to tell. Two interviews were done with the assistance of a translator whom I knew very well.

All the interviews were recorded on an audio device, nobody refused to cooperate. I ensured that the interviews were fully anonymised and that the person always had the rights to
delete parts of an interview. Sometimes certain parts of an answer needed to be deleted, at the request of certain interviewees. I ensured that after the interview, I will not transcribe those parts of their answers. Because they trusted me, it was not considered as a problem and they were also aware of my knowledge of how discrete the interviews needed to be. Also, I ensured them that they could first read the study before publishing it. The promises of discretion, anonymisation and consent ensured the interviewee that I have been thinking about consequences if names were publicised. Finally, staff members at PINK also helped me with advising how to organise an interview: 1) A trusted environment with 2) a personal approach and 3) openness from the interviewer.

After each interview, I updated my 'list of interviews'. This is a document in which I wrote down all my interviews I had done, interviews I still had to do or where I wrote down names of people who still had to react on my request for an interview. After updating this document, I immediately started transcribing the interviews. By doing this, the interview was fresh in my mind, so I still knew what the person said in case the audio device was not working correctly or when the person spoke unclear.

The interviews were semi-structured because little was known beforehand and I wanted to let the activists tell their own story rather than answering pre-invented questions by me. Although, at the beginning I strictly followed my interview guide (ANNEX 1), I found out quickly that I should focus on the answers given by the interviewees. Every interview started by getting to know the interviewee and his or her role as an activist. Sometimes I already knew the person very well, but still I asked to describe themselves, wondering how they saw themselves as a person. In the first interviews, I asked the interviewee whether he or she considered him- or herself LGBTI or straight, but these questions were not necessary. In the first place because I sometimes did not know the person very well, and these questions were considered very personal. In the second place, during the interviews, I already heard shocking stories about their sexual orientation or gender identity which automatically pulled my interview into the right directions.

After asking questions about their work and themselves, I asked questions about their identity as an activist. In this part of the interview we mostly talked about their personal life and also about the national situation of Armenia. This was a good way to go into the next section of the interview about the international situation of Armenia. People often told me that they didn’t think about certain aspects of influences before. I chose to split up national influences and international influences because I wanted to create some kind of structure in the interviews. When we talked about the international influences, we first talked about Russia and then about the EU. After this, they could turn to other influences from other countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkey and also the diaspora living all over the world. By maintaining a semi-structured interview, I could
also ask questions about the view of the interviewee on Armenia’s international influences. By doing this, I was given insights which I personally did not think about before.

At the end, after talking about their personal identities, their work and their view on the issue of the geopolitical context, I asked about the future. I deliberately kept this question very open and multi-interpretable, because I was wondering what they would consider as ‘the future’. Mostly, they spoke about the situation for LGBTI persons or activism in Armenia. Only in some cases they told about their own situation, which was characteristic for interviewing activists. Activists seem to rather not talk about themselves but about the situation of the whole community. When I asked personal questions to the activists, the questions were mostly hard to answer and they mostly replied that they hardly ever thought about their own feelings regarding certain issues and that they were living their life for the sake of the whole community.

3.3. Data Analysis

In this chapter, I explained my methodology and my used research methods. I used a qualitative approach which I used in a specific case study in order to explore this case. Not much had been written about this case besides NGO reports, but mostly the opinion and experiences of the activists themselves, studied by an external researcher, have been neglected. By being in the situation that you study, you get insights which seem normal to the people living in this situation.

For my analysis, I used Atlas TI in order to comprehend on all the data I gathered. Because all the interviews were recorded, I was able to paraphrase directly from the interviews. I coded the interviews in such a way that the gathered data logically fits in the analytical framework. Though I first used a more structured approach, I discovered that the interviewees rather wanted to share their stories, which sometimes were guided by the interviewer. They provided me with information about their past, their current situation and their future. By telling these stories, they also shared their opinions regarding my research question on the geopolitical situation of Armenia.

This way of interviewing resulted into a narrative analysis. Every interview had a narrative aspect which I reflected upon. I will present them in a revised shape in order to reformulate stories and present them in different contexts. By doing this, I am able to link the empirical data to each other and to ultimately link it to the theory. By analyzing all the interviews and the notes gathered by participant observation, I could make my analytical framework complete. In the next chapter, I will turn to my analysis of the case.
Chapter 4 Data Analysis

In this chapter I will analyse the data I gathered from my fieldwork in Armenia. I provided an analytical framework in order to structure this complex chapter, due to the big collection of data and the connectedness of the different variables. In each section of this chapter, I will combine the geopolitical dimension with the Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviour-Model. In every section, I will question how the geopolitical situation is affecting these three parts of the model. While analysing the data, I discovered that my respondents were mainly talking about problems regarding knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. These problems did not only concern knowledge of the Armenian population about LGBTI issues, but they also talked about problems regarding actions of the EU and Russia that have a major influence on activists’ work. The respondents spoke about attitudes of the Armenian population towards LGBTI activists, but also the attitudes of the EU and Russia towards Armenia and how Armenia should deal with LGBTI issues.

4.1. Knowledge of LGBTI issues and –activism

In this part of my analysis, I will mainly focus on how the geopolitical situation of Armenia influences knowledge of LGBTI issues and –activism. This is the first step in the development of social actions in the model mentioned. I will analyse how LGBTI activists experience influences from either Russia, the EU or conflicts at the borders on the knowledge of the society about LGBTI-related issues. Furthermore, knowledge of the EU and Russia about their influence on Armenia regarding LGBTI issues will be discussed. It is hard to determine exactly what knowledge is gathered due to Armenia’s geopolitical position. However, in multiple interviews, people mostly said that mass media and internet are the two most influenced sources of knowledge.

Knowledge about LGBTI issues in Armenia is subject to geopolitical influences because both Russia and the EU provide information through their own channels. Besides concrete ways of providing information, such as TV-channels, internet, supporting NGOs that educate the community, Russia and the EU also offer a possibility of how to deal with LGBTI issues. Both Russia and the EU could either attract people to learn more about LGBTI issues or they could rather create a rejection among the population to learn more. Russia, as mentioned in the theoretical chapter, introduced multiple anti-LGBTI laws that could inspire politics, media, education and
everyday discourses in Armenia, in creating a national identity which put LGBTI people in the out-
group, although they're living within the nation's borders. On the contrary, the EU sets
requirements for being countries which are part of the EaP regarding LGBTI rights. This could also
inspire politics, media, education and everyday discourses in Armenia. However, looking at the
current state of LGBTI rights in Armenia, it seems that LGBTI activists are dealing with an
environment which is clearly anti-LGBTI. Does the geopolitical situation influence this anti-LGBTI
environment? And how do LGBTI activists tackle problems surrounding knowledge about LGBTI
issues?

It does not seem that the conflicts at the borders directly influence knowledge about LGBTI
issues in Armenia. However indirectly, the conflicts at the borders solidify Russia’s presence in
Armenia as their most important military ally. This can be best explained through a quote by
Respondent #14 in which the person describes the feeling on how the conflict with Azerbaijan
indirectly influences Armenian national policy regarding human rights.

Respondent #14: “So Russia sells Azerbaijan these missile systems and then it gives Armenia as a
gift other weapons to defend itself from the weapons that it sold to Azerbaijan. (...) Russia has a
military base in Gyumri, Armenia is now member of the Eurasian Economic Union, and being a
member of the Eurasian Economic Union, we have seen no material gains from being a part of this.
(...) Russia is a big country, but it is not a democratic nation. It is a highly corruptive government
where human rights are not protected and people can do whatever they want because of the
widespread corruption in Russia. (...). They're transplanted here in Armenia. If Armenia has
relationships with Europe, you would receive democracy from Europe, human rights are protected,
quality of life, quality of society as a democracy will be better. (...)”.

Russia's military presence in Armenia was nearly mentioned in every interview as an
indirect influence on Armenia's human rights record. What respondent #14 is saying, is that
Armenian citizens are generally more directed towards Russia and other countries of the EEU.
People in Armenia tend to trust Russian information and practices more because Russia proves to
be an important ally in the conflict with Azerbaijan which is one of the key problems for Armenia.
On the other hand, the EU does not seem to put much effort to solve this conflict and thus the EU
looks less trustworthy.

The Eurasian Development Bank has published the EDB Integration Barometer (2015)
where they look at the attractiveness of different geopolitical blocs to countries located in Eurasia.
The level of individual’s attraction to a country include “interest, sympathy, connections (through
work, relatives, etc.), and willingness to work together. On the level of a country's entire
population it reflects public support for cooperation and integration, as expressed in aggregate
public sentiment” (EDB Integration Barometer 2015). On the question: “Which of the listed
countries are friends of our country (i.e. countries we can rely on for help in an hour of need)?
87% answered ‘Countries of the CIS region’ which consists mainly of EEU countries. Only 32% answered ‘Countries of the EU’.

Figure 3: In your opinion, which of the listed countries are friends of our country (i.e. countries we can rely on for help in an hour of need)? – EDB Barometer 2015, 22)

Considering other countries as ‘friends’ could imply that people are more likely to understand and accept these countries. They might be able to identify more with these countries because, as the whole Barometer shows, they intent to expand cooperation with these countries (militarily, politically, economically, and culturally) (EDB Barometer 2015, 38). They are less likely to expand cooperation with countries in the EU due to the lack of trust or because they do not see EU-countries as potential partners. Will this difference in cooperation also reflect in a different influence of knowledge about LGBTI issues? In other words: Will Russia have more influence on the level of knowledge about LGBTI issues in Armenia than the EU because Armenia tend to be more interested in cooperating with Russia than the EU? And if so, how is this influence recognised?

Knowledge, as described in the theoretical framework, is acquired through different sources: educational institutions, mass media, religious institutions and peer- and self-education. The level of knowledge about LGBTI issues in Armenia falls short and the sources of knowledge create a false view of what LGBTI actually means. For example this respondent's view:
Respondent #2: “It’s a matter of not knowing what sexuality is, what sexual orientation is because they’re very bad. If a kid sees a gay couple or lesbian couple or transgender, they might become transgender or gay or bisexual themselves. That’s the biggest concern for them (Author: Armenian society). It comes from not knowing, not understanding, lack of information”.

These misconceptions about what sexuality is, remain one of the most important problems for LGBTI activists to tackle. In a news article it is stated that: “If people have even the slightest information about LGBT’s, they can more easily embrace and understand members of their families, their children who happen to have a different sexual orientation. But if they have no information at all and only hear about the negative stereotypes in society, it is natural that there will be a more negative reaction” (“Harsh Reality: “Negative Stereotypes” blamed for ill-treatment of LGBTI in Armenia”, 2016). These misconceptions are prevalent in different sources of knowledge and the geopolitical situation has its influence on these misconceptions as well.

Education in schools about sexuality in Armenia remains unsatisfactory and religious institutions do not seem to properly educate people about sexuality. Religious institutions in Armenia only seem to spread a negative view on LGBTI issues:

Respondent #13: “I mean in the educational system in medical universities, there are doctors, scientists, lecturers saying that it is a taboo for them to discuss sensitive topics and they are not well-trained to handle such topics”.

Respondent #2: “It’s against our religion and they’re so proud to talk about their Christianity and how Armenia was the first country that adopt Christianity. (…) With regard to Christianity, most of the comments for instance you can read about PINK or LGBT people. We’re Christians and we need to burn you. Like, what the fuck. Is that what Christianity promotes? Hate and killing and burning”?

As mentioned, the Ministry of Education of Armenia does not seem to be interested in offering formal sexual education in educational institutions (“Sex Ed a Taboo in Armenia: If Taught at All, It’s by Phys Ed Teachers, Some 80 Years Old”, 2015). Respondent #13 mentioned that teachers say that it is a taboo for them to talk about sexual orientation and sexual education. This is also mentioned by many youngsters to whom I spoke during informal talks. Because some of the younger visitors used the office of PINK to make their homework, I asked how school was. I asked if they liked school and what is taught in schools. When I spoke about sexual education, they all responded that they did not receive any information in schools. They had to educate themselves, especially when it concerned sexual orientation.

The Armenian Apostolic Church indeed rejected homosexuality as ‘a sin’ and a ‘negative phenomenon’ . Debates on so-called homo-addiction, hosted by the Church, are broadcasted on national television. During these debates, they spread extremely hateful and violent messages towards LGBTI people which are in line with what respondent #2 is saying about experiences this
person has with hate messages. The prominent place of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia is often used to condemn something which does not fall in line with conservative views of Armenian identity.

But Russia and the EU does not seem to significantly influence these two sources of information on LGBTI issues. Russia and the EU mainly influence mass media which influences people's ways of educating themselves. Therefore I will highlight these two sources of information.

The level of self-education on LGBTI issues is dependent on multiple variables such as a) the access to internet and b) the level of knowledge of English/Russian, and c) exposure to other ways of living. Younger generations have been using the internet as an important source to educate themselves. Older generations have been using the television more as a source of information. The access to internet is higher in the cities, contrary to the countryside where access to internet is hardly possible. “Internet access in Armenia continues to grow, although the internet penetration rate remains below 50 percent, and the average access speed was only 3.2 Mbps by the end of 2014” (Freedom House 2015). It is the access to internet which influences to what extent people can educate themselves about sexuality, the internet contains many information on sexual orientation and gender identity. According to activists, there is not much to find on solely Armenian websites. It is thus necessary to be able to speak another foreign language such as English or Russian.

Respondent #10: “Because of the way it is here, there is not a lot of information available, so I had to educate myself. And it was mostly through the internet that I learned about sexuality, that I learned about gender. Mainly from Russian language websites, because when I was younger, I didn’t understand English that well. Most of the information that was accessible was in Russian and there was no information and there is still no information about gender and sexuality in Armenian (...) through reading these websites I understood who I was and what sexuality and what gender was. I learned the word gender that I’ve heard of before through internet”.

Respondent #15: ‘And when I first had access to computers, I was 16 years old. Fortunately I spoke English at that time, and I discovered Google and Wikipedia and the article on homosexuality. It was the first time I ever read about other homosexual people. And I saw that I am not the only one. And I am not a disease or something. But there was this internal homophobia, so I started reading a lot and then I started blogging and translating stuff from English to Armenian. (...).’

So respondent #10 as well as respondent #15 were able to understand either Russian or English to understand what their sexual orientation or gender identity meant. Speaking other languages contributes to the level of knowledge about LGBTI issues, but also the accessibility to information on LGBTI issues on the internet is heavily influenced by the geopolitical game. Activists in Armenia mention that new laws in Russia prevent people in Russia from publicizing on LGBTI
issues. After my visit to Armenia, I read that two of Russia's influential LGBTI websites were banned ("Russia censors internet support site for LGBT Teens, 2016). Websites, written in Russian, are more and more contributing to the misconceptions about LGBTI people. The ongoing willingness in Armenia to expand cooperation with Russia politically and culturally, also increases the influence of Russian websites on work of LGBTI activists in Armenia. Russia provides information and LGBTI activists in Armenia provide information on LGBTI issues, however these two might differ from each other in labeling what is right and what is considered wrong. More and more pro-LGBTI websites are banned in Russia which result in mainly negative information on the internet.

Besides the Internet, the television could provide people with information on LGBTI issues. However, television channels in Armenia are often blamed that they are aligning with Russia when they cover items regarding social, economic and religious issues.

Respondent #3: “It depends on what sorts of information you have, like people who only get information from TV of course they are more friends with Russia, friends with Putin and all the things that are happening there. But the younger generation have a wider source of information such as Internet. (...) Yes, we have several Russian TV-channels, everyone has. (...) Russian politics, anything with Russia is shown as a good example. Always that relying and comparing with our Big Brother in a positive way”.

Russia broadcasts a lot of shows in Armenia because many people can speak Russian. TV-channels from other countries are hardly ever broadcasted in Armenia. Furthermore, Armenian television shows mostly spread negative messages regarding LGBTI people.

While talking with some respondents during my stay, I wanted to discover what the influence of Russia on the Internet and television channels meant for them. They said that it is difficult to inform people about LGBTI issues in a correct way because negative stereotyping is more prevalent throughout the Armenian society. Access to internet and television does not mean that people are instantly well-informed about these issues: Russian websites are often copied to Armenian websites and spread misconceptions among Armenian citizens. Furthermore, they stated that primarily younger generations use the Internet more and are often more able to understand English instead of older generations (Kempe, 2013). Finally, the respondents said that among the youngsters in Armenia, they could speak of a kind of “sexual revolution”: a small revolution that has moved them to understand sexuality better and that is moving away from conservative views on sexuality. However, I could not find any proof about the so-called sexual revolution. Though, younger generations are more able to understand English which provides them with more comprehensive information on LGBTI issues via the Internet. The younger generations, if they have access, have the possibility to educate themselves and their peers through Internet.
Besides mass-media and self-education, an important other foreign influence on knowledge about LGBTI issues is tourism. According to the majority of respondents, tourism and studying abroad contribute to how people see the world and can change their perspective about LGBTI issues. Respondent #19 "Yes, maybe the youth. They are traveling. When they go to Europe and they see how people there are and that it is nothing to be afraid of, for them it is ok, it is normal". But also here, mostly younger people are travelling abroad and not the older generations. It seems that the discrepancy is increasing between what younger and older generations know about LGBTI issues. Traveling and tourism could definitely contribute to an increasing knowledge of LGBTI issues. The total number of tourists, coming to Armenia, mostly Russians and ethnic Armenians from the diaspora, has been increasing since the last years. Though in 2015, there was a decrease in tourists mostly due to the falling number of tourists coming from Russia. For LGBTI activists this means that people went abroad and experienced other ways of living. These travelers might understand to a larger extent that LGBTI activists are not telling fairytales. They could see themselves that the acceptance of LGBTI people will not destroy a nation, as messages spread by the Church and government officials might indicate.

Knowledge about LGBTI issues is thus mostly gained out of experience in daily life instead of learning from books. Geopolitical influences on the Internet, television and travel are witnessed by almost all respondents. Their work has been made more difficult to overcome these influences because cooperation between Armenia and Russia receives more support regarding militaristic, economic, political and cultural cooperation. The EU, with its intentions to launch projects or to fund projects to improve the situation for LGBTI people in Armenia and to improve the level of knowledge regarding LGBTI issues has not significantly changed the domestic situation in Armenia. Though there are all-encompassing studies on the situation for LGBTI people in Armenia, the results of some projects remain unsatisfactory. Improving knowledge as a joint goal of LGBTI activists in Armenia and EU institutions has been regarded by the respondents as something which is not a great priority for EU institutions. The credibility of the EU in Armenia is criticized by the respondents because of the abundance of EU’s statements and the lack of EU’s actual actions.

For Armenia, it is the lack of information in books about sexuality that determines how people think about LGBTI issues. Learning from experience is not necessarily wrong, but in the Armenian example, it could lead to misconceptions about what LGBTI actually is. These misconceptions, which are mostly portraying a negative image of LGBTI people, need to be overcome according to the activists. However, overcoming these misconceptions seems rather problematic because trustworthy, scientific examples are not taught to pupils in education.

After analysing the interviews, the lack of knowledge is the key problem of the whole research question. Knowledge is the first step of social action, which should determine how you
think about something and how you finally do something. As described above, providing knowledge and educating people about LGBTI issues is the key concern for LGBTI activists in Armenia.

Education and providing knowledge on sexual diversity in Armenia falls short, but could this be explained with the help of Armenia's geopolitical position in the shared neighbourhood. In the theoretical framework, some assumptions were presented about the discursive construction of national identities. Through media, politics and education misconceptions and negative statements about LGBTI issues are spread, as is showed in the theoretical chapter. Ideas about what a national identity is for a country depends mainly on those who have the power to disseminate these ideas. These beliefs could be disseminated through education, schooling, mass communication, militarisation and national events such as sports matches or national celebrations (De Cillia et al. 2011, 153). The decision to neglect sexual education in schools and to allow politicians to spread hate speech contributes to what is considered as a status quo in Armenia regarding LGBTI issues.

In the Armenian society there exists a certain view on what is considered generally accepted regarding LGBTI issues. Another assumption which is presented, was the creation of in-groups and out-groups. Kuus (2007, 12) states that the geopolitical discourse sets boundaries to whom is involved into ‘our’ place and ‘their’ place. Even if threats are domestic, thus within the geographical borders of the nation, they could still be conceived as dangerous to the preservation of the idea of national identity. Dominant national identities, constructed by those in power, could create this inclusion and exclusion of groups. However, eliminating differences in the nation which differ from dominant discourses of the national identity will create problems for those who cannot belong to the in-group. The creation of insiders and outsiders is useful for those who are in power, because it could determine whether something is a danger to their legitimacy. Threats, considered by them, serve as a precondition for a stable national identity because those who can spread a construct of national identity could identify if something is a danger to their state or not.

Insecurity remains one of the key problems for the Armenian society. The geopolitical situation, described in the theoretical section, contributes to a situation in which the Government of Armenia is somehow balancing between the EU and Russia. Armenian President Sargsyan raises this insecurity as top-priority in EU as well as EEU meetings. On May 30, 2016, during a meeting of the European People’s Party, a political party in the European Parliament, Sargsyan underlined the commonality of democratic European values and he signaled intentions to sign a political document with the EU. A day later, during an EEU meeting, Sargsyan mentioned the conflict with Azerbaijan which is a threat to the security and investments in the Russian-led EEU.

So, insecurity regarding Armenia’s foreign policy is the result of the position in the shared neighbourhood and the conflict with Azerbaijan. This insecurity, as mentioned, create a stable
national identity because those who spread these ideas claim that their idea is based on the preservation of Armenia's borders and national interests in times of insecurity. Out-groups, foreign as well as domestic, who are a threat to a stable national identity need to be placed outside of society. In this case, negative views on LGBTI issues are spread throughout Armenia by those who disseminate a national identity, but activists tend to oppose these negative views by spreading their different views on LGBTI issues. LGBTI activists are considered as an out-group because they cannot fit into the expectations of the constructed dominant national identity in Armenia. They are considered as people who oppose a national identity and thus are seen as a threat to stability within an insecure geopolitical situation.

In May, the attack on an LGBT friendly bar, was characterised by a Member of Parliament (MP) Eduard Sharmazanov as “completely right and justified.” He also claimed that those who support the rights of LGBT Armenians "are perverting our society, and defaming the Armenian national identity." Another MP, Artsvik Minasyan, stated that the young men behind the attack “acted in accordance with our society’s values and national ideology, and in an appropriate manner” (ILGA 2013).

It is for the sake of those who spread a dominant national identity that knowledge about LGBTI issues remains limited because more knowledge could cause an instability of this dominant national identity, as defined by multiple MP's in Armenia. Therefore, it is almost impossible for LGBTI activists to educate youngsters and to overcome stereotyping (“Harsh Reality: "Negative Stereotypes" blamed for ill-treatment of LGBTI in Armenia", 2016).

The geopolitical situation is even further complicating the situation for LGBTI activists. Because of the membership of Armenia in the EEU, it is not obliged to ensure equal rights for LGBTI people anymore. Due to this membership, the EU seems to have lost its interest in Armenia. Besides giving aid to the Armenian government, activists do not experience much support from the EU. Furthermore, the EU is mostly promoting LGBTI rights in its formal statements, rather than focusing on the domestic situation of its partner countries. Combatting stereotypes by creating proper sources of knowledge about LGBTI issues should be a top priority in order to improve the situation for LGBTI people and to ease the environment for LGBTI activists.

In the next part of this analysis, I will turn to how the geopolitical situation is affecting attitudes towards LGBTI issues and –activism. The lack of knowledge, partly as a result of the geopolitical clash, has created misconceptions which are difficult for activists to overcome. Changing attitudes is even more difficult in a country where the access to knowledge about LGBTI issues has been moved to informal education instead of formal educational institutions.
4.2. Attitudes towards LGBTI issues and –activism

In this part of my analysis, I will take the next step from knowledge to attitudes. Attitudes describe how people think about LGBTI issues and –activism. Attitudes towards these issues are based on knowledge of the society, however this level of knowledge remains very low in the Armenian society. Misconceptions about LGBTI-related issues could lead to attitudes which are an extension of these misconceptions.

Probably the main misconception which is creating dangerous and inevitable attitudes among the Armenian citizens is that LGBTI issues are seen as a Western product. These are dangerous attitudes because they ultimately make the work of LGBTI activists impossible. By saying that LGBTI issues are something Western and not Armenian, LGBTI activists are labeled as something Western as well and thus something which is not Armenian ("Gay rights fall victim to EU-Russia geopolitics", 2015). This will be further explained in this part.

Attitudes are about wrong and right, desirable and undesirable. Positive or negative reactions are based on which goals people value. As described in the theoretical framework, in Armenia the attitude towards LGBTI people remains largely negative. Homophobia is predominant in society but could this also be the result of the geopolitical situation?

Respondent #16: “I think here it is like, stereotypes, gender stereotypes is so strong. It is a kind of dependence mechanism: they think oh no that is something from Europe or somewhere and that they want to destroy our nationality and blabla. Such things. They fix on such things”.

This respondent said that people depend on stereotyping and labelling homosexuality as something European. Homophobia has literally reached a level where homosexuality is seen as foreign. This falls in line with the assumptions that a domestic threat to security is also labelled as something foreign. So LGBTI activists, who are a part of the out-group, almost have no space to change or influence the dominant national identity. LGBTI issues become politicized and furthermore LGBTI issues become an instrument in the geopolitical situation of Armenia. Respondent #22 sketches how LGBTI have become an instrument in the geopolitical situation of Armenia:

Respondent #22: “The Russian influence in society has a very big role. When the Russian Federation wants to play with the Government of Armenia and the society, LGBT issues are always raised and are presented as something that the European Union wants to destroy Armenian values. And we are the agents of the European Union and the USA”.

How does Russia influence attitudes around LGBTI issues and –activism?

How does the EU influence attitudes around LGBTI issues and –activism?

How do conflicts at the borders influence attitudes towards LGBTI issues and –activism?
What this respondent is saying, is that LGBTI issues are used whenever Russia wants to accomplish something in Armenia. In order to establish a tough EEU, Russia is mostly emphasizing the differences between the EU and Armenia. Respondent 20 said: “If you are pro human rights, than you are pro-European, pro-West person. And if you are against LGBT rights you are with Russia”. According to this view, the protection of LGBTI people is something which is a product from Europe and is not something which comes naturally in Armenia.

According to the activists, it is mainly the result of how the EU is promoting the protection of LGBTI rights in EaP-countries outside of the EU. On October 15, 2015, Member of the European Parliament In ’t Veld wrote a parliamentary question to the vice-chairwoman of the European Parliament Mogherini regarding countering homophobia in third countries as part of the EU’s foreign policy agenda:

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Subject: VP/HR — Countering homophobia in third countries as part of the EU’s foreign policy agenda

In some countries, homophobia is not merely a social issue, but is used as part of a political, nationalist and anti-EU agenda. State actors use inequality and discrimination towards LGBTI people as tools for their broader political anti-EU agenda.

1. How does the VP/HR view the politicisation of homophobia as an anti-EU instrument by third countries, for example Russia?

2. Given that homophobia is used by third countries as part of their broader political anti-EU agenda, how will the VP/HR respond to this in the context of the EU’s external relations and foreign affairs policies?

3. Will the VP/HR include LGBTI rights in the EU’s broader external relations and foreign affairs policies, alongside existing fundamental rights tools, in order to prevent LGBTI people from being victims of this anti-EU propaganda?

Box 1: Parliamentary Question – MEP In ’t Veld to VP/HR Mogherini

This parliamentary question is drafted after various meetings with LGBTI activists from EaP-countries. The activists stated that they try to combat negative attitudes towards LGBTI people in their country, but that these activists face the problem that they are not considered as a part of the society (the in-group).
Parliamentary questions
17 December 2015

Answer given by Vice-President Mogherini on behalf of the Commission

Issues of gender identity and sexual orientation continue to be used as the pretext for serious human rights violations. The EU closely follows this issue worldwide and through its instruments seeks to confront falsehoods defended by some leaders and groups that homosexuality is a western imposition anathema to their culture or values. The EU aims to protect and promote the rights of Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals through its political dialogue and through public statements when appropriate.

In line with the EU Guidelines on LGBTI, and in places where the LGBTI community is under threat, the EU is providing financial support to civil society organisations in their work on this matter. Through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights the EU can also provide human rights defenders at risk with an emergency grant to assist in their protection. Moreover, the EU is also active in all multilateral fora in pushing for the promotion and protection of LGBTI rights.

Box 2: Answer on Parliamentary Question VP/HR Mogherini to MEP In ‘t Veld

The answer given by vice-president Mogherini on behalf of the European Commission is further problematizing the position of LGBTI activists in Armenia and other countries that are situated in the shared neighbourhood. Asking LGBTI activists about the methods of the EU in combatting homophobia in third countries, Respondent #8 reacted as follows:

Respondent 8: “(...). When the EU says you have to protect gay people, that only adds fuel of this idea that homosexuality is not native in this country. It is like something that is not from here, it comes from the outside. Look, and then, when people have doubts in their minds, like: wait a minute, I don’t actually think that homosexuality only exists in Western Europe, someone who is trying to convince you is saying: well, look the Europeans are telling us to protect gay people, the Europeans have gay pride parades, the Europeans have gay teachers and doctors who are open and interact with children (...).it creates a binary with the West”.

The EU tries to improve the situation for LGBTI people through political dialogue, public statements and financial support. Respondents reacted on these methods, used by the EU to promote LGBTI rights, with mixed feelings. On the one hand the activists appreciate it whenever representatives of the EU release a statement on the situation for LGBTI people in Armenia. On the other hand, activists say that these statements are hardly effective. They are hardly effective because the EU has little legitimacy in Armenia due to Armenia’s EEU-membership and due to the lack of credibility of the EU regarding the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

Respondent #20 said that the lack of legitimacy of the EU in Armenia, and statements of the EU on combating homophobia in Armenia, create aversion among the Armenian population towards the EU and LGBTI people. Respondent #20 describes this as: “So EU is Gayrope, Europe is labelled as Gayrope”. Because LGBTI activists mostly get help from European countries, they are placed in the out-group. They are labelled as foreign and as a threat to the instability of a
national dominant identity within the Armenian nation. Respondent #9 describes this as a kind of “Europhobia”, fear for the loss of an Armenian national identity as a result of interference of the EU regarding LGBTI rights.

Activists mostly blame the EU for using the wrong idiom in its promotion for LGBTI rights. By stating that the protection of LGBTI rights is an important EU-value, it emphasizes the differences between regional blocs. This paves the way for Russia and Armenian officials who are not willing to ensure equality for LGBTI persons in Armenia. The use of this language also emphasizes that LGBTI activists in Armenia are claiming rights that derive from the EU instead of Armenia.

Respondent #12: “So, the problem with the EU saying European values is this. It’s good rhetoric for inside the EU, when you want to create unity, that all Europeans can come around these European values, that is good. Go ahead and use that rhetoric inside the EU. But using that rhetoric outside, you are reinforcing that divide that is trying to be painted between East and West”.

Respondent #8: “European values, I don’t like that term, European values because I don’t think human rights are European, they are universal. And the way in it is framed that way. Of course, I’ve heard people from Europe, I’ve heard Europeans and actual people who are representatives or have certain titles and who use the words European values or OUR values (…)”.

What activists are actually saying is that European values and LGBTI rights should be generalized into ‘human rights’. By stating that equality is embedded in human rights, equality becomes less politicized because human rights equals all humans. However, the effectiveness of this rhetoric is rather problematic because depoliticizing equality is hard to establish. People in Armenia for example, inherently link equality to LGBTI rights. Just as the word gender which has a negative connotation among Armenian citizens.

Respondent #16: “After that (Author: passing a law on gender equality), people started saying about gender: Aah it is a bad thing. You said gender?! No... Don’t say such a dirty word!”

Interviewer: Is it still like this? Like a dirty word?

Respondent #16: “Yes, but it is a little bit better than before. But still yes, when you say gender, people start to say that you are talking about LGBT rights”.

Russia and Armenia have created an identity and a rhetoric for itself in contrast to Europe and Europe has created an identity for itself which is in contrast with the East. But why do these different identities contradict each other and why is Armenia accepting the rhetoric derived from Russia? For this, we have to go back to the theoretical framework about the underlying goals and subjected values of each party.
First, we need to understand that the shared neighbourhood is a region between two power blocs which both have their own view on how human rights should be ensured. The EU has policies both domestic and foreign about ensuring these rights which also account for Armenia because of its EaP. Although the Association Agreement with Armenia is still being revised, there are still agreements on social issues and human rights. The EU wants to prevent Armenia from slipping backwards regarding its human rights record and it sets requirements towards the partnership with Armenia. The power-relationship between the EU and Armenia has proven to be unbalanced.

On the one hand the EU is giving money to the Armenian Government, but on the other hand Armenia’s human rights record is hardly making any progress and it is still violating LGBTI rights. According to the activists I interviewed, the EU is not blaming Armenia for its poor human rights record because then it would emphasize its difference with Armenia. This could reinforce Russia’s ties with Armenia even more, because they could also work together on social policies, the way they do now on trade and economic policy in the EEU. Both power blocs see Armenia as one of their partners and as a country that should identify with the policies of one of the power blocs. They both seem mutual exclusive and this has its effect on LGBTI activists in Armenia. Respondent #17 said: “The EU should however exert more pressure on Armenia to act properly, but maybe they are not doing that because they don’t want to lose Armenia definitely to Russia. It is about control and demand”.

The labelling of LGBTI activists in Armenia as ‘agents of the West’ is the result of the geopolitical scene in which Armenia is finding itself. First, the conflict with Azerbaijan and the closed borders with Turkey have created nationalistic and militaristic attitudes throughout the Armenian population (Delcour 2014; Delcour and Kostanyan 2014; Harutyunyan 2009). The Armenian society is centering itself around an imagined national identity. In other words, as a true Armenian it is expected that your attitudes correspond with the national identity. This is based on traditions, traditional values and unity, all constructed by dominant discourses.

However, LGBTI people do not fit into this national identity because they deviate from the traditional form of family and sexuality. Respondent #22 said “When I started to speak about human rights, I said I am also Armenian and I love my country and I also listen to traditional Armenian music”. He, as an LGBTI advocate tried to overcome this label as being part of the out-group by saying that he also has parts in him which could make him part of the in-group. LGBTI activists experience that they are placed outside the society because they do not fit within the expectations of the Armenian society about identity and attitude. “Sometimes we are the Armenian national Other. Other with the capital O is the Turk”. Respondent #8 is saying here that LGBTI Armenians are sometimes compared to Turks, their biggest enemies mostly due to the Genocide in 1915. As Respondent #8 continues:
"I have heard lots of people particularly in the Diaspora, when they say disturbing things about gay people or LGBTQ Armenians. They say: how can you be gay? When a million and a half Armenians are slaughtered and that we are such a small amount of people. How can you be gay and not pass on your blood or creating more Armenians. (...) It is dishonor or shame on the memory of the victims of the Genocide. In memory of the murders of the wars with Turkey or with Azerbaijan or with whom we were fighting. And then in this country it is interesting because, again, it falls in line with Armenian, gay Armenians being a threat to the nation also a threat to the state".

LGBTI people are pictured as a national enemy who do not care for national security but only for themselves. But respondents state that they do care for security and that is why they are fighting for human rights instead of calling it LGBTI rights. As stated, equality is embedded in human rights and human rights equals all humans. Still equality is linked to LGBTI issues and it has a negative connotation in the Armenian society. National security plays an important part in the lives of the Armenian population due to ongoing conflicts and insecure politics. Mass media, politics and education in times of conflict with Azerbaijan are all spreading a discourse on security as being of major importance to Armenia and the Armenian population.

National security and the conflict with Azerbaijan are too important from an identity-generating perspective, and too strong weigh the legitimacy deficits that both regimes are faced with (Schumacher, 2016). It is identity-generating because it creates an image of the enemy, the out-group, who is a threat to the Armenian nation, according to respondents talking about the 'national Other'. According to the multiple respondents, this identity-generating perspective is constructing parts of a national identity which are mostly focusing on collective responsibilities towards the nation. Armenian Ministers have repeatedly stated that individual security depends on collective security and the collective power of all Armenians.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Oskanian (2002):<sup>6</sup> "Armenia wishes to attain stability and progress, which is only possible under the conditions of security and cooperation"

Minister of Diaspora Hakobyan (2011):<sup>7</sup> "The power of the Armenian people is the collective and unified power of all Armenians".

This focus on the collective national identity and the promotion of such a national identity legitimizes the power of those who spread this construction of national identity. As Kuus (2007) stated, legitimisation of the state is increased because those in power are able to identify a threat and to counter this threat. People who counter certain aspects of this collective identity

<sup>6</sup> http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/3785/
<sup>7</sup> http://en.hayernaysor.am/
undermine the legitimisation of those who promote this identity are then labelled as a threat (Kuus 2007).

LGBTI activists, for example, try to counter this dominant collective identity and try to seek a common ground based on universal human rights which should be available to all Armenians rather than excluding Armenians from a collective identity. As described in multiple reports, LGBTI people are therefore often seen as a threat because they undermine the constructed identity of Armenians, as promoted by those who have the power to do so. LGBTI people are then described as: “They do not contribute to a growth of the Armenian population which would make Armenia stronger and they only care about their own safety and their LGBTI rights. Therefore, they are seen as traitors of the country (ILGA, 2013). However, they are a threat to the collective identity constructed by the promoters of this identity rather than a threat to the country.

The EU is assisting LGBTI activists with their work and by doing this, the EU is creating aversion towards itself and towards the activists. Following the line of reasoning in the previous paragraph, the EU is also a threat to those who are in power to construct and promote the national identity.

Respondent #15: “But also like there are certainly people here, in Armenia or in Russia who will say our values versus their values. We value the family, like it is not that Europeans don’t value their family? Of course they do, family is an important value, it is just a matter of how you define family. I think the usage of OUR European values is a disturbance and undermines the idea, because you try to build bridges across borders, across regional blocs”.

In short, insecurity, as a result of the conflicts at the borders and the isolated position of Armenia between the EU and Russia, causes an urge for those who are in power to construct a stable collective national identity amongst the Armenian population. This collective identity contributes to their legitimacy to stay in power. However, focusing on collective rights such as security instead of individual rights, such as LGBTI rights, creates fields of contestation. The EU is seen as a promoter of individual rights by aiding LGBTI activists. However, LGBTI activists try to phrase LGBTI rights as human rights and thus as a collective right for equality. This rephrasing is not effective because this rephrasing is heavily influenced by politics. The controversy about equality and being able to change a dominant national identity will remain as long as insecurity will be a top priority for the Armenian nation. The conflict is a viable instrument in Armenia’s as well as Azerbaijan’s autocratic toolkit that can be used and adjusted anytime, depending on the domestic political and economic situation. The geopolitical insecurity of Armenia secures the position and legitimacy of those who are in power. They will use this insecurity to secure their view of how
Armenia’s national identity should be constructed in order to stay in power and to create the out-groups who form a threat to this identity.

4.3. Behaviour towards LGBTI issues and –activism

In the previous parts we have seen how knowledge and attitudes about LGBTI issues and activism are affected by the geopolitical situation of Armenia. A lack of knowledge about LGBTI issues and mainly homophobic attitudes in Armenia lead to tougher conditions under which LGBTI activists have to work. They have to cope with a label of ‘enemies of the state’ and they have to convince uneducated people that LGBTI people also deserve an equal way of living. We know how attitudes in the Armenian society towards LGBTI people and –activists are also the result of the geopolitical situation. But how are these attitudes expressed in the form of actual behaviour? How do activists behave to overcome their stigma? How does the society behave towards LGBTI activists as a result of Armenia’s geopolitical position? These questions will be answered in this final part of the analysis chapter.

As explained in the theoretical chapter, discrimination of LGBTI people remains prevalent in almost every sphere of life.

Respondent #5: “That there is still no positive development for LGBT issues in Armenia. At the same time, all the stress under the LGBT community is under the high profile. The activists receive threat and they receive hate speech in E-mails and on Facebook, and attacks and etc. But the psychical attacks *knocks on table*, we have received less psychical attacks on the LGBT community in the last five years than the years before that”.

The discrimination and hate speech towards LGBTI people seems to be embedded within the Armenian society. Especially LGBTI activists are affected by hate speech because they mostly choose to be visible towards the rest of the society. As said, activists could either tolerate these reactions and use the space they got while executing their work but they can also strive to challenge these reactions and step to the forefront. Activists described this mostly as a split between the public and private. LGBTI activists are aware that their public actions affect the entire LGBTI community of the country.

Respondent #10: “They (young LGBTI persons) are not thinking about the consequences of the community and also they are not thinking seriously about how the things that you do in public affect
the rest of community. Because if you are a gay person or a transgender person and you do something publicly, you are representing the entire community”.

According to the informants, the public/private dichotomy in Armenia has a major influence on the behaviour of LGBTI people and therefore the activists have to deal with it carefully. Respondents say that the public/private dichotomy is an accepted dichotomy among the majority of the Armenian population. The dichotomy implies that you as a person have certain public commitments which are part of your Armenian national identity, again constructed by a dominant narrative. Besides this public part there is a private part which provides you with space to undertake private actions.

Respondent #12: “My understanding is that you fulfill your role publicly and that is the public manifestation of your identity. And the other aspects of your identity, your interior identity, your inner identity, it can be explored or pursued so long as it is covered and private. And that dichotomy of life, that dichotomy is superimposed on everything”.

Respondents report that this dichotomy is also superimposed on sexuality. There is a part of your sexuality which is your public sexuality. This is mostly the obligation to marry, to have children and to fit into the Armenian traditional family. Though there is also a private part of sexuality which remains private and provides space for the individual to discover his or her own sexuality. Due to this dichotomy it is possible for people to live a life which fits into the expectations of the national identity and at the same time they can live a life that is not in accordance with the national identity.

Respondent #12: “I have a friend who has gay acquaintances. He married, he says that he was totally in love with his wife and he married her. And he had children but at some point, at some point he returned to gay sex. And he had gay relationships on the long-term. So in a Western interpretation, he was cheating on his wife with a man. But in his interpretation he was being faithful to his wife in terms providing for her, in terms of being a father to her children, in terms of fulfilling his social expectations and he still loved her”.

This double life could offer people the opportunity to discover the parts of sexuality which are considered as non-traditional by society. However, this also implies that the work of LGBTI activists becomes more difficult because there is a different understanding of what freedom is.

LGBTI activists try to express their non-traditional sexuality in the public sphere as well. However, many LGBTI people who are not activists and who live their non-traditional sexuality in the private sphere do not accept LGBTI activism because they think that non-traditional sexuality should stay within the private sphere and no attention should be drawn to it.
Respondent #23: “Or when they, mostly gay men, say that the existence of PINK is dangerous for them, and they hate my personality, because I was the first person who spoke publicly about LGBT issues. And they blame me, when I didn’t speak about homosexuality, than we could live with the life that we had easier. Having an underground life, they think that this is better. But now people start to think and speak about. So there life is getting harder, they cannot hide that much”.

The difference in understanding what freedom means to a person is the result of having different goals which individuals try to pursue. LGBTI activists, as respondent #23 is saying, try to change the status quo by drawing attention to the inequality of LGBTI people in society. Here it is important that the research question of my research is focused on LGBTI activists and not regular LGBTI people. LGBTI activists seek the attention deliberately and they are combining their private life with the public sphere. According to many respondents, many LGBTI people have accepted their double life in some way. They chose to live a heterosexual life or a life in which they conceal their transgender identity and at the same time they find space in which they can express their LGBTI identity. So, LGBTI activists try to improve the situation for LGBTI people but at the same time their effort is often not welcomed.

Another important social expectation for men is to complete military service once they are 18. During my stay in Armenia, I spoke to one of the boys in the office of PINK Armenia. He said that he had to do his military service but that he wanted to admit that he was homosexual. He continued that this was a problem because homosexual men are not allowed to do military service and they have to go to a psychologist instead. At the same time he said that his country needs him in times of war and that he wanted to support his country as a military when it is necessary. He tried to combine two different values within himself: security and self-direction. At the end, he found out that he could impossibly ignore his own sexuality and he decided to admit that he was a homosexual. The conflicts at the borders have a major influence because it reinforces the urge for security. Homosexual men cannot contribute to increasing security through military service when they choose to make their homosexual identity public. They are, again, labelled as traitors to the state. This time not because they are a ‘Western product’ but this time because they let other people fight for them instead of fighting themselves.

Respondent #13: “I don’t know if you heard about the expressions ‘Faggots to Baku’. Because they don’t like LGBT people and they don’t like Azerbaijan, so there is an expression that Faggots go to Baku”.

Interviewer: So in a certain sense LGBT people are affected by the conflict?

Respondent #13: “Yes, if you are an LGBT you don’t have a place in this society, but you have a place in Azerbaijan. And they want us to go to Baku because it is good for Azerbaijan to have gays because their country would be destroyed”.
Interviewer: So you are seen as destroyers of Armenia?

Respondent #13: “Yes, of the Armenian society.”

The conflict with Azerbaijan also presents other implications for LGBTI activists in Armenia. I experienced it myself when the conflict with Azerbaijan intensified in April (the Four-Day-War), tensions in Armenia were noticeable. My respondents reacted on how this intensification of the conflict influenced their work. During this period, I recognised that the activists were much more careful with their work. They cancelled parties, they did not publicise statements and also in the office people said that the activists needed to be more careful on the streets.

Respondent #23: “And when we do something, some activities, we publish something, they will attack us and say: come on it is a hard period, you are focused on your gay sex, (...) It is not important that the report then is about violations or whatever. The thing is that being gay for them is only (...) sex (...). So, that’s why everyone thinks that we (LGBTI activists) have to give up whatever we do and just go to the border and fight against Azerbaijan”.

The conflict is on the one hand contributing to a feeling of conformity among the Armenian population. But on the other hand it is contributing to differences in Armenian society, because some people are excluded from contributing to the conflict. Moreover, the conflict is even used as an instrument to distract from other structural problems in the Armenian society. If activists would like to highlight these problems such as inequality and discrimination, they are seen as selfish. This should be remain private life instead of bringing it to the public sphere, according to the majority of Armenians.

So, behaviour towards LGBTI people is mostly discriminating and excluding regarding the conflicts at the borders. The discrepancy of behaviour between LGBTI activists and the Armenian society causes a clash of misunderstanding. LGBTI activists bring their behaviour out of the private to the public sphere in order to live their life to the fullest. The Armenian society behaves in a more conservative way and thinks that this behaviour should be private because there are other, more important problems in Armenia.

Regarding the behaviour of the EU and Russia, one could expect that the EU would side with the LGBTI activists and that Russia would help Armenia with maintaining its conformity. However, after interviewing LGBTI activists, I recognised that EU’s attitude towards them is positive but their behaviour is rather disappointing. LGBTI activists seem to feel that the EU does not genuinely care about what actually happens in Armenia. This could be the consequence of Armenia’s choice to join the EEU instead of signing the Association Agreement with the EU.

Respondent #22: “Sometimes we are very angry with the EU delegation in Armenia, because we don’t really know what they do. We recently met someone from the delegation and talked about our concerns they never react on whatever happened. They promised to pay more attention to
human rights, for example (...). If you really want to help or to support you should know what happens with your money. There is no transparency at all. (...) In front of their (EU’s Delegation in Yerevan) building they burnt the LGBT flag, but we didn’t see any response: they just came out said: Yes, yes we are protecting all the rights of all people, and they went in again. (...) Burning the flag means burning the whole community, it is hate speech”.

No transparency and no genuine interest are the most-heard critiques on the work of the EU towards LGBTI activists. LGBTI activists have often compared their situation with the situation of Georgia (see Box 3).

Respondent #20: "For me it was always interesting to see how Armenia is somehow trying to be in good relations with EU and Russia. Because living in Georgia, for me it was kind of strange that after 2003, we (Georgia) somehow got rid of Russia and become more pro-European. And after 2008, after the war, it was fully clear to me that it was impossible to always be somewhere between Russia and EU. Because Russia would never allow you to go closer to EU. You really have to choose what to do. For Armenia, everything was ok, like Armenia was somewhere between. It was ready for Euro-integration and signing the Agreement, but suddenly one day our President decided to sign an agreement with Russia. And I think that it affects the situation in the country a lot”.

BOX 3
Georgia and the EU

The protection of LGBTI rights in Georgia is slightly better than in its neighboring country Armenia. Georgia, just as Armenia has known conflicts over territory. South-Ossetia and Abkhazia are both occupied by Russia but are de jure the territory of Georgia. The EU does not recognize the regions as a part of Russia or as independent regions.

Links between Georgia and the West have been strengthened in an attempt to move away from the Russian sphere of influence. Georgia is also a part of the EaP and it has an Association Agreement with the EU. Moreover, the EU operates a peacekeeping mission in South-Ossetia. The EU is formally not involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Georgia tries to bring its human rights record in line with the demands of Georgia’s integration into the European region. The Association Agreement sets clear obligations towards Georgia regarding LGBTI rights. However, more and more people are becoming disappointed because Georgian efforts to get closer to the EU have so far yielded little rewards.

On May 19th Georgia’s president, Margvelashvili told the Associated Press that EU’s indifference was sabotaging Georgia’s pro-EU foreign policy: "The basic message is that Europeans don’t care about you, you are abandoned, you do not have a choice, the Georgian European choice is doomed." (“Gay Rights in Georgia – Eastern Partners”, 2015)
The geopolitical situation of Armenia influences behaviour towards LGBTI activism because the geopolitical situation affects the construction of a national identity in which security plays a big role. LGBTI activism deviates from these values, which triggers a violent and correcting behaviour towards LGBTI activists. Hate speech, attacks and discrimination are commonly used against LGBTI activists to scare them, to hurt them and to prove to them that they are wrong in their ideas. Respondent #8 compares it to an actual crime: "Wherever it is, there is an incredible pressure to fall in line with certain cultural, social norms and expectations. And to deviate from that, it’s like committing crime". Normally, you punish and correct criminals who are committing an actual crime, however, LGBTI activists are sometimes dealt with as actual criminals.

Many activists state that the EU seems to be an unreliable partner when it comes to tackling behavioural problems. Respondent #14 also mentions the problem that the EU tries to enforce human rights laws in Armenia through formal agreements: "In Armenia we have a lot of laws for the EU and Council of Europe, but people are not ready for that. It was very much enforced by elites. They had to act according to something else". The LGBTI activists cannot rely too much on the EU, just as the Armenian society only trusts Russia as their most important military ally. LGBTI activists, although labeled as EU-agents, are stuck in this geopolitical scene because reliable help from international organizations fails to appear. Ultimately, LGBTI activists continue their fight for equality but at the same time the backlash increases as the focus on security increases as well. Some activists choose to leave the country in order to be able to live a life in safety and free of discrimination:

Respondent #17: "I was in a situation in which I didn't have a chance to stay in Armenia. But if people will stay and fight, in Armenia it is not possible to live with your boyfriend for a long time because your neighbor will notice it, you have problems in work and all these kind of things. (...) A lot of gays of Armenia are even married, have children and on the side they continue to have sex with men for this kind of people, they don't fight for LGBT rights, you should do it. But the people who want to live the very life with their lover, it has to come to them to try to find a way to leave Armenia, sooner or later”.

Others choose to stay and to find ways of coping with stigmatisation and coping with their identity as an LGBTI activist:

Respondent #23: "I think human rights defenders and activists are more successful when they are separate. They don't have weak points in terms of for example, they can't harm your parents or family. (...) You have to be alone. It is even hard to be in a relationship. It is so fucking hard, you have to think about your work, your activism, your relationship and then you lose one of the other... that is fucked up. Because sometimes in this hard moment, you want someone to hug you, to love you, to be this soft kitty that also needs protection and you then don't have".
Respondent #23: “I will never give up. Because I know that it is even then not impossible to work. Maybe even, you know sometimes that more negative things give better challenges and better possibilities. (...) Anyway, when there are a lot of negative things on the one side or other side, I can’t say exactly what we can do, but first thing we are afraid of such laws, but secondly we know that it challenges us in another discourse”.

Furthermore, in this last step in the development of social actions, behaviour is heavily influenced by the goals that are prevalent in the geopolitical situation of Armenia. Though in this last step it is questioned whether the values that are prevalent in the EU are genuine, because they seem to neglect the actual situation for LGBTI activists. In other words, the EU is aware of the membership of Armenia in the EEU and so it partially lost its interest in the country. LGBTI activists recognise this loss of interest but they do not overemphasize the effect the EU could have on their situation. Russia, on the other hand, has a stable influence on the country which triggers negative behaviour towards LGBTI activists.

The geopolitical insecurity results in behaviour that either force LGBTI activists to leave the country or stay in the country and live under harsh conditions. The ones who stay seek to challenge the prevailing norms on sexuality and see negative things as challenges. Respondent #22: “Oh, we are front fighters. Being in the background was in the past. We have to speak up, be in the front and fight for the rights and protecting the rights of LGBT. The time has come and it is now”.
Chapter 5 Concluding Remarks

5.1. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have asked the following research question:

How does the geopolitical context of Armenia influence LGBTI activism in the country?

In order to be able to answer this research question, I firstly described the geopolitical context of Armenia by dividing it into three sections. Russia, the EU and the conflicts at the borders were mentioned as the three most important geopolitical influences. Armenia is part of the shared neighbourhood between Russia and the EU and it is therefore subject to pressures from both sides. Mutual exclusive integration projects such as the EaP and the EEU cause Armenian officials to balance between the East and the West (Benhabib 1996 3ff. in De Cilia et al. 2011, 154). Important weights on this balance, are the conflicts at the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Armenian Genocide in 1915, the closed borders with Turkey and the conflict about Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan cause domestic as well as foreign insecurity throughout Armenia.

Secondly, a description was given on LGBTI activism and the current situation of LGBTI rights in Armenia. I applied a Knowledge, Attitude, Behaviour-model to argue how social actions towards LGBTI people are developed. Regarding knowledge, the main sources of information and education are educational institutions such as schools and universities, mass media, religious institutions and peer- and self-education. However these channels do not provide scientific, neutral information on LGBTI-related issues. The term LGBTI is often seen as immoral and a sin either by the Church or by mass media channels. Besides these sources of knowledge, visibility of LGBTI people could contribute to a better understanding among the Armenian population. However, there is an increasing number of LGBTI people who are emigrating and LGBTI people are not always able to be vocal or publicly out.

Regarding attitudes, the second part of the model, it becomes clear that homophobia is embedded in almost every part of the social domain. Misconceptions are prevalent in the country, these are mostly caused by a lack of knowledge about LGBTI people. The belief that homosexuality can never be justified, determines ultimately how people act towards LGBTI people.

Behaviour, as a third and final part of the model, described that LGBTI people in Armenia face discrimination and violent attacks and despite these events they do not have any legal protection. Instead of improvement in the legal sphere, some attempts have been undertaken to introduce anti-LGBTI laws in Armenia.

This model, together with the geographical division, created an analytical framework for the analytical chapter. The analysis, derived from these concepts, is also based on theoretical assumptions regarding the construction of national identities. The creation of in-groups and out-
groups as a result of dominant narratives about foreign policy and security issues lie at the core of the research problem.

The three sections of the analysis have provided an extensive insight into LGBTI activism in Armenia and how activists experience influences from Armenia's geopolitical context. In my opinion, I can conclude by taking the following steps of reasoning:

Firstly, the conflict with Azerbaijan has a major influence on the situation of LGBTI activists in Armenia due to a couple of reasons. Firstly, the conflict creates an insecure situation along the borders of Armenia. The conflict is one of the most important policy issues for Armenian officials. These officials need full support of the Armenian citizens in order to carry out and continue their work. Due to the conflict, a legitimisation of power of the Armenian government is provided because it pretends to defend the Armenian interests in this conflict. In other words, the insecurity along the borders is used to keep those who have the power in place (Kuus, 2007).

Secondly, how does this insecurity and the legitimisation of power influence LGBTI activists? This is the result of how this described insecurity is used by those who are in power. Insecurity to a country poses a threat to the safety of its society (ibid.). The Armenian government could act as a provider of security by constructing a narrative. This narrative states that the Armenian government's foremost concern is the conflict with Azerbaijan and that Armenian citizens should follow this view. I saw that a dominant national narrative is created based on security and threat. Those who accept this dominant narrative to some extent could be considered as the in-group. They are part of the society which share a view on how a national identity should be constructed. Though this creating of a in-group inherently states that there are people who are not able to fit into this group (Casier 2016, 13). This so-called out-group consists of people who do not agree with this dominant narrative and strive to change this narrative due to the fluidity of a national identity (Diez 2004, 322). Either domestic or foreign, this out-group is considered as a threat to security by those who spread the narrative of a dominant national identity such as mass media, academia and politicians. LGBTI activists strive to change a status quo regarding equality, human rights and the general thought in Armenia about different issues. They are undesirably labelled as an out-group because they seem to question the legitimisation of the constructors of a dominant national identity (Kuus 2007).

Thirdly, how does the shared neighbourhood, as an important part of Armenia's geopolitical context influence this line of reasoning? The shared neighbourhood creates a difficult situation for Armenia because it is difficult to balance between the EU and Russia without losing credibility as a country. Armenia, as being a member of the EEU, seems to have lost the interest of the EU to a great extent. According to the activists, by choosing the side of Russia, Armenia has set a step into the wrong direction regarding LGBTI rights and the position of activists in Armenia. On
the one hand Russia is known for its anti-LGBTI laws and on the other hand the EU is known for its laws regarding the protection of LGBTI persons. However, LGBTI activists state that neither the EEU nor the EU significantly contributes to improvement of the situation for LGBTI rights in Armenia. They state that the EEU, and especially Russia, serves as an example regarding many policy issues in the field of economics, politics and societal issues. Furthermore, the credibility of the EU falls short according to the activists, because the EU is mainly funding the Armenian government which is violating human rights.

Russia is Armenia’s most important ally in the conflict against Azerbaijan and that it contributes to a feeling of security among the Armenian people. Though Russia is also delivering weapons to Azerbaijan, it is still an essential partner for Armenia in order to seize the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It seems that the EU is a less credible partner in this conflict. Many activists said that besides formal statements, the EU has lost its interest in Armenia because of its EEU-member.

Summarizing, firstly, the EU is seen as a place where LGBTI people are protected. Secondly the EU has lost its credibility for not truly contributing to security in Armenia. Finally, Russia has an extensive influence over Armenia. These three factors contribute to a view that the EU is also part of the out-group because it promotes its EU-values beyond its borders. LGBTI rights are used in speeches as EU-values which could be received as values which are not part of the Armenian identity. LGBTI activists are often linked to this line of thought, because they are considered as the out-group as well. By calling them as ‘agents of the West’ and ‘enemies of the state’, the constructors of the dominant national identity place the domestic ‘threat’ outside the nation. Their legitimisation of power remains untouched, because they have placed those groups who question their legitimacy, outside the nation.

By improving knowledge, being visible to the public and by changing laws, LGBTI activists strive to change attitudes towards LGBTI people. They try to oppose misconceptions regarding LGBTI issues and at the end they try to positively change public behaviour towards LGBTI people. By emphasizing that LGBTI activists are also part of the Armenian nation, the activists try to improve the situation and to escape the out-group and the label as ‘threat to the nation’. Still, the harsh conditions in their daily life result in an increasing number of LGBTI persons who flee the country.

This conclusion is based on a period of participant observation, 24 interviews with LGBTI activists and multiple reports written by both national and international organisations. In my opinion, the influence of the geopolitical context cannot be neglected when talking about the position of LGBTI activists in Armenia. The EU should consider its influence over a region which lies outside its borders and which consists of six totally different countries. The EU-strategy of having partner
countries along its Eastern borders might be established with good intentions, but it underestimates its influence over these countries. Especially countries such as Armenia which has been struggling with its position between the EU and Russia for years. Moreover, focus should lie on educating the society about sexual orientation and gender identity. The EU is now funding the Armenian government without consequences when it is violating human rights.

5.2. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

In this thesis, I have argued that the geopolitical context of Armenia is heavily influencing the position of LGBTI activists within the society. With this exploratory study, I can indeed state that LGBTI activists experience geopolitical pressures on their work. Furthermore, I contributed to the limited existing literature, in a way that LGBTI activists are now themselves interviewed by another external person. This study has linked LGBTI activism in Armenia to the geopolitical context by making use of important, multiple assumptions on the creation of national identities, something which has hardly been done. However, some limitations of this study should be mentioned.

The first limitation which I like to discuss is my position as a researcher within this research. I chose to write the beginning of my introduction about my own experience in Armenia. This introduction described how my position as an outsider changed to an insider within the community. After a period of getting used to the way of life, I recognised that my relation with my respondents was changing as well. At first, I tried to stay unbiased and I tried to be an independent researcher. However, due to changing relations, I recognised that my professional stance became difficult to uphold. This was also the result of my own position within the research. As a homosexual man from a country which is located in the EU, I already had certain expectations about how the outcomes would be. Some of these expectations seem to be incorrect, which at first was difficult to accept. My own sexual orientation also had its advantages because you are able to understand some inner struggles and you could easier relate to certain problems which are mentioned. Still, I wonder how this research would be carried out if the researcher had a different profile regarding nationality and sexual orientation as I have. Positionality within this research remained one of my key struggles.

The second limitation which was quite problematic, was my limited knowledge of the Armenian language. In my opinion, I missed a lot of information and important messages because it was written or said in Armenian. Demonstrations, hate speech messages, informal talks in the office and the limited knowledge of English among the younger visitors were important sources of knowledge which could add interesting insights in this topic. The respondents were often able to speak English and if not, a reliable interpreter helped me. However, in my opinion, I sometimes had the feeling that they could not fully express themselves during the interviews.
Finally, I want to add a limitation on the interviewed people. The number of the respondents was satisfying and I had the feeling that I spoke to a diverse group of activists which are active in Armenia. Still, I spoke to the most vocal ones and they are intensively working together. Therefore, the answers in the interviews given by different respondents were not very different from each other. I constantly had to think how to prevent that my results were 24 copies of the same interview. Therefore, I hardly used the interview guide after a while and I chose to distinguish my interviews more. However, by doing this, I sometimes missed important questions which were vital to this research.

For further research, I would recommend to choose a research group which is more diverse or where contact among the respondents is more limited. The activists that I interviewed were the most vocal ones, which means that they might differ in their opinion from those who are less vocal. Furthermore, I questioned activists about their view on activism. For further research, it would be interesting to interview politicians, academia and representatives of mass media channels about their opinion on this research question.
Reference List


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ANNEX I – Interview Guide
. **General questions**
  - What is your first name?
  - What is your age?
  - Where do you live? Alone?
  - Do you have a job?

. **Being LGBT**
  - Do you identify yourself as Straight, Lesbian Gay Bisexual or Transgender or Other?
  - Do people know about your sexual orientation? *Family, friends, colleagues, school.*
  - Did something change when you told people about your sexual orientation?
  - How is it for you to live as an LGB or T in Armenia? *Meet other LGBT’s? Homophobic society.*
  - Did you encourage problems in being LGB or T in Armenia? *Violence, anti-gay laws, unsafety.*
  - Is it difficult, for you, to live as an LGB or T in Armenia? Why? *Religion? Nationalism?*
  - How do you cope with misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBT people?

. **LGBT activism**
  - How did you become engaged in LGBT activism? *Since when, reasons for engagement.*
  - What are the challenges for you as an activist for LGBT-rights? *Problems, who causes the problems?*
  - As an activist for LGBT-rights, could you name events in your activism? *Negative and positive.*
  - What changed due to LGBT activism? *Legally, socially, media.*
  - What are main priorities for you as an activist at the moment? *What is considered most important?*

. **External actors**
  - Which international relations are, in your eyes, most important for Armenia?
  - Could you say anything about Armenia joining the EEU? *Test general knowledge about the EEU.*
- Does the EEU, in your eyes, influences national policy in Armenia? *Besides economy also politically?*
- In how far do the EEU and the EU differ regarding their view on LGBT? *LGBT rights*
- How do you see the EU? *Is it considered as a safe haven? Any critiques on it?*
- The EU has a document 'Guidelines for supporting LGBTI persons' human rights, 2013', did it help you as an LGBT activist in your work? *Financially? International pressure?*
- Does the conflict of Ngorno-Karabakh have any influence on your work? *Governments' priorities?*
- Armenia has made a switch from signing an association agreement with the EU to joining the EEU. Did this change anything in your work? *What changed? Less freedom? More restricted?*
- Do you have contact with LGBT NGOs in other countries as well? *Could you tell something about it?*
- Do you think Armenia has more similarities with Russia then with the EU?

  **Final questions**
  - What gives you the strength to fight for LGBT-rights?
  - What is your vision on the future?