DECODING LGBTQ SCAPEGOATING

OVER ZERO

May 2024

About Over Zero

Over Zero works to prevent, address, and build societal resilience to identity-based and political violence and underlying risk factors, including democratic backsliding. We have a particular focus on the role of communications and narratives in either driving or counteracting these risks. A core component of our work is synthesizing historical and global trends, interdisciplinary research, and insights from practice into frameworks and tools for action.

This presentation was authored by Seth Flaxman, with contributions from Laura Livingston.

We are grateful for the expertise of scholars and journalists whose insights and time helped shape this presentation.

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Overview

This presentation organizes insights about a growing international crisis: the global scapegoating of LGBTQ people.

We conducted this research via literature reviews, case studies, and over a dozen expert interviews.

This presentation seeks to answer four questions:
1. *What is LGBTQ scapegoating?*
2. *How can it be identified?*
3. *What are its goals?*
4. *How can we distinguish LGBTQ scapegoating from politics as usual?*

Here's what we found:
- LGBTQ scapegoating is strategic, used to achieve political goals.
- It is not random, not a "natural" consequence of polarization, but a strategy to drive polarization.
- It is global, not US specific.
- It is part of the "authoritarian playbook" eroding liberal democracy* worldwide.

* Democracies with civil rights and individual liberties are called liberal; democracies with elections but not civil rights and individual liberties are called illiberal.

Our Perspective

The lives and freedoms of LGBTQ people are under growing global threat. That is reason enough to pay attention, but we hope to demonstrate one more: **LGBTQ scapegoating is a threat to democracy, cloaking itself as culture war politics as usual.**

To care about democracy is to care about LGBTQ scapegoating.

It is critical that journalists in particular, and citizens in general, are equipped to identify scapegoating as a tactic that facilitates authoritarianism, distinct from politics as usual.

This is also true for individuals who have qualms about specific LGBTQ-related issues. Individuals can oppose LGBTQ scapegoating even if they are not in ideological or policy alignment with the LGBTQ rights movement.

Our research identified six <u>interconnected and overlapping</u> political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating

<u>Interconnected</u>
- Achieving one scapegoating goal can make it easier to achieve others.

<u>Overlapping</u>
- The same scapegoating strategy can sometimes achieve multiple goals simultaneously.

These goals do not encompass all the ways this scapegoating causes significant real-world harm to the LGBTQ community, nor are they an exhaustive list of all the ways LGBTQ scapegoating advances political ends.

We define and illustrate each goal in the "Political Goals of LGBTQ Scapegoating" section, using international snapshots, or "caselets," from countries where this scapegoating has occurred.

By identifying these goals we aim to:

- Illustrate scapegoating as an organized authoritarian strategy that is distinct from regular politics in a normal democracy.

- Provide journalists and citizens with tools to discern the political motivations and actors behind that scapegoating.

CONTENT WARNING: This presentation cites hateful language, and caselets include descriptions of assault, harassment, violence, death, and torture.

Six Interconnected and Overlapping Political Goals of LGBTQ Scapegoating

Several of the six interconnected political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating are legitimate political goals (e.g., seeking to mobilize a base or win elections). **But when a marginalized group is scapegoated to achieve that political goal, alarm bells should go off that this is not politics as usual.**

GOAL # 1
STIGMATIZE

Censoring discussion or depiction of a marginalized group further stigmatizes that group, cementing their status as a scapegoat.

GOAL # 2
MOBILIZE BASE

Turning a scapegoated group into a common enemy to energize and organize a base.

GOAL # 3
WIN ELECTIONS

Exploiting fears of the scapegoat to gain electoral support and secure victories in political contests.

GOAL # 4
POLARIZE

Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition.

GOAL # 5
DISTRACT

Shifting public focus away from critical issues, government failures, or unpopular goals by inflaming fear, disgust and anger at a scapegoat.

GOAL # 6
NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Targeting a scapegoat for intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to violence against the group specifically and in society more broadly.

Using the acronym "LGBTQ"

- This presentation follows the AP Stylebook with the exception that we are also introducing the phrase "Queer scapegoating" as a possible alternative to "LGBTQ scapegoating."

- When this presentation uses a different variation of LGBTQ, such as LGBTQIA or LGBT, we are mirroring the acronym that was used in the source being cited.

- We would explore other language options for an international non-English speaking audience, but this presentation is mostly meant for English speakers in the US. Interview subjects in Hungary and Poland noted that the English acronym LGBTQ sounds especially alien in their languages and is being weaponized against queer people in their countries.

AP Stylebook Online

"LGBT, LGBTQ — Acceptable in all references for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning and/or queer.

- In quotations and the formal names of organizations and events, other forms such as LGBTQIA and other variations are also acceptable with the other letters in the acronym explained.
- I generally stands for intersex.
- A can stand for allies (a person who is not LGBTQ but who actively supports the LGBTQ community), asexual (a person who doesn't experience sexual attraction) or both.
- The word queer can be considered a slur in many contexts, so limit use of the word to quotes and names of organizations, following rules for obscenities, profanities, vulgarities as appropriate.
- Note that sex, gender and sexual orientation are not synonymous. "

Using the word "queer"

- There are many evolving ways that sexual and gender differences are described across cultures.

- When we use the word "queer" in this presentation we are using it as an umbrella term for LGBTQIA.

- Queer has a history as a pejorative term that US activists have been reclaiming as positive since at least the 1990s (eg., Queer Eye, Seasons 1-8).

- "Queer Scapegoating" can be used as an alternate to "LGBTQ Scapegoating;" whereas "Gay Scapegoating" or "Trans Scapegoating" should be used depending on what part of the LGBTQ community is the most prominent scapegoat in the context.

US Context: Drag vs Trans

- Queer scapegoating in the US has largely focused on two distinct groups, trans individuals and drag performers.

- The term "queer scapegoating" can be applied to both groups despite a critical distinction: drag performers turn gender into performance art, adopting campy caricatures for entertainment. Trans individuals are never performing their gender for entertainment, they are just trying to live authentically in public.

- Drag queens are often gay men performing in a female caricature primarily for other gay men. But anyone of any sexual orientation or gender identity can enjoy and perform in drag by playing with gender presentation as performance art.

With all scapegoats, authoritarians magnify attention on the most stereotypical examples – the word "queer" can sometimes help denote that authoritarians are likely to do the same to the LGBTQ community.

WHY IT MATTERS

18 years of Declining Freedom

Queer scapegoating is occurring amid a broader democracy crisis. In 2024, Freedom House marked the 18th consecutive year of declining global freedom and liberal democracy.

LGBTQ people were targeted to varying degrees during the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 1920s and 30s, by illiberal democracies in the 40s and 50s (including in the US), and by some military juntas in the 60s and 70s.[2] **These histories have much to teach us, but this presentation focuses explicitly on examples from the last 18 years.**

Why? Because democracies die differently today.

" *The global order is nearing a tipping point, and if democracy's defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail.* "

Freedom in the World 2022, Freedom House

Authoritarian Playbook

Threats to democracy have evolved over the last three decades. Instead of by military coups, democracies die from the actions of elected leaders who gradually chip away at the institutional, legal, and political constraints that defend our civil rights and freedoms: ***this is called the authoritarian playbook.***[3]

As Protect Democracy outlines, the authoritarian playbook encompasses seven key tactics observed globally in dozens of countries, including Russia, Venezuela, Hungary, the Philippines, Poland, Nicaragua, India, Turkey, and even the United States.

The authoritarian playbook encompasses seven key tactics:

1. Politicizing independent institutions
2. Spreading disinformation
3. Aggrandizing executive power
4. Quashing dissent
5. Scapegoating vulnerable communities
6. Corrupting elections
7. Stoking violence

This presentation focuses on one part of this playbook:

- **Scapegoating vulnerable communities**

Facilitating Authoritarianism

LGBTQ scapegoating is a proven strategy that facilitates the erosion of democracy, but it must be understood with nuance:

- We say facilitate, not cause, because scapegoating does not always directly lead to authoritarianism.
- Several of the six interconnected political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating are legitimate political goals (e.g., mobilizing a base, winning elections). **But when a marginalized group is scapegoated to achieve that political goal, alarm bells should go off.**
- LGBTQ scapegoating is often accompanied by efforts to scapegoat other groups.
- Further, scapegoating is just one of the interconnected strategies in the authoritarian playbook. To help identify authoritarian intent, look to see if it is occurring alongside other parts of the playbook.
- LGBTQ scapegoating misleadingly mimics a "natural backlash" to recent progress on LGBTQ rights, and leverages pre-existing homophobia and transphobia.

" *Contemporary democratic breakdowns are far more difficult to identify because — in snapshots — they can mimic the typical acts of political jockeying to gain advantage that are routine even in healthy democracies. But especially as these acts accumulate and intensify, hard-nosed politics can cross a line into authoritarian threats. Unfortunately, there is no simple bright-line answer or mechanical test to distinguish between the two.* "

"The Authoritarian Playbook"
Protect Democracy, June 15, 2022

Democracy's Blind Spot

The queer community has long been a target of strategic scapegoating, but the **first** cross-national study of this phenomenon that we're aware of was only published in September 2023 by UCLA's Williams Institute. **This blind spot is a glaring vulnerability for democracy.**

Many groups are threatened by scapegoating. Immigrants easily come to mind as one of the most globally scapegoated populations.

This presentation focuses specifically on LGBTQ scapegoating in part because the strategy is so understudied that it leaves democracy defenders largely in the dark.

"

Attacks on LGBTI people and their rights can be a precursor to democratic backsliding, and anti-LGBTI stigma and policies may contribute to the weakening of democratic norms and institutions.

"

Democratic Backsliding and LGBTI Acceptance
Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law
September 2023

Happening Now

Following every set of international examples, this presentation presents a slide on the "US Context" to demonstrate how LGBTQ scapegoating is unfolding across the country.

According to the ACLU, 23 state legislatures have collectively signed more than 84 anti-LGBTQ bills into law in 2023, more than doubling the number from 2022, with hundreds of additional bills in the pipeline for 2024.

And the United States is not alone. This is a global crisis that will only accelerate in the coming year. **The time to understand queer scapegoating is now.**

"

LGBTI people are being used as political pawns by ultra-conservative leaders in more and more European countries, and in turn, the human rights and freedom of everyone are being undermined.

"

Dunja Mijatovic,
"How LGBTI rights are being used for political manipulation in Europe, and why that's something everyone should be worried about"
European Commissioner for Human Rights,
August 2021

SCAPEGOATING 101

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Scapegoating 101

What is scapegoating? [4]

- A political strategy that constructs a threatening "them" to blame for society's problems and a virtuous "us" in need of protection.

- The "us vs them" frame is a psychological tool that manipulates collective anxiety, anger, and fear to create a permission structure for previously unthinkable political goals.

Scapegoating is a tactic that names a societal problem, real or imagined, and blames a group for that problem.

However, beyond a single malicious accusation, the "problem" blamed on a scapegoat is often every problem in the society, or modernity itself.

Blaming a marginalized community for the problems of modernity is called "restorative nostalgia" and it provides a narrative to focus all the discomfort people feel about a quickly changing society onto a single enemy. [5]

Restorative Nostalgia

According to historian Anne Applebaum, scapegoats are often blamed for perverting "the course of history" and reducing "the nation to a shadow of its former self."

This "restorative nostalgia" is a common factor in authoritarian movements that argue that "the nation is no longer great because someone has attacked us, undermined us, sapped our strength." Ridding the nation of the scapegoat, they contend, provides a pathway to restore a mythologized past.[5]

Scapegoating involves three parts:
1. Picking a problem to lay at the feet of a specific group;
2. Generating public anger, outrage, or panic about it; and
3. Identifying the group to blame.

SCAPEGOATING 101

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Disinformation is maximally effective because the lack of public understanding about a group can make it easier to spread false narratives and stereotypes without being challenged.

SMALL SIZE

Smaller, less-known groups can be more easily marginalized because they may struggle to counter disinformation campaigns effectively.

SEXUAL ANXIETIES

Disinformation tying scapegoats to sexual anxieties and taboos can trigger strong emotional reactions of disgust and contempt, making it easier to dehumanize the targeted group.

HOW TO CHOOSE A SCAPEGOAT

Our research reveals at least eight characteristics of a compelling scapegoat. [4]

REDUCE IDENTITY TO BEHAVIORS

Attacking behaviors and reframing innate identities as ideology can dehumanize scapegoats while shielding attackers from charges of bigotry by claiming to target conduct, not groups.

RELIGIOUS ALLIANCE

Scapegoating the perceived opponents of a country's religious majority builds support from religious institutions, reinforcing perception that actions against scapegoats are morally justified.

INTERNATIONAL & FOREIGN

Groups that can be redefined as foreign or international can be strategically advantageous, as it taps into nationalist sentiments and fosters the "Us versus Them" mentality.

PRE-EXISTING CONSPIRACIES

Pre-existing conspiracies help reinforce new ones. *For this reason, scapegoating strategies usually tie into well known antisemitic conspiracies.*

RELATED TO WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Groups that can be exploited to evoke anxiety about women and children are the most strategic. Campaigns will frame the group as a threat to children ("groomers") and women ("bathroom bills" & "women's sports") to make the targeted group appear more menacing.

What Makes the "Ideal" Scapegoat?

LGBTQ scapegoating has focused on "demonizing people via repeated false claims that LGBTQ+ people are 'pedophiles' who are 'grooming' children in order to abuse them."

Queer scapegoating commonly includes at least six of the characteristics of a compelling scapegoat, making LGBTQ people powerful scapegoating targets.

- ☑ Knowledge gaps
- ☑ Small size
- ☑ Sexual anxieties
- ☑ Reduce identity to behaviors
- ☑ Religious alliance
- ☑ Related to women and children

Context dependent
- ☐ International and foreign
- ☐ Pre-existing conspiracies

"
Autocrats and aspiring autocrats need an effective way of communicating a very simple idea, which is I can take you back to an imaginary past...that whole big promise of past-oriented politics can be communicated with this very simple strategy of attacking trans people, in particular, but then all of what they call gender ideology and LGBT rights.
"

Masha Gessen, as interviewed in the *New York Times*, Oct 10, 2023

What Makes the "Ideal" Scapegoat?

Queer scapegoating sometimes touches on all eight characteristics by tapping into preexisting conspiracies, including anti-semitic conspiracies.

- ☑ Knowledge gaps
- ☑ Small size
- ☑ Sexual anxieties
- ☑ Reduce identity to behaviors
- ☑ Religious alliance
- ☑ Related to women and children
- ☑ International and foreign
- ☑ Pre-existing conspiracies

During the May 2012 protests against Putin's election to a third term, a soldier cracking down on protests tells a reporter that "the truth was found in the book Blows from the Russian Gods...It purported to 'uncover the real crimes of the Jews,' who had taken over the world. One subsection was called 'The Sexual Traits of the Jews.' It began with homosexuality: 'Not only was homosexuality widespread among the ancient Jews but it was known to take over entire cities, such as Sodom and Gomorrah for example.' The lieutenant... [noted] that every soldier in his platoon had received a copy of the book."

"The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia" by Masha Gessen

LGBTQ Scapegoating & Women's Rights

According to author and historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat, women's rights are often the primary target of authoritarian movements.[7] However, targeting women's rights is often met with fierce resistance. It is not strategic to target large and powerful groups early and directly.

If the goal of an authoritarian movement is to enforce gender roles with state power, it's more strategic to start by weaponizing pre-existing homophobia and transphobia to target and scapegoat LGBTQ people.

"

"LGBTQ people are not always the primary target of authoritarians, but they are the group most consistently targeted by authoritarians.

"

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat
Author of 'Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present,'
as stated during an interview conducted
for this presentation in July 2023.**

Scapegoating Linguistics

According to linguist <u>Anna Szilagyi</u>,[8] all scapegoating strategies share a universal speech pattern:

"Us versus them" is the foundational "speech strategy" of scapegoating.

Division is created mainly through plural forms ("we", "us", "they", "them", "our", "their").

The division between "us" and "them" can then be further reinforced by framing.

"Us vs Them" Framing Strategies

Labeling
Making a "super label" of the group's name (LGBTQ) through repetitive association (e.g., "Groomers", "Pedophiles") trains listeners to think of a handful of malicious and hostile labels when they hear the group's name.

Metaphors
Powerful rhetorical devices which support the threatening labels (e.g., "LGBT invasion") and dispossess the group of its humanity (e.g.: "Rainbow Plague") in ways that violence against its members may appear to be legitimate.

Reversals
Attackers always claim to be the victim; this is important psychologically and very effective (e.g., "Groomers" is a label that communicates a reversal that "they are attacking our kids").

Scapegoating Linguistics:

Labels & Metaphors

If you see these words and phrases directed at the LGBTQ community then you are witnessing the linguistics of LGBTQ scapegoating.

- "Pedophile sympathizers"
- "Eliminating indoctrination and the sexualization of children"
- "Promote homosexuality and gender change"
- "Rainbow plague"
- "LGBTQ emergency"

- "Promote the sexualization of children and adolescents"
- "Immerse young children in sexual imagery and radical gender ideology"
- "Stop the sexualization of children"
- "Pedophile menace"
- "Sexual propaganda"
- "Groomer" or "Grooming"
- "Rainbow plague"
- "LGBTQ invasion"
- "Transgenderism Must Be Eradicated"

Identifying Scapegoating Worksheet

Responding "yes" to even a few of these questions can aid in distinguishing between regular politics and scapegoating.

- [ ] Is an entire group accused of being a threat to society (e.g., a threat to children, families, our "way of life")?

- [ ] Are scapegoating linguistics being used?
  - [ ] Us versus them
  - [ ] Labels
  - [ ] Metaphors
  - [ ] Reversals

- [ ] Does the group have several of the characteristics of an ideal scapegoat?
  - [ ] Knowledge gaps
  - [ ] Small size
  - [ ] Sexual anxieties
  - [ ] Reduce identity to behaviors
  - [ ] Religious alliance
  - [ ] Related to women and children
  - [ ] International and foreign
  - [ ] Preexisting conspiracies

- [ ] Is the campaign being organized with support from a global scapegoating infrastructure?

- [ ] Does it appear that the campaign could be accomplishing several interconnected political goals for an authoritarian movement?
  - [ ] Stigmatize using state power
  - [ ] Mobilize base with scapegoating
  - [ ] Win elections with scapegoating
  - [ ] Polarize with scapegoating
  - [ ] Distract with scapegoating
  - [ ] Normalize political violence

- [ ] Is the campaign similar to scapegoating efforts that were used to subvert democracy in other countries?

- [ ] Advanced stage: Are scapegoating linguistics being used to quickly pass laws impacting a vulnerable group, especially in the absence of serious policy debate about the societal crisis these laws are supposed to address?

US Context

How a Campaign Against Transgender Rights Mobilized Conservatives (NYT, April 16, 2023)

"When the Supreme Court declared a constitutional right to same-sex marriage nearly eight years ago, social conservatives were set adrift. The ruling stripped them of an issue they had used to galvanize rank-and-file supporters and big donors. And it left them searching for a cause that — like opposing gay marriage — would rally the base and raise the movement's profile on the national stage.

'We knew we needed to find an issue that the candidates were comfortable talking about,' said Terry Schilling, the president of American Principles Project, a social conservative advocacy group. 'And we threw everything at the wall.'

What has stuck, somewhat unexpectedly, is the issue of transgender identity, particularly among young people. Today, the effort to restrict transgender rights has supplanted same-sex marriage as an animating issue for social conservatives at a pace that has stunned political leaders across the spectrum. It has reinvigorated a network of conservative groups, increased fund-raising and set the agenda in school boards and state legislatures.

The campaign has been both organic and deliberate, and has even gained speed since Donald J. Trump, an ideological ally, left the White House. Since then, at least 20 states, all controlled by Republicans, have enacted laws that reach well beyond the initial debates over access to bathrooms and into medical treatments, participation in sports and policies on discussing gender in schools."

Key takeaway:

The decision to target trans kids in the US was a deliberate and tested political strategy.

POLITICAL GOALS OF LGBTQ SCAPEGOATING

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

POLITICAL GOALS

GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE

GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS

GOAL # 4: POLARIZE

GOAL # 5: DISTRACT

GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

International "Caselets"

We illustrate six political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating, using examples from 8 countries across 4 continents. We do not provide an exhaustive index.

Scapegoating is part of the authoritarian playbook, and like the other playbook strategies, it sometimes fails and proving intent is hard.

Our examples have sometimes led to authoritarianism, and sometimes have not. But across them all is a clear pattern of political objectives and enough "success" to show why this strategy is so appealing to electoral authoritarians.

Further, even when queer scapegoating "fails" or does not directly lead to authoritarianism, it creates a more permissive environment for further scapegoating and anti-democratic actions.

INTERNATIONAL "CASELETS"

Our snapshot examples come from countries classified by
Freedom House as Free, Partly Free, and Not Free.

	FREE	PARTLY FREE	NOT FREE
GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER	Brazil	Indonesia, Hungary	Russia
GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE		Hungary	Russia
GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS	Colombia, Poland	Indonesia	
GOAL # 4: POLARIZE	Brazil, Ghana	Hungary	
GOAL # 5: DISTRACT	Poland, Ghana	Hungary	
GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE	Poland, Brazil		Russia

STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

Definition

GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE

GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS

GOAL # 4: POLARIZE

GOAL # 5: DISTRACT

GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Censoring discussion and depiction of a marginalized group cements their status as a scapegoat by using the law to stigmatize, adding legal legitimacy to claims that the scapegoat is dangerous. Censorship makes it easier to defame and spread conspiracies. Stigmatization deters the public from supporting the scapegoated group by creating guilt by association.

RUSSIA

GOAL # 1
STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

Censoring discussion and depiction of a marginalized group cements their status as a scapegoat by using the law to stigmatize, adding legal legitimacy to claims that the scapegoat is dangerous. Censorship makes it easier to defame and spread conspiracies. Stigmatization deters the public from supporting the scapegoated group by creating guilt by association.

Describing the Russian debate over the 2013 "propaganda of homosexuality" bill introduced at the federal level in Russia, Masha Gessen writes, "Gays were shaping up to be the perfect scapegoat: they were spies, they were bad for the army and dangerous to children, and whatever acceptance they had gained was a mistake made in 1993, under pressure from the West. Banning the gays, or at least, shutting them up, was a shortcut to health and power, a rebuke to the West, and a guarantee of a populous and healthy nation."[6]

According to the Washington Post, in December 2023 Putin expanded Russia's 2013 ban on "gay propaganda," criminalizing depictions of LGBTQ people, banning gender affirming care, and "information that can make children want to change their sex."

The 2023 law was an expansion of the 2013 ban that applied only to what minors might see. The new law bans all depictions of "non-traditional sexual relations or preferences" for adults and minors and includes one of the most repressive anti-trans bills in the world.

Its passage comes amid Russia's war in Ukraine and is the centerpiece of its war propaganda to "protect traditional values" from the West. It effectively criminalized all physical and online spaces, public and private, where LGBTQ people might associate. The bill was passed at the same moment all forms of dissent against the war and Putin were outlawed.

INDONESIA

GOAL # 1
STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

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Setbacks for LGBTQ rights in 2016 were a turning point against liberalism, speech, and association rights in Indonesia after nearly two decades of progress during the Reformasi period.

It started with campus censorship, when the University of Indonesia rejected an official request by students to establish a Support Group and Resource Center on Sexuality Studies. Then, "the Minister for Technology, Research, and Higher Education proposed to ban LGBT student organizations on Indonesian university campuses, stating that LGBT people '[corrupt] the morals of the nation.' "

That year, a reform to the Electronic Information and Transactions Law was passed and invoked to block websites with LGBT-related content as "offensive" and "too radical."

"The Ministry of Communication and Information ordered internet service providers to block social networking applications used by the LGBT community, claiming that they promoted 'sexual deviance,' and the national broadcasting commission (KPI) banned TV and radio programs that portray 'effeminate men' and 'LGBT behaviors.' In 2018, Google bowed to government pressure and removed up to 80 mobile applications that had LGBT-related content from its online store in Indonesia."

Selected excerpts from Williams Institute case studies.

BRAZIL

GOAL # 1
STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

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Since 2014, there has been a surge in legislative efforts in Brazil–at least one at the state level and 20 at the municipal level–to prohibit "indoctrination" or "gender ideology" in schools. During his 2018 election campaign, Bolsonaro supported these efforts, railing against "gender ideology" and accusing teachers of "indoctrinating" students toward "early sexualization."

Shortly after taking office, Bolsonaro used an executive order to temporarily mandate that the Office of the Government Secretary oversee the activities of international and local organizations, as an attempt to shut down LGBTQ, human rights, and environmental activism. Activists lobbied Congress to prevent the mandate from becoming permanent.

According to Human Rights Watch, some legislatures persist in proposing prohibitions on gender and sexuality despite the Supreme Court invalidating eight of these laws in 2020 as infringing on fundamental rights, including equality, non-discrimination, and education, and criticizing them for stifling discourse and promoting obscurantism.

In June 2021, city councilors in Divinópolis, Minas Gerais state, unanimously approved a project that bans public funds being used for events and services that "directly or indirectly promote the sexualization of children and adolescents." In December 2021, Caucaia, a city in Ceará state, passed a law banning discussion of "matters related to sexuality" and "gender ideology" in municipal schools.

Selected excerpts from Williams Institute case studies.

HUNGARY

GOAL # 1
STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

Censoring discussion and depiction of a marginalized group cements their status as a scapegoat by using the law to stigmatize, adding legal legitimacy to claims that the scapegoat is dangerous. Censorship makes it easier to defame and spread conspiracies. Stigmatization deters the public from supporting the scapegoated group by creating guilt by association.

In 2021 Hungary passed a "child protection" law prohibiting the "depiction or promotion" of LGBTQ people in television, films, advertisements, literature, and education programs available to minors. The law was passed at the urging of Prime Minister Orbán's government "to protect children" and broadly conflates homosexuality with pedophilia, also increasing criminal penalties for pedophilia and creating a searchable database of sex offenders.

The law was followed up by a decree ordering booksellers to place children's books that depict LGBTQ people in "closed packaging," forbids the public display of products that depict "gender deviating from sex at birth," and bans the sale of all media that depict LGBTQ people within 200 meters (650 feet) of a school or church.

In July 2023, the government levied a fine of around $35,930 on Hungary's second largest bookstore, Líra Könyv, for placing "Heartstopper" by author Alice Oseman in its youth section, and for failing to place it in closed packaging. That same month, Hungary's largest bookseller, Libri, began complying after it was taken over by a foundation with close ties to Viktor Orbán.

Some smaller bookstore owners are speaking out while complying. Eva Redai, owner of Láng Téka, said, "people that identify as non-heterosexual are being stigmatized ... This feeds into an idea that, unfortunately, already happened in the 20th century, where people were judged and persecuted based on their appearance, skin color, religion or other affiliation, and many, many people fell victim to this idea. Quite simply, this could be the beginning of something terrible that so many of us have tried to forget."

GOAL # 1
STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

Censoring discussion and depiction of a marginalized group cements their status as a scapegoat by using the law to stigmatize, adding legal legitimacy to claims that the scapegoat is dangerous. Censorship makes it easier to defame and spread conspiracies. Stigmatization deters the public from supporting the scapegoated group by creating guilt by association.

US Context

In March 2022, Governor DeSantis passed Florida's HB 1557, also known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, threatening educators with the loss of their teaching license if they allowed any mention of gender identity and sexual orientation around kindergarten-third grade students. Grades 4-12 were allowed "developmentally appropriate" instruction as determined by the Florida department of education.

A year later, Florida's department of education approved Gov. DeSantis' proposal to expand the ban to all public school students.

The intent is clear to student leaders: "when you ban something from the high school library, all you're doing is saying that that is a bad thing. You're not preventing anyone from getting any information" because it can be found online, and "the second you start limiting people's views, and limiting the way they can express [them] based on the content of those views, it's impossible to say who will be limited next."

By September 2023, North Carolina, Arkansas, Iowa, and Indiana had passed 'copycat' "Don't Say Gay" bills, and 23 states introduced variants of the bill for the 2024 legislative session.

By November 2023, a Florida bill had been introduced expanding censorship into the workplace. In the U.S. Congress, Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA) introduced the "Stop the Sexualization of Children Act" a week before he secured the speakership. The federal bill extends the censorship of the "Don't Say Gay" bill nationwide and beyond schools, by targeting restrictions at all institutions receiving federal funds.

MOBILIZE BASE WITH SCAPEGOATING

GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE

GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS

GOAL # 4: POLARIZE

GOAL # 5: DISTRACT

GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Definition

Modern authoritarian movements wield a mobilized base of supporters to intimidate opponents. Even in countries with rigged elections, mobilizing a base is useful for intimidating and attacking opposition protest movements.

LGBTQ scapegoating has been used to animate this base at the local, state and national level through constructing a clearly defined enemy. LGBTQ people are sexualized, slandered as pedophiles and groomers, and ultimately presented as "threats to children."

RUSSIA

GOAL # 2
MOBILIZE BASE

Modern authoritarian movements wield a mobilized base of supporters to intimidate opponents. Even in countries with rigged elections, mobilizing a base is useful for intimidating and attacking opposition protest movements.

Queer scapegoating has been used to animate this base at the local, state and national level through constructing a clearly defined enemy. LGBTQ people are sexualized, slandered as pedophiles and groomers, and ultimately presented as "threats to children."

Alexander Dugin, often referred to as "Putin's brain," made "pedophile menace" commonplace in Russian politics and media by 2008. The rhetoric had been ramping up for years, at least since 2005, after Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" and the "Dissenters' March" protests broke out in Russia. The protestors held out for nearly three years against crackdowns, while Putin built up militia-like youth groups, complete with brands, training camps, and dances, to fill the public space.

The youth groups needed an internal enemy to mobilize against. Rhetoric reached a fever pitch in 2010 as politicians accused each other of belonging to a secret "pedophile lobby" upon the slightest demonstration of independent thinking. Dugin called for "Russian men to kill pedophiles on sight."[6]

A message as simple as, "It gets better – you can be gay and happy," was proof of pedophilia. By April 2011, activists were mobilizing the public against the "pedophile menace" on livejournal pages. A popular blogger conducted "pedophile hunting" trainings at a Kremlin youth camp and met with President Medvedev.

In November 2011, a St Petersburg legislator proposed banning "propaganda of homosexuality," while partnering with an organization called Parental Control to go "hunting" for pedophiles. By March 2012, Putin was re-elected to a third term and a federal bill was introduced to ban "propaganda that negates traditional values."[6]

This mobilization strategy has only become more prominent since then, providing a primary justification in 2023 for Russia's war against Ukraine.

HUNGARY

GOAL # 2
MOBILIZE BASE

Modern authoritarian movements wield a mobilized base of supporters to intimidate opponents. Even in countries with rigged elections, mobilizing a base is useful for intimidating and attacking opposition protest movements.

LGBTQ scapegoating has been used to animate this base at the local, state and national level through constructing a clearly defined enemy. LGBTQ people are sexualized, slandered as pedophiles and groomers, and ultimately presented as "threats to children."

Since winning office in 2010, Prime Minister Orbán and his Fidesz party have moved the EU member state toward authoritarianism by eroding the independence of democratic institutions, concentrating power in the executive branch, financially and legally attacking civil society, and curtailing press freedom. Scapegoating has been a constant tool.

According to a Hungarian LGBTQ leader, "The first social group that they used as a scapegoat, as the public enemy, were the Roma people, and after that came the 2014 refugee crisis, which they again used for their own political fear-mongering … and since then they have had a campaign against the EU and against [George] Soros and they have the anti-homeless law – they have been targeting vulnerable, marginalized social group[s] one after the other."

The past few years have seen a crescendo of LGBTQ scapegoating. After passing a bill in June 2021 that banned any depictions of LGBTQ people that could be seen by children, blue government billboards sprang up around the country trumpeting the question: "Are you afraid your child could be exposed to sexual propaganda?" also running on online media, radio, and television.

The same question was featured in a so-called "national consultation" survey, a tool used by the Orbán regime since 2010. The questions deliver and spread government propaganda and the results of the "surveys" are used as "proof" of unconditional popular support. This time, 97% of 1.423 million people who answered on issues from tax cuts to immigration, welcomed the legislation limiting "sexual propaganda" targeting school children.

GOAL # 2
MOBILIZE BASE

Modern authoritarian movements wield a mobilized base of supporters to intimidate opponents. Even in countries with rigged elections, mobilizing a base is useful for intimidating and attacking opposition protest movements.

Queer scapegoating has been used to animate this base at the local, state and national level through constructing a clearly defined enemy. LGBTQ people are sexualized, slandered as pedophiles and groomers, and ultimately presented as "threats to children."

US Context

In April 2022, the Washington Post identified Chaya Raichik, a participant in the January 6 insurrection, as the anonymous creator behind "LibsofTikTok" (LoTT). The ironically titled social media account has been mobilizing conservatives by claiming that children are being "groomed" by "predator" LGBTQ adults. Since being publicly identified, Raichik has been embraced by the right, dining one-on-one with former President Trump, appearing numerous times on Fox News and addressing CPAC alongside former President Bolsonaro.

The site has "become an agenda-setter in right-wing online discourse, and the content it surfaces shows a direct correlation with the recent push in legislation and rhetoric directly targeting the LGBTQ+ community," according to the Washington Post.

In the past year, "harassment and threats of violence against at least 35 institutions, events, or individuals have followed incitement from the social media account." After Raichik spread misinformation about gender-affirming care at Boston Children's Hospital last fall, doctors and nurses received death threats and the medical center received bomb threats. Schools around the country have received continued bomb threats after similar spotlights. A drag show in California was stormed by the Proud Boys after its location was posted on the site and 31 members of the Patriot Front were arrested as they attempted to storm a show in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho.

In 2022, this mobilized base was implicated in 141 documented cases of threats against US drag shows across 47 states. This base was powerful enough to hurt Bud Light sales in a widespread 2023 boycott of BudLight after their partnership with trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney.

WIN ELECTIONS WITH SCAPEGOATING

GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE

GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS

GOAL # 4: POLARIZE

GOAL # 5: DIVERT ATTENTION

GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Definition

Securing victories in national, state, and local electoral contests by promising to keep society (and children, in particular) safe from the scapegoated group and restore the nation to its former glory.

INDONESIA

GOAL # 3
WIN ELECTIONS

Securing victories in national, state, and local electoral contests by promising to keep society (and children in particular) safe from the scapegoated group and restore the nation to its former glory.

In a bid to navigate the challenges of rising Islamic conservatism, President Widodo, commonly known as Jokowi, strategically appealed to Islamist conservatives leading up to the April 2019 presidential election.

Despite being a Muslim, Jokowi is widely perceived as a secular nationalist in a nation characterized by a broad division between supporters of Islamic and nationalist parties. He had even been characterized as anti-Islam.

In the months before the 2019 general elections, protests against the LGBTQ community took place in cities and at universities across the country.

As he tried to shore up Islamist conservative support, an "LGBT emergency" was "weaponized by politicians to drive voters to the polls. In Sumatra, the mayor of Padang city led a march to reject LGBT people. This public demonstration sparked a state-sponsored campaign against LGBT people," including an episode where the police chief of North Aceh province led raids on transgender beauty salons and supervised the shaving of the trans women's hair in front of a laughing mob. Jokowi was re-elected.

Selected excerpts from Williams Institute case studies.

COLOMBIA

GOAL # 3
WIN ELECTIONS

Securing victories in national, state, and local electoral contests by promising to keep society (and children in particular) safe from the scapegoated group and restore the nation to its former glory.

Two years after the launch of peace negotiations with the FARC guerillas in 2012, pressure from women's and LGBTQ movements led to the inclusion of a subcommission that held hearings on the disproportionate and differentiated violence experienced by women and LGBTQ individuals from the conflict.

According to NBC, "During a conflict that has killed 220,000 people and forced 6.7 million from their homes since 1964, FARC, National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and even the armed forces have routinely targeted those with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities."

After four years of negotiations, the deal was signed by President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC leader Timoleon Jimenez, but needed to be ratified by Colombians to come into force.

However, the peace deal was shockingly defeated by a small majority of 50.2 percent after the Evangelical community mobilized the "no" electorate by claiming it "dismantled traditional mores," such as the "biological difference between men and women," the "importance of the heterosexual family" and recognized LGBTQ populations as victims of the armed conflict.

The Colombian Congress passed a revised version of the accords two months later with a diminished focus on gender. Progress on ceasefires with smaller rebel groups in 2023 provide hope for an end to the violence that has made Colombia one of the most dangerous nations in the world for human rights defenders.

POLAND

GOAL # 3
WIN ELECTIONS

Securing victories in national, state, and local electoral contests by promising to keep society (and children in particular) safe from the scapegoated group and restore the nation to its former glory.

After the Law and Justice (PiS) party's victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections, Poland experienced a shift toward authoritarianism, and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and policies were the central feature of the winning PiS campaigns in the 2019 and 2020 elections.

According to Anne Applebaum, "the president and his party ginned up fear of LGBTQ people-and rode that strategy to reelection" in a rare election campaign that truly hinged "on a single issue." In this case, "suspicion of LGBTQ people is a brand-new political issue in Poland. The fear of the "rainbow plague" has been created from scratch, ginned up by cynical propagandists who know perfectly well how nasty it is. "

In her analysis, ""LGBT"—an English acronym that sounds strange and foreign in Polish—was unquestionably the dominant theme. The coronavirus pandemic is still ravaging the world, an economic crisis looms, and international politics are in turmoil. Yet when the Polish president, Andrzej Duda, declared that "LGBT are not people; they are an ideology"—and for that matter an ideology "even more destructive" than communism—the statement instantly became the most widely discussed moment of the campaign."

TVP, a state television station, broadcast stories in prime time, just before the parliamentary election, about the "rainbow invasion" and the "rainbow plague of homosexuality," using rhetoric described as "open demonization."

Selected excerpts from Williams Institute case studies.

GOAL # 3
WIN ELECTIONS

Securing victories in national, state, and local electoral contests by promising to keep society (and children in particular) safe from the scapegoated group and restore the nation to its former glory.

US Context

In 2021, the right-wing activist organization Moms for Liberty was established in Florida to influence and gain control of school boards. It gained significant traction leading up to the 2021 school board elections and the 2022 midterms. The group rapidly expanded, establishing 265 chapters in 43 states, and by July 2023, its membership exceeded 110,000.

One membership strategy included showing recruits information from hate-filled social media accounts like "LibsofTikTok." Any reference to sexuality, even indirect, is labeled "pornography," opponents are labeled "groomers," "pedophile sympathizers," and accused of abusing their children or possessing child pornography.

The group claims to have won 40% of its school board races in 2023. Republican presidential candidates Ron DeSantis, Nikki Haley, and Donald Trump all addressed Moms for Liberty's 2023 conference.

In one breakout session, Christian Ziegler, the chairman of the Florida Republican Party and husband of Moms for Liberty co-founder Bridget Ziegler, coached attendees on how to deal with the media: "Your product is parental rights. Your product is protecting children and eliminating indoctrination and the sexualization of children. You're the grassroots. You're on the ground. You're the moms, the grandparents, the families that are impacted. The stories you tell help set a narrative."

POLARIZE WITH SCAPEGOATING

GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH CENSORSHIP

GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE

GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS

GOAL # 4: POLARIZE

GOAL # 5: DISTRACT

GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Definition

Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition. Authoritarian movements use scapegoating as the wedge issue to spark intense polarization that ensures the entire society focuses on it.

HUNGARY

GOAL # 4
POLARIZE

Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition. Authoritarian movements use scapegoating as the wedge issue to spark intense polarization that ensures the entire society focuses on it.

United for Hungary was founded in 2020 by six political parties stretching from the left-wing Hungarian Socialist Party to the right-wing Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) in order to defeat Orbán and his Fidesz party in the 2022 parliamentary elections. The alliance sought to counter the right-wing parliamentary alliance of Fidesz–KDNP by endorsing a single candidate in each of the 106 constituencies while running a single center-right prime minister candidate, Péter Márki-Zay.

According to CNN, "LGBTQ rights remain a major sticking point within the group" and one that Orbán was ready to exploit in order to "divide his opponents." In the run-up to this election, Fidesz introduced its "child protection" law that conflated pedophilia with the rights of the LGBTQ community.

The government illustrated its intent to polarize the election around LGBTQ scapegoating by organizing what they dubbed "a referendum about child protection," timed for the same day as the parliamentary vote. Questions on this referendum included, "do you support the promotion of sex reassignment therapy for underage children?" and "do you support the unrestricted exposure of underage children to sexually explicit media content that may affect their development?"

Ultimately, United for Hungary lost the election, with Márki-Zay attributing the loss to mass voter defections from their right-wing coalition member, Jobbik, claiming that as many as two thirds of their voters went over to the other side.

GHANA

GOAL # 4
POLARIZE

Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition. Authoritarian movements use scapegoating as the wedge issue to spark intense polarization that ensures the entire society focuses on it.

In religiously diverse societies, LGBTQ scapegoating provides a unifying wedge issue. In 2020, Ashanti regional chief Imam Sheikh Muumin Abdul Haroun vowed to stop the "demonic" Pan Africa ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association).

In a radio interview, he used the LGBTQ event to unite religious movements, "we Muslims, Christians and the traditional religion will all rise up. We will not allow them to even step foot here and not even the government can stand in our way. The country does not belong to them; it belongs to us so we decide who does what here." He described homosexuality as an "evil that must not be countenanced in any way because it is despised by God."

BRAZIL

GOAL # 4
POLARIZE

Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition. Authoritarian movements use scapegoating as the wedge issue to spark intense polarization that ensures the entire society focuses on it.

Jair Bolsonaro, a former member of Congress, ran for president in 2018 as a "pan-Christian figure who unites conservative competitors in the religious market—Catholics and evangelicals—around a mythical representation of Brazil's past and an imagined project for its future," according to a piece by Christian Century titled "Christian nationalism is thriving in Bolsonaro's Brazil." His strategy involved deploying anti-LGBTQ rhetoric as a wedge to bring these two groups together.

As part of that strategy, Bolsonaro claimed that the left aimed to destroy the traditional family and introduce "gay kits" and "gender ideologies" into schools. According to him, the goal of his campaign was to "unite the people...

[who] value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, fight gender ideology, and preserve our values."

Details referenced from Williams Institute case studies.

GOAL # 4
POLARIZE

Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition. Authoritarian movements use scapegoating as the wedge issue to spark intense polarization that ensures the entire society focuses on it.

US Context

In the US, groups pushing anti-trans laws have been purposefully attempting to divide the women's movement and the LGBTQ movement, according to reporting in the New Republic.

As the Women's March organized after President Trump's 2016 election victory, the head of the Christian right group Family Policy Institute of Washington State wrote, "the real war on women," was the "transgender phenomenon."

Meg Kilgannon, then the Executive Director of Concerned Parents and Educators of Fairfax County, made the strategy explicit in 2017: "Focus on gender identity to divide and conquer," because "for all of its recent success, the LGBT alliance is actually fragile."

Efforts to create a wedge between the women's and LGBTQ movements continued when "an anti-trans feminist group" called the Women's Liberation Front, or WoLF, and the Family Policy Alliance, formalized an alliance in 2017. The groups submitted a joint amicus brief to the Supreme Court that invoked women's rights arguments in support of the anti-trans bathroom policy in Virginia drafted by Alliance for Defending Freedom (ADF).

The alliance and its deliberate use of feminist rhetoric has "helped inject Christian right policy objectives into public debates between liberals," in turn helping create a wedge between the women's and LGBTQ movements.

DIVERT ATTENTION WITH SCAPEGOATING

GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE

GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS

GOAL # 4: POLARIZE

GOAL # 5: DISTRACT

GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Definition

Shifting public focus away from government failures or unpopular goals by inflaming public fear, disgust and anger towards a scapegoated group. Diverting attention is often a component in attempts to weaken independent democratic institutions.

HUNGARY

GOAL # 5
DISTRACT

Shifting public focus away from government failures or unpopular goals by inflaming public fear, disgust and anger towards a scapegoated group. Diverting attention is often a component in attempts to weaken independent democratic institutions.

Hours before an unpopular second COVID lockdown was set to begin in November 2020, Prime Minister Orbán's Fidesz government introduced a range of new legislation. The centerpiece was a constitutional amendment to defend "Christian values" by making it impossible for gay couples to adopt children.

This controversy diverted attention from both the lockdown and a simultaneously proposed new rule making it harder for parties to run joint lists in elections without fully uniting. The fragmented opposition had been winning mayoral elections in recent years and had announced plans to run a unity candidate against Fidesz in 2020 parliamentary elections.

POLAND

GOAL # 5
DISTRACT

Shifting public focus away from government failures or unpopular goals by inflaming public fear, disgust and anger towards a scapegoated group. Diverting attention is often a component in attempts to weaken independent democratic institutions.

In April 2020, in the middle of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a month before a presidential election, the Law & Justice Party (PiS) simultaneously and unexpectedly reintroduced two bills in Parliament that distracted attention from an unpopular nationwide lockdown.

The first was a "Stop Abortion" bill that had failed to move forward after being met with massive street protests when it was earlier introduced, first in March 2018 and again in October 2019. The unpopular measure eliminated legal access to abortion in cases of severe or fatal fetal anomaly.

The second bill was the "Stop Pedophilia Act," which proposed penalizing members of the "LGBT lobby" for providing reliable sex education. This second bill was a major focus of government owned media.

According to interviews with Anne Applebaum conducted for this presentation, the distraction attempt failed - the abortion measures led to some of the largest street protests in Polish history, but the government was indeed determined to "change the subject" and get people "to stop talking about" the "profoundly unpopular" abortion measures.

GHANA

GOAL # 5
DISTRACT

Shifting public focus away from government failures or unpopular goals by inflaming public fear, disgust and anger towards a scapegoated group. Diverting attention is often a component in attempts to weaken independent democratic institutions.

The Ghanaian economy was shaken by record inflation in 2022. Police clashed with hundreds of demonstrators in Accra from June through September protesting fuel price hikes, a tax on electronic payments and cuts to government spending that violated the campaign promises of President Nana Akufo-Addo.

A columnist for the Washington Post noted how the government kept public attention focused on a sweeping new anti-LGBTQ bill introduced originally in 2021, the "Promotion of Appropriate Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill," writing that "Ghanaians are suffering under runaway prices for goods, with inflation at the highest level in 18 years. Yet politicians are focusing on oppressing Ghanaian citizens simply for being themselves."

As of February 2024, the bill has not yet passed, but seemed close to passage in July 2023 after a disinformation campaign included claims that the government was paying for anal repair procedures for gay people.

The bill criminalizes the "promotion, advocacy, funding, and acts of homosexuality" with prison terms up to ten years in prison for advocates, three years for anyone identifying as LGBTQ, while also denying health services, including HIV medication.

GOAL # 5
DISTRACT

Shifting public focus away from government failures or unpopular goals by inflaming public fear, disgust and anger towards a scapegoated group. Diverting attention is often a component in attempts to weaken independent democratic institutions.

US Context

Since June 2022, when the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, twenty-one states have begun banning or restricting abortion, and bans have been blocked or defeated in an additional six. The issue has been consistently mobilizing for Democratic voters across multiple elections, including the 2022 midterms.

As Republican controlled legislatures looked to ramp up unpopular abortion restrictions in 2023, Republicans introduced a wave of over 125 bills that re-focused national attention on the very small number of trans teenagers who receive gender affirming treatment. "GOP candidates really suffered from headlines about abortion," said Kelly Baden, vice-president for public policy at the Guttmacher Institute, which tracks policies related to sexual and reproductive health.

"It makes absolute sense that they would rather talk about a 12-year-old being on puberty blockers."

This strategy aligns with one exposed in a leaked memo from Independent Women's Voice (IWV) for a $6 million messaging campaign to promote anti-trans narratives in 10 swing states ahead of the 2022 midterms. The memo characterizes transgender people as a threat to women's success and safety, and argues that focusing on issues other than abortion enables the IWV to more successfully "convince moderates" to vote for Republicans.

The research firm that uncovered the memo, True North, argues that IWV's campaign "could be part of a through-line strategy to distract voters from the fallout of last summer's supreme court ruling against the constitutional right to abortion."

NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

GOAL # 1: STIGMATIZE WITH STATE POWER

GOAL # 2: MOBILIZE BASE

GOAL # 3: WIN ELECTIONS

GOAL # 4: POLARIZE

GOAL # 5: DISTRACT

GOAL # 6: NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Definition

Targeting a scapegoat group for organized intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to organized violence against the group specifically and in society more broadly. This creates a more permissive environment for acts of individual hate crimes which can then be publicized strategically by the authoritarian movement to continue normalizing political violence.

RUSSIA

GOAL # 6
NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Targeting a scapegoat group for organized intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to organized violence against the group specifically and in society more broadly. This creates a more permissive environment for acts of individual hate crimes which can then be publicized strategically by the authoritarian movement to continue normalizing political violence.

In January 2013, the Russian federal parliament took the first of three required votes on the "gay propaganda" bill. LGBTQ protesters marched against it, but were dwarfed by a mob that threw Nazi-style salutes, tossed eggs and excrement at the protestors, and beat them until the police started arresting the LGBTQ activists.

The second vote took place after the well publicized murder of 23 year old Vlad Tornovoy by two friends at a playground late at night in response to his coming out. They beat, kicked, and sexually tortured him, tried to light him on fire, and then killed him by hitting his head repeatedly with a forty-pound boulder.

The murder was publicized by the bill's sponsor to mobilize the second and third votes for the "propaganda bill" – he had been killed for flaunting his sexuality, the

sort of thing that would be banned moving forward.

Anti-gay vigilante groups like "Occupy Pedophilia" grew in popularity. These groups terrorized gay men in their homes, breaking down their doors, humiliating and beating them on camera, and then sending videos to paying members. "Our next safari will take place on Thursday. Open to all. Entry fee is 250 rubles," they advertised. They characterized themselves as "the social movement to prevent pedophilia."[6]

The law passed in 2013, and has since been tied to a threefold increase in violent hate crimes targeting LGBTQ people in Russia. Researchers have noted that the violence is also "qualitatively different" than what occurred prior to the legislation: it is more extreme, more often premeditated, and more often organized by homophobic hate groups.

BRAZIL

GOAL # 6
NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Targeting a scapegoat group for organized intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to organized violence against the group specifically and in society more broadly. This creates a more permissive environment for acts of individual hate crimes which can then be publicized strategically by the authoritarian movement to continue normalizing political violence.

Alongside intensifying rhetoric depicting LGBTQ people as worthy targets of violence and harassment, the run up to Bolsonaro's 2018 election saw a record number of anti-queer killings, with reports of 445 such murders in 2017. One of those murders was the assassination of councilwoman Marielle Franco, a black, lesbian single mother, and the only black woman on Rio's 51-member city council.

Online threats soared during campaigning with videos of soccer fans chanting "Bolsonaro will kill queers" spreading terror among LGBTQ people.

According to the Washington Post, in the days before the first round of voting on Oct. 7, 2018 Bolsonaro supporters committed at least 50 politically motivated attacks, many of them targeting the LGBTQ community. In just

three weeks of campaign season, three transgender women were killed in separate attacks — stabbed to death by men shouting Bolsonaro's name.

POLAND

GOAL # 6
NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Targeting a scapegoat group for organized intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to organized violence against the group specifically and in society more broadly. This creates a more permissive environment for acts of individual hate crimes which can then be publicized strategically by the authoritarian movement to continue normalizing political violence.

Anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and policies escalated in 2019 and became a central feature of the ruling party, Law & Justice (PiS), campaign for the 2019 and 2020 elections. While campaigning, President Duda (PiS) said he agreed with another conservative politician on the LGBTQ community: "They are trying to convince us that they are people, but this is an ideology." Over the same period, 94 local authorities passed resolutions opposing "LGBT ideology," popularly called "LGBT Free Zones."

A report for the Council of Europe summed up the strategy, "By naming people as an ideology, they dehumanize them." Banning the "ideology" in communities, "then gives rise to violence and discrimination."

According to the Williams Institute, hate crimes targeting the LGBTQ community thereafter doubled, and two pride parades were attacked. In 2019, far-right groups mobilized 4000 nationalist football "ultra" fans in Bialystok, northeastern Poland's largest city, to attack pride marchers.

As the approximately 1000 pride marchers paraded a 1.8 mile route through the city center, they were attacked with bricks, rocks, flash bombs, bags of flour, and glass bottles. Police flanked the pride marchers and detained 20, including four individuals for "threats and insults against officers."

GOAL # 6
NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Targeting a scapegoat group for organized intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to organized violence against the group specifically and in society more broadly. This creates a more permissive environment for acts of individual hate crimes which can then be publicized strategically by the authoritarian movement to continue normalizing political violence.

US Context

Support for political violence has continued to rise after the January 6 insurrection, according to several studies. The Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution, for instance, found 23% support for this statement in October 2023, "because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country," up from 15% in March 2021.

Over that same period, according to ICAP, many of the same "armed extremist groups—including the Proud Boys, who led the breach of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021—have increasingly targeted LGBTQ+ community events" as a mobilizing rallying cry. "Across the country, drag events and other LGBTQ+ community spaces have been vandalized, disrupted, and violently attacked." This includes, "documented instances of armed extremists seeking to disrupt LGBTQ+ community events, often by seeking to block entry with armed demonstrations or by initiating conflict with community members... Recent efforts have targeted drag events that are open to all ages, given the focus by violent extremists and private paramilitary organizations on the false narrative that LGBTQ+ communities are sexually "grooming" minors."

A report monitoring anti-LGBTQ+ hate incidents from June 2022 to April 2023 by A.D.L. and GLAAD that collected data on 356 incidents across 46 states and DC had similar findings. Nearly half the incidents were connected to organized extremist groups; 191 were connected to the "grooming" conspiracy theory, 138 incidents targeted drag events and performers, and 128 incidents referenced antisemitic tropes or conspiracies.

CONCLUSION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY IT MATTERS

SCAPEGOATING 101

POLITICAL GOALS: EXAMPLES

CONCLUSION

ENDNOTES

Key Takeaways

- *LGBTQ scapegoating is a democracy issue*

- *LGBTQ scapegoating infrastructure = authoritarian infrastructure*

- *The US is in the midst of a powerful wave of LGBTQ scapegoating*

- *Democracy defenders must mobilize a response*

LGBTQ scapegoating is a democracy issue, in addition to a civil and human rights concern

- LGBTQ scapegoating impacts everyone as a key strategy to undermine democracy worldwide.

- It is part of the "authoritarian playbook" that facilitates the erosion of democracy globally, including and beyond the U.S.

- Journalists can investigate, document, and report on LGBTQ scapegoating as an authoritarian tactic, distinct from politics or policy stories.

- Citizens, leaders, as well as advocacy and religious organizations can oppose LGBTQ scapegoating, even if they are not in ideological or policy alignment with the LGBTQ rights movement.

The US is in the midst of escalating LGBTQ scapegoating

- This is not politics as usual.
- It is possible to identify LGBTQ scapegoating using analytical frameworks.

Democracy defenders must confront this issue and strategize a response

- LGBTQ scapegoating is organized, not random, and will not go away on its own.
- It is not merely a "natural" consequence of polarization or rights advancements but a tool to deepen polarization and undermine democracy.

LGBTQ Scapegoating Analysis of the US

LGBTQ scapegoating is not politics as usual. The situation in the U.S. checks all the boxes of an authoritarian strategy.

☑ Is an entire group accused of being a threat to society? (e.g., children, families)

☑ Are scapegoating linguistics being used?

    ☑ Us versus them
    ☑ Dehumanizing frame: Labels
    ☑ Dehumanizing frame: Metaphors
    ☑ Dehumanizing frame: Reversals

☑ Does the group have several of the characteristics of an ideal scapegoat?

    ☑ Knowledge gaps
    ☑ Small size
    ☑ Sexual anxieties
    ☑ Reduce identity to behaviors
    ☑ Religious alliance
    ☑ Related to women and children
    ☑ International and foreign
    ☑ Preexisting conspiracies

☑ Is the campaign being organized with support from a global scapegoating infrastructure?

☑ Does it appear as if the campaign could be accomplishing several interconnected political goals for an authoritarian movement?

    ☑ Stigmatize using state power
    ☑ Mobilize base with scapegoating
    ☑ Win elections with scapegoating
    ☑ Polarize with scapegoating
    ☑ Distract with scapegoating
    ☑ Normalize political violence

☑ Is the campaign similar to scapegoating efforts that were used to subvert democracy in other countries?

☑ Advanced stage: are scapegoating linguistics being used to quickly pass laws impacting a vulnerable group, especially in the absence of serious policy debate about the societal crisis these laws are supposed to address?

We Must Deepen Our Understanding of Political Goals & Research Others

Additional political goals may include:
- *Eroding Universal Human Rights*
- *Weakening Independent Institutions*

Our research surfaced numerous examples of LGBTQ scapegoating across dozens of countries.

We call for systematic documentation and comparative analysis of these individual cases across more contexts and cultures to deepen our collective understanding of how this threat to global democracy is evolving.

We also theorize that LGBTQ scapegoating is being deployed for additional political goals that facilitate authoritarianism, but more expansive research is needed to document and categorize examples. Those additional political goals include:

Eroding Everyone's Rights:
- Undermining equal rights for all by generating popular support to remove rights from the scapegoated group. This normalizes and creates a precedent for future rights reductions of that group, other groups, and the general public. Curtailed rights include freedom of speech, expression, and assembly.

Weakening Independent Institutions:
- Diminishing the influence and effectiveness of independent institutions, such as the judiciary, by passing popular bills to limit their powers after associating those institutions with scapegoated groups.

Testing, Evaluating, and Amplifying Counter Strategies

LGBTQ scapegoating is authoritarian behavior that requires counter strategies.

We specifically need to study and fund counter strategies that don't play into the hands of the authoritarian movement by further heightening the polarization that LGBTQ scapegoating is meant to spark.

More cross-border documentation is necessary in order to systematically understand when and how LGBTQ scapegoating fails, as well as tracking trends over time.

We call for amplifying successful counter strategies, as well as testing and evaluating promising new ones.

Our hope is that this presentation will support the efforts of leaders calling for greater cross-sector, cross-ideological, and cross-border collaboration among those working across the spectrum of democracy and LGBTQ issues.

Together, we can turn the tide.

ENDNOTES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY IT MATTERS

SCAPEGOATING 101

POLITICAL GOALS: EXAMPLES

CONCLUSION

ENDNOTES

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