

# Orchestrating Vulnerability

A critical analysis of the socially induced precarious condition of Georgian LGBTQ+ bodies as a source of social protest



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For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you,' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.

- Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* 49.

# Abstract

Georgia decriminalised homosexuality in 2000 and adopted the Anti-Discrimination Law in 2014. Despite these laws, societal exclusion of and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people remain prevalent. This thesis aims to explore how Georgian LGBTQ+ bodies fall outside of what is alleged to be a normative notion of being a valuable human being. Building on theoretical concepts such as biopower, vulnerability, public space/sphere, and the politics of in/visibility, this thesis asks: How can the vulnerability of bodies of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community enact forms of public resistance to socio-political discourses which shape that vulnerability? Based on my analysis of news articles/photos and legalisation reports on the topic of LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia's societal debate, and relating it to geopolitical, religious, sociocultural factors, I will make clear that Georgia's biopower system reinforces a heterosexual and reproductive norm. Deviating from these norms, Georgian queer bodies are considered to endanger the nation's biological heritage as well as the deeply rooted traditional values. My study shows that both the Georgian Orthodox Church and nationalist groups seek to reduce LGBTQ+ presence, whether by disrupting the assemblies of the LGBTQ+ activists in the public space or by protesting heavily against the premiere of a queer themed film that facilitates the LGBTQ+ community's visibility. The thesis furthermore shows that the lack of support from Georgian authorities not only violates the basic human rights of the LGBTQ+ people, but also reduces their bodies to precarity. It subsequently makes clear that through recognising this precarious condition and by exposing their bodily vulnerability collectively, forms of social agency against dominant power relations can be enacted. The importance here lies in recognising human interdependency as an invariable feature of social existence. This will lead to a collective responsibility and solidarity, which in turn, can bridge the gap constructed by biopolitical practices.

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# Introduction

In June 2019, I visited my partner who was living in Tbilisi, Georgia at the time. One of the things to bring over from the Netherlands was a rainbow flag as he and his flatmates were unable to procure one in Georgia. This was also confirmed by the organisation Tbilisi Pride, telling him he only can find the rainbow flag outside Georgia's borders.<sup>1</sup> The reason for him – and his flat flatmates – to have this particular flag was to show support for the upcoming pride week in Tbilisi, which had been organised by Tbilisi Pride. With the pride and the accompanying activities, Tbilisi Pride hoped to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and to gain some recognition, as the LGBTQ+ community has been mistreated and excluded from Georgia society. Thus, I brought the flag over, and after meeting my partner's Russian, Georgian, and Swedish-Syrian flatmates we attached the rainbow flag on my partner's balcony and made plans on how we could safely attend the pride activities and show our support to the community.<sup>2</sup> After a while, the flatmates were betting on how many complaints they would get for showing the rainbow flag so prominently. At that moment it occurred to me that displaying this flag could have bigger consequences than I initially thought. A day later, and besides getting some looks of disapproval from pedestrians walking by the balcony, our little act of resistance seemed to have gone by unnoticed. However, just then we received a message from the Georgian flatmate, who was alerting us that the flag made an appearance on Georgian national news (fig. 0.1). For a split second I felt that we did something important, but I also knew that with this appearance on the news, from which the location of the apartment was recognisable for the neighbourhood, the potential of possible backlash was heightened. This became reality when a large group of men woke up everyone in the apartment by shouting threats in Georgian and by banging on the front door while trying to unlock it. While the Georgian flat mate was shouting back at the group of men, we decided to remove the flag. Some time passed and eventually the group of men left the apartment building and finally got back to the taxi they came with. We, on the other hand, sat at the kitchen table for an hour and were discussing the events of the night, questioning what exactly happened, and thinking about other possible

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<sup>1</sup> For brevity I prefer to use the term LGBTQ+. It is short for the acronym 'LGBTQIA,' which represents an array of identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/allies. Throughout this thesis it can occur that I will use the terms LGBTQ+ synonymously with 'queer.'

<sup>2</sup> Eventually, due to other social protest in Georgia in June, the first Pride Week was canceled and delayed.

scenarios. What if we did not lock the door? What if we decided not to remove the flag? What shall we do with the flag?



Figure 0.1 © TV Pirveli (2019, June 6). Translation: 'Vasadze decrees' 'Tbilisi Pride' and threats.

It was on this night that we found ourselves in a situation that is indicative of a longer tradition of heated debates over LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia between conservative groups claiming to safeguard traditional and religious values and LGBTQ+ and human rights activist that mostly consist of the younger – more liberal – generation. This public debate reached its low-point on May 17, 2013 when thousands of civilians led by Georgian Orthodox priest violently attacked a small group of gay rights demonstrators who were commemorating the International Day Against Homophobia in the public space of Tbilisi (Roth 2013). Even though Georgia decriminalised homosexuality in 2000 and adopted a law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in 2014, the exclusion of and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people is still prevalent today.

## Introducing Research Objective and Research Question

The vulnerability of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community to physical violence, public exclusion and discrimination raises the question of why this community has fallen outside of what is alleged to be a normative notion of being a human. To look at this in a bigger picture, then, what rights to



life, liberty, and expression people who do not fit the norms that has been set in a society have? Why are some bodies protected, considered grievable, while other bodies are exposed to violence and discrimination? How is knowledge about certain bodies produced? And by whom? These questions are essential when thinking about today's violence and are subsequently also the motives of many social and political movements that are (re)claiming their agency and autonomy. Indeed, with social protest bodies play a significant role on different levels. Protesters prominently appear as an assembly of bodies. Hereby, the bodily and hence physical component of an assembly gathering in a public space is already in itself politically meaningful (Butler 2015, 18). The body is not only present in the act of protesting itself; the body is also often an important subject of social protest. As Judith Butler explains, the claims of rights over the autonomy of our bodies is important to many movements: "[...] essential to many political movements is the claim of bodily integrity and self-determination. It is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense our own and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies" (2004, 25). That the body is pivotal to many movements is also evident with movements that attempt to deracialise, decolonise, and desexualise bodies imprinted by certain normalisations. However, to follow Butler's line of thought, with practices of resistance, protests and demonstrations we expose our bodies to the gaze and touch of others, which shows the public dimension of the body as well as its vulnerability (ibid., 26).

This study seeks to contribute to an already extensive body of work on the concept of the body and the way it is used discursively. Given the resurgence of social protests and socio-political movements across the world in the past decade, and the fact that in today's world violence is an everyday reality, the question of which bodies matter is profoundly relevant. More specifically, I want to research the vulnerabilities of the bodies of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community as a form of resistance. I would like to answer the following research question: *How can the vulnerability of bodies of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community enact forms of public resistance to socio-political discourses which shape that vulnerability?* In order to examine what these socio-political discourses entail it is important to relate these to geopolitical, religious, and sociocultural factors. This will provide me with a better understanding of how these discourses are depriving queer bodies from social/cultural/political/economical structures they depend on and are decimating their livelihoods. One of the key terms that describe this matter more clearly is 'precarity,' which Butler defines as "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social

and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (2009, 25).

## Theoretical Frameworks

Whereas the sociality of the body had previously been addressed in scientific studies in anthropology (Douglas 1970), sociology (Goffman 1959, Bourdieu 1984, Turner 1984), feminist theory and gender/queer studies (Butler 1990, Haraway 1985), cultural studies (Mulvey 1975), philosophy (Merleau-Ponty 1945, de Beauvoir 1949, Foucault 1977), and fashion studies (Entwistle 2000), its connection with social protest/resistance and vulnerability still leaves open the possibility for further research. This means that most theorists I will draw on in my thesis do not specifically relate their account of the human body to protest or vulnerability, but I have nonetheless attempted to draw on some concepts and implications of the mentioned theoretical perspectives for my thesis. Each chapter of this thesis will have one focus that is complemented by a theory. This means that my thesis consists of interlocking theoretical frameworks.

The first theory that will be introduced in this thesis is Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower,’ which means power over life. This concept sheds a light on how bodies are sites of social control and discipline in spaces infused with power relations (Foucault 1990 [1976], 139). Using this concept as one of my main theoretical frameworks, Foucault’s work can help me to trace how certain socio-political discourses in Georgia exert social control over the population (i.e. body politics) and the individual body via systematic medical and legal regulations of life (e.g. reproduction, family purity, sexual acts). What also is relevant here, is the work *Homo Sacer* (1988) by Giorgio Agamben, which takes up and redevise Foucault’s biopolitics. He argues how via biopolitical measures citizens can be stripped from their rights (*‘bios’*), excluded from the political/social domain, and thereby being reduced to their natural ‘bare life’ (*‘zoē’*) (1998, 1).<sup>3</sup> Another theorist that draws on Foucault’s biopower is Achille Mbembe’s concept of ‘necropolitics’ (2003). Here, the focus from the power over life is shifted towards the power over death. As such, Mbembe analyses how different contemporary forms of necropolitics forces some bodies to live in precarious conditions. He hereby poses the question of which bodies are considered disposable and

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<sup>3</sup> Both the work by Foucault and Agamben were already anticipated by second-wave feminism, wherein feminist body politics redefined the female body in political rather than biological terms. The same goes for racial politics, whereby movement such as Black Power and the Civil Right Movement reclaimed and decolonised bodies that were inscribed with racist normalisations.

ungrievable and which bodies are not.

The question asked by Mbembe is also posed by Judith Butler, who in her later work re-evaluates the human body in relation to vulnerability as a means to resist prevailing norms. Butler's concept of 'vulnerability' will be another prominent theory in my thesis. According to her, it is necessary to understand that humans as embodied beings are ontologically dependent on "environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance" (Butler 2016, 21). Here, the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is visible. With his phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty foregrounds the idea that to be a body is to be of the world, a world which is occupied with other embodied subjects and objects (2002 [1945], 171]. He hereby emphasises that via one's bodily position in the spatial world, one is exposed to the gaze and touch of others and comes thereby to know and experience the world. Merleau-Ponty's work will provide me with a steadier foundation to explain what Butler means with her argument about how human beings are dependent on and interrelated to their spatial environment and other embodied beings. For Butler we are all made vulnerable to various systems which precede our existence in the world and thereby structure how we act, how we identify ourselves and our relationship with others. But if vulnerability is seen as an ontological category that characterizes us equally, we must then think about how certain political or cultural powers produce vulnerability to discredit specific social groups. In her work Butler invites us to stop considering vulnerability as weakness, but instead view it as a force that can be translated into claims of agency that might forge resistance. Hereby, Butler's analysis on vulnerability helps me examining how the Georgian LGBTQ+ people, in showing their precarious conditions collectively, draw effective force from this vulnerability.

Another theoretical concept that will help me to study my research question more thoroughly is the role of the public space and sphere. Public space is relevant because the denial of the LGBTQ+ community's right to appear and assemble in public space is one of the larger battles in Georgia's LGBTQ+ protests. Jürgen Habermas (1962) considers the public sphere to be the basic element of democracy and sees it as the realm of society where the exchange of socio-political matters takes place, where public opinion is formed, and wherein all citizens can assemble equally.<sup>4</sup> However, what counts as a public sphere is also constituted by those people in society that are excluded. This means that for many of social and cultural movements, they must find ways to

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<sup>4</sup> This equality, and thereby leaving power relations behind, is a regulative ideal for Habermas rather than a reality. One of the most common criticisms of Habermas is that by postulating that equality, he is simply ignoring the existing inequality in society.

assemble to advocate for their rights to appear, assemble, and political express themselves freely in the public space/sphere. And lastly, I will integrate the politics of in/visibility into my thesis wherein I will refute the dominant – mainly Western – idea that a heightened visibility of excluded societal groups equals social liberation. Just a visibility can be encountered as a site of resistance, it also can have regulatory effects in the way how bodies (are made to) appear in the public sphere or are made invisible.

## Methodology

As my methodological framework I use discourse analysis, which provides insights into the way how texts in the largest possible sense are able to show meaning-making processes that construct particular social relations, social identities, and versions of social realities. In other words, discourse analysis explores how specific views and implications are constructed as real, universal, and natural. In any epoch what can and cannot be expressed is, by definition, limited. This can be due to suppression or censorship, or potential ways of beings which were simply not possible to imagine at that time. This means that while some statements are taken as truth, other statements are suppressed (Griffin 2013, 92). Discourse analysis as a method, then, is concerned with how discourses, produced by and through power relations and institutions (e.g. medical, political, religious) replicate visions of the world. Hereby, discourse analysts critically engage with examining and unravelling discursive practices in order to reveal truths and knowledge, as well as how they shape perceptions and generate effects (ibid., 103).

Text, as noted, should be considered in its largest possible meaning, so as not only to include written texts, but also all communication of meaning, including objects. This can vary from printed, transcribed, and verbal conversations such as newspapers, speeches, and interviews to visual images such as photos, films, and webpages. To specify, when looking at newspapers we may also look at the lay-out and the relation between news photo and the accompanied text. Important to note is that the term ‘discourse analysis’ is used in all kinds of social science disciplines. This means that it knows a variety of approaches which cannot be described briefly. Bearing in mind what kind of knowledge I seek to uncover in my research approach, I consider the ‘critical discourse analysis’ the most fitting to my research.

Jørgensen and Phillips argue that within the critical discourse analytical movement, multiple approaches exist that have developed theory and method to examine the relationships between discourse and social and cultural phenomena in social domains. Since there are similarities

in these approaches, but also some differences, Jørgensen and Phillips foreground the five common features. These are: the understanding that discursive practices (through which texts are produced and consumed) contributes to the constitution of the social world; discourse is both constitutive and constituted; the focus on the languages used should be analysed within its social context; the implication that discursive practices contribute to the (re)production of unequal power relations between social groups; critical research committed to social change (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 60-64). Even though there are some large differences between the approaches, I follow these five commonalities among the approaches while doing my research. To elaborate, I believe that certain socio-political discursive practices do indeed constitute the dire situation in Georgia for the LGBTQ+ rights and therefore I will trace this in a wider social and geopolitical context. By doing this, I examine to what extent these discursive practices (re)produce and legitimise social inequality within social groups in Georgia. By undermining the self-evident nature of these discursive legitimations of social inequality, with my thesis I – hopefully – contribute to raise awareness.

What kind of ‘texts’ am I going to analyse? As I already mentioned, discourses are articulated through a range of images, texts, and practices that produce meanings. The relevance of texts depends largely upon the perspectives in which I will approach the texts, including also the specific social issues in question and the theoretical framework I draw upon. With this in mind, I will read texts inscribed with meaning that reflect the public debate on LGBTQ+ rights in the social and political space of Georgia. Here recent media texts (e.g. news articles, social media posts, photo’s) and (litigation) reports provide me with useful reflections and insights on the way how queerness, sexuality, and gender in Georgia’s society are thought of today. It also sketches the decimating conditions of Georgian LGBTQ+ people and the position of anti-gay societal groups. A potential drawback is that I can neither write, read nor speak Georgian, which already limits an amount of texts that I could examine. Nonetheless, organisations such as Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG), Tbilisi Pride, and various news sites such as Open Caucasus Media (OC Media) or Civil.ge report on political and social issues in the region of Georgian in the English language. However, here it is important that I attempt to be transparent about how these news channels are supported as some of the news platforms are funded by Western organisations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, almost every media outlet is sponsored. This does not mean that they cannot be journalistically independent. Georgia is simply too small to make an English-language based platform profitable. I agree that these news platforms often have a critical view of the government or society, however, this does not mean that this criticism is handed over by their donors.

Moreover, international organisations such as Council of Europe, ILGA-Europe, and Amnesty International also reports on the protection of human rights in Georgia focusing specifically on the violence and discriminations on Georgian LGBTQ+ people. Again, it is important to consider that these organisations are working within a liberal framework.

In the third chapter especially, I will look into documentary photograph visualising the recent societal debate of LGBTQ+ visibility and rights in Georgia. To efficiently approach these visual images, I will explore what meaning is created within these photos (i.e. texts) and subsequently how they function within culture (Walton 2012, 45). Here, Roland Barthes' semiotics will provide me with the useful tools to do so. Although I am not extensively describing Barthes' method in this thesis, it is still plausible to explain his study of signs. Barthes elaborates that every text consists of a sign that can be decoded. Here the sign is constituted by two elements, namely a 'signifier,' which is the material substance or the sensory, and a 'signified' which is a cultural concept or idea evoked by the signifier (Barthes 1972 [1957], 111-112). The signifier and the signified are two distinct but indivisible concepts, and when they are combined during the process of signification they form the sign. With his semiotics Barthes shows that texts are not inherently natural or essential, but rather are imbued with meaning that is indicative of dominant values and beliefs.

In conclusion, I should discuss one further constraint to my method. The observations that are going to be made through critical discourse analysis are dependent on argumentation rather than on empirical data which is gained through quantitative research or other qualitative techniques. To elaborate, using discourse analysis as my method does not provide me with empirical data such as participant observations (i.e. interviews) of those 'protesting bodies' that give me a more direct insight into the embodied experience of being excluded to assembly in public space, or of being in social protest against those powerful forces. Since discourse analysis is largely focused on written/spoken/visualised language, it rarely tells the whole stories, or it does not enable scholars to concretely define the mechanism underlying some socio-cultural phenomenon. Despite the fact it was impossible for me to do fieldwork in Tbilisi, participate in a protest, or conduct interviews, I do believe that through discourse analysis I can study how socio-political discourses – the vulnerable and agentic body – and public space/sphere are interrelated. My approach is firmly grounded in the idea that texts reveal attitudes, principles, and meanings and that decoding them advances knowledge on the circulation of knowledge and beliefs in society.

## Western Perspective – Situated Knowledge

Considering Georgia's long history as a former Soviet State and its continuation of military and politically threat from Russia, it can be difficult to find my "right" place and voice. As I am born and raised in a Western European country, I do not want to approach this thesis as an imperial project that argues within the paradigm of the 'West versus the rest,' which situates the West at the forefront of progress and modernity in contrast to non-Western states that are classified as not modern [enough]. Owing to global capitalism, the increase exchanges via communication technologies, and the recent politics on sexual equality that found its roots in the 1960s in the West, the alleged tolerance towards sexual minorities is incorporated as an indication of progress (Kahlina 2015, 74). This also led to positioning homophobic attitudes as being against this Western civilisation process. So, how should I, if that is even possible or plausible, be objective as I am also taking a critical strand as a methodological approach?

With these questions in mind, I would like to briefly touch upon Donna Haraway's work, which has an interdisciplinary aim to transcend seemingly clear distinctions and to deal more with complex, hybrid, and bordering phenomena (Åsberg 2009, 33). She herewith advocates for a feminist approach of science that provides a critical tool for analysis that departs from fixed results and moves towards a knowledge production that is open for ambiguities (ibid., 36). In her essay "Situated Knowledges" (1988), Haraway contends that appropriating the vision of the less powerful and claiming to understand their position is not feasible. The same goes for forms of relativism which, according to Haraway, have a totalising character, as she argues that "relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally" (ibid., 584). To move away from this seemingly paradoxical universalist and relativists account of knowledge, the alternative for seeking knowledge is by taking up a partial and locatable perspective as it offers "to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination" (ibid., 585). Since only "partial perspective promises objective vision," situated knowledge, thus, offers the opportunity to locate ourselves and to make knowledge claims more responsible (ibid., 583). For Haraway the objectivity question in feminism is that there is no perfect, innocent, feminist subject position conferring privilege, rather, every position can be critical as all knowledge is always political. Haraway also argues that all objects (humans and nonhumans) and the researchers involved with these objects contribute to knowledge (ibid., 591).

Hereby, situated knowledges emphasises the social, political as well as material conditions that enable knowledges. The production of knowledge cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which this knowledge is produced. That is to say, I have to acknowledge, to be accountable, and to understand my own position in the world, and the context in which I make my claims to knowledge. In doing so, it opens a possibility to produce knowledge more efficiently than when I claim to have a neutral perspective. All in all, even though I am aware of the political nature of history, and the fact that some voices dominate others, it is essential for me that I approach my observations, my questions and my quest for knowledge with a critical and self-reflective attitude throughout this thesis.

## Thesis Outline

My primary research question will be supplemented by sub-questions. I will introduce these sub-questions by outlining the structure of the thesis. In the first chapter I will take Georgia's geopolitical context into account to summarise the unstable political and social situation of the country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia became part of a discursive geopolitical tug-of-war between the Russian Federation and the European Union who each aim to exert influence in the region. Seeking to move more towards a Western model of democracy by reforming the law and by implementing more progressive policies, Georgia attempts to enhance its relationship with the EU. However, Georgia's straining relation with Russia remains prevalent in society. Besides the military presence of Russia that occupies twenty percent of Georgia's country, Russia continues to politically exert influence in its bordering country. Thereby, the Soviet legacy remains tangible, especially for the older generations who grew up within the socialist system, who speak Russian, and who share the same cultural/conservative values. In addressing Georgia's geopolitical situation, I will look how these ideological differences between the two larger geopolitical entities also is reflected in the existing disparity in Georgia's society. Here, I will examine how sociocultural factors such as religion and nationalism influence the prevailing public opinion towards Georgian LGBTQ+ people. The first chapter will be examined in the theoretical framework of Foucault's concept 'biopower.' The sub-question posed in this chapter is: how are Georgian LGBTQ+ bodies made vulnerable by discourses that shape that vulnerability by decimating their liveability?

In the second chapter I will apply Butler's account on (bodily) vulnerability to analyse how it mobilises the Georgian LGBTQ+ people to social protest. Here, I will also touch upon the public



space as it is, what Butler calls, part of “the infrastructural goods” people are dependent on for a liveable life (2016, 21). The marginalisation of particular kinds of bodies, and their right to assembly in public space, is one of the main problems the Georgian LGBTQ+ community is protesting against. Here, LGBTQ+ activists, such as those involved in Tbilisi Pride, fight for their right to be counted as bodies that matter, and as such to appear in public space as they are. Dominant groups, on the other hand, object to their appearance in public space, resulting in their exclusion and invisibility. Body politics and public space are connected in that, as mentioned before, embodiment means being of the world, and normative ideas over which bodies are allowed to appear in public space shape the bodily appearance of marginalised groups. In this chapter I will look at how vulnerability can enact forms of resistance. The sub-question that I will pose is: what is the role of the public space in the threats faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia by opposing dominant forces, and how is the community itself resisting this exclusion through social protest?

Given that Georgian LGBTQ+ rights activists, and the community in general, gained more visibility in the media and became a prominent topic in the societal debate, I will investigate the ambivalence of this increased visibility in the third chapter. Here I will focus on the social turmoil regarding the Georgian premiere of the film *And Then We Danced* (2019) by Swedish-Georgian director Levan Akin. Whereas the queer-themed film seeks to facilitate awareness on Georgian LGBTQ+ people by means of humanising them and making them more recognisable to the public, it subsequently provoked social contestations from conservative groups in society who eventually attempted to stop the screenings of the movie. Using the politics of in/visibility and its ambiguities as the central concept in this chapter, the film’s premiere in Georgia provides me with an interesting case on how an increasing visibility not only can assist forms of social protest, but also can lead to further cycles of exclusion and discrimination. The sub-questions I seek to answer in this chapter are: in what ways can artistic product, such as the film *And Then We Danced*, improve visibility for the Georgian LGBTQ+ people living in vulnerability, and what are the possible problems and dangers of raising such a socially sensitive subject in a conservative society such as Georgia?

# Chapter 1

## Geopolitics, Homophobia, and the Liveability of LGBTQ+ community in Georgia

Georgia, a post-Soviet country in the South Caucasus, has had its fair share of geopolitical difficulties. Since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has been attempting a transition towards a more democratic system of government. Despite these attempts to restructure its political system, society in general remains largely conservative. This is noticeable in how the Georgian LGBTQ+ community is one of the most marginalised groups of society (Mestvirishvili et al. 2016; Council of Europe 2018; Women's Initiatives Supporting Group 2019), although homosexuality was decriminalised in 2000 and the law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination was adopted in 2014. In this chapter I will outline a background to the persistence of widespread homophobic attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people in Georgian society. To do so, I will take sociocultural factors into account. These include topics such as global or regional geopolitics, nationalism, and religion, all of which influence the prevailing public opinion towards LGBTQ+ rights and shape the precarious conditions the community lives in.

I will begin by elaborating relevant aspects of Michel Foucault's influential work *Histoire de la Sexualité* (1976-1984). Focusing on his theoretical concept of 'biopower' will provide me with an understanding of how power structures exert control over the Georgian population, and therewith how socio-political discourses deprive bodies that deviate from the prevailing norms from support, leaving them in precarious conditions. Before I apply Foucault's theoretical framework to the example of LGBTQ+ people in Georgia, I first will examine Georgia's geopolitical context in order to draw a more comprehensive picture on how the question of LGBTQ+ rights has become one of the main societal conflicts in contemporary Georgia. Thereafter, I seek to analyse the sub-question of this chapter, which asks how Georgian LGBTQ+ bodies are made vulnerable by discourses that shape that vulnerability by decimating their liveability. By doing this, I aim to situate the struggle of the LGBTQ+ community within its social, (geo)political, and cultural climate.

## Part I – Power over Life or Death

Throughout his work Foucault tries to explain how power operates. For him, power is interesting because it can be both productive as well as oppressive. An important concept that Foucault often uses throughout his work is discourse, which he defines as a “regime of truth:”

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (1980, 131).

Foucault’s notion of discourse shows that in a given context a specific set of statements are maintained through regulated practices that govern conditions for how to think and speak, determine what is considered to be true or false, and what knowledge is. Here, language – speech and writing – is significant. Foucault is fascinated by how discourses are determined by a set of mainly internalised rules and normalisations that arise from the historical circumstances one finds oneself in. This set of rules and therewith knowledges change over time and with it the discourse. For this reason, Foucault developed a methodological approach which he termed ‘archaeology of knowledge’ (1969). He considered it important for there to be an archaeology of knowledge in order to dig out the discourses of previous times and the history of their development. Although this approach is an efficient method for getting insights on how discourses changes over time, it is restricted in the sense that it is merely concerned with history as a coherent narrative. It hereby ignores the contingency of embedded positions. Therefore, in his later work, Foucault complemented his archaeological approach with a genealogical approach, which prefers to approach history as a “complex human construction” and questions therewith the idea that “historical discourses can mediate the past” (Walton, 2012: 163;164). This approach suggests that discourses are not simply determined or produced, but rather depend on the mechanisms of power they are connected to. This means that what is considered true or false is not a universal given, but is fluid and depends on the system these claims are situated in. Here, some claims are more powerful than others. Whoever has the authority to determine what can be talked about in a discourse, and what claims are true or false, also determines what can be known, how to think, and who we are. This shows “that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a

field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 1995 [1975], 27).

In *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), Foucault contends that there has been a shift from a pre-modern society towards a modern society, whereby he further examines the techniques of social control that characterises these types of societies. According to him, within pre-modern societies there was repressive sovereign power that operates through fear as there is a constant threat of punishment. He explains this further through the example of the spectacle of physical punishment in which the loyalty of the spectators is enforced through intimidation (Foucault 1995, 33;55). Thus, power reinforces one into a subordinate subject when it accepts the rule of the sovereign.<sup>6</sup> From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this spectacle society transitioned towards a modern society that used a disciplinary mechanism to exert power. With the example of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon as the metaphor of modern society, Foucault explains how this disciplinary mechanism exercises power over the bodies of subjects by managing their bodies and behaviour based on the assumption that they potentially are being monitored (1995, 201-202). Thus, this disciplinary mechanism is a way to govern subjects not through sovereign force, but by means of the subjects managing their own conduct. The reason for this transition of power mechanism, according to Foucault, is the rise of the modern form of population and statistics that gained momentum from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward (1990 [1976], 18).<sup>7</sup>

In *Histoire de la Sexualité* (1976-1984) Foucault proposes that the history of sexuality should be written from the “viewpoint of a history of discourses” (Foucault 1990, 69). He refutes

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<sup>6</sup> This sovereign mode of government involves obedience to the law of a central authority figure. Social contract theorist Thomas Hobbes, for instance, writes in *Leviathan* (1651) that social unity is achieved by a social contract that established a commonwealth. Here the thought is that an ideal society (i.e. commonwealth) is created in which all individuals are united as subjects under the absolute power of the sovereign who is responsible for protecting its subjects. However, there is a kind of a justification of why and when the sovereign has power over its subjects. For Hobbes, this justification is that the sovereign has power because without any rule, humans will find themselves in a state of nature, which for Hobbes famously consisted of a war of all against all (2009 [1651], 70 & 71). The conceptualisation of juridical power (i.e. the power of law over citizens) is that type of power that can ban certain actions and rights and enforce the constant threat of violence when subjects breaks the covenant.

<sup>7</sup> In his work, Foucault emphasises the term ‘population’ as a new specific phenomenon of modern times. Before this redefinition, population had another meaning. As he regularly put the emphasis on the term, Foucault shows that in its modern usage it becomes analytically important: “One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of ‘population’ as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with a ‘people,’ but with a ‘population,’ [...]” (1990, 25).

‘the repressive hypothesis,’ which claims that from the 17<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century certain kinds of sexuality have been repressed and silenced in Western societies. Instead, Foucault claims, the exact opposite happened at that time as there was a proliferation of discourses on sexuality (ibid., 18). Sexuality is not just simply something that power represses, but something that can play a pivotal role in exerting power. To elaborate on this, with the arrival of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the economic and political problem that was caused by the growing population led to more sophisticated techniques of power (ibid., 25). The government perceived that it was not only dealing with subjects, but with a population that has its own variables. For society, then, it was the first time that the future was tied to the way the individual made use of his sexuality and sex (ibid., 26). It was therefore considered to be essential for the state to know what was happening with regards to sex in society. Hence, the abundance of diverse mechanisms for attaining the “subjugation of bodies” and – to a larger degree – the control of populations, which introduces the new era of what Foucault conceptualises as ‘biopower’ (ibid., 140;141).

Biopower, i.e. power over life, refers to an array of regulations that monitor people’s behaviour and thereby manipulate biological features of the human bodies into a powerful, political strategy that govern the entire population (Foucault 2003, 16). Biopower is completely disciplinary and operates along two intertwined axes. The first axis is the “anatomo-politics of the human body” that centres on the human body as a docile machine that is disciplined by various systems. The second axis is “a bio-politics of the human body,” or ‘body politics,’ that via regulating controls focuses on the species body (Foucault 1990, 139). Thus, sexuality gradually became a subject to medical, legal, religious, political and educational controls. This includes procedures on fertility, reproduction, birth and death rates, frequency of (mental) illness, and sex. The power relations between the governing, modern institutions of society and the way how discourses exert social control over the body thereby simultaneously regulate and normalise certain types of sexual behaviour. As biopower is directing the behaviour of the individual within a larger political rationality that impacts the whole population, subjects must internalise the main narrative of the prevailing discourse and conduct themselves in accordance with it. In sum, biopower became the new power mechanism that exerts control over society on both the level of the population (i.e. body politics) and the individual.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> To clarify: whereas discipline controls and constitutes the bodies of individuals, biopolitics does this with the population at large. Biopower, then, is the overall power mechanism.

The realisation that sex can be economically useful encourage an increase of discourses on sex attempting to limit sexual identity to biological, reproductive sexual practices in order to “ensure population, to reproduce labour capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations” (ibid., 36-37). This means that these discourses are directed at reducing non-reproductive sexual practices. That is to say, expelling those sexualities that are “not amenable to this strict economy of reproduction: to say no to the unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation” (ibid., 36). Through these discourses, sanctions against these so-called perversions were multiplied as they were violations of the “natural” practice of marriage as well as the law. Those perversities that fell outside the norm include the mentally ill, homosexuals, and criminals (ibid., 38).

As the study of sexuality was gradually made into a science, homosexuality was invented in modern Western societies, as well as perception of homosexuality as a problem. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the homosexual became “a personage,” as psychiatrists started to analyse it from a medical perspective (Foucault 1990, 43). For Foucault “the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized” and appeared as one of the forms of sexuality (ibid.). This emphasises the Foucauldian claim that the medicalisation of sex is not a form of repression (i.e. repressive hypothesis), as it produces new subjectivities for different sexual orientations (Walton 2012, 168). Since the body was subjected to medical checks, homosexuality was detected as a “symptom” found in “the depths of the organism, or on the surface, or among all the signs of behavior” (Foucault 1990, 44). The power mechanism, then, gives homosexuality a reality as it was not only implanted in bodies but also made into a classification that consequently, and quite strategically, was incorporated into the individual. Here, the discourse on sex claiming to speak from a neutral viewpoint of science is interesting, as in fact this science was made up of falsifications and was primarily concerned with sexual aberrations (ibid., 53). Moreover, these discourses on sex are based on a science subordinated to what Foucault describes as, “the imperatives of a morality whose divisions are reiterated under the guise of the medical norm” (ibid.). Hereby, these discourses build on constructed scientific knowledge and capitalises on people’s fear by ascribing allegedly sexual perversities, such as homosexuality, as not only a threat to the individual but to the whole population of the society. Therefore, Foucault notes, societies attempted to cleanse themselves from these “defective individuals” (ibid., 54). This means that all these newly invented alternative sexual practices are signified as perversities

deviating from the monogamous, reproductive, heterosexual, and marital norm (Walton 2012, 169). Whereas the discourses tried to reduce these allegedly perverse pleasures by condemning them, the opposite happened, as the specification and fixation on sexual deviations did not lead to repressing them, but rather to helping them flourish (Foucault 1990, 53).

Interesting is how Foucault describes the transition between power mechanisms: “one might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (ibid., 138). The part “disallow it to the point of death” raises the question of whether biopower is really that distinctive from sovereign power, or if it is rather meshed up with it. To elaborate, in “Il Faut Défendre la Société” lectures, held at the Collège de France (1975-1976), Foucault explains that with the emergence of biopower, state racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power (2003, 254). In his words, state racism is “a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products. This is the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization” (ibid., 62). In the name of biological and historical urgency, Foucault explains, racisms of the state are justified and are embedded in the truth (1990, 54). Those people or groups who deviate from the norm pose a threat to the biological heritage are differentiated from those who hold power and are entitled to define these normalisations. Therefore, racism gives the normalising, modern state the prerequisite that makes killing acceptable (Foucault 2003, 256). Here, killing does not simply mean murdering, but entails forms of indirect murder, such as “exposing someone to the death, increasing the risk of death for some people [...] political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (ibid.). This thus includes politically forcing certain populations into precarious conditions by depriving them of economic and social networks (Butler 2009, 25). Hence, biopower became the anchor point for different varieties of racism, constructing the dividing line in modern states between what is part of the population and what is not.

In his work *Homo Sacer* (1998), Giorgio Agamben takes up Foucault’s analysis on the transition of power mechanism described above. In a similar, yet different vein, he utilises – and redevise – Foucault’s biopolitics. Whereas for Foucault the emergence of bio politics in modern societies is distinguished from sovereign power, Agamben asserts explicitly that sovereign power in itself is already biopolitical as he explains: “it can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitical is at least as old as the sovereign exception” (Agamben 1998, 6). Thus, according to Agamben, biopower does

not signify a division in the history of Western politics but moves towards the political centre of the nation-state (ibid). Here, he uses Carl Schmitt's (*Politische Theologie* 1922) notion on the paradox of sovereignty, in which the sovereign is simultaneously outside and inside the juridical order. This can be explained through Schmitt's concept of 'state of exception,' whereby the sovereign decides on the exception when the state perceives an imminent threat. For Agamben modern (Western) democracies constantly incorporate this rule of state of exception whereby the state's law can be suspended indefinitely. This is noticeable when via biopolitical measures, any citizen can be discarded from a proper political life (i.e. '*bios*') and excluded from the political domain. Agamben here uses the figure in Roman law, '*homo sacer*,' to describe the subject who is banned from the community and who can be killed with impunity. Deprived of all his rights and other political qualifications, the *homo sacer* is reduced to its bare, naked life (i.e. '*zoē*'). For Agamben, the exclusion of the *homo sacer* is a prerequisite for sovereignty from which it derives its existence.<sup>9</sup>

Achille Mbembe also relates sovereignty in relation to the Foucauldian concept of biopower. He explains that power defines itself in relation to a biological field in order to take control of it. This enables "the subdivision of the population into subgroups," controlling thereby the split between the living and the dead (Mbembe 2003, 16). Instead of biopower, Mbembe prefers his concept 'necropolitics' as it encompasses contemporary forms of subjugation and violence. Necropolitics is a technology that has the capacity to manage, enslave, and subjugate life to the

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<sup>9</sup> Agamben makes the distinction between the Greek concepts of '*zoē*' and '*bios*.' *Zoē* signifies the general natural living of all living beings, or 'bare life.' *Bios* indicates "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group," or, the human life in the political sphere dignified by language (Agamben 1998, 1). For Agamben, *bios* is a process of exclusion of bare life (i.e. *zoē*). But precisely with this constant exclusion, *zoē* is also included. To explain this paradox, Agamben uses the example of the '*homo sacer*,' which describes a figure in Roman law that may be killed with impunity, and "yet not be sacrificed" (ibid., 8). The life of the *homo sacer* is thus "included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion" (ibid.). But who decides who can be excluded, or killed, legally? It is with the concept of 'state of exception,' in which the sovereign decides who are banned from the political domain and are merely recognised as biological beings. Agamben asserts that with modernity especially, and here he draws on Foucault's conceptualisation of biopolitics, the measurement of people's biological qualities reduced them to their bare life. However, different from Foucault, Agamben asserts that in modern societies the concepts of *zoē* and *bios* are intertwined. By claiming this, he criticises the (Western) democratic nation-states by explaining that these democracies are totalitarian states that appear as democracies and which are constantly implementing the logic of the state of exception. This is noticeable in the way how the rights of any citizen can be withdrawn at any moment (e.g. when its life is perceived as a threat to the nation-state) and is thereby banned to bare life where possible violence is justified. To strengthen his argument, Agamben uses the system of the concentration camps in the 20th century as an example (1998, 166) to show how the totalitarian system works and incorporates the state of exception as a temporal suspension from "the normal state of law" (Mbembe 2003, 12).



power of death and is connected to the increased utilisation of death in our contemporary world (ibid., 39). The dominant project here is “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (ibid., 14). Mbembe also draws on how necropolitics attempts to create “death worlds,” regarding some bodies as subjected to exist in different states between life or death, conferring upon them “the status of *living dead*” (ibid., 40). Moreover, he suggests that with necropolitics, the “lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred” (ibid., 40).<sup>10</sup> Thus, according to Mbembe, death is central to socio-political power, racism, and resistance. Some bodies are marked as disposable and for death while others are cultivated for live and reproduction. Even though Mbembe’s work focuses on major technologies of destruction, his concept also provides a useful tool to uncover daily practice that lead to the diminishment of certain subgroups. Among them, for instance, are LGBTQ+ people who daily experience social exclusion, homo/transphobia, alongside other forms of subjection. The collection of essays *Queer Necropolitics* (2014) builds on Mbembe’s work and thereby tries to make sense of “the many forms of death that accompany and condition queer claims to life, visibility and protection” (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, & Posocco 2014, 19).

Elaborating further on the concept of ‘resistance,’ Foucault contends that there is always the possibility of resistance, no matter how oppressive a certain system may be, as he explains: “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 1990, 95). This resistance is never external to power, but rather manifest in different places and aligned with the dynamics of power change. His idea of discourse is that it can be both an instrument and an effect of power (ibid., 100-101). This suggests that not only can a discourse reinforce power, it also “undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (ibid.). To come back to the topic of homosexuality, the formation of the scientific knowledge that refers to this sexuality was regulated by power mechanisms to the extent that individuals started to recognise themselves in this categorisation of homosexuality. Just as there are a many form of social control advanced alongside the discourses of homosexuality, there is also the possibility of a reverse discourse. Foucault points out that

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<sup>10</sup> To set out his argument, Mbembe touches upon today’s technologies of destruction and civilian massacres. An interesting point he makes is the logic of martyrdom, which according to Mbembe is “epitomised by the figure of suicide bombers,” who use the killing of one’s body to kill others and thereby using death as a means of winning (ibid., 36). To take hold over your own death, and thereby taking away that power from your dominator, is hereby one of the extreme forms of resistance.

homosexuality “began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (ibid., 101). Through resistance, homosexuals can disengage from socio-cultural discourses that condemn and exclude homosexuality. By suppressing the effect of power to control the homosexual bodies, health and liveability, homosexuals started to claim their rights. For instance, the Western LGBTQ+ activism emerged strongly in the late 1960s onwards. This gradually led to a shift in the power relations, which in turn enabled an advance of LGBTQ+ rights in most of the Western countries. These implementation of LGBTQ+ rights eventually became the marker of the Western humanitarian frameworks.

## Part II – Georgia’s Geopolitical Context

In this section I will elaborate on Georgia’s geopolitical context, as it influenced how the rapidly changed socio-political climate of Georgia, and concomitantly ingrained discourses regarding LGBTQ+ rights, came into being. Geopolitically, Georgia is torn between two larger geopolitical entities that both attempt to bring the region into their respective rationalities. Specifically, the region is caught between the increasing influence of the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Europeanisation on the one hand, and The Russian Federation, which considers the enlargement of the EU in its own vicinity provocative and threatening, on the other. Georgia’s relation with Russia has a long and tense history of occupation. In 1783 Georgia became a vassal state of the Russian Empire, and it was formally annexed in 1801. More than a century later, Georgia was briefly independent during the Russian Civil War (1919-1921). However, this time of independence did not last long as the Red Army occupied Georgia in 1921, overturning the first republic of Georgia and creating the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. It was not until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 that Georgia became an independent republic again.

The collapse of the Soviet Union severed many political and economic connections between Russia and Georgia. Simultaneously, Georgia lost its imports and exports with other former Soviet republics as well as the countries of the Warsaw pact, which led to an economic collapse (Dunn 2018, 226). Besides this, the civil wars in Georgia in the early 1990s engulfed the entire country in chaos. At the same time, the West did not pay too much attention to the Caucasus as it was too busy with the wars in the Balkans and the Middle East, expanding their spheres of influence without

contravening the treaties made with Russia. Despite the proliferation of strong nationalism, the series of civil wars did distort the nationalistic feeling in the country. This because the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, whose de facto independence is deeply premised on their relationship with Russia, wanted to become independent states. For these reasons, Georgia turned more inwards and became more isolated geopolitically. The political instability, nationalism, and economic difficulties created an unsteady climate in Georgia which was not compatible with the emergence of human rights-oriented groups (Rekhviashvili 2018, 209). Throughout this time, the Soviet residue of criminalising homosexuality remained enshrined in law in Georgia. This situation changed when at the end of the twentieth century NGOs connected to the West showed interest in supporting post-Soviet countries (ibid.). Here the support was oriented on the Western model of democracy and liberalism. With the turn of the new century and the new orientation to the West, Georgia decriminalised homosexuality in 2000.

The major turning point for Georgia was the 2003 Rose Revolution, after which newly elected president Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) changed Georgia's geopolitical orientation and economy. This revolution brought pro-Western oriented leaders who encouraged foreign investment as well as for Georgian businesses to trade outside the country's own borders. Simultaneously, Georgian politics started democratising, as new modernisation projects were introduced together with anticorruption policies, the reconstruction of state institutions, education, police reforms, and the tackling of unemployment and violations of human rights (Nodia 2005; Quinn 2007). The aim was rapprochement to the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, embodied in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU. Both had been increasingly expanded in the early 2000s. Becoming part of this alliance required proving Georgia's Europeanness. This meant not only working towards European legal frameworks or political institutions, but also connecting more closely in the cultural domain to align with the EU's rationale (Dunn 2018, 226). One might question whether it is desirable for Georgians to be forced to accept a way of life that many consider to be incommensurable with their own.

In the context of the EU, the deployment of LGBTQ+ rights are used as markers of progress in order to construct an hierarchical dichotomy between the tolerant West against the homophobic

Other, signifying non-Western cultures (Kahlina 2015, 74).<sup>11</sup> Here, the concept of ‘homonationalism’ (Puar 2007) uncovers how Western societies evaluate LGBTQ+ politics in order to target racialised, religious others and justify thereby xenophobic and racist practices based on prejudices. The EU’s performance is part of what Robert Kulpa (2014) conceptualise as ‘leveraged pedagogy,’ which implies that each country seeking to become an EU member state must meet a set of established conditions; protection of LGBTQ+ rights became one of these conditions. With this cultural hegemonic relation of power, then, prominent EU/Western states essentialise themselves as the knowledgeable role model that has to educate the post-communist countries in transition, to catch up with the progressive EU and its self-proclaimed universalities of tolerance, democracy and liberalism (Kulpa 2014, 431;432). This implies as if adopting Western values are the only way forward. However, there is a kind of irony in the way Western nations use LGBTQ+ rights as a criterion for tolerance and modernity. Following Foucault’s argument, sexual categories such as homosexuality were constituted in modern Western societies in order to reduce and condemn such non-reproductive sexualities in the first place. The humanitarian governmental practices of the EU to constantly define that LGBTQ+ people are in need of protection can be seen as another way to expand its biopolitics to monitor and regulate bodies outside its own border.

To gain credits with the EU, Georgia has to redefine the unequal citizenship of sexual minorities and grant them with equal social and political opportunity. One of the main impacts of the EU’s influence is manifest in gender related studies in Georgia, funded by the EU, as well as projects related to female empowerment and sexual diversity (Rekhviashvili 2018, 211). For example, in 2006 the Inclusive Foundation was established as the first formal Georgian LGBTQ+ rights organisation, which organises activities that advocated gender-and sexual equality in a hostile societal environment (ibid.). Although the European intervention of Georgia emphasised rapid societal, economical, and cultural transformations, it did not change the existing attitudes towards hegemonic gender norms that prevailed in society, but rather reinforced them (Dunn 2018, 228). As Katja Kahlina (2015) notes, the EUs externalisation of the discourses of sexual equality and human rights in non-Western countries also was joined with “heteronationalist, religious, and anti-EU discourses” that mobilised against this strive for equality (74). There was also a tension on

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<sup>11</sup> In the 2000s, the rights of sexual minorities progressively became an important premise in the debates of the EU. In 2006 and 2007, two European Parliament resolutions against homophobia were passed as to target homophobia in mainly East European countries (Kahlina 2015, 75).

the level of Georgia's national politics. Whereas some politicians wanted Georgia to become more European, making the accession to the EU and NATO the country's top priority, other politicians preferred Georgia to stay true to its traditional orientation (Dunn 2018, 229).

In the last decade, this tension entered the stage of a bigger geopolitical conflict. One of the major reasons for this was the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, which led to the semi-definitive breakaway of the pro-Russian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, thereby deepening the divide between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic alliance.<sup>12</sup> The conflict between these large political entities is also fought in the cultural domain, in which the Putin Administration adopted a new branding mechanism by advancing Russia's international image as the protector of traditional values. Consequently, this had massive implications for the regulations of gender identity and sexuality as the Duma unanimously passed Putin's anti-homopropaganda law in 2013 (Kirchick 2014). This law describes the prohibition of propaganda of "non-traditional sexual attitudes" to minors.<sup>13</sup> The adoption of this anti-homopropaganda law had an unsettling effect on any expression and discussion of homosexuality, which was evident in the increase of violent attacks and hate speech incidents on homosexuality by prominent spokespersons in Russia (ibid.). With this law, then, Russia has turned homophobia into a convenient tool for propagating traditional values, legitimising violations of basic human rights. Interestingly, within this narrative Putin has made use of his alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church, which allows him to capitalise on the Church's societal influence (Pomerantsev 2012). Using the traditional values argument, Putin has clarified his vision and belief that it is the state's responsibility to protect these values for the survival of the nation-state. Cai Wilkinson (2014) contends that Putin thereby stimulated the moral panic over homosexuality by "capitalising on the Russian population's wider fear about the future in the face of perceived demographic decline, concerns about living standards, and Russia's post-Cold War loss of international status" (2014, 367;368). By camouflaging the assaults on civil rights for gay citizens and falsifying them as measures to protect minors from

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<sup>12</sup> To clarify, 20 percent of Georgia is occupied by Russia.

<sup>13</sup> The specific law describes the following: "Distribution of information that is aimed at the formation among minors of non-traditional sexual attitudes, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations, misperceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations or enforcing information about non-traditional sexual relations that evokes interest to such relations [...]" (McDonald & Jefanova 2013, 3). Some years before the aforementioned law was adopted, Russia led a campaign on "traditional values" at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which was met with concerned responses on the vague formulation of traditional values, which were not only interpreted as religious traditions, but could also be easily implemented to legitimise human rights abuses in the country (UNHRC 2010: 10; Wilkinson 2014, 363).

inappropriate information and non-traditional sexualities, Putin has been able to gain support from the population.<sup>14</sup> The idea of safeguarding traditional values that is embedded in Russia's political logic can also be found in Georgia. Similar ideas, norms, and values have been shared in Georgia by the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has strong ties to the Russian Orthodox Church (which in turn, is strongly connected to the Kremlin). Later in this chapter, I will delve deeper into this connection, and accordingly also on the influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church over Georgia's society.

All in all, the pro-Western vision put forward by Saakashvili and his political party UNM, implied a one-way vision to the future in which Georgia would transition according to EU-models, including increased protection of human rights. Although Saakashvili and his UNM no longer wield substantial power in Georgia, the succeeding Georgian Dream (GD) party broadly follows the path Saakashvili originally sets out, which is presented as a vision that has no real alternative in Georgia. This vision, aimed at accession to the EU and NATO, was supposed to bring Georgia closer to the West. However, this future prospect remains uncertain. Many other visions about the future of Georgia exist. The political situation of Georgia in the post-Saakashvili era shows how Western notions of rights, mainly focusing on the individual, conflict immensely with other ideas that still signify some Soviet values and prioritise the rights of the collective over the rights of the individual (Dunn 2018, 231). This conflict about what Georgian society could be in the future is also reflected in the societal discussions regarding alternative sexual orientations, gender identities and LGBTQ+ rights.

### Part III – The Emergence of Georgian LGBTQ+ Activism

As the penultimate section explores, the criminalization of homosexuality, and the political/economic instability marked the early days of Georgian independence from the Soviet Union. Despite the arrival of NGOs which supported Georgia's development and pushed the country to more Western standards, the country remained silence when it comes to the topics of LGBTQ+ rights (Rekhviashvili 2018, 209). The only way for homosexuals to meet each other was in underground social scenes. Following the newfound Western orientation of Georgia towards a

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<sup>14</sup> In a 2014 article, James Kirchick argues that the real commotion on "Russia's anti-gay crusade" is about more than "scapegoating" a sexual minority as he explains that the real problem implemented in this law is that it limits the freedom of speech and association of all Russians.

possible EU accession, homosexuality was decriminalised with the adoption of the revised Criminal Code in 2000. However, the formulations of Articles 138 and 140 still stigmatise homosexuality by classifying homosexuality as a “perverted form of sexual intercourse” (Women Initiative Supportive Group 2012, 54; Law of Georgia 2013).<sup>15</sup>

The Rose Revolution in 2003 and the UNM party created a feeling of stability in the country. The explicit Western orientation in both the state’s rationale and institutions, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and other legal protections facilitated the emergence of new queer scenes. The development of the internet provided Georgian LGBTQ+ people with the tools to communicate with each other via online networks and with the possibility to organise gatherings in safe, public spaces (Rekhviashvili 2018, 211). With the help of Western funding this led to the establishment of the first gay rights organisations (i.e. Inclusive Foundation). However, alongside the emergence of Georgian LGBTQ+ activism in the social and political environment, there was also backlash in the form of hostile attitudes against the LGBTQ+ people. This hostility reached one of its peaks when the Inclusive Foundation was shut down in a police raid and its director was arrested with the allegations for the possession of marijuana (International Federation for Human Rights 2009). The question remains whether this was an attack on the LGBTQ+ organisation or if it was a legitimate drug search. However, according to the witnesses, the police did not wear any police uniforms nor had a search warrant. They also were shouting death threats and degrading remarks by calling the victims “perverts” and “sick persons” and mistreated the women by stripping them down naked (ibid.). After this police raid, the Inclusive Foundation dispersed. Hereafter, in 2010, the new organisation named Identoba continued, together with the Women Initiative Supportive Group (WISG) and other activist groups, to shape the Georgian LGBTQ+ activism (Rekhviashvili 2018, 214).

In the 2010s LGBTQ+ activism became louder as its community extended. Georgian politics more generally was also in turmoil around this time, as UNM was amid a crisis and became more authoritarian despite its Western orientation. Because of the police raid in 2009 on the

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<sup>15</sup> The full text of article 138 in the Georgian Criminal Code: “Homosexuality, lesbianism or other sexual intercourse in perverted form committed using violence, threat of violence or the victim's helpless state, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of six to eight years.” The full text of article 140 in the Georgian Criminal Code: “Sexual intercourse, homosexual or lesbian or other sexual intercourse in a perverted form committed knowingly by an adult offender against a person who has not attained the age of 16 years, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of seven to nine years.”

Inclusive Foundation UNM's vision and reputation was being questioned by international press coverage. It was therefore politically difficult to target the emerging LGBTQ+ activism (ibid., 215). The growth of the LGBTQ+ community was also made possible by the intensification of information translated from Western sources on theories of gender and sexuality (ibid.). The LGBTQ+ organisations aimed to share knowledge about the community's experiences, people, and rights in the public space of Georgia. Here, legal and advocacy work became a main activity of the activism and succeeded to change some constitutional regulations against homophobia. Since the decriminalisation of homosexuality, there was an improvement of other legal protection in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation by laws such as the Labour code or the Laws on Patients' Right (Gvianishvili 2020, 207). The activists also organised public demonstrations. It was this increased visibility that brought the issue of unequal citizenship of sexual minorities into the public discourse, which subsequently led to the rise of attacks from right-wing extremists. Together with the Georgian Orthodox Church an opposition was formed against LGBTQ+ rights. This tension reached its peak during the violent counter demonstrations against LGBTQ+ activists on 17 May 2012 and 2013 who were commemorating International Day Against Homophobia (i.e. IDAHOT).

## Part IV – Socio-political Discourses Decimating LGBTQ+ Liveability

The violent attacks against the Georgian LGBTQ+ community on 17 May 2012 and 2013 reflect the homophobic attitudes in Georgia. A national representative survey from the Council of Europe (2018) shows that only 33 percent of the 2205 respondents in Georgia think that it is important to protect the rights of sexual minorities (24). The existing homophobia is influenced by several social-cultural discourses circulating in the Georgian society. To elaborate on this, it is important to set out the different prejudices that become apparent in the public debate on LGBTQ+ rights. This, in turn, both affect and reflect the opinions among the populations. In this section I will build on the theoretical framework and the Georgia's geopolitical background I have outlined in the first two subchapters. Hereby, I will elaborate on this chapter's sub-question by examining how the lives of Georgian LGBTQ+ are decimated and made more vulnerable by the circulating discourses in Georgian society.

Rener and Ule (1998) contend that the transition from a Soviet regulated society to a modern market economy and democratic society simultaneously strengthened a return to traditional values



in many former Soviet countries. Here, the values of the home, nation, traditional gender roles, and God ensure that people can cope with “the shock of the new” (Rener & Ule 1998, 111). For this reason, they argue, it is understandable that the socialist system that lasted for decades undeniably left deep-rooted traces in the people who grew up and lived within this system (ibid). This explains that while the transition towards a Western orientation led to many rapid changes in Georgia, it coincided with increased homophobic and anti-Western rhetoric (Mestvirishvili et al. 2016, 1261). These hostile attitudes can be considered expressions of “uncertainty” of Western values, democratisation, and Europeanisation all of which are perceived as threatening to traditional Georgian values (ibid.)

A major factor of the existing homophobia in Georgian society is the increased power of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which became a “significant ideological actor in Georgia” (ibid., 1262).<sup>16</sup> A majority of Georgians identify themselves as Orthodox Christians and for most Georgians the Orthodox Church is intimately connected with Georgian culture. Therefore, the Georgian Orthodox Church is considered the most trustworthy institution in Georgia (Caucasus Research Resource Center 2013; WISG 2016, 193). This provides the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilia II, with extensive influence over public opinion (Gvianishvili 2020, 212). In a study on the Georgian Orthodox Church, Irakli Vacharadze questions why this Church is so dedicated in condemning homosexuality to the extent of encouraging hate against LGBTQ+ people (2015, 55). He goes on by stating that this “homosexuality hysteria” in the Georgian Orthodox Church, and its opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, is part of the institution’s anti-Western ideology, which is closely related to the ideology of the Russian Orthodox Church (ibid.).

During Soviet rule, any form of religion was banned. However, from the 1970s onwards, these restrictions eased somewhat and in 1977 Ilia II was elected patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church (Chitanava 2015, 41). With the Putin administration in Russia, as I mentioned before, the Kremlin’s relation with the Russian Orthodox Church became increasingly close. This

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<sup>16</sup> The Georgian Orthodox Church is an autocephalous Eastern Orthodox church. The literal meaning of the term ‘autocephalous’ (Greek: *autokephalos*) is ‘self-headed’ and signifies the governing of the self without relying upon other authorities. Whereas the name Georgian Orthodox Church implies that it is a national church, it maintains relations with other Orthodox churches that take part in Eastern Orthodoxy. Within Eastern Orthodoxy there is a traditional order of precedence whereby the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (now Istanbul) takes the first place. However, this order has more to do with honour than authority since the Patriarchs all hold equal authority in the Church. This is also traceable to the fact that there is no centralised headquarters of Eastern Orthodox as is the case with the Roman Catholic Church (i.e. Vatican).

close alliance with the Church partially enabled Putin to consolidate and expand his power in different spheres of Russian society. Here, many of the traditional values of the Russian Orthodox Church were enshrined into law in Russia. It is difficult to claim that Russia has explicit connections with the Georgian Orthodox Church. However, as Markozashvili and Dvalishvili contend, Russia “soft power activities” can be observed in Georgia’s cultural sphere, where “the sole hope of Georgia’s Eurasianization lies in the orthodox culture of the state” (2017, 181). This is for instance noticeable in the way how the Georgian Orthodox Church share similar ideological values cherished by officials from the Russian Orthodox Church (ibid., 182). In 2013 Georgia’s Patriarch visited Russia and met with Putin. The Patriarch emphasised the religious and cultural ties between the two countries. Among the aspects that ties the Georgian Orthodox Church with Russia, both culturally and politically, is the anti-Western sentiment which approaches any innovation as a foreign threat against the sacred traditions of the nation. This sentimentality led to occasional frictions between Georgia’s pro-Western politicians and the Church. Since it is considered the most trustworthy institution in Georgian society, certain statements made by the Church also causes difficulties for Georgia’s EU prospects and integration. This has been greatly reinforced in the past few years, as the government’s pro-Western discourses were softened and the Church’s pro-Russian sentiments were promoted by Orthodox clergies (Chitanava 2015, 52). Moreover, with the Georgian Dream Party and the current government, the Church has granted more privileges and faces less consequences when the institution commits hate speeches or violence towards sexual and religious minorities (ibid.). Hence, the dividing line between the state and the Church becomes increasingly blurred.<sup>17</sup>

By constantly referring to homosexuality or LGBTQ+ rights as perverted Western propaganda, the Georgian Orthodox Church also stimulated Georgian nationalistic groups to join their battle to counter homosexuality. Together they approach homosexuality as an infectious disease from the West that is spread by LGBTQ+ activists whose ultimate goals are to demolish Georgian traditional values. This is a worrisome stigmatising vision to have as a religious institution that also serves, guides, and offers comfort to its community. In a 2016 survey “From Prejudice to Equality,” a large percentage of the population agrees that Georgian homosexuals changed their sexual orientation under the influence of the West (WISG 2016, 216). Besides the

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<sup>17</sup> The Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian State are officially separated, however, the Church does have its privileges which includes a full tax exemption and an annual contribution from the State budget.

view that alternative sexualities of gender identities is a Western invention (which in a way is true, following Foucault's argument), the Georgian Orthodox Church's homophobic discourse is also based on how it interprets Biblical scriptures, which accordingly to the Church are denouncing sexual minorities.

The Church's argument that sexual minorities are not compatible with the Georgian, Orthodox Christian traditional values is often used when stating that same-sex activities and non-reproductive sexual encounters will pose a threat to the nation's biological heritage (WISG 2012, 64). Here, Foucault's notion of biopower shows that these arguments by the Georgian Orthodox Church exploits the features of human bodies and uses them as a socio-political strategy to govern the behavior of the individual within a larger social and political rationality. The fact that socio-political discourses on sex in Georgia are especially used to reduce non-reproductive sexual practices is also noticeable in the constitutional ban of same sex marriage. The old constitution did not clearly specify the gender of the spouses as it stated that marriage "shall be based on the equality of rights and the free will of spouses" (Constitution of Georgia 2004 [1995]). In 2017 the Government changed the constitution by re-defining marriage as a "union between a man and a woman for the purpose of founding a family" (Constitution of Georgia 2017). Through these discourses, then, those sexualities that are not amenable to the purpose of reproduction are considered violations of the (un)written laws of the religious institution. The increased influence of the Church is also noticeable within the medical institutions, as Georgia is witnessing a growing number of doctors who refuse to perform an abortion on the basis of their religious and moral views, even though abortion has been decriminalised in Georgia since 2000 (Ghoghoberidze 2019).

Another example of biopolitical strategy the Georgian Orthodox Church's encouragement of family planning, marking May 17 the 'Family Purity Day.' Not only does this counter the International Day against Homophobia, which is held on the same day, it was also launched in 2014, a year after the violent attacks against the LGBTQ+ demonstrators. On this day, large Family Purity marches are being held and are led by clerics and members of the Orthodox Church (fig.1.1).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Important to note is that even though many people are participating in these marches, it is still a marginality of society. Not every churchgoer takes part in the marches.



Figure 1.1 © Georgia Today

These marches are joined by several radical conservative groups and influential public figures (Civil.ge 2019). Coinciding with Family Purity Day celebrations, since 2017, the Church also organises mass wedding ceremonies. The purpose of this is to strengthen the “institution of the traditional family” (Orthodox Christianity 2019). In a 2019 statement the Patriarch contends that this day is not against anyone but for the “future of Georgia” and “Georgian families” (ibid.). However, by emphasizing that families can only be created between one man and one woman, he intentionally excludes same-sex couples from this norm. During the Family Purity march of 2019 itself, the Georgian Patriarch’s spokesperson Shio Mujiri was more direct, stating the following: “[...] when we see that abortions are legalized, when we see that the LGBT ideology is being introduced as a norm, it is our obligation to save families because this is a precondition for saving our country” (Civil.ge 2019).<sup>19</sup> Here again, exploiting the population’s fear about the country’s

<sup>19</sup> These marches are also held in the EU and the United States. Think hereof about the recent anti-abortion debate in the US (e.g. ‘Heartbeat bill’) or anti-gay marches held by Western far-rights groups. Yet, the situation in these parts of the worlds seems to be different. The reason behind this can be that anti-gay or anti-abortion viewpoints are more marginal and have relatively little impact on the dominant discourse that circulates in the EU or US – whereby human

future that is allegedly threatened by the LGBTQ+ people and acts of abortion, the discourse reiterates the norm that only married couples that can biologically reproduce can be seen as families. Its opposite, impurity, signifies non-reproductive sex activities practiced by alternative sexualities.

Furthermore, the anti-discrimination law in 2014 did not pass without controversies in Georgia. This because the law recognises gender identity or sexual orientation as potential ground of discrimination. The references to sexual minorities led to major opposition from the Georgian Orthodox Church that made it clear that they consider the bill to be a “legalisation of deadly sin,” a reflection of Western propaganda, and thereby an assault on Georgia’s traditional values (Civil.ge 2014). Again, the discussion surrounding this law stimulates social debates about questions that reflect the many social conflicts regarding topics such as West versus Russia, the role of the Orthodox Church in society, and the implementation of human rights. Some Georgian politicians believe that the Church’s opposition to the law is strongly connected to Russian’s plans to prevent Georgia from signing the EU’s Association Agreement, as the Kremlin assumes that Georgians will support the Church in this matter (Maza 2014). However, the situation is far more complicated, as the Georgian society is divided on this matter. Despite the opposition of most of the Georgian population to Western notions of equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community, further integration with the EU is still supported. Partly because many Georgians have resentments towards Russia for the Russia-Georgian war in 2008, but also because an EU integration is believed to help the Georgian economy to flourish. Eventually, the adoption of the law has not really satisfied anyone. Although several compromises have been made to gratify the Church, the Church is still displeased and continues to oppose the law. Moreover, the final version of the anti-discrimination law lacked effective mechanisms of enforcement, as the human rights defender of the Constitution states: “[...] although the current version of it gives victims of discrimination the right to claim compensation, it can be very hard for them to prove the extent of harm caused by discrimination” (Human Rights House 2014). This suggests that little can be done when people who face discrimination do not

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rights are constructed to be the markers of progress and civilisation. However, different political stances do exist within the US and EU member states regarding these topics. To give an example, in November 2019 Polish local authorities declared themselves free from ‘LGBT ideology’ which do not correspond with EU’s fundamental values. As a response the European Commission condemned these resolutions. This example shows that within the EU certain ideological values are enforced and alternative viewpoints are disallowed. Another example, in US June 2020, the Trump administration ruled that federal government will erase the rights of protection for transgender patients against discrimination in health care.

have explicit proof or do not file a lawsuit. The law enforcement agencies often do not seriously address the wrongdoings or are already biased before they investigate the incidents (Gvianishvili 2020, 208). Thus, this anti-discrimination law does not really implement protective measures that can prevent discrimination or hate crimes from happening in the first place. Moreover, this law is also very restrictive for transgender people, as they are forced to identify themselves as either a man or a woman before they can legally file a case. Because the law does not recognise another category that will suit the identity for transgender people, the only options are full gender reassignment surgery, or aligning themselves to a sex which does not fit to their gender identity and expression (ibid). In the end, the adoption of the anti-discrimination law does not benefit LGBTQ+ rights substantially, as there are no strict implications for the people discriminating or conducting a hate crime. The law is thereby itself discriminating as it hinders the people who need it the most.

The continuous emphasis on homosexuality as violating the morality of the country's identity, health, future generations, and traditional values, and thereby prioritising the collective over the individual, generates an internalisation of this prevailing narrative by many Georgians. The negative public attitude to allowing LGBTQ+ people to enjoy their basic rights is also maintained by the lack of general knowledge on gender and sexuality as neither in the media nor the educational systems share adequate information on these topics (ibid., 207). In this regard, the power relations between institutions hold the authority over knowledge and expand the biopolitical forms to manage and regulate the lives of the Georgian population. This relates to Foucault's analysis of the diffuse consequences of power, pointing out that its source is similarly diffuse. To put this more clearly, ultimately, the individuals are subjecting themselves to the ways of thinking in which they have been – internally – instructed. This forces the individuals to regulate themselves in accordance with the prevalent discourses on sex. This is what Foucault refers to with his concept biopower, whereby the regulation of bodies is considered necessary for the political and economic prosperity of the state's future. Looking at the discourses in Georgia, a lot of emphasis lies on traditional values and Georgian culture, which is closely intertwined with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Preferring the purity of families implies that reproduction of the Georgian species is profoundly valued. Thus, those bodies that deviate from this heterosexual, marital and pro-reproduction normative norms circulating in Georgia are subsequently constructed as those bodies that endanger the biological future of Georgia. Here the rationale is that without reproduction, birth

rates will decline, traditional and cultural values are not preserved and will vanish, and an uncertain future awaits. These bodies of sins, abnormalities or so-called perversities are incompetent and should therefore be condemned in society.

It is exactly this dividing line that separates bodies that should be counted as valuable to Georgian population and bodies that are not that captures the social conflict regarding LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia. This relates strongly to what Foucault defines as state racism, a power mechanism that via social normalisation strives for the permanent purification in a society and therefore makes any form of indirect killing possible. Given all of the above, there are several varieties of racism towards LGBTQ+ people, such as dealing with homo/transphobia, the marriage law that excludes same-sex couples, the dysfunctional anti-discrimination law, hate crimes, limited freedom of expression and bodily autonomy, discrimination in the workspace or medical care, in/visibility, the constant threat of both physical and verbal violence in both the private space (i.e. family) as well as in the public space, and so on and so forth.<sup>20</sup> Indirect killing manifests itself here in the form of social and institutional exclusion, continuous scrutiny, and rejection, leading to a decimated liveability for LGBTQ+ people and an increased risk of exposing their bodies to possible violence and – in some cases – death. Mbembe's necropolitics is highly suitable to explain this situation, as necropolitical regulations over the lives of LGBTQ+ people regard them as disposable and thus are reduced to live in precarity. Hereby, by depriving the LGBTQ+ bodies of social, political and economic networks, the bodies are forced away from a proper life and political qualifications. They thereby are reduced to what Agamben calls their 'bare life,' i.e. making them more vulnerable.

At the same time, the bodies of LGBTQ+ people who are constantly excluded and scrutinised incorporate the narrative of the Western discourse on sexuality and attempt thereby to advocate for their bodily autonomy. As Foucault argued, within modern Western societies the formation of scientific knowledge constituted homosexuality and made it into a categorisation. This led to subjects starting to identify themselves as homosexuals and started to disengage from the norms and normalisations by contesting strategies of power. The same pattern can be recognised outside these Western societies. Hereby, local LGBTQ+ activist make use of the EU accession and its discourses on human rights as leverage to put pressure on the government to improve their rights

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<sup>20</sup> To clarify, Foucault's notion of 'state racism' should not be understood as the state's power mechanism that treats various racial groups differently or as a form of ideology. It should rather be understood as a mechanism that legitimises the state to defend its population from dangerous elements threatening the future and the prosperity of this population. In biopolitical terms, it is about the powerful race of the state and about those individuals that go against its norms.

and lives. However, it is also of great importance to emphasise that Georgian LGBTQ+ activists are not merely passive victims to these Western tactics. Discourses circulate and put into effect by activist groups and morphed within the context these groups are situated in. With the gained visibility in the last decade, the Georgian LGBTQ+ activists question the power mechanism that control the life of the population in order to resist what excludes and separates them specifically. The discourses that restrain basic rights for LGBTQ+ people, and which makes them vulnerable, also enact forms of agency that seek to subvert, and evade these strategies of power.

## Part V – Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the geopolitical background of Georgia in order to draw a comprehensive picture of the wide-spread homophobic attitudes to the Georgian LGBTQ+ community. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both local and international factors influenced the rapid changing socio-political climate of Georgia. Whereas the Georgian Government attempts to implement more progressive policies to gain recognition from the EU, the long history and ongoing conflict with the Russian Federation also has its lasting impact on Georgia's society. The consequence is that Georgia is torn between the EU and Russia. This is also reflected in the socio-cultural domain of Georgian society and the way in which LGBTQ+ rights have become the topic of an important social debate. The transition towards a more Western liberal democracy also facilitated the emergence of Georgian LGBTQ+ activism, which has partly been shaped by Western human rights frameworks. Noticeable, is how the EU implement LGBTQ+ rights and sexual diversity as a criterion of European progress and tolerance which reinforce the hierarchic dynamics between the West versus the rest.

The heightened visibility of the community was accompanied by societal homophobic attitudes which reflect the fear of Western notions on equal rights for LGBTQ+ people. By using Foucault's concept biopower I traced how socio-political discourses on sex existing in Georgia exert social control over the population and the individual via systematic legal regulations of life (e.g. reproduction, family purity, abortion). Here, the Georgian Orthodox Church played a pivotal role by opposing alternative sexualities. Since this Church is seen as the most trustworthy institution it has a substantial influence on how the majority of the population forms an opinion on LGBTQ+ people. In the biopower system of Georgia and its socio-political discourses, then, LGBTQ+ people are seen as a biological threat to the improvement of the nation. The disposability



of the Georgian queer bodies and their claim to a liveable life, bodily autonomy, institutional inclusion, and visibility reduce them to exist in, what Mbembe defines as, the status of the living dead, making them more vulnerable to risk and injury. However, as Foucault states, discourses are both instruments and effects of power. This suggests that resistance is always possible. Here, the social control over Georgian LGBTQ+ people also led to forms of resistance that challenge the socio-cultural discourses denying their rights and reducing their livelihood. How the Georgian LGBTQ+ community effectively builds on its vulnerability while resisting injustice will be examined more thoroughly in the second chapter.

# Chapter 2

## The Vulnerability of the Georgian LGBTQ+ Community in the Public Space

In the previous chapter I have touched upon the geopolitical position of Georgia and examined how (inter)national forces influence the socio-political conditions of Georgian society, and by extension the circulation of prevailing homophobic attitudes. In so doing, I showed how the differential operation of power and institutionalised discourses on sex construct and regulate bodies via biopolitical forms, whereby the bodies of Georgian LGBTQ+ people are stigmatised as unnatural, non-reproductive, and non-normative. Therefore, the lives of these people have been decimated and are neglected from political, social, and legal support, making them more vulnerable to live in precarious conditions.

However, I should be careful by stating such an understanding of vulnerability, as it reinforces and reproduces the assumption that the Georgian LGBTQ+ community does not possess its own agency. The concept of vulnerability has since the past decade – especially within feminist theory – been reformulated as a condition interlinked to resistance (Koivunen, Kyrölä, & Ryberg 2018, 5). In this second chapter this new resurgence of vulnerability and its complexities will serve as a theoretical framework. Here I will use Judith Butler’s conceptualisation of vulnerability which she developed throughout her work and is always questioned in relation to power, dependency, the human body, and agency. To do so, I will argue that vulnerability can mobilise the Georgian LGBTQ+ community to practice forms of resistance. At the same time, it is important to point out that vulnerability is also claimed by those who hold power and seek to justify suppression of sexual minorities. Another factor I consider while studying the vulnerability of the Georgian LGBTQ+ people is the ‘public space.’

I will start this chapter by briefly summarising Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere. Thereafter I will move my attention to what the conception of the body in relation to vulnerability is. Here, I consider it helpful to relate Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to Butler’s understanding of bodily vulnerability. Furthermore, I also will touch upon how the concept of vulnerability transitioned from something that is used to signify ‘passivity’ towards a key concept of agency and empowerment. In doing so the question will be raised how vulnerability of

bodies enact forms of resistance. After looking at these sub-question I will move towards my case study, focusing on the role of public space in the threats faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia by opposing dominant forces, and how the community itself is resisting this exclusion through vulnerability as a form of resistance.

## Part I – Public Sphere/Space

Habermas's concept of the 'public sphere' in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962) provides a historical account of the emergence and decline of the public sphere. In pre-modern societies, the public and private had no clear distinction as public affairs were mostly decided via "representative publicity," whereby a king displayed their status before the people (Habermas 1989 [1962], 7).<sup>21</sup> However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the "private and public spheres became separate in a specifically modern sense" (ibid., 11). In other words, society separated itself from the state. Here, the participatory "bourgeois public space" came into being and may be conceived as the sphere where "private people come together as a public" (ibid., 27). Habermas envisions the public sphere as the thriving realm of social life where the exchange of information, socio-political matters, and questions of morality take place. It is a sphere wherein all citizens can equally assemble and form a public opinion. As the basic mechanism of democracy, this public opinion controls the state and authorities via this political process of rational-critical debate in society. However, Habermas notices that with modern societies, the emergence of mass media and the increase of corporations led to the demarcation between the public and private sphere. The public sphere, as an environment for incubating socio-political ideas, began to dissolve.<sup>22</sup> Here, Habermas emphasises the importance of the public sphere for democracy as it operates as an intermediary between public and the state and can subverts forms of domination. Although Habermas' model of public sphere provides a goal where democracies should live up its potential, it is quite an idealistic and normative

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<sup>21</sup> Habermas argues here that the carriers of this representative publicness (or "the feudal powers") were "the Church, the prince, and the nobility" (Habermas 1989, 11). With the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, guided by the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution/rise of consumerism, these authorities and their feudal powers became more divided from the public.

<sup>22</sup> Habermas also refers to this shift as "refeudalized public sphere" (Habermas, 1989, 200). He argues that in modern society the "representative publicity" has returned. This because modern politicians represent themselves before the public and pretend to call upon public opinion whereas in reality this is not the case. This calling upon the public opinion is only generated and manipulated 'for the purpose of an abstract vote' during election time (ibid., 222). Moreover, in modern democracies the mass media has the great potential to initiate, manipulate, and influence public opinions and affairs. Here, the influence of the *Frankfurter Schule*, in which Habermas was part of, comes to the fore.

concept. Thereby, Habermas' public sphere lacks notions of gender and sense of reality.

Public space is often a site of unequal interactions and is constantly constructed and exemplified by a heteronormative and heterosexist presence (Stella 2012, 1823). This necessitates LGBTQ + people to fight for their presence, appearance and their movement within public space. For Butler, in order to appear publicly, one must enter both the visual and audible field and be recognisable. That is to say, the body is regulated in a specific gendered, sexualised, laboured, and racialised form (2015, 86). Thus, what counts as the public sphere is simultaneously also constituted by those subjects that are absent or excluded. This division is called into questions when "precarious lives assemble on the street in forms of alliance that must struggle to achieve a space of appearance" (ibid.). The public space, thus, is part of what Butler defines as "infrastructural goods," which can be understood as "environment, social relations, networks of support and sustenance" by which humans are dependent on (2016, 21). It also provides the material foundation that makes resistance and political mobilisation possible.

## Part II – Rethinking Vulnerability

Vulnerability expresses how people can suffer from physical conditions such as natural disasters, or from social conditions such as racism, violence, discrimination, oppression, inequality, and exclusion (Koivunen et al. 2018, 4). Everyone has the capacity to become vulnerable as we are all "social, bodily, and affective beings" (ibid.). However, there are many ways to understand the concept of vulnerability itself. According to Erinn Gilson (2016) the dominant, traditional understanding of vulnerability derives from the "capitalist Western parts of the world," and influences how people are able to encounter vulnerability when they experience it (74). This understanding is reductively negative as vulnerability is constantly equated with weakness, incapability, and passivity and is therefore conceived as an undesirable value that should be avoided. Consequently, this can lead to a conception of vulnerability as something that is fixed. Certain groups, individuals and populations are deemed vulnerable and it is unlikely that this state of being is to change (ibid.). It also suggests that vulnerability is distributed hierarchically, as some people are characterised as vulnerable whereas others, those who do have the capacity of having agency and power, are not. This distribution of vulnerability, thus, reproduces this hierarchy where the vulnerable people "must appeal to the invulnerable saviour" (ibid.). This, then, will allow paternalistic power to construct vulnerability as a condition that is ascribed to those who are deviant

from the norm and who therefore should be excluded and marginalised.

Noticeable is how this understanding of vulnerability is often attributed to femininity, in which it is ascribed with connotations such as passivity, dependency, powerlessness. As Maltem Ahiska (2016) contends: “vulnerability appears as the ultimate truth about women; it almost becomes the general defining character of being a woman” (221). This gendered approach to vulnerability has throughout history enabled the subjugation of female bodies and sexual minorities to objectification, sexual assault, and violence, which stands in stark contrast to the strong, invulnerable character attributed to male, heterosexual bodies (Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016, 3). This connection of vulnerability and its connotations with femininity became a troubling notion within feminist theory. Therefore, feminists started to rethink vulnerability in relation to mobilisation, agency, and resistance, questioning thereby the asymmetries of power as well as making injustice more visible (Koivunen et al. 2018, 6). In the last decade, this resurgence of vulnerability is visible in how collective voices publicly express their experiences of violence, racism, and trauma, translating it thereby into a powerful force that challenge institutional, patriarchal power (e.g. #MeToo movement). At the same time, claims of vulnerability are receptive and complex, as they can shift and morph into any socio-political position. Because vulnerability has become a territory of political contestation, it is all the more important that its understanding is reconsidered. This will demonstrate the urgency of an alternative politics where solidarity comes from recognising humans’ interdependency, as Butler’s work will show later on.

### Part III – The Perceptive Body

It is useful to briefly touch upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to draw some analogies to Butler’s notion of bodily vulnerability. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an object in the world but rather a medium through which subjects experience and know the world. Merleau-Ponty hereby acknowledges that knowledge is produced through bodily perceptions, which indicates that the mind, or consciousness, cannot be separated from the body (2002 [1945], 239). This opposes the Cartesian mind-body dualism of which the central claim is that the material body and the immaterial mind are distinctive but interacting substances. Significant in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is the role of spatiality, as Merleau-Ponty asserts that “[...] a primitive spatiality of which experience is merely the outer covering and which merges with the body’s very being. To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily *in* space:

it is of it” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 171). The being of space indicates that the body comes into being as a body when it grasps external space and engages with objects and other bodily subjects via its historical and physical position in, and bodily movement through, the world. Simultaneously, the body’s position in the world also ensures that a subject comes to be seen by others. Via these interactions in the world the subject develops a haptic awareness, i.e. the perceptual and embodied experience to things external to the body as well of the body itself through touch. Simultaneously, via this haptic awareness, the subject also shapes others. Thus, just as the body is acted upon by external influences, the body itself has the capacity to act. Merleau-Ponty stresses that human beings should reawaken their experience of the world and relearn to feel their bodies in order to discover oneself as he claims: “By remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception” (2002, 239). So, his account of the body provides a useful tool, as it shows how embodiment is important in understanding what individuals know and who they are. However, one thing that Merleau-Ponty neglects in his work is sexuality and gender. The bodies movements through space are experienced differently by men and women, as well as the way how physically different these bodies are in their presentation. This partly contradicts another statement Merleau-Ponty makes, namely, that the body is an “historical idea and not a natural species,” which denies the assumption that the body is merely a predetermined natural thing (2002, 198). In one of her earlier essays (1988), Butler discusses this exact statement by Merleau-Ponty as it has set the stage for Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “woman” is a “historical situation” rather than a “natural fact” (520).<sup>23</sup> Even though Butler critiques Merleau-Ponty’s neglect of sexual difference in his work (1989, 92-93), she ultimately does find that his argumentation on how the body “gains its meaning through a concrete and historically expression in the world,” rather than being determined by a “interior essence,” profoundly useful for feminist theory (1988, 520-521). This does not mean that Merleau-Ponty fully denies the natural materiality of the body. Rather he reconsiders it as something separated from the active process of the body coming to bear certain

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<sup>23</sup> De Beauvoir cites Merleau-Ponty’s statement – “man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea” – in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (De Beauvoir 1989 [1949], 61). Butler touches upon De Beauvoir’s citation in order to comment how it set the stage for her infamous statement that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman” (ibid., 273). In doing so, Butler tries to explain that De Beauvoir’s statements show that a becoming “a woman” (or a man) is a social process which is not dictated by one’s bodily sex. Hereby, Butler attempts to emphasise the apparent, essentialised, unity of “biological facticity, sex, and gender” as an illusion (Butler 1988, 522).

sociocultural and historical meanings (ibid.). In sum, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology shows how human beings, through their bodies, are dependent on and interrelated to the external spatial environment as well as other human beings, creatures and objects. It opens the possibility to think about lived experiences in certain spaces embedded by sociocultural meanings.

## Part IV – (Bodily) Vulnerability and Resistance

The influence of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology echoes in Butler's early work, in which she develops her deconstruction of gender notions by stating that gender is performative. Here, she argues that gender is not something you are, but something you do (Butler 1990, 25). It is through repeated stylisation of the body that one does female/male, suggesting that there is no essential femininity or masculinity prior to the social norm and normalisations that regulate them. This also reveals Foucault's influence on how Butler argues that gender and biological sex are constructed as essential naturalised truths in regulatory discourses. In her more recent work, Butler also aligns with Merleau-Ponty's notions of the perceptive body in relation to how human beings are interrelated to each other. She thereby attempts to set out a stronger ethical relation between human beings. In doing so, Butler questions how power mechanisms determine who counts as worthy, grievable humans that receive social and economic support, while others do not qualify as such (2004, 31). In order to shed light on these matters she engages throughout her work with the concept of vulnerability.

For Butler, the body implies “mortality, vulnerability, agency” whereby the materiality of the body, skin and flesh, is constantly exposed to the gaze, touch, and possible violence of others (ibid., 24). This emphasises Merleau-Ponty's idea that through the body's physical position in the world, it sees and is being seen, and engages with other objects and embodied subjects. Being attached to others via our bodily exposure the perceptive body has its invariably public dimension, as Butler writes:

Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others; it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body. Indeed, if I deny that prior to the formation of my “will,” my body related me to others whom I did not choose to have in proximity to myself, if I build a notion of “autonomy” on the basis of the denial of this sphere of a

primary and unwilling physical proximity with others, then am I denying the social conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy (ibid.).

Here, Butler refers to a primary, common human vulnerability which precedes individualisation. From the start we are being given over to others, which indicates that every bodily being is vulnerable and this is unavoidable. Although this may make vulnerability appear as an ontological and existential condition determining all equally, it is also a socially induced condition. For Butler, the concept of subjectivity is not individual, stressing that “we are social, we are comported toward a ‘you’; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally” (ibid., 45).

Vulnerability is the main topic of the edited work *Vulnerability and Resistance* (2016) wherein Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay (eds.) call into question the dominant assumption that vulnerability and resistance are opposed concepts. They do this by reconsidering vulnerability as a resource of resistance that aspires to the political aim of justice and equality. Here, they argue how vulnerability in resistance is manifested in forms of “embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependency and public action” (Butler et al. 2016, 7). Butler starts her own chapter by contending how the body is at the heart of many social protest movements and demonstrations. Not only because the bodies of those who gather in public assemblies are collectively opposing the precarious conditions they live in and thereby resisting forms of power, but also because those who resist via this embodied form of gathering are exposing their bodies to the gaze and touch of others. By putting themselves at risk to potential violence from groups with oppositional views or the police (Butler 2016, 12), bodily vulnerability is used as a political instrument. However, Butler also explains that this vulnerability already emerges prior to any protest. To elaborate, the condition of precarity, which is often an issue addressed by protest movements, indicates a vulnerability that precedes the one people encounter in the public space (ibid). Again, she points out that everyone is made vulnerable to various systems which precede our existence in the world and structures how people should act, identify themselves, and their relationship to others. However, similar to what Gilson states, this vulnerability is distributed differently around the globe since political and social organisations do increase the precarious



conditions of some people whereas of other others are minimalised (Butler 2009, 2).<sup>24</sup>

An important emphasis in Butler's essay is the political mobilisation of vulnerability. To delve deeper into this, she argues that the human body is dependent on certain "infrastructural goods," which as I mentioned before, implicates "environment, social relations and networks of support and sustenance" (Butler 2016, 21). This means that when these infrastructural goods are decimated or consistently fail, so do the bodies that depend on them (ibid.,13). Political mobilisation, then, can be motivated to prevent infrastructure from being destroyed, or in order to advocate for establishing a well-functioning infrastructure. The street is also part of the infrastructural goods, since it not only provides a platform for political demand, it also enables assemblies to appear, gather, and move in public (ibid.). As a material condition, then, the street itself can become a public good whose protection and persistence people advocate for, so as to maintain it and open it up for public assembly and political expression in the public space (ibid.). The public space also includes forms of media that mediate public space, as Butler explains: "Media can function as part of 'infrastructural support' when it facilitates modes of solidarity and establishes new spatio-temporal dimensions of the public sphere" (ibid., 14).

When an embodied subject moves freely through public space and is allowed to speak its mind, it is logical to assume that this subject lives in a supportive environment where freedom of movement and expression is encouraged (ibid.,15). This also indicates that the body requires support that makes its movement possible. Here, Butler foregrounds the suggestion that mobility itself is already a right that needs to be sustained (ibid.). Subsequently, this means when this support fails, it will jeopardise the capacity to exercise the basic right of mobility (ibid., 15). The notion that the body needs to be supported in order to act is evident in many of the public assemblies. On the one hand bodies are being acted upon by socio-political powers that are inducing people's livelihoods, and on the other hand, these bodies recognise and understand themselves collectively to be in a precarious position and resist these powers by exposing their vulnerability (ibid.). The body's capacity to act and to be acted upon shows its dependency on infrastructural support as well as an interdependency on other social bodies. By recognising this, modes of alliance can be formed.

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<sup>24</sup> Butler makes a distinction between the interlinking concepts 'precarity' and 'precariousness' (Butler 2009, 25). Whereas precariousness is an existential human condition that builds on the notion that all human beings are interdependent on one another, hence vulnerable (ibid., 2-3; 25), precarity is based on the way how this vulnerability is distributed unequally and is experienced by marginalised people who to a larger extent are unvalued and exposed to social and economic insecurity, violence, exclusion, and so on and so forth (ibid., 25).

In formulating this, Butler questions the assumption of the body as “singular” and “self-sufficient,” which suggests that individual bodies are distinct from one another. She thereby asserts that the body should be understood as relational, interdependent as well as performative. In other words, it is via the “social and material relations” of the body that bodily vulnerability can be understood, and enables action (ibid., 16).

People are also always dependent on language and thus experience linguistic vulnerability. The vulnerability here has to do with how people are exposed to speech acts. For instance, there is a “performative effect” of “name-calling” whereby someone is named as part of a minority, a certain gender, or sexuality (ibid.). To be called “a woman” has an effect in the way how one “does a woman,” by which the practices of gendering and gender normalisations is incorporated and reiterated by the subject’s body. This shows how discourse and language are intrinsically bound up with one another. Again, speech acts act upon people and discipline the aspects of their lives which precede their own speaking (ibid., 17). The norms, ideals and the constructed truths that language holds and is produced by discourses in order to act on people, can eventually be incorporated in gestures (ibid.). Thus, constructing these norms not only institutes bodily vulnerability but also requires it. Without the body, the operation of normalising norms is impossible.<sup>25</sup> Butler elaborates on this by using gender as an example, saying that the requirement of bodily vulnerability will allow to define “powerful citational force of gender norms as they are instituted and applied by medical, legal, and psychiatric institutions, and object to the effect they have on the formation and understanding of gender in pathological or criminal terms” (ibid., 18).<sup>26</sup> Consequently, during this process where one is affected by these powerful forces, deviant situations can subvert these citational series of gender norms (ibid.). Similar to what Foucault writes about how the proliferation of discourses have invented and concretise homosexuality, Butler also argues that “new formulations and forms of gender begin” which will modify or refuse with the gendered norm and normativity (ibid.).

In sum, Butler writes about people as embodied beings that depend on the structures that

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<sup>25</sup> Moreover, for Butler, speech act in public assemblies is made possible by the very corporeality of the body, not only because it is the body that is on the line during these gathering, but also because it is taking up space, which asserts that people are living. Here “showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence” is already a political significant and expressive action which can happen before the group start to share its demands in political speech (Butler 2015, 18).

<sup>26</sup> Butler uses Jacques Derrida’s notion on citation in her theory on gender performativity to describe that gender is a citation (or re-citation) rather than something that is essentially natural (Butler 1993, 219).

allow them to live a liveable life. But what about those livelihoods that are decimated? Social normativity cannot be easily overcome, as social norms already precede and historically condition people's existence. However, people can make social conditions more equal. For Butler, then, what is part of what she calls "performative agency" is interdependency, relationality, and vulnerability (ibid., 19). Whereas the reconceptualisation of vulnerability asserts the capacity of the body to act, one may ask what the reconceptualisation of resistance is. As I mentioned elsewhere, Butler's aim is to oppose the idea that vulnerability is the opposition of resistance, as she implies that it is "part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment" (ibid., 22). The fact that people recognise their precarious conditions and subsequently deliberately show these conditions collectively, signifies the agentic force of vulnerability. This differs from the form of resistance to vulnerability for which it is wished that those discourses and power enforced on people never have occurred and shaped their lives in ways they did not want to (ibid., 24). Any opposition to vulnerability does not refute its workings on people's social, hence bodily, lives. So, by acknowledging how vulnerability is both an existential condition and socially constituted, and has the capacity to be agentic, then the opposition between vulnerability and resistance can be thwarted.

## Part V – Orchestrating Vulnerability in Georgia

On June 14, 2019, a small gathering of LGBTQ+ activists rallied outside the administration building of the government of Georgia to demand support from the state for the first upcoming Tbilisi Pride Week, set to take place between June 18<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. In February 2019, the organisation Tbilisi Pride announced that they were planning a week full of campaigns and cultural events in June which would be finalised with a March of Dignity in Tbilisi. In doing so, the organisation wanted to raise awareness about the rights of sexual minorities and advocate for policy changes in Georgia. Thereby, by using feminist and gender theory in their communication and planned activities they also attempt to educate people more about LGBTQ+ people in order to get a better understanding. However, this announcement sparked many controversies and was followed by many threats, escalating in the week leading up to Pride Week. One of the many threats was posed by Levan Vasadze, a far-right businessman who claims to safeguard Georgian traditional values, and who is also known for funding social-conservative and anti-gay groups. In order to prevent the LGBTQ+ community and other activists to hold any events during the Pride Week, Vasadze called out for support to create vigilante groups in Tbilisi, as he emphasises: "Among us are lots of people

with military experience, famous athletes, rugby players, wrestlers...[I]f the propagandists of perversion attempt to hold some sort of demonstration, we will break through any police cordon” (Eurasianet 2019). The emphasis on creating groups consisting solely of physically strong people implies that Vasadze will use physical force when the government fails to protect the Georgian population from “LGBT propaganda” (Agenda.de 2019). Moreover, a few days prior to the Pride Week, Georgian’s Patriarch Ilia II urged the government to cancel the events as he considers the event offensive to Georgian society as he states: “When a small group tries to force its position on the entire population, it, of course, causes a sharp reverse reaction, inasmuch as it is a deliberate act, an insult to the dignity of the majority, and violence against their choice, provoking disorder and confrontation”(Orthodox Christianity 2019). All these received negative responses led to the protest on June 14<sup>th</sup>, whereby the organisers of Tbilisi Pride, together with other solidary activists, decided to demonstrate (fig.2.1.).



Figure 2.1 © Mari Nikuradze via OC Media

By holding signs reading the texts “Come out for freedom/equality!” while yelling “Where are you, state?” the activists called on the authorities to publicly ensure the safety and protection of LGBTQ+ people during the events planned and during the dignity march (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2019). Moreover, the activists also urged the Interior Ministry for an investigation regarding the threatening statements of Vasadze (ibid.). Subsequently, several priests from the Orthodox Church and nationalist groups led by Vasadze entered the scene and counteracted the protests of the LGBTQ+ activists by shouting homophobic slurs and by throwing eggs. Eventually, LGBTQ+ rights activists were evacuated in minibuses. During the protest, the police made a cordon between the two protests and detained a few counter-protesters (fig 2.2).



*Figure 2.2 © Mari Nikuradze via OC Media*

Following the tense confrontation, that eventually became violent to a small extent, LGBTQ+ activists continued to share their discontent with the way how the government failed to support them by not granting them any assurance of protection for the upcoming Pride Week. Earlier in June, the Interior Ministry already was called on by some NGO's and by the Georgian public defender Nino Lomjaria after it released a statement saying that the Ministry could not guarantee

safety for the Pride Week in the public space, stating that it a great risk for all the people involved (Transparency International Georgia 2019). Instead, the Interior Ministry proposed the Pride to be held indoors, going against people's right to freedom of assembly in public space (Civil.ge 2019).<sup>27</sup> In the end, Pride week was postponed as it was overshadowed by another national, political situation and ongoing protests in Tbilisi whereby a police crackdown against protestors led to 240 injuries (Lavers 2019).

The reason I described this specific event of June 14<sup>th</sup> is to show how the concept of vulnerability has the tendency of shifting along with different socio-political agendas. Butler et al. explained that vulnerability can be claimed by “those who seek to rationalize the subjugation of minorities” and thereby seek to strengthen their own political position (2016, 5). Having a different idea of what the essence of human beings is than the LGBTQ+ activists, who are steeped in theories on feminism, gender, and sexuality, Georgia's dominant societal groups invariably maintain their perception of Georgia as a heterosexual patriarchy. This is evident in the way how some Georgian politicians, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and nationalist groups claim vulnerability by arguing that the survival of the nation state and its heterosexual, traditional, and religious norms and values are imperilled by the lifestyles of the LGBTQ+ community. In other words, this envisioned national essence of Georgia is threatened by the immorality and abnormality of non-heterosexual people. To a larger degree, since LGBTQ+ rights are considered an epitome of Western values, these groups also use their own alleged vulnerability as a justification to safeguard the nation from Western influence.

Within human rights frameworks aiming for more social equality, vulnerability is often used as a reference to “vulnerable groups” that deviate from the constituted norm of a specific society (Koivunen et al. 2018, 13). As Koivunen et al. explain, such definitions as “vulnerable groups/populations” have been established within the human rights discourse by humanitarian organisations or political unions (e.g. European Union, the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights, and ILGA Europe) in order to advocate for protection of marginalised and discriminated groups who are considered vulnerable to violations of their rights (ibid.). This is apparent in how those organisations report on the societal struggle in Georgia regarding LGBTQ+

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<sup>27</sup> The Interior Ministry did launch an investigation into Vasadze's statement, nonetheless, it did not respond on the cases reported by three organisers of Tbilisi Pride who all received death threats (ILGA Europe 2020). To my knowledge, no tangible result has (yet) been released about the investigation on Vasadze to date. The investigation falls under Article 223 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, which sanction the formation of illegal groupings.

people and call out the Georgian authorities to improve the rights of sexual minorities (Amnesty International Public Statement 2019; ILGA Europe 2020). However, the question can be raised whether naming a certain population vulnerable improves the condition of precarity. By orchestrating vulnerability as a worrisome condition and ascribing it to merely those populations that endure verbal/physical violence and exclusion, the assumption that the subjugated people do not have the capacity to be powerful or to enact political actions is perpetuated. Besides this, when these humanitarian organisations reassume and reproduce the notion that vulnerability is connected to characteristics such as passivity and defenceless, they simultaneously essentialise themselves as the invulnerable saviour that does not need any protection, hence enhancing their paternalistic power. Does this imply that those organisations are not vulnerable themselves? That they never need protection? That they cannot be countered by external forces or through modes of resistance? For Butler et al., then, to counter this “untenable framework,” it must be understood that (in)vulnerability is “politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power” (2016, 5).

## Part VI – The Right of Public Assembly and the Vulnerability of Georgian LGBTQ+ Community as a Source of Social Protest

What about the vulnerability of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community? In the previous chapter, I wrote about how socio-political discourses circulating in Georgia society regulate its population via biopolitical forms of control, of which the lives of the Georgian LGBTQ+ people are socially and politically decimated through institutional exclusion, discrimination, and other forms of neglect. That vulnerability is distributed unequally in Georgian society is noticeable in the way how a small gathering of LGBTQ+ activists who demand support from the state for protecting their basis rights of political expression and public assembly during the Pride Week, is already widely opposed by nationalists, religious groups and by authorities. This foreground an emphatically unsupportive environment by which the fundamental right of political mobilisation of Georgian LGBTQ+ people is constantly disrupted.

To delve deeper into this, the Georgian LGBTQ+ community already has a history facing violence in the public space. The most explicit example was when the peaceful march on 17 May 2013, which marks the international day against homophobia and transphobia (IDAHOT), was radically disrupted by the opposition. A small group of approximately 50 LGBTQ+ activists were



violently attacked by thousands of counterdemonstrators of oppositional groups led by Orthodox priests (Roth 2013). These antigay protesters gathered outside the parliament building on Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue, where the gay rights activists originally planned to hold their dignity march. Being aware of the counterdemonstration at the parliament building, gay rights activists changed their venue to an area nearby Freedom Square.<sup>28</sup> Heavy police presence blocked the areas in order to prevent the antigay protesters from moving towards the peaceful march of LGBTQ+ rights activists. However, the news broke of the new location of this march, and the antigay demonstrators pushed through the police cordon.<sup>29</sup> This eventually led to violent attacks from the antigay protestors, who were beating gay right activists as well throwing stones at them and shouting discriminating slurs (Civil.ge 2013). A few dozens of gay rights activists were evacuated by the police in yellow municipal buses that were besieged by antigay protestors (fig. 2.3). At the end of the day, the police and the authorities failed to ensure the safety of the activists and none of the attackers were held responsible in a court of law. This violent attack came amidst increased antigay rhetoric in Russia, whose government later that year adopted the anti-homopropaganda law, and whose influence also reached Georgian society through Russian influence over the Orthodox Churches.

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<sup>28</sup> Freedom Square is connected to Rustaveli Avenue.

<sup>29</sup> To get a clearer picture on the violent scene of this day watch: Stalinsky, K. (2013, May 17). "Extremist Orthodox vs LGBT right defenders in Tbilisi" in *YouTube*. Retrieved through: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBshyyKQoY&feature=youtu.be> on 24 February 2020.





Figure 2.3 © George Gogua via VOA - В Тбилиси протестуют против теократии

Thus, these dignity marches advocating for gay rights is one of the central events in the struggle for equal citizenship of sexual minorities in Georgia.<sup>30</sup> The marches not only emphasise the politics of visibility that bring issues regarding LGBTQ+ rights to the fore, it also triggers public homophobia to an extent that it can evolve into verbal and physical harm. The violent scenes during the peaceful march described above remain imprinted in the minds of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community and withheld gay right activists from organising marches for a while. As a response,

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<sup>30</sup> To clarify, Georgian LGBTQ+ people have citizenship and the accompanied rights. However, it is important to have in mind that having formal rights is quite different from actually having those rights. How can someone who is openly gay freely exercise those rights when there are societal groups and authorities who do not accept sexual minorities as their equals? This can have a big influence on the day-to-day personal safety as well as other issues such as violations of rights in the workplace, health care, and a lack of governmental and legal representation. Moreover, as I already emphasised in the first chapter, even though the anti-discrimination law exist, there still seems to be a culture of legal impunity in Georgia for LGBTQ+ people's right and an indifference for the government's duty to safeguard those rights. In my opinion, thus, since there is a lack of effective mechanism that protect and support the LGBTQ+ people and their rights, I do think that the main struggle is to achieve the equal citizenship, thereby equal opportunities, freedom of expression, and so on.

during the following years on IDAHOT, the Orthodox Church organised Family Purity Day which shares a clear anti-LGBTQ+ message. One of the reasons to organise this event is to prevent IDAHOT demonstrations, and other celebrations from the LGBTQ+ community, from happening. As priest Davit Rukhadze explains: “So, we, ordinary Georgians who value our families, our homeland and our religion have to gather from early mornings in places where they might assemble and hinder their sinful activities”(Civil.ge 2019).

Reducing the presence of LGBTQ+ people in public space seems to have become one of the top priorities on the political agenda of anti-LGBTQ+ groups. One of the foremost examples is the violent attacks on gender nonconforming people and homosexuals in the public domain, such as the incident in 2017 whereby four transgender women were physically abused in Tbilisi’s city centre (OC Media). Besides, the few safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community (i.e. queer spaces) in Georgia often are subjected to harassment. For instance, in 2016, the vegan and LGBTQ+ friendly, restaurant Kiwi Café was harassed by far-right extremists wearing sausages around their necks and throwing meat at the customers. Whereas it seems that the attack was solely based against veganism, the café already has experienced suspicious negative attitudes regarding the types of customers the café attracts, referring here to LGBTQ+ people and foreigners (Synovitz 2016). On the night of May 11, 2017, the nightclub Café Gallery and the widely known techno club in Tbilisi, Bassiani, were raided by special police forces with machine guns. The apparent reason was a crackdown on drug dealers, but in the end, after young people were hauled from the dance floors and detained, no one was arrested (de Waal 2019, 244). For many people involved suspected that the raid had another political motive than the authorities put forward and appeared to be “an act of initiation against young people with an alternative lifestyle” (ibid.). Organising and hosting the monthly LGBTQ+ parties called ‘Horoom,’ Bassiani is vocally advocating for gay and women rights in Georgia. Therefore, the police brutality on both clubs partly appeared to be targeted at LGBTQ+ people, who found their safe haven in this nightclub, allowing them to meet and communicate with others, and thereby overcome the distance created by societal homophobia (Berianidze 2018).

Besides the physical invasion of these LGBTQ+ friendly spaces, the community has also experienced difficulties online. As Butler mentions, all forms of media that mediate the public is part of infrastructural support when it “facilitates modes of solidarity” and establish “new spatio-temporal dimensions of the public space” including “those who are, through coercion, fear, or

necessity, living outside the reach of the visual frame” (Butler 2016, 14). On May 14, 2019, the Facebook page of the feminist group Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) was cyber-attacked allegedly by extremist groups. Therefore, the organisation was unable to share new online content for over a week, which disrupted its work for IDAHOT (ILGA Europe 2020). This attack also resulted in removed content, including documentaries on how anti-gay movements benefitted from the struggle of LGBTQ+ activist’s claim for public space (WISG 2019). Just as the raids at LGBTQ+ friendly spaces in the public space, cyber-attacks on organisations who advocate for gay rights and equality online, can be seen as a violation of the safety and rights of LGBTQ+ people who rely heavily on these online sources and find comfort in them. In sum, the disruption of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ community, both online and offline, is quite problematic. In a social environment where homosexuality or gender nonconforming people are often devalued and stigmatised, those safe spaces often provide a platform for LGBTQ+ people to explore their sexuality or to gain more positive experience with their identity. This to an extent that those safe spaces function often as the only important reference point where they can safely express themselves.

The efforts to reduce the visibility of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community online and offline deprive the LGBTQ+ to move freely and express themselves openly in the public space.<sup>31</sup> This shows the dependency of the human body on the infrastructural and social support that condition a liveable life, from which it cannot be fully disassociated. Just as the speech act depends on its social conventions, the way people move their body also depends on these social conventions and support (Butler 2016, 19). What can be deduced from this, is that human dependency will be affected when those infrastructural conditions are failing certain groups of people who eventually find themselves living in such conditions of precarity and uncovers a specific vulnerability. This ultimately has implications for any form of social action. As the aforementioned examples show, there is a bodily risk when LGBTQ+ activists are assembling in public squares or when transgenders are walking in Tbilisi’s public streets. However, with all these declining infrastructural conditions, one of the main motivations for the Georgian LGBTQ+ community to mobilise political actions is exactly to fight for establishing a platform in which they can adequately share their political demand. That is

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<sup>31</sup> Especially in assemblies the chance is higher that the LGBTQ+ community faces possible harassment, but to a lesser extent, also on an individual level. Think hereof when someone is expressing his sexuality openly or dresses in a non-conforming way/alternative way (i.e. when someone is not “doing” their gender).

to say, while advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia, the material and social conditions that make their political mobilisation possible, and thereby allow them to appear in the public space, is one of the most significant basic rights on the political agenda for which Georgian LGBTQ+ people advocate.

This brings me to the sub-question coined in this chapter's introduction: how do Georgian LGBTQ+ activists, through their vulnerability, resist those socio-political powers that decrease their livelihoods? Both Foucault and Butler contend that via discourses the formulation of scientific knowledge on normative sexuality or gender were produced, regulated, and internalised/incorporated. However, through categorisation and exclusion, deviant formations of sexualities and genders began to subvert those powers that are denying their rights. Just as the bodies of Georgian LGBTQ+ people are act upon by sociocultural norms that preceded their existence and made them vulnerable, those bodies also resist those powers by means of exposing their vulnerability to these powers via public assemblies. Since Georgian public spaces are infused with hostile attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community and given the history of enduring public harassment, Georgian LGBTQ+ activists persist and continue to assemble. Even though activists deliberately expose their bodies to possible harm, injury, or detainment, it does not prevent new activists, human rights agencies, and solidary movements from joining and strengthen the network of support. Here, the underground clubs in Tbilisi have played an instrumental role in mobilising political and social action by the LGBTQ+ over the past few years. This is noticeable in the way how the aforementioned nightclub Bassiani and its monthly LGBTQ+ parties (i.e. Horoom) and the club Success Bar have become an intrinsic part of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community. Both clubs provide the community with a platform where LGBTQ+ people can come together and become more confident to express themselves freely. Eventually, these clubs became a sort of "incubators" for socio-political equality movements that organise future pro-LGBTQ+ rallies among other demonstrations and dignity marches (Roth 2019). That these clubs became an essential part of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community is noticeable when on the next day after the police raid on Bassiani, the Equality Movement, a local feminist and LGBTQ+ organisation, together with the White Noise Movement, a movement advocating for drug policy reform, organised a protest against police brutality and abuse of power (Berianidze 2018). This resulted in a protest rave where thousands of protestors gathered together in front of the parliament building

and danced.<sup>32</sup> Here, dancing is the political act that protests the government's conventional attitude to social change and liberal youth culture (Collin 2018). As a counter response, nationalists turned up in force, angry that the protests were not about the police raids alone but also about LGBTQ+ rights and against the repressive drugs laws.

Coming back to Tbilisi Pride, amidst the threats the organisation has faced, it had the determination to continue with the preparations for Georgia's first Pride Week. Being aware of the possible consequences, Tbilisi Pride still released videos of LGBTQ+ people and allies dancing in public and stating openly that they support the upcoming Pride Week. They also claimed thereby their right to appear in public space (Roth 2019).<sup>33</sup> This form of resistance once again shows how people put themselves at risk to potential cyberbullying, public shaming, and violence. Here, the understanding of their vulnerability is mobilised for the very purpose of resistance. One of the Pride's co-founders and Georgian LGBTQ+ spokesperson, Giorgi Tabagari, also touches upon the motivation of undertaking social action by arguing the following: "But how long can we hide? If we saw government was effective at combating homophobia and moving in a different direction, maybe there would not be a for us to do a risky decision like pride. But we need to decide whether to remain with the status quo or to push harder" (ibid.). In due course, the Pride Week and its March of Dignity has been postponed multiple times, firstly because of the ongoing political turmoil regarding the country's tensions with Russia, and secondly because of the lack of confidence in the Georgian authorities, who are hesitant to ensure the safety of activists.

When the March of Dignity was planned on a new date, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2019, various homophobic groups went to the parliament to protest the march. However, since the organisers of Tbilisi Pride did not succeed to reach an agreement with the authorities on holding the events at the desired public spaces due to security risks, the organisation decided to have a small dignity march at another place in Tbilisi, namely, in front of the Interior Ministry. Deciding to assemble in public without the protection from the government, and thus with the heightened risk of verbal and physical abuse, is already a daring move. Nonetheless, the LGBTQ+ activists did think of

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<sup>32</sup> Watch for example a short length videoclip on the police raid of the nightclubs, rave protests, and the Family Purity Day watch: Al Jazeera English. (2018, May 20). "Georgia: Thousands protest nightclub raids in Tbilisi | Al Jazeera English" in *YouTube*. Retrieved through: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sR8pOaJyvMU> on 3 April 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Tbilisi Pride. (2019, May 2). "Come Out for Equality – Tbilisi Pride" in *YouTube*. Retrieved through: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9h8PUtIFbo&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9h8PUtIFbo&feature=emb_title) on 3 April 2020.

Tbilisi Pride. (2019, May 16). "მზავისმისმის / Hear our Voices" in *YouTube*. Retrieved through: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9h8PUtIFbo&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9h8PUtIFbo&feature=emb_title) on 3 April 2020.

alternative ways to appear prominently in Tbilisi. As a form of guerrilla action, then, they hung a rainbow flag on a drone (fig.2.4) and flew the flag above the square near the parliament, where at that exact moment Vasadze gave an antigay speech in front of an audience of counter-demonstrators existing of far-rights groups and several priests from the Orthodox Church (Lomsadze 2019). As the rainbow flag has become a universal symbol for the LGBTQ+ movement, and connotes the movement's diversity, flying the flag around in the public space of Tbilisi signifies Georgia's first, yet small, Pride event. It also exemplifies the existence, voice, and presence of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community.



*Figure 2.4* © Tbilisi Pride



One day after the small gathering, Tbilisi Pride released a statement wherein the organisation emphasises how the Interior Ministry accused Tbilisi Pride of “staging a provocation” and that the ministry therefore neither could cooperate nor protects the activists (Tbilisi Pride 2019). Besides this, some of the ministry’s representatives and members of Georgia’s ruling party (i.e. Georgian Dream Party) were consistently seeking to delegitimise the Pride and directly called the organisation to cancel the March of Dignity. Not only does this show that Georgian authorities do not have the “political will to ensure its LGBTIQ citizens’ right of peaceful assembly,” it also shows how in Georgia there is a violation of basic human rights (Tbilisi Pride 2019). Despite all these political challenges, the reluctance of the authorities, and the violent threats from oppositional groups, the small gathering on July 8<sup>th</sup> did achieve some victories. Here the achievement lies with the Georgian LGBTQ+ people and solidary activists, who stand their ground in front of the Interior Ministry building, one of the nation’s governmental and powerful authority. Here, they claimed their right to appear and express themselves in the public space. Moreover, even though Tbilisi Pride did not have received the infrastructural support it hoped for, the community did gain more visibility. Through means of consistently exerting pressure on the authorities and emphasising the precarious positions of the LGBTQ+ community, more media platforms started to cover the issues regarding LGBTQ+ rights, albeit often in a stigmatising manner. Therewith the activists achieved an increased presence of their struggles in the societal and political debate. With this increased presence and visibility, more local or international LGBTQ+ and human rights activists will join the movement to resist injustices and those powers that deteriorates their livelihoods. By doing so, they also fight for those material and social conditions that make their public assembly possible, hence, they are not giving up their right to appear in public space even when they risk the safety of their own bodies.<sup>34</sup>

## Part VII – Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at how the concept of vulnerability has been reconceptualised within feminist theory that reframes vulnerability as a force that can enact forms of social action. I have used Butler’s concept of vulnerability, which explains that all human beings are made vulnerable

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<sup>34</sup> In June 2020 a trailer was released for an upcoming feature documentary *March For Dignity* (2020) directed by John Eames. This documentary follows LGBTQ+ activists in Tbilisi and their attempt to organise the first Pride in Georgia. John Eames. “March For Dignity.” Retrieved through: <https://www.marchfordignityfilm.com/on> 14 June 2020.

by cultural and social norms that preceded their existence in the world. Here, the influence of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology comes to the fore as he argues that it is through our historical, hence bodily, position of and movement through the world that humans come to bear cultural meanings, produce knowledge, encounter physical and verbal contact with others. This implies, following Butler's thought, the inevitable interdependence on social and material constructions. Nonetheless, vulnerability has its ambiguities and is far complex than it initially appears as it shifts alongside different political rationalisation. This also shows how vulnerability is produced politically and distributed unequally. Using Butler's account on (bodily) vulnerability I then examined how the vulnerability of Georgian LGBTQ+ people enable forms of resistance by focusing particularly on the public space. Here, the marginalisation and exclusion of queer bodies in Georgia's public space is what is at stake in Georgian LGBTQ+ protests. Whereas people cannot overcome the social norms that precede their existence, they still can seek to make it more equal via social action. This is evident in the way how with the lack of support from the Georgian authorities, LGBTQ+ activists still gather in public to advocate for their rights. Thereby they are exposing their bodies to others, and collectively show how vulnerability mobilises and evokes their political agency. Even though the first Pride Week in Tbilisi did not happen in the way it was initially planned, it did increase the visibility of the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community in Georgian society as it entered the political and societal debate and has been discussed more actively. The question whether this gained visibility is plausible will be examined in the next chapter.



# Chapter 3

## The Rainbow Flag and the Cross: *And Then We Danced* and the Politics of In/Visibility

*“I made this film with love and compassion. It is my love letter to Georgia and to my heritage. With this story I wanted to reclaim and redefine Georgian culture to include all not just some”*

– Levan Akin, Director *And Then We Danced* (2019)<sup>35</sup>

In the previous chapter I wrote about how the organisation of Tbilisi Pride and its plans to organise the first Pride Week in June 2019 have led to controversies in Georgian society. Various media platforms covered the events, which in turn, led to an increased visibility of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community and their fight for social inclusion. However, one may ask whether the increased visibility of Georgia’s sexual minorities is altogether positive. Whereas, on the one hand, making their emancipation for equal rights visible can help to normalise or humanise the Georgian LGBTQ+ community and raise awareness, on the other hand, it also can coincide with further cycles of regulations or violence. It is this politics of in/visibility and its ambiguities that will serve as a central node of this chapter.

The socio-political turmoil surrounding the Georgian premier of the film *And Then We Danced* in November 2019 will illustrate the ambiguities of the politics of visibility. The film, directed by the Swedish-Georgian director Levan Akin, touches upon homosexuality in Georgia’s conservative society. Although homosexuality is not an overwrought plot point in the movie, the way the movie added fuel to the societal unrest regarding LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia is an interesting case. During the premieres in Tbilisi and Batumi, conservative groups harassed and threatened attendees and were seeking to stop the screenings of the film. Therefore, the sub-question I will pose in this chapter is in what ways the film *And Then We Danced* can increase visibility for the vulnerable Georgian LGBTQ+ people, and what the potential benefits, problems,

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<sup>35</sup> Levan Akin, the director of *And Then We Danced*, posted on 5 November 2019 a statement on his Instagram account after national groups and the Church in Georgia threatened to disrupt the film’s premiere. Akin, L. [@levanakin]. (2019, November 5). Retrieved through [https://www.instagram.com/p/B4fcz4nJgho/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/B4fcz4nJgho/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link) on 29 April 2020.

and dangers of raising such a socially sensitive subject in Georgia's conservative society are.

I will read multiple texts that report on the public debate regarding the event of the premiere of *And Then We Danced* and the overall social issues of LGBTQ+ rights and visibility in Georgia. Here, I seek to attempt reading texts from different viewpoints in order to paint a more comprehensive picture of the polarisation that exist in society. As I can neither write, read nor speak Georgian, I am certainly not able to examine the entire Georgian media landscape.<sup>36</sup> Besides reading written texts, I will also look at news photos since they are intrinsically linked to the meaning-making process. I start this chapter by describing the ambiguities of visibility. Thereafter I sketch the setting of *And Then We Dance* and the genesis of the film. With the events surrounding the film's premiere as a case study, I then will analyse key tendencies related to the socio-cultural debate of LGBTQ+ rights, and problematise it by using the concept of visibility.

## Part I – The Politics of In/Visibility and its Ambiguities

The dominant idea that public visibility is a necessity that facilitates a platform from which to raise awareness on social injustice guides the rationale of many Western movements that are attempting to liberate minorities or seeking to assert their rights (Edenborg 2020, 109). The metaphorical “coming out” of the closet for gay people is one of the examples that illustrate the believe that visibility is deeply linked to a socio-political recognition of rights, making them more visible in an environment wherein heterosexual norms have excluded non-heterosexual people.<sup>37</sup> This aligns with Foucault's writings on confession.<sup>38</sup> According to Foucault, “Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth” (1990 [1976], 58). He hereby outlines how the emergence of confessional techniques plays a central role

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<sup>36</sup> As I already mentioned in the introduction, the sources I depend on are news sites that cover political and social issues in Georgia in the English language. Hereby, I attempt to be transparent about how these news channels are supported, as some allegedly politically independent media platforms are funded by Western or Russian organisations. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that almost every media outlet is sponsored by something. This does not automatically mean they cannot be journalistic independent. For example, a sponsor can demand high-quality journalism, but not interfere with the content. Georgia is simply too small to make a fully independent English-language platform profitable. A Georgian English-language platform do often hold a critical strand towards the government, this does not mean that this criticism is provided directly by donors.

<sup>37</sup> It was the American gay activists Harvey Milk who stated in 1977 that to “come out” is the way to achieve rights for gay people: “Come out, stand up and let that world know. That would do more to end prejudice overnight than anybody would imagine. I urge them to do that, urge them to come out. Only that way will we start to achieve our rights” (quoted in: Ayoub 2016, 21).

<sup>38</sup> Foucault often situates the term “confession” within his study on sexuality as an object of science.

in “civil and religious powers” and is also “at the heat of the procedures of individualization by power” (ibid., 58-59). Confessing is deeply rooted in Western societies, to such an extent that people no longer perceive it as an effect of power that constrain us, but rather as something that liberate people (ibid., 60). Interesting is, with the proliferation of discourses on sexuality, it is expected for those sexualities that deviate from the heterosexual norm “to step forward and speak to the difficult confessions of what they were” (ibid., 39). This confession, or coming out, can provoke a feeling of being listened to or being accepted in the broader sense, however non-heterosexuals would be condemned all the same (ibid.). Not only does this emphasise that coming out is a heteronormative thing to do, it also shows how the outworking of confessing one’s sexuality in society is an example of how via surveillance, individuals internalise regulations of their own subjugation.

Philip Ayoub’s study on LGBTQ+ movements in Europe argues how the politics of visibility is the “key” to social inclusion and, ultimately, social change as it empowers LGBTQ+ activists (2016, 4-5). To problematise this dominant understanding of visibility, Emil Edenborg notes that Western notion of visibility “enjoys a privileged epistemological status” (2020, 350). He explains that when something is being seen, or visible, it will be taken as indication that it exists, while invisibility is understood as non-existing. He draws here on Butler’s argument that the public sphere is “constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not” (Butler 2004, xx; Edenborg 2020, 350). For Edenborg, the heterosexual “collective body” is constructed by this regulation of public visibility as it selectively frames which gendered/sexualised/racialised bodies matter, are real and recognisable, and can therefore appear in public, and which bodies are rendered as invisible (2020, 107). This shows how visibility and invisibility are both intrinsically related to construction of societies.

Nonetheless, visibility is not solely a concept that paves the way for a better future for all lives of sexual minorities. It also provokes counter-reactions such as societal contestation and stricter regulation which leaves some people more vulnerable, especially when the intersections of class, race, and religion are considered. This ambiguity of LGBTQ+ visibility is described by Oluoch and Tabengwa as a “double-edged sword of visibility” (2017, 150). Whereas, on the one hand, visibility can serve as a vehicle for improving the societal position for LGBTQ+ people, on the other hand, it also serves as creating “an enabling environment for state and non-state actors to

stigmatise, violate and discriminate against people due to their sexual or gender identity” (ibid.). In some cases, countries manage visibility of sexual minorities in such an elaborated way (i.e. hypervisibility) so as to stigmatise them as abnormalities that cause the dissolution of traditional, heterosexual norms, family values, and the population’s decline (e.g. Russia’s anti-homopropaganda law).

On a global scale, the politics of LGBTQ+ visibility can be seen as a Eurocentric model which does not resonate with the experiences of LGBTQ+ people beyond the borders of Western, liberal societies (Stella 2015, 22; Edenborg 2020, 109). To give an example, the coming out of the closet rationale which Western LGBTQ+ movements regard as an important visible element of liberation, can be counterproductive in non-Western countries where heightened visibility will lead to other, riskier, consequences. This has been the case with some Pride Marches in Eastern Europe, Africa, and South America that were sponsored and guided by Western institutions and activists.<sup>39</sup> In various Western societies themselves differences also exist in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights. Whereas in some countries homonationalist politicians (e.g. Geert Wilders/*PVV*; Marine Le Pen/*Rassemblement National*) instrumentalise LGBTQ+ visibility to justify political stances against immigration, other countries seek to delimit this visibility. Moreover, most Western countries capitalise on their acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights and visibility to essentialise themselves as progressive and tolerant, emphasising the division between them and the homophobic Other. With this in mind, for many post-socialist countries, LGBTQ+ visibility often is linked to Westernisation and modernisation and is perceived as endangering the traditions of the nation state.<sup>40</sup>

In a similar vein, the introduction of *Trap Door* (2017), Gossett, Stanley & Burton problematise the representation of trans people in cultural production. They start their introduction by stating that “visibility is a trap,” in which they critically refer to the dominant notion that visibility is the “primary path through which trans people might have access to liveable lives” (Gossett et al. 2017, xv). In recent years, there has been an increase of representations of trans lives

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<sup>39</sup> There are cases that the Western sponsorship of Pride parades are counterproductive in countries where such initiatives are not adequately anchored in the local activist organisations. This, of course, should be examined case by case, whereby the local context also should be taken into consideration.

<sup>40</sup> But not always. In many countries, especially by the more progressive young people, the state of affairs is seen as a sign that the country is still lagging behind and still has much to catch up on (e.g. by some in Georgia, but also in Poland).

and bodies in mainstream media and the cultural landscape.<sup>41</sup> Whereas at the first glance this may appear as progress, it is important to keep in mind that images hold power. To elaborate, images are not merely mechanisms of representation, but rather, as Marie-José Mondzain notes, “images are an instrument of power over bodies and minds” (2009, 22). She continues by explaining that the “master of the visible” also “organizes the control of the gaze” (ibid., 20). As many people learn about trans people through the media it is important to understand that these representations mostly offer a fetishised and fragmented image constructed by a dominant group and their heterosexual norms (ibid.). Since these representations of trans people in mass media serves the liberal assumption that representation is the remedy to social struggles, the contrary is true as well. In many cases this increased representation coincides with forms of prejudice, violence, and discrimination against trans people (Gossett et al. 2017, xxv). Mondzain contends that there is always the possibility to “produce counterimages” that would diverge those dominant images (2009, 27). The responsibility here lies with those who understand the modes of constructing images (ibid., 33). As a passageway, *Trap Door* advocate to bring a “new visual grammar into existence” (ibid., xviii). This can unravel the current instrumentalisation of trans people in the mainstream media that allowed the trans community to feel precarious in the first place. Although *Trap Door* is solely focused on the ambiguities of trans visibility, it provides the tools to question ramifications of the overall LGBTQ+ visibility in today’s cultural production.

This discussion shows that visibility does not necessarily mean liberation for all LGBTQ+ people. As a complex concept, the politics of visibility has differential effects in the way how formerly invisible bodies become visible and (are made to) appear in public spheres. The varied effects of LGBTQ+ visibility in (inter)national politics also foregrounds how different actors instrumentalise certain pro/anti LGBTQ+ discourses (Edenborg 2020: 359). Besides providing a representational, political platform of which LGBTQ+ people can demand their social rights, public visibility is also regulated in order to categorise which sexualised and gendered bodies are worthy to appear and which bodies should remain invisible. This does not mean that the public visibility as a site of resistance should be refuted, nor that LGBTQ+ activist should avoid becoming more visible. It does, however, propose a better consideration of the concept of visibility itself, what the

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<sup>41</sup> This heightened trans visibility in the US has been defined as “the transgender tripping point” by *Time Magazine*. Steinmetz, K. (2014, May 29). “The Transgender Tipping Point” in *Time Magazine*. Retrieved through: <https://time.com/magazine/us/135460/june-9th-2014-vol-183-no-22-u-s/> on 27 May 2020.

potential benefits or dangers are and what consequences may result from it. Thereby, when talking about the politics of LGBTQ+ visibility, each case should be examined and formulated within its own historical, (geo)political, cultural, and social context. This will help to consider the ways in which contemporary notions about in/visibility are the product of discourses that selectively include or exclude certain truths, norms, and behaviours in society.

## Part II – *And Then We Danced*: A Challenging Production

Whereas the Swedish-French-Georgian co-production *And Then We Danced* has received critical acclaim worldwide, it was not taken to heart by Georgia's nationalist groups and Georgian Orthodox Church who denounced the film as an insult for traditional Georgian values.<sup>42</sup> Before I am going to evaluate how the social unrest surrounding the film's premiere reflects the current disparity in Georgian society regarding LGBTQ+ visibility and rights, I first will provide some background information about the film.<sup>43</sup>

The movie tells the coming-of-age story of Merab (Levan Gelbakhiani), a devoted dancer at the national dance ensemble in Georgia whose goal is to join the main ensemble of the dance company. He faces competition from another skilled male dancer Irakli (Bachi Valishvili) who is new to the dance ensemble. Irakli has a masculine posture and dances more rigidly, which are central tenets in tradition Georgian dance. In contrast, Merab's dance movements are shown as soft, gracious, and feminine, something that is often berated by the ensemble's instructor. The rivalry between the dancers eventually leads to a short-lived romantic relationship between the two. Finding himself in love with Irakli, something awakens in Merab as he starts to explore his sexuality and reclaiming his own truth, power, and identity in a hyper-masculine culture that is not very accepting to deviations from the norms. Besides this, the plot also touches on topics such as social-economic problems, intergenerational living situations, xenophobia, the Russian occupation, and Westernisation.

According to director Akin, the concept of the movie was influenced by the events that took place on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013, when Georgian LGBTQ+ activists were violently attacked by hundreds

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<sup>42</sup> The film was first premiered at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival and has won awards at the Sarajevo Film Festival and Chicago International Film Festival. It was also screened at the London Film Festival. Moreover, Sweden have selected *And Then We Danced* as its entry for the 'best international feature film' category of the Oscars.

<sup>43</sup> To watch the trailer: Peccadillo Pictures. (2019, October 3). "AND THEN WE DANCED – Trailer – Peccadillo Pictures" in *YouTube*. Retrieved through: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmjDLJ7dkHg> on 10 April 2020.

of anti-gay protestors during a peaceful demonstration. This have led to him going to Tbilisi to research the societal topic (Gray 2019). He thereby conducted numerous of interviews with Georgian LGBTQ+ people about their lives in a society that holds a hostile attitude towards them. The stories told by the interviewees eventually were implemented in the pre-production of the film. When shooting the film, the production team faced many difficulties (Allaire 2020). After providing an alternate plot synopsis, the truth about the real storyline came out. This led to a rejection of funding from Georgian film institutes and multiple locations in Tbilisi dropping out the film project on one day's notice. Fortunately, some public spaces, such as the gay-friendly techno nightclub Bassiani, did allow filming to take place at their venue. Inevitably the news of the film project spread further to such an extent that bodyguards were hired after those involved received death threats. Not only did the production crew have to keep a low profile while shooting, the threats uttered against them also necessitated the use of a discrete guerrilla-style of shooting. For this reason, many scenes were improvised. As Akin also wanted to incorporate Georgian traditional songs in the film to show the rich Georgian culture, permission was asked to Georgian musicians to use their recording, but this was denied. It was therefore necessary to find musicians to rerecord the songs for the film's soundtrack. Ultimately, the musicians, alongside the film's choreographer, wanted to remain anonymous as they fear that their involvement would damage their future prospects. With all these complications while filming the movie, Akin states in an interview with *The Calvert Journal* that he could not have made this film if he lived in Georgia as "he would have been ostracised" (Gray 2019).

One of the main cinematic choices Akin made was the use of the metaphor of traditional Georgian dance because to him it showcases Georgian traditional society and its patriarchal structures. Dance is an essential part of Georgia's cultural traditions, and every child in Georgia must learn Georgian traditional dance. The disparity in Georgian society between the conservative groups and young, liberal people, is also reflected in the way how the younger generation turns away from the traditional Georgian dance towards a new form of expression. This is evident when the police raid of Bassiani in May 2018 led to the rave protest, whereby dancing became a form of activism.<sup>44</sup> In the film, it is Merab who challenges those powerful structures that determine the nationalistic and heterosexual constructions of what is meant by a real Georgian. By appropriating parts of his own culture, the film's overall message is to show the younger generation that traditions

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<sup>44</sup> The slogan of this rave protest was 'we dance together, we fight together.'

can be honored while also be transformed. As Akin himself appeals to the younger generation: “I want them to own their culture and not let these crazy bigots claim authority over what it means to be Georgian” (ibid.).

What does the film do for Georgians, specifically Georgian LGBTQ+ people? In the aforementioned interview Akin explains that he encounters cinema as another effective vehicle for visibility as it has the powerful potential “to change minds in Georgia, in Ukraine, and that part of the world [...] Somebody’s mother in Georgia – not necessarily a homophobic, but unsure – would see the film and realise that LGBTQI+ people are struggling with their lives just like everyone else” (ibid.). The phrasing “struggling with their lives just like everyone else” aligns with the dominant idea of the politics of visibility, as it raises awareness of the social position of LGBTQ+ people by humanising them and showing that their bodies also exist in society. This is indeed valuable since living outside the visual of dominant power is one of the many obstacles for LGBTQ+ people. However, to take a critical stance, stating that the film has the potential to change the minds of Georgians (or “that part of the world”) is a complex statement to make. Especially when Akin also claims that he could not have made the film if he lived in Georgia. The many difficulties faced while filming and Akin’s argument that he would have been “ostracised” if he lived in Georgia, already implies that the widespread resentment towards queer people in the public opinion of Georgia is persistent. When the director acknowledges that many societal authorities were extremely displeased with his project, why should the outcome of the film shift this public opinion? Moreover, how can the film’s LGBTQ+ visibility change the ongoing (or increased) struggles in the lives of Georgian LGBTQ+ people for the better? Does a gained visibility for Georgian LGBTQ+ community in a cultural production equals a liberation of all Georgian queers? Just as the non-Western Pride Parades, funded by Western institutions, can have a counterproductive effect because LGBTQ+ visibility and rights are a sensitive topic in society, this film also can arouse similar consequences. To examine the social turmoil surrounding the film’s premiere it is important to take the local context as a starting point, because it is the expressed perspectives of the local LGBTQ+ people and the general population that eventually will encounter the consequences of this gained LGBTQ+ visibility.



### Part III – The Film’s Premiere and Social Turmoil

The film *And Then We Danced* projects what Oluoch and Tabengwa mean with the “double-edged sword of visibility.” On the one hand the visible LGBTQ+ content of the film can raise awareness of social injustice and the precarious conditions of LGBTQ+ people in Georgian society. On the other hand, the gained visibility for LGBTQ+ people can coincide with proliferating discrimination or violence.<sup>45</sup> One of the difficulties for Georgian LGBTQ+ people is their appearance in the public space, as forms of exclusion not only violate their right of the freedom of assembly but also to express themselves socially and politically. As Butler argues, “the regulation of the space of appearance” is selective in what bodies can appear, i.e. exist, and what bodies will be rendered invisible, i.e. non-existing (Butler 2004, xx). With this in mind, it is understandable that sexual minorities want to become acknowledged. At the same time, the louder and more visible LGBTQ+ people become, whether in the media or via their embodied appearance in public space, the louder the oppositional groups get as well. The Georgian government acts as an arbitrator and ultimately is strategically engaged. Given the status of the Church in society, the state cannot afford to oppose the Church too much. Here, some populist politicians play into the hands of nationalist groups or the Church, often at the expense of LGBTQ+ people. At the same time, the government also wants to gain a foothold in the EU. This led to pseudo-supporters in Georgia’s politics who often instrumentally use LGBTQ+ rights to attain support from liberal, progressive people in society. Here, the issue of LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia seems to become part over an overarching power game, distracting from the real precarious problems of the livelihoods of the Georgian LGBTQ+ people. It is this ambiguity of the politics of in/visibility that is showcased in the way the premiere of *And Then We Danced* hit at the centre of the deep-rooted cultural tensions between the conservative, nationalist groups that claim to be safeguarding traditional values and the younger generation advocating for social equality, freedom of expression, and progress.<sup>46</sup>

The film premiered in Georgia on 8 November, and was shown in five major cinemas in Tbilisi and one in Batumi. As the screenings of the film was only scheduled for three days, the

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<sup>45</sup> There is no immediate connection between an increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people and the upsurge of violence and discriminations. The emergence of anti-gay rhetoric in countries such as Georgia cannot simply be considered to be a logical consequence of the increasing presence of LGBTQ+ people. However, as Meredith Weiss describes, “transnational discursive flows” have “yielded a form of anticipatory countermobilization” in conservative societies against the overtly expressed LGBTQ+ activism (2013, 149;158).

<sup>46</sup> The generational, hence ideological, gap is influenced by the cultural, historical, and economic context each generation has grown up in.

tickets sold out within minutes. However, days prior the film's premiere, nationalist groups unofficially led by far-right devotee Levan Vasadze called on supporters to prevent any screenings from happening. On the day of the premiere itself, the Ministry of Internal Affairs released a statement saying:

The policy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is rigid and fair towards the persons committing hate crimes that primarily aims at eliminating all forms of discrimination and ensuring equal rights envisaged by Georgian legislation for any natural and legal persons [...] Ministry of Internal Affairs will ensure the public safety and order on the ground, as well as freedom of expression of each person will be ensured that does not go beyond limits prescribed by the legislation. Ministry of Internal Affairs once again urges everyone to obey requirements of the law. Otherwise, the police will act within its mandate and any case of violation of the law will be precluded immediately (Ministry of Internal Affairs 2019).

In response, the Equality Movement finds the Ministry's statement vague and calls on the law enforcement agency to "adequately assess the situation" (Equality Movement 2019). The organisation emphasised the urgency as past events show that the protests of the "homophobic groups" are "far from peaceful form of manifestation" (ibid.). Indeed, it is debatable whether the Ministry is "rigid and fair" to people committing hate crimes and its vow to maintain public order during the film's premiere was not efficiently realised. However, the Ministry did arrange police forces, which was much needed during the premiere. At the time of the premiere, large crowds of anti-gay protestors gathered outside Tbilisi's Amirani Cinema and confronted the riot police by attempting to break through their cordons (fig 3.1).<sup>47</sup> To delve deeper into the public debate regarding this event of the film's premiere, I will now draw a more comprehensive picture of the different actors and their viewpoints in society and relate them to each other by using the politics of visibility.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Smaller crowds of anti-gay protestors were also to found at other cinemas in Tbilisi and Batumi.

<sup>48</sup> To get a glimpse on the events of the film's premiere in Tbilisi: OC Media. (2019, November 9). "Ultra-Conservative Groups Attacked Moviegoers in Tbilisi" in *Facebook*. Retrieved through: <https://www.facebook.com/ocmediaorg/videos/791005964694603/> on 15 April 2020.



Figure 3.1 © Zurab Kurtsikidze via New York Times

I will begin with the nationalist groups leading the protest against the screening of the film. In recent years, these groups have been growing stronger and have adopted anti-immigration and homophobic views. At the forefront of these groups is Georgian March, founded in 2017 and led by the former politician Sandro Bergadze. As *OC Media* (i.e. Open Caucasus Media), an independent media platform with donations from mostly international sources, contends, Georgian March is known for its aggressive position against humanitarian rights groups financed by foreign donors (Avetisyan 2019).<sup>49</sup> Days prior the film's premiere, Georgian March's Facebook shared a news item of Bergadze's appeal to the cinemas' management to cancel the screenings, defining thereby the film as "gay propaganda" (Georgian March 2019).<sup>50</sup> A few days later, a clip was published on the same Facebook page, calling out for their supports to gather on the day of the

<sup>49</sup> The "about us" section OC-Media explains that it survives solely from these international sources, which entails mostly Western authorities. However, as the media platform claims that it "never allow any donor to dictate our editorial policy" it remains "vulnerable to their funding schedules and changing priorities." Moreover, the platform's independent journalism is often under attack due to the accusation that the journalists are "serving the enemy." OC Media. "Who We Are." Retrieved through: <https://oc-media.org/who-we-are/> on 16 April 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Georgian March. (2019, November 2). "ქართული მარში არ დაუშვებს 'ლგბტ' პროპაგანდას!!!" ("Georgian March will not allow 'LGBT propaganda'!!!") Retrieved through: <https://www.facebook.com/QartuliMarshiGeorgianMarch/videos/516260345593412/?v=516260345593412/> on 17 April 2020.

premiere and disrupt the screenings. The clip shows footages of *And Then We Danced*, followed by pictures of traditional Georgian male dancers which eventually is interspersed with a photo of someone raising his middle fingers. One possible intention of this clip is to safeguard Georgian traditional dance from the “obscurities” of the film. The accompanied text provides the time and the location (i.e. 16:00 at Philharmonic Hall) of the gathering and asserts that it is the duty of every Georgian to “peacefully” prevent any moviegoer entering this “filth” in Georgian cinemas (Georgian March 2019).<sup>51</sup> During this gathering, the following news photo is taken (fig. 3.2).



Figure 3.2 © Mzia Saganelidze.via RFE/RL

This photo derives from the news channel RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (i.e. RFE/RL) which serves as a “surrogate of free press in countries whereby it is not yet fully developed.”<sup>52</sup> RFE/RL is funded by the U.S. Congress through the United States Agency for Global Media. Despite this government funding, the firewall enshrined in the U.S. International Broadcasting Act ensures its

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<sup>51</sup> Georgian March Facebook (2019, November 6). “არა ჰომოსექსუალიზმის პროპაგანდას!” (“No to the propaganda of homosexuality”) *Facebook*. Received through: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=426618134557666> on 17 April 2020.

<sup>52</sup> RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. “About Us.” Retrieved through: <https://pressroom.rferl.org/about-us> on 20 April 2020.

journalistic credibility.<sup>53</sup> However, this platform is more bias-dependent because it originally was the US-funded pro-Western channel in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. To come back to the photo, looking at it on a denotative level (i.e. explicit literal meaning), I see men in front of a building who are setting a multi-coloured flag with the text ‘No [...]GB [...]’ (read: ‘No LGBT’) on fire. Whereas the man in the back is waving a banner with a unicorn, another man holds a megaphone in his hand. While looking at this image, the associative meaning I produce is that that the picture is taken in front of the National Philharmonic Hall in Tbilisi. Furthermore, I see a Bolnisi cross adorned on the black uniforms, which is considered a Georgian national symbol and is used as one of the logos of Georgian March. Besides, Georgian March also uses the banner inspired on the ‘Saint George’s Cross and unicorn flag’ of king David IV (commonly known as Davit Aghmashenebeli or David the Builder) as its logo. King David IV (1076-1125) is one of the most successful Georgian ruler as he reunited Georgia and expanded the country’s control in the Caucasus.<sup>54</sup> Using David IV’s flag as its emblem suggests that Georgian March as a nationalistic group seek to return Georgia to the powerful state as it was under David’s rule.<sup>55</sup> The self-made multi-coloured flag signifies the rainbow flag, which symbolises the diversity and pride of the LGBTQ+ community and originates from 1970s LGBTQ+ movements in the United States. Considering the context in which this photo is designedly taken, Georgian March is holding an anti-gay protest before the actual premiere of *And Then We Danced*. By burning the rainbow flag, Georgian March displays its opposition of the film’s LGBTQ+ content which is not compatible with the group’s nationalistic values.

When moving the protests towards the Amirani Cinema, Sandro Bregadze had planned the formation of a corridor of shame in front of the cinema’s entrance, whereby each moviegoer who was attending the film’s premiere had to pass through. Another Georgian March’s leader, Kostantine Morgoshia, said that disrupting the screening shows that “entire Georgia sees that 100-200 bastards do not represent Georgia” (Civil.ge 2019). Even though Bregadze said that the protest

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<sup>53</sup> This certifies that journalists have the upper hand of how, and what, stories are covered without the interference by U.S. government officials.

<sup>54</sup> Saint George’s Cross is a red cross on a white background. It also appears in the center of the Georgia’s national flag, accompanied by four red Bolnisi crosses in each corner.

<sup>55</sup> This is based on the notion of ‘Greater Georgia,’ which basically means what nationalists forces think what should belong to Georgia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many of political elites in post-Soviet nations have built alliances with nationalist forces and proclaimed ideas such as creating ‘Greater Georgia.’ Thus, this is common to East European nationalistic movements (e.g. ‘Greater Azerbaijan’ ‘Greater Albania’ ‘Ukrainization of Ukraine’) (Fenenko 2008, 320).



will be peaceful, protesters threw firecrackers at the police and the filmgoers. By the same token, the far-right businessman Vasadze organised a protest in Vera Park, located close to Amirani Cinema (fig. 3.3).<sup>56</sup> During this gathering, Vasadze encouraged his supporters to forcefully break through the police cordon and enter the cinema in order to disrupt the screening, saying: “Our goal is not to allow the screening of this movie. If they wanted to make a film depicting love, then why couldn't it be about the relationship of a man and a woman?” (Dumbadze 2019). He called supporters in Batumi to protest as well against the upcoming premiere.



Figure 3.3 © Jam News.

Unlike the nationalist/far-right groups, the Georgian Orthodox Church did not plan any direct disruption of the film’s screening. However, Patriarch Ilia II did express the church’s critical stance towards the film. The website *Orthodox Christianity* translated and quoted the Patriarch’s statement: “The Orthodox Church of Georgia has always been, is and will be categorically irreconcilable both with sin in general and, especially, with the popularization and legitimization of sodomite relations. Therefore, we consider it absolutely unacceptable to show such a film in cinemas” (Orthodox Christianity 2019). The website *Orthodox Christianity* is under the auspices of the Patriarchal Cultural Council. When looking at the recommended articles on the website, the

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<sup>56</sup> Vasadze also held an anti-LGBTQ+ protest at Vera Park in July, opposing the first upcoming Tbilisi Pride.

platform critically alleges the West as enforcing a “LGBT-ideology” in Georgia.<sup>57</sup>

One of the reasons why no protest was announced beforehand might be that the Georgian Orthodox Church itself had become enmeshed in a scandal of its own in the same week of the film’s premiere. On live television, accusations of homosexuality and molestations of men/underaged boys were made towards Patriarch Ilia II by Archbishop Petre Tsaava.<sup>58</sup> The Church has denied all allegations and after the meeting of the Holy Synod, Tsaava was dismissed. In the aforementioned statement, the Patriarch asserts that it is “no coincidence” that the film’s release is in the same week of the accusations made against the Patriarch (Orthodox Christianity 2019). He seems to imply here that there is a connection between the recent unrest within the Church and the film’s premiere in Georgia. By stressing that the film is part of a force that has begun to attack the authority of the Church and traditional values, the public attention is shift away from the serious accusations that were made against the Patriarch. With his strong ties with the Church, Vasadze also claimed that the film is “part of the same process of destroying our country and the Church” (Chkareuli 2019). He thereby also emphasises the need for people to join the fight against the film’s release. Not only does this show how prominent figures in Georgia’s society have deployed their alleged vulnerability to attack the LGBTQ+ community they exclude in the first place, they also appeal to the sympathy of the people on the basis of those made claims. During the rally in front of the Amirani Cinema, clerics of the Orthodox Church, some members of the Orthodox Parent’s Union (OPU), and regular churchgoers came out to protest. Here, some protesters used religious icons (e.g. crosses), candles and shared prayers, while others were more physical resistant and made homophobic statements. The photo below depicts a woman who protest the film outside the Amirani Cinema peacefully (fig. 3.4). Holding a candle and a Hodegetria-icon, in which Maria is depicted as Theotokos or God-bearer and is pointing to the saviour of the world, Christ.

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<sup>57</sup> Some of the titles of the recommended readings on Orthodox Christianity

Orthodox Christianity. (2019, June 17). “Western Powers Aggravating Situation in Georgia Surrounding LGBT Events.” Retrieved through: <http://orthochristian.com/121888.html> on 21 April 2020.

Jatras, J.G. (2019, July 1). “Violence Erupts as West Turns Its Sexual Subversion Weapon on Georgia” in *Orthodox Christianity*. Retrieved through: <https://orthochristian.com/122134.html> on 21 April 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Other accusations continued to emerge from this, for example, Orthodox Priest Giorgi Skhiladze accused an Archbishop of sexual misconduct with a male theology student in the 1980s (Avetisyan 2019).



Figure 3.4 © Vano Shlamov via *New York Times*

Looking at the position of the filmgoers and the LGBTQ+/human rights activists, they endured a lot of counterforce from protesters of nationalist groups. The filmgoers had to walk through a corridor of shame by which they were scrutinised and physically pushed by the protestors. Some never made it into the cinema building. To report on the event, Tbilisi Pride gave updates on its social media platforms, including a livestream on Facebook.<sup>59</sup> One of the incidents this livestream captured is the moment after the outspoken supporter of LGBTQ+ rights, Ana Subeliani, was hit by a heavy object thrown by protesters (fig. 3.5).

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<sup>59</sup> To see this livestream: Tbilisi Pride. (2019, November 8). *Facebook*. Retrieved through: <https://www.facebook.com/TiflisPride/videos/473923049878992/> on 27 April 2020.





Figure 3.5 © Irakli Gedenidze via RFE/RL

This photo was taken from *RFE/RL* and displays the wounded Subeliani after the incident. Whereas the policemen on the left seem to prevent other people from entering the scene, the policemen and friends on the right are attending her. It appears as if the ambulance nurse in the middle is making her way towards the wounded. Afterwards, Subeliani was taken away in an ambulance. By means of sharing pictures of the incident, Tbilisi Pride appealed to the Interior Ministry, demanding thereby the arrest of the perpetrators (Tbilisi Pride 2019). After her release from the hospital, Subeliani shared her statement wherein she explained that while she was trying to get inside the cinema, far-right protestors shouted homophobic slurs to her. The police, however, witnessed this but did not undertake protective measures (Avetisyan 2019; Tbilisi Pride 2019). This aligns with the bodily vulnerability I touched upon in the previous chapter. The filmgoers, including LGBTQ+ activists, put themselves at risk to potential physical and verbal abuse. Here, exposing their bodies to the touch and sight of others while attempting to enter the film's screening, shows already how their vulnerability can be mobilised as a form of resistance. Besides Subeliani, the politician David Berdzenishvili and some journalists also were harassed (EMC 2019).

## Part IV – The Aftermath

Given the above, the protest against the film's screening builds mainly on the argument that the film epitomises 'gay propaganda.' Both nationalist groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church plead that this film encouraged the popularisation of non-heterosexual sexual relations, which they consider being part of a process destroying Georgia's traditional, family, and religious values. This foregrounds the idea that the survival of Georgia as a nation depends on the preservation of these values, which according to conservative groups, the West tries to destroy by promoting a gay agenda. Looking at the developments of recent years, the attempt to erase LGBTQ+ appearance in the public space seems to be accompanied by a hypervisibilisation of a LGBTQ+ menace by far-right groups and the Church. By consistently stigmatising non-heterosexuals as sinners that through their alleged propaganda are endangering family values and population's decline, those conservative groups construct the idolatry of the imagined LGBTQ+ enemy (fig.3.6). The exposition of this imaged LGBTQ+ enemy renders thereby a heteropatriarchal conception of Georgia and what a real Georgian should be and act like.



Figure 3.6 © Georgian National Awakening Facebook

The Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) in Georgia has written a report on the events of the film's premiere. The rapport considers the protester's received media attention problematic. Throughout the day, various media platforms have broadcasted items focusing on the protest against the film's release. This provide Vasadze and Georgian March's leaders with a platform that facilitates "the spread of ideas based on inequality and violence and reinforces the influence of pro-violence leaders" (EMC 2019). Moreover, since the Georgian Orthodox Church has extensive influence over public opinion, any condemnation of LGBTQ+ content is shared by a large part of the population.

As EMC's report further states, the rally in front the Amirani Cinema has "fallen out of the sphere of freedom of peaceful assembly and expression" (ibid.). Not only did the protestors put the filmgoers and LGBTQ+ activists at risk with their rally, they also undermined civil peace and public safety. Moreover, the report also notes that the police mobilisation was "considerably weak" which made it easier for protestors to occupy space around the cinema and physically push through the police cordon. Whereas the police must safeguard the protests from violence and thereby guarantee the freedom of protest from both sides (LGBTQ+ activists, anti-gay protesters), it is, paradoxically, also the potential source of violence. Firstly, the protection that the police offer is always an uncertain protection and secondly, the police are also the only ones who can use violence legally. When the events started to escalate, the Interior Ministry did send special task forces towards the cinema (ibid.). Even though the Interior Ministry showed action during this event, the question can be raised why they did not investigate the threats made by Vasadze and Georgian March prior the premier. By launching an interrogation of these threatening statements, the violent outcomes of the organised protests could have been reduced. The Interior Ministry legitimised this by stating that these groups have the freedom to assembly and this right should be protected (ibid). The Ministry, however, did made the choice to investigate an appeal by the anti-gay campaigner Dimitri Lortkipanidze whom proclaimed that the film contained pornographic scenes (Avetyisyan 2019).<sup>60</sup> It is noteworthy that by publicly exposing their discontent of the film's screening, those conservative groups are not actually reducing LGBTQ+ visibility in the public domain. As I argued elsewhere, this can be a useful tactic by reinforcing Georgian values against the imagined LGBTQ+ bogeyman. However, it also receives another form of attention. The turmoil during Georgia's

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<sup>60</sup> Article 255 of Georgia's Criminal Code shows that the production and distribution of pornography should be banned.

premiere of *And Then We Danced* received international media attention, bringing an international spotlight on the situation regarding LGBTQ + rights in Georgia. When the film premiered in other – mostly Western – countries, it was accompanied by an explanation of the current socio-political situation for LGBTQ+ people in Georgia (e.g. *The New York Times*; *Vogue*; *The Guardian*, *De Volkskrant*). Nonetheless, this increased international media visibility has its ambiguities. For instance, it enables the Georgian LGBTQ+ community to receive more international support from Western humanitarian organisations, NGO's, and activists. This can simultaneously strengthen the argument that the film's LGBTQ+ content is part of the Western agenda of promoting LGBTQ+ ideology. The latter can lead to more oppositional force from nationalist groups and the Church.

*And Then We Danced* was noticeably absent from the line up of the Tbilisi International Film Festival in December 2019. Usually this festival displays the most prominent released Georgian films of the year. However, due to the violent rally during the film's premiere in Georgia, no further risks were taken. Thus, in total, the film only was screened in Georgia for three days. So, in what ways did the film increase the visibility for the vulnerable Georgian LGBTQ+ people? By using the interviews Akin conducted with Georgian LGBTQ+ people in the writings of the script, some of their voices were implemented and shared. Besides, the film covered multiple politically and socially sensitive topics and opened thereby dialogue in the public sphere. Here, cultural productions can provide a visual tool that seek to overcome social stigma's and phobias towards excluded groups. The film's creative team received an Equality Award, which is an award given by the Equality Movement as an act of gratitude for supporters who had an impact on changing societal attitudes towards Georgian LGBTQ+ people. According to the Equality movement, the film had "a profound impact on public life" (Equality Movement 2019). Therefore, the courage that the production team have shown should be acknowledged. The film did lead to aggressive responses from conservative groups, with the protests in front of the cinemas as the most visible example. Nonetheless, still amidst these threats, none of the cinemas retreated and cancelled the screenings. Moreover, some prominent figures within the Georgian LGBTQ+ activism were provided a media platform whereby they could share their perspectives on the matter. For instance, Tbilisi Pride's executives Tamar Sozashvili and Giorgi Tabagari shared their standpoint on national news channels such as TV Mtavari Arkhi, TV Formula, and TV Pirveli.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> For example: Tbilisi Pride. (2019, November 7). *Facebook*.

Retrieved through: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=588954878507105> on 29 April 2020.

This would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

Besides the media attention, the well-known Georgian street artist Gagosh re-appropriated Tbilisi's urban landscape by making a graffiti artwork reflecting the events regarding the film's premiere (fig. 3.7). Here, the artist contributes to the visibility of the Georgian LGBTQ+ community in the public space.



Figure 3.7 © Gagosh

This graffiti work portrays the film's protagonist, Merab, as Cupid (i.e. the Roman god of love) with colored pencils that signify the LGBTQ+ rainbow. He points these pencils at an uncoloured army wearing Roman attire and which represents the nationalist groups. This army, in turn, is aiming the spears at Cupid. Gagosh explains the following about this work: "It's the war between Cupid and an armed group, that are hiding behind their shields, protecting themselves from the colors of Cupid, as they are afraid it will change their orientation" (Dakhundaridze 2019). It also can be interpreted as a visualisation of persistence. To elaborate, amidst the hatred and threats from conservative groups, rather than withdrawing, the Georgian LGBTQ+ community draws affective

force from it. This is shown in the community's persistence to strive for a better livelihood and a more social included Georgia.

## Part V – Conclusion

The film *And Then We Dance* and its LGBTQ+ content has sparked social unrest in Georgia which led to nationalist groups and the Church protesting and disrupting the film's premiere. This event provided me with an interesting case showcasing how LGBTQ+ visibility, whether in cultural production/media or through embodied appearance in public space, is a biased concept. An increased LGBTQ+ visibility does not facilitate a guaranteed ticket for social liberation, which is often is a prominent conception of many Western societies/movements. Being more ambiguous than this, in each individual case, the concept of in/visibility should be considered and formulated within its own social/historical/(geo)political/cultural context. Within Georgia's conservative society, the socio-political agenda of nationalist groups and Georgian Orthodox Church often hypervisibilise LGBTQ+ rights in such a way as to reinforce their heterosexual conception of Georgia. Therefore, according to these conservative groups, the film is part of a force that endanger the collapse of traditional and religious values and should therefore be prevented forcefully. This shows how an increased LGBTQ+ visibility also can lead to potential backlash. Even though the film hit at the center of the current societal issues regarding LGBTQ+ rights, it did shed a light on the precarious livelihoods of sexual minorities in Georgia. Moreover, it also appealed the younger, more progressive generation, that they can decide for themselves how they express themselves. All in all, the film brought the topic of Georgian LGBTQ+ lives, among other topics, to the public sphere whereby prominent figures from different socio-political and cultural groups were debating the issue. Here, the ways the film has awakened a discussion in the public sphere, the persistence of the cinemas to continue the screenings, and the fact that the police was attempting to preserve public safety during the premiere, already indicates that something is shifting in Georgian society. It remains to be seen what this shift entails and in which direction it will develop.

# Conclusion

While Georgia has decriminalised homosexuality in 2000 and passed a law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in 2014, the LGBTQ+ community is still one of the most marginalised groups in Georgian society. As I argued in this thesis, the prevailing homophobic attitudes and the community's fight for inclusion and equality has been one of the main topics in Georgia's societal debate. I have sought to trace the recent history of the circulation of social-political discourses that shape the vulnerability of Georgian LGBTQ+ bodies within the context of the country's geopolitical, religious, and sociocultural context. By examining how Georgian LGBTQ+ bodies are acted upon by these discourses, this thesis has subsequently shown that the orchestrated vulnerability of these bodies also reveals an agentic force which subverts dominant discourses.

I have explained that Georgia is part of a discursive geopolitical tug-of-war between two larger geopolitical entities – the Russian Federation and the EU – who each seek to bring the region into their own sphere of influence. While restoring its national identity and prospects since the country's independence in 1991, the Georgian government attempts to implement more progressive policies to gain credit with the EU. Despite the country's effort to disassociate from the Russian Federation, the military and political presence of Russia continues to be prevalent in Georgia. Owing to its long history with Russia, a large part of the population speaks Russian and shares the same cultural sentiments. Besides this, twenty percent of Georgia is still under Russia's occupation. Thereby, the enlargement of the EU in Russia's vicinity is one of the factors that triggers Russia to exert influence in the bordering country. I also put forward that Russia proclaimed an image as the protector of traditional values, whereby the adopted anti-homopropaganda law in 2013 was explained as preventive measure to protect the survival of the nation-state. This rhetoric of 'traditional values' differs from the EU's civilisational project that essentialised the self-proclaimed universalities of tolerance and social equality as the markers of progress and modernity. Here, sexual diversity and LGBTQ+/human rights became a criterion that reinforces the Western proclaimed dominant position against the alleged homophobic Other.

These ideological differences between Russia and the EU mirror the current polarisation that exists in Georgia's society. When the collapse of the Soviet Union brought new, pro-Western oriented leaders to power, there was also a gradual emergence of LGBTQ+ activism noticeable.



Under the influence of the internet, Western theories on gender and sexuality, and with the help of Western humanitarian organisations, Georgian activists seek to achieve social equality and freedom of expression in the country. Nevertheless, with the deep roots of traditional norms and the continuing influence of a generation who grew up under Soviet rule, Georgia's transition to a modern market economy was simultaneously strengthened with a resurgence of nationalistic values. This is partly recognisable in the adherence to traditional and religious values that is safeguarded by the influential Georgian Orthodox Church, and nationalist/far-right groups. In contrast to the younger, more progressive, post-Soviet generation, these dominant groups, among other institutions (e.g. medical, legal, cultural, political) internalise and reproduce discourses on heterosexuality, marriage, and reproduction as the normative truth. These circulating discourses have implications for the lives of Georgian LGBTQ+ people who are considered to form a threat to the country's conservative values.

The dividing line of what separates Georgian queer bodies from the normative notion of being a 'real Georgian' captures the current social debate regarding LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia. To expand this argument further I have employed Foucault's concept of biopower, i.e. power over life. By critically approaching sociocultural phenomena in Georgian society through reading legalisations and news articles, I found that Georgia's biopower system exerts social control over the individuals and the population via regulations of life (e.g. reproduction, sex, abortion, family purity). Georgia's constitutional ban of same sex marriage in 2017, which re-defines marriage for the purpose of founding a family, and the annual 'Family Purity Marches' organised by the Georgian Orthodox Church, show that those bodies that are not amenable to the norm of reproductive heterosexuality are considered to endanger the nation's biological heritage. The influence of these dominant socio-political discourses is traceable in the prevailing homophobic attitude in society which stigmatises non-heterosexual bodies as abnormalities. Relating this to what Foucault defines as state racism, racism against Georgian LGBTQ+ bodies is justified in the name of alleged biological and nationalistic urgency and is manifested in forms of social exclusion and scrutiny. This goes to such an extent that queer people in Georgia are deprived of social, political, legal, economic networks which reduce them to precarity.

Using his theoretical concepts and implementing it in my thesis, Foucault gives useful insights into the way bodies are constituted and act upon discursively. However, there are some limitations. Whereas his theory does note that resistance to oppressive systems are possible, he



does not give a thorough explanation how this operates in social action. Thereby he does not really seem to acknowledge bodily experiences, or embodiment, which serves the assumption that the body is a passive object of knowledge and power that lacks any account of agency. Since I sought to look at a reverse discourse, whereby the Georgian LGBTQ+ community disengages and subverts those socio-cultural discourses that excluded them and shaped their vulnerability, I needed a theoretical approach that does provide an insight on how agency unfolds through and from bodies.

To do so, the concept of vulnerability should be reformulated as a condition that enables social action. In order to take this step, I looked into Butler's understanding of (bodily) vulnerability. This understanding suggests that all embodied human beings are made vulnerable to various norms which precede their existence in the world and structure how we act, think, and identify ourselves and our relation to other human beings. To support Butler's notion that human beings are dependent on social and material structures that allow them to live a liveable life, I touched upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. His work shows that via embodied movement through the world, bodies are exposed to the touch and sight of others and come thereby to bear certain sociocultural/historical meanings. Here, Merleau-Ponty's theory provided me with the insight that the body is not only being acted upon, but also has the capacity to act upon others through its embodied practices and lived experiences.

Being interrelated and dependent on others, certain powers in society orchestrate vulnerability to demean specific societal groups or people. This demonstrates the hierarchical distribution of vulnerability. What highlights the vulnerability of Georgian LGBTQ+ people are their exclusion and marginalisation of their bodies in the public space/sphere. A major event that shows how Georgian LGBTQ+ activists' appearance in the public space is distorted is when on May 17, 2013, a small group of gay right activists were violently attacked by thousands of anti-gay demonstrators. To look at more recent events, I used the example of the organisation Tbilisi Pride who were planning to hold the first Pride Week in June 2019. The many threats received from the Georgian Church and nationalist groups and the lack of support from Georgian authorities, illustrates how LGBTQ+ people's right to assembly in the public space is violated. The reduction of Georgian queer presence in public space is also noticeable in the way how the few safe spaces for the community are often under threat. With the decimating social and political structures, one of the main motivations for Georgian LGBTQ+ rights activists to mobilise their social action is for establishing a platform in which they can appear and advocate their political demands. Through

recognition of their vulnerable, precarious position, Georgian LGBTQ+ rights activists form alliances. Their collective exposure of their bodies to the touch as sight of others in the public space and knowing the risk of getting physically/verbally harmed by other people, shows that their (bodily) vulnerability evokes their political agency. This simultaneously indicates how resistance relies on this mobilisation of vulnerability.

Being persistent in their activism, Georgian LGBTQ+ community appearance in the public space and their fight for social inclusion and equality gained more media attention. This was particularly the case in 2019, when the organisation of Tbilisi Pride sparked many controversies in the societal debate. Thereby, the cultural production and the Georgian premiere of Levan Akin's film *And Then We Danced* (2019) and its LGBTQ+ content further fuelled this debate. By reading news articles, and photos reporting the film's premiere in November, I found that the turmoil regarding this film foregrounds the ambivalence of visibility. At this point of my thesis, I have implemented the politics of in/visibility, which provides useful insights into the differential and regulatory effects of how bodies are rendered to appear (or made invisible) in the public sphere. It also challenges the idealised idea that visibility is merely the key to social inclusion and liberation, which is the rationale of many Western movements. A heightened visibility can resonate differently depending on the country and its societal/cultural outlooks. In Georgia, the LGBTQ+ content of the film shed a light on queer lives in Georgia's conservative societies by means of making them more recognisable. However, as my critical review of the societal responses to this film puts forward, this heightened visibility of Georgian queer people did not really resonate with the conservative groups in society.

The threats to disrupt the first screenings of the film's premiere and the verbal and physical harassment towards moviegoers emphasises the potential risk involved with the gained LGBTQ+ visibility in Georgia. Strikingly, while the anti-LGBTQ+ groups (e.g. Georgian March and Georgian Orthodox Church) in Georgia seek to prevent the presence of queer bodies, both in cultural production as well as their embodied appearance in the public space, they simultaneously are hypervisibilising them. I explained this argument by stating that the politics of visibility provides dominant non-/state actors the tools to selectively frame which gendered/sexualised/racialised bodies are worthy or unworthy to appear in public. Aligning with what Foucault means with biopower and state racism, this categorising enables an environment where deviant bodies are violated or discriminated against. This is evident in the argument that the

film popularises non-heterosexual relations (i.e. gay propaganda). By constantly scrutinising LGBTQ+ people as a societal enemy that causes the decay of heterosexual norms, family purity, and thereby the decline of the population, reinforces the heteronormative and patriarchal conception of Georgia. However, despite the threats, both the filmgoers and LGBTQ+/human rights activists put themselves at risk by exposing their bodily vulnerability while attending the premiere of the movie. This persistence again illustrates the force of vulnerability. Lastly, looking at the more progressive consequences of a gained visibility, the very fact that LGBTQ+ rights are debated more extensively in Georgia's public sphere already implies that there is something shifting in society.

To better understand the implications of these findings, future research could address the local context regarding the societal debate of LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia more extensively. It is the expressed positions of local queer people and activists, as well as anti-gay groups, which will enrich first-hand experience on this current societal conflict. Thereby, via other qualitative research techniques such as interviews or other forms of field-research, the embodied experience of Georgian LGBTQ+ people can be further explored. In the end, the local activists collectively have the agency to raise awareness and educate others about their precarious condition. This is important, as the current societal debate on LGBTQ+ rights has become part over an overarching tug-of-war which diverts attention away from the problems of the precarious livelihoods of Georgian queer people. Without the full support of the Georgian government, and without full legal recognition of alternative sexualities and genders, and without an effective Anti-Discrimination Law and its consistent enforcement, the institutions in society have the freedom to discriminate and exclude without any legal consequences. This became tragically clear during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, whereby the LGBTQ+ community, as one of the marginalised groups in society, are hit the hardest. Due to the lack of access to basic and medical needs, in the end of April 2020, a transgender woman set herself on fire as a protest against governmental negligence. However, there are also fraternising gestures in these times, as a few clergy of one of Georgian Orthodox Churches anonymously donated supplies for transgenders hit by the pandemic. This implicates that within the Orthodox Church, not everyone has a strong discontent to queer people. Eventually, only time will tell how the power relations in Georgian society will shift and what future beholds for the Georgian LGBTQ+ people.

With my study I want to foreground that any tensions surrounding human rights norms in

relation to sociocultural norms deserve to be taken seriously. Especially in the last decade, whereby a resurgence of socio-political movements is noticeable in mainly (former) Western spheres of influence. Besides demands for a protected, fully recognised lives and government support, and with the proliferating interest in identity politics, many of the essential claims made by these movements concern the rights of autonomy over one's own body. Not to deny that this is profoundly important, it is still crucial to emphasise that bodies are never singular and always are implicated within and dependent on social structures. As Butler's work shows, people cannot repudiate the social norms that precede their existence in the world. However, there is always the possibility to make these social norms more just through social action. It is via the reconsideration and recognition of human interdependency by which we will address ourselves to participate in forms of solidarity and collective responsibility to resist biopolitical practices that reduce the livelihoods of certain bodies. We are all condemned to each other, and whether we like it or not, the awareness of this dependency can aspire to bridge the constructed divides that needlessly separate us.

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