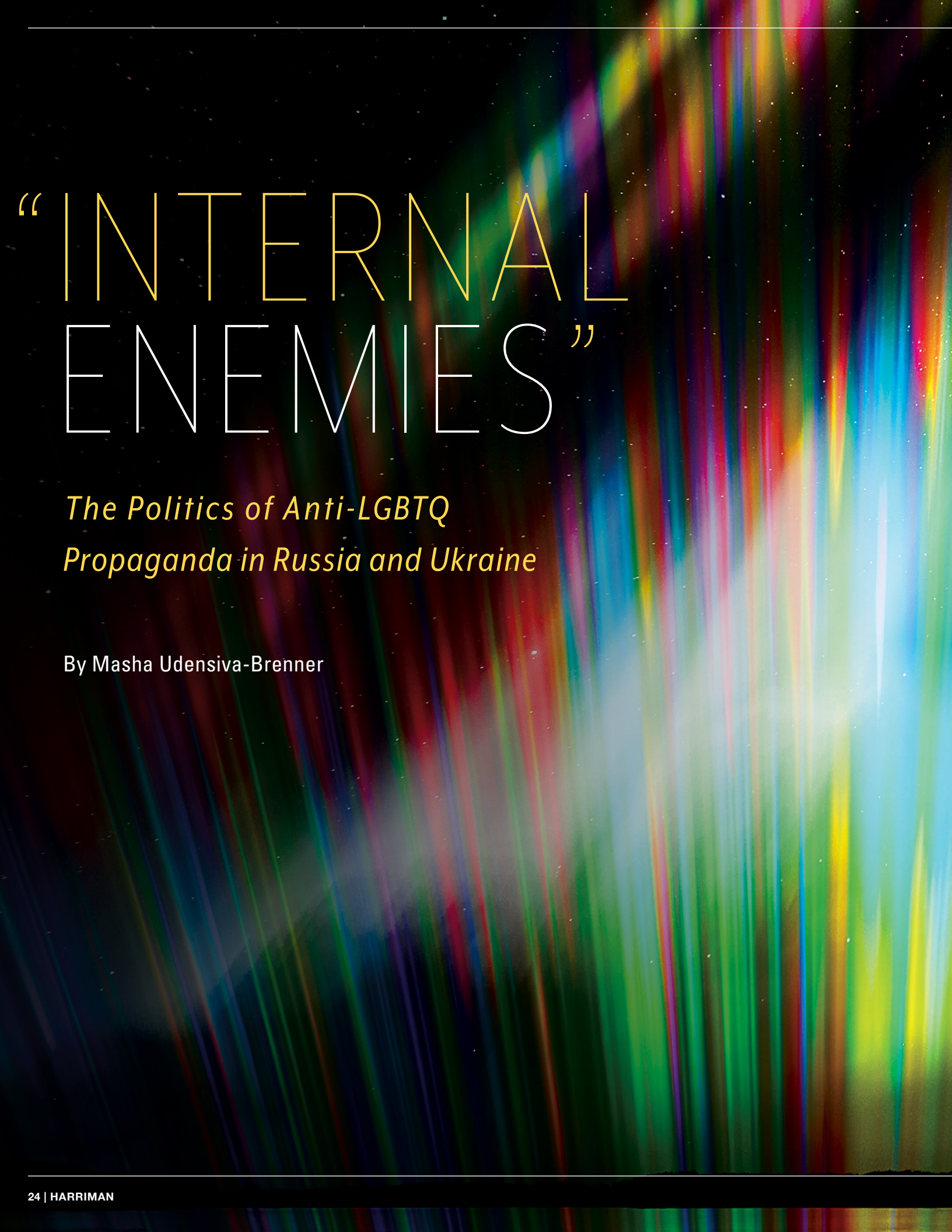

"INTERNAL ENEMIES"

The Politics of Anti-LGBTQ Propaganda in Russia and Ukraine

By Masha Udensiva-Brenner

In 2013, the Russian State Duma passed a law banning the "propaganda" of "nontraditional" sexual relations among minors. This created an atmosphere of impunity, with spikes in homophobic crimes and "huntings" of LGBTQ people all over Russia. The following year, revolution broke out in Ukraine and Russian state-sponsored media portrayed it as a fascist, Western-sponsored conspiracy with a homosexual agenda. Throughout the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russia's strategy has continued to include anti-LGBTQ messaging both at home and in Ukraine.

I interviewed LGBTQ activists Bogdan Globa and Yelena Goltsman about Russia's anti-LGBTQ messaging before and during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict at a panel discussion hosted by the Harriman Institute's Program on U.S.-Russia Relations and by the Ukrainian Studies Program, in October 2019. The event was supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The transcript below has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: Yelena, you immigrated here from Soviet Kyiv as a Jewish refugee in the early '90s. Can you talk about the Soviet criminalization of homosexuality and what it meant to be gay in that context?

Yelena Goltsman: I left Ukraine when it was the Soviet Union. I was 28 years old and I had a family, kids, a husband. I did not live my life as a gay person, and the reason for that is that I didn't know any other gay people. I knew there were people who were homosexual, but I didn't know anybody personally. I always knew I was a lesbian. It's just that there was no way to express myself, especially in a public way. There was no literature to explain what gay even meant, so it was an extremely closeted society.

> In general people never talked about it. We didn't even have sex education in school.

The Soviet way of dealing with homosexuality was very cruel, and there was actually a criminal law that punished male homosexuality with five years in prison. The law did not apply to women, who were sent to mental institutions instead. Believe me, that wasn't any better.

I believe that this is one of the reasons I left the Soviet Union. I say "believe," because I wasn't necessarily consciously understanding that, but I think that was one of the ways for me to become free.

Udensiva-Brenner: And Bogdan, you were born in '88, at the end of the Soviet Union. Can you talk about your background and what it was like growing up in the '90s and the aughts in Ukraine as a gay person?

Bogdan Globa: I lived the first of my 15 years in Poltava. It's very close to Kyiv, but it's a different region and a small town—about 200,000 people. When I was a child there was no internet, no literature about homosexuality, and in general people never talked about it. We didn't even have sex education in school. It was a post-Soviet society where you could not talk about sexuality in public spaces.

When I was in school my parents never talked about sexuality with me, but I started understanding that something was wrong with me; that I have feelings toward boys and not girls. It was very hard for me to understand.

In 2005, we got internet in Poltava. It was some public program in a library—you could go and have one hour of internet per week per person. I found some information about homosexuality, and I found another guy in my city and started kind of dating him. And then, of course, I got into trouble, because my mom found some movie on my

computer at home, and asked me, "You're a faggot?"

It was unsurprising for me, and I said yes. . . . I had never read about what coming out is, how to do it. I said yes only because it was a surprise. After that my parents, both very highly educated teachers, were very pissed off and started fighting with me. They called a psychiatric clinic, but the psychiatric clinic said, "We cannot fix it; it's not how we do things anymore." And then I decided to leave home.

Udensiva-Brenner: How old were you?

Globa: I was 15. It was a huge drama. I started living with that boy in Poltava. I lived with him for a couple of years, and then I moved to Kyiv and became active in human rights.

Udensiva-Brenner: Was there any political messaging at the time about LGBTQ people from—?

Globa: Only negative—these people are sick, there's something wrong with these people. But at that time there were more Hollywood movies with homosexual actors and stories. So people started to have a clearer understanding. And at the same time, international LGBT movements started becoming more visible in Ukraine, so every year was better and better.

Udensiva-Brenner: Russia had its own trajectory. The '90s were freewheeling. There was still a lot of homophobia, but gay people could kind of exist, until after 2013, when the propaganda law was passed. What's your perception of the situation in Russia versus the situation in Ukraine during the '90s and the aughts?

Goltsman: There was a period of time when everything Western was new and good, and clubs were everywhere—maybe not in Poltava, but certainly in big cities. A lot of performers started coming out that they were gay. So although it was still taboo, it was an interesting taboo. Alla Pugachova performed a concert with gay men, the Christ Chorus in Moscow, and it was a great success. So that was a really mainstream performer associating herself with a gay chorus.

I was not in Russia or Ukraine at the time, but I know a lot of people from Russia and Ukraine, and I knew them then. Ukraine was much more advanced in LGBT activism than Russia, and probably still is, and that is because of the number of people involved, because of the organizations that are involved and helped, but not because of the government necessarily.

At that time, there was no difference in government support, but there were many more Ukrainian organizations. Not only LGBT, but also feminist. I would say there was more progressive work done in Ukraine in the LGBT arena.

Udensiva-Brenner: Bogdan, you mentioned that you started working in human rights. Can you tell us how you ended up becoming the

Top: LGBTQ column at a St. Petersburg protest against the Russian invasion of Crimea (May 1, 2014). Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Bottom left: Police at Kyiv's LGBTQ "March of Equality" (March 8, 2019).

Bottom right: A fight between LGBTQ activists and supporters of "traditional values" in a St. Petersburg metro station (May 17, 2014). Photo by Andrey Pronin (ZUMAPRESS.com) via Alamy.

first openly gay person to speak before the Ukrainian Parliament?

Globa: It was after several years of getting more and more involved in LGBT movements. In 2012, the U.S. Embassy invited me to participate in a special advocacy program in the U.S., and they showed me how LGBT advocacy works here. It was during the Obama presidency, and it was a very progressive time, before gay marriage, but I saw a lot of progressive things here. All the activists were preparing for the Supreme Court issue, and there was a lot of advocacy in Congress, at the state level, so they showed me how human rights activists worked with Congress.

Then I went back to Ukraine, where we don't do too much to push our rights, and no one had worked with Parliament before on the advocacy level. After that program, the U.S. Embassy helped me get to the Parliament for a human rights committee event.

After all the MPs [members of Parliament] gave speeches on some political issue, participants had a chance to ask questions. I asked the human rights committee, "What about gay rights in Ukraine?" And everyone froze. It was such a surprising question there, and they tried to answer me, but they didn't mention the word "gay." They always try to say "this community" instead.

Goltsman: "These people."

Globa: "These people," yeah. They're afraid to use the word "gay," so for me it was frustrating. After that we started to work with Parliament more actively, and each meeting was friendlier. They understood we're not some sick people. We're absolutely normal people; citizens who pay taxes and who want equal rights. But still, there were a lot of things they didn't understand.

Udensiva-Brenner: In 2013, you lobbied Parliament for an antidiscrimination law in the workplace.

Globa: Yes. That was a requirement in order to join the European Union's visa-free regime, which helped me a lot.

Goltsman: That was an interesting time, because I don't think Parliament was really ready for it, but the European Union has certain requirements, and human rights and LGBT rights are part of those requirements. Grudgingly they were passed. And I think you were on the balcony, yeah?

Globa: Yes.

Goltsman: I actually remember watching him [Globa] on TV, saying, "Oh my God, we have that in Ukraine. Things are happening."

Udensiva-Brenner: Yeah, and that's amazing, because, meanwhile, in Russia things were really going downhill, and that's when you, Yelena, started your political activism, in 2013.

Goltsman: Yeah, but I have a longer history. When I started RUSA in 2008 it was more a social organization for Russian-speakers than a political one. Our political activity was focused on the Russian-speaking community in New York, because a lot of people in the community are homophobic or unaware.

This was our concentration in 2008. The group grew quite a bit, and by 2013 we had hundreds of people associated with RUSA. Not only in the New York area, but also in Boston, Philadelphia, D.C., Miami, and San Francisco. And I just want to highlight that we invite anybody who speaks Russian to join. We have a lot of people

> We're absolutely normal people; citizens who pay taxes and who want equal rights.

Left: A young woman supporting LGBTQ during an antigovernment rally in Moscow (September 9, 2018). Photo by Roman Chukanov via Alamy.

Top: "IKEA Gets Queered with Russian Kiss-In." A campaign protesting the removal of a gay couple from Ikea's Russian catalogue, co-organized by Yelena Goltsman. Photo by Alexander Kargaltsev via Wikimedia Commons.

from Ukraine, a lot of people from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan. We've even had people from the Philippines come to our meetings.

It's interesting that when you start an organization you think one thing, and then something else happens. I thought it would be more about people like me, who were closeted and needed help being out. But, no, these were mostly young people who wanted to be with people of the same cultural background, to have parties, and to enjoy each other's company. Then, in 2013, and even in 2012, we started to hear rumblings about antigay laws in St. Petersburg.

We didn't know about [the antigay laws in] Ryazan. Ryazan happened in 2006, but we did know about St. Petersburg. At the time we thought, how can it be? St. Petersburg is such a progressive city. How can it be that they passed an ordinance that was basically the precursor to the federal law that we now all know about—what we call the antigay propaganda law? Basically, a prohibition of communication or any kind of positive messaging to children about homosexuality.

> We decided to not just watch, but actually go to the Pride March with a very political statement: Do not support Russia.

That's when it all came home for us. We had a meeting and we talked about how we could help.

The first thing that came to mind—we knew that the law passed the Duma in June 2013, and later in June we had a gay Pride March, so we decided to not just watch, but actually go to the Pride March with a very political statement: Do not support Russia. Do not support the Russian Olympics. Do not buy Russian products. Don't buy vodka, don't buy caviar, don't buy anything Russian.

We were the first group that asked for the Sochi Olympics to be moved. Now, who are we to move

the Sochi Olympics? Obviously, we knew that it wasn't going to happen, but it doesn't matter, because all we were trying to do was to get the attention of the American media, and because the Sochi Olympics were the next year we had a really good chance. And guess what? It actually worked. We were noticed during the Pride March. Several people contacted us and started working with us, asking, how can they help Russians, how can they help us to help them.

This basically catapulted our organization into a completely different world, where we still are.

Udensiva-Brenner: And the law in St. Petersburg was passed the same year as there was a wave of mass anticorruption protests in Moscow . . .

Goltsman: It is absolutely related, in my mind, okay? I don't think there is hard evidence of anything like that, but I think that the anticorruption protests, the anti-Putin protests—I think they did something to Putin and his clique, and they decided to choose a minority to go after.

We always look for internal enemies. Gay people were selected for that, and then later on it became Ukrainians.

Udensiva-Brenner: That brings us to my next question, which is about how and why Russia used anti-LGBTQ propaganda during Maidan . . .

Globa: There are a lot of theories about why Russia was doing this. I believe Russia is focusing a lot on the LGBT issue because it's a very easy target. My understanding, and my personal opinion, is that Russia uses anti-LGBT propaganda in Ukraine because it is trying to stop Ukraine's integration into Europe, into the West.

Russia uses technology to split society and to show the West that

Opposite page, left: RUSA LGBT column at New York Pride March (June 28, 2015). Photo by Alexander Kargaltsev via Wikimedia Commons.

Bottom, left to right: Protesters in London calling for a boycott of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi in response to Russia's treatment of LGBTQ people (August 10, 2013). Photo by Mario Mitsis via Alamy; LGBTQ demonstrators at a St. Petersburg protest against the Russian invasion of Crimea (May 1, 2014). Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Ukraine has different values. What I see now is that Putin is trying to build his own ideology, and all of this ideology is in opposition to the West. So they say, "We have different family values, and our family values are traditional family values, which do not include gay couples."

Goltsman: So, "you have democracy and we have traditional values." That way people have something to believe in. It's also very important to remember that Putin is really, really upset that the Soviet Union is no more, so a lot of things that are being done are so he can have the superpower back.

Udensiva-Brenner: And can you discuss the specific tactics he uses? The methods of propaganda?

Globa: They have different methods. A very good example occurred during the year of Euromaidan, in January 2014. They tried to organize a fake gay Pride [March], where they invited some Russian people to Ukraine—no one in Ukraine helped them organize it, so they announced it through Russian or pro-Russian organizations. If you remember, by that time some people had died on Maidan, and the situation was very, very sensitive. People were emotional and unstable, and they [the organizers] tried to hold a press conference with people who were dressed as drag queens. I think the idea was to make a mess in Euromaidan and show the West that Ukrainian society is homophobic; that they would fight with LGBTs, and kill LGBTs. And so why would you fight for Ukraine if Ukraine has different values from the West?

The idea was to break up the relationship with the European Union, because at that time the

European Union tried to fight with [Viktor] Yanukovych, with Russia, and help Ukraine in some way. But we were doing work in Euromaidan at the time, and we put out information about this. We had a special plan for this event, and we told everyone that we should let this group do whatever they want; that people should not beat them. Not react to them. It was a group of 40 to 50 people, I think.

They came to Euromaidan, and they danced around Euromaidan—but not in the middle of it—and they went back, and nothing happened. Nobody beat them. So we neutralized that.

Goltsman: I just want to say that in Russia they did the same thing, when there were mass protests, anticorruption protests, anti-Putin protests. They hired people, and those people would come with gay flags, and they would have signs, and when you looked at those people you knew they found them somewhere on the street, and they just gave them $10 or whatever the currency, to basically represent the LGBT people. But then what is this for? It's not real, but this is what they do. They implant this fake-ness everywhere, but sometimes it's very obvious. The one I'm describing, it was very obvious; and sometimes, unfortunately, it's very hard to understand if it's actually Russian work.

> So they say, "We have different family values,and our family values are traditional family values, which do not include gay couples."

Udensiva-Brenner: What effect have these sorts of tactics had in Ukraine in general?

Globa: In general, they really work. So I believe they have several goals. One of these goals is to try to mobilize people. And one of these goals is to give people in the East some reason why they should not be with Ukraine.

Udensiva-Brenner: Is homophobia rising in Ukraine as a result of these tactics?

Globa: Yeah.

Goltsman: I think one of the things we see, even in this country, the way Putin operates, it's destabilization. He's always winning when people argue with each other, so LGBT issues for him are this very strong destabilizing factor. ■

Bogdan Globa relocated to New York in 2016. From 2015 until 2016, he worked as an assistant to the chairman of the Human Rights Committee of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Hryhoriy Nemyria. Globa is founder and leader of the New York–based ProudUkraine, an association of LGBTQ Ukrainians living in North America.

Yelena Goltsman founded RUSA LGBT, a social network for the Russian-speaking LGBTQ community in the New York area and beyond. RUSA LGBT organizes the annual Brighton Beach Pride March. Goltsman was awarded the 2014 Lambda Independent Democrats of Brooklyn Award, the 2018 New York City Public Advocate Letitia James's LGBTQ Award, and the Queens Borough President Melinda Katz's LGBTQ Pride Award. She is a 2015 COJECO Keystone Fellow.

Left to right: Little boy taking part in the Kyiv Pride March waving a rainbow flag (June 18, 2017). Photo by Rostyslav Zabolotnyi via Alamy; LGBTQ activist at Kyiv Pride 2017. Photo by Kateryna Olexenko via Alamy.