

Reflections on ‘Culture wars’

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This is a short reflective note on culture wars centred around seven statements. It is largely based on the introduction to the special issue of *Europe-Asia Studies* co-written with Sarah Whitmore and Jon Wheatley.ⁱ That special issue sought to explore the phenomenon of culture wars in the former Soviet space, drawing on case studies such as Latvia, Georgia, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. I will draw on some of the case studies featured in that special issue in the reflection below. If there is a definitive take-away from these statement-based reflections it is that culture wars are less about culture and more about a struggle for power over access to resources and rights among a complex of different political, social, and cultural actors, both elite and non-elite.

Culture wars are everywhere. At least this is what a cursory glance of any media format, old and new, seemingly suggests. Whether it is the on-going social division in Poland regarding abortion laws, or the promotion of US-style evangelical Christianity in the African continent, or the anti-gender movement across Europe which vehemently campaigns against LGBTQ+ rights or the history wars over the interpretation of European colonisation in Australia, culture wars, simply understood as polarising battles over competing values and norms, are perceptibly ever expanding. The term ‘culture war’ is hard to avoid, it can feel like it surrounds us every day. A recent 2021 report by the Policy Institute at Kings College London and the polling company Ipsos confirms this trend. Researchers found that the number of references to ‘culture wars’ for anywhere in the world in British newspapers had increased from 106 in 2015 to 808 in 2020.ⁱⁱ What the report captures acutely is how the term culture war has proliferated in the last decade as a neat label to capture contemporary social conflicts pertaining to values, morality and identity that have seemingly become so prevalent in political discourse.

Culture wars are not new. There is a familiar narrative in most discussions on culture wars with regards to its history. Attention is drawn by historians to how in 19th Century Europe there were notable battles between secular liberal elites on the one hand and the clerical (typically Catholic) elites on the other. Those battles went on to shape the contours of politics and public life in Europe for more than a generation.ⁱⁱⁱ This was most famously encapsulated in Otto Von Bismarck’s raft of policies known as *Kulturkampf* (struggle of cultures) which sought to negate and suppress the influence and power of the Catholic Church in German states. In recent decades the term culture war appeared in the 1980s and 1990s during discussions regarding the social fissures in American politics over on a range of moral issues including but not limited to gender, abortion, sexuality, education, art and the role of religious institutions.^{iv} The sociologist James Davison Hunter was the first to provide a conceptualisation of a culture war and did so by distinguishing the phenomenon as a conflict between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular. Through this lens, polarisation in American society was framed as a battle ‘between conservative ‘traditionalists’ devoted to a moral order rooted in the past and familiar social roles and mores on the one hand and progressives committed to an open and liberal society on the other.’^v In the era of ‘stop the steal’, post-truth and Q-anon there is something almost quaint about the Christian evangelical culture wars of 1980s America. No doubt, the current moral malaise of US politics has its roots in the debates and value-laden struggles Davison Hunter was writing about in the 1980s and 1990s, but today’s US culture war is through the looking glass where nothing is what it seems, and a collective sense of reality is almost at stake. However, culture wars have not been isolated to the US. The ‘globalisation of culture wars’ witnessed the US Christian right exporting the normative battles over ‘family values’ and

sexual orientation across the world, notably in the Global South, although there were willing local groups ready to proselytise such a conservative message.^{vi} The introduction in Uganda in 2009 of an Anti-Homosexuality Bill is often held up as an example of the transitional influence of the US Christian right in shaping the ideational and moral politics of a country in the Global South.^{vii} Since the 2010s ‘culture wars’ have gone truly transnational given their proliferation across Europe and the post-Soviet space, where conservative, traditionalist groups, actors and organisations are pitted against progressive and liberal constituencies on a range of debates including LGBTQ+ rights, same-sex marriage, abortion, ‘traditional’ values and migration.

Culture war is a poorly conceptualised term. Despite the increasing use of the term, in the UK, USA and beyond, there has been little considered scholarly analysis of its precise meaning and its use as an analytical concept. The recently published special issue of *Europe-Asia Studies* dedicated to examining the phenomenon of culture wars in the post-Soviet space sought to unpack more precisely the conceptual usefulness of the term. The different contributions in that special issue went beyond the simple media sensationalist sloganeering of ‘culture wars’ to deepen and complicate our understanding of the phenomenon in post-Soviet countries. Too often the term is applied to a conflict or battle over social values and morals in a dichotomous form. For Hunter it was the battle between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’, for others culture wars represent a battle between the ‘liberal’ and the ‘illiberal’ or ‘traditionalists’ versus ‘progressives’, or ‘somewheres’ versus ‘anywheres’.^{viii} On the surface such binaries are useful at capturing the essence of contemporary cultural clashes, but underneath they are reductive and undermine the complexity and multiplicity of agents and relations involved. As a term, or even concept, culture war rarely has much analytical utility. It is a hard concept to operationalise. In an article I co-wrote with Liga Rudzite we sought via an analysis of Latvia’s culture war over the ratification of the Istanbul Convention^{ix} to delineate an analytical frame which went beyond viewing culture wars as a straightforward dichotomy. From the Latvian case we identified four elements upon which culture wars can be composed 1) the way public discourse over cultural values is underpinned by different forms of moralisation 2) the externalisation of political agency, in other words the way in which an external actor is blamed for triggering the culture war or are used to legitimise positions within the cultural clash 3) how culture wars are used or instigated by elites for electoral gain or legitimation and 4) how culture wars feature power struggles among a complex of different actors at different levels (both elite and non-elite) over the instruction or restriction of rights, resources and values upon which society is premised.

Culture wars are multifaceted and complex. It is not controversial to suggest any social phenomenon is complex, but as the last component of the fourfold analytical frame we constructed implies, binary understandings of culture wars misses their multifaceted and complex nature. In our essay on Latvia, Liga Rudzite and myself were able to illustrate how the cultural clash over the ratification of the Istanbul Convention featured a complex of actors including politicians, parties, religious authorities, community groups, NGOs and the general public. While these various actors were engaged in an on-going public discussion regarding whether the Istanbul Convention was unconstitutional and threatened to promote same-sex marriage and undermine so-called ‘traditional family values’, such discussions also represented a broader political struggle over maintaining or gaining access to resources (political power) or to determine what constitutes the morally acceptable bounds of who is entitled to be considered part of society. What this demonstrates is that while the ‘domain of values’ is important to culture wars as Zora Hesová has suggested,^x they are more complex than these simple binaries suggest. Thus, culture wars are often about more than ‘cultural values’ they are about political struggle – they are about access to resources and power. Such an argument is

not new. Neil Robinson^{xi} has written on how Putin's 'cultural turn' in the mid-2010s was driven by questions of political expediency and legitimacy. Likewise, in Matt Frear's essay^{xii} published in the *Europe-Asia Studies* special issue on the case of Belarus, both President Lukashenko and the political opposition are using homophobic discourses to advance their own interests. Similarly, in the UK, Boris Johnson's government's 'war on woke', through policies such as protecting historical statutes relating to questionable colonial practices, or the claim to want to protect the country's "cultural inheritance" from any re-writing of the history books on the British Empire, is being driven by political expediency in the belief that it resonates with most voters.^{xiii} In other words, for some political elites the instigation of a culture war has great electoral advantage.

Culture wars have a moral religious dimension. While culture wars are more complex than 'sacred' versus 'secular' dichotomy suggests, the phenomenon retains an important religious dimension. Religious morality has long characterised culture wars going back to the Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, and it has been central to its contemporary manifestation. This appears most obviously in the role of religious actors and organisations who perpetuate a discourse around religious morality and values as being the appropriate basis for public policy. For example, Jon Wheatley has pointed to the way in which the Georgian Orthodox Church has become increasingly emboldened since the 1990s, spurning any reformist tendencies and adopting a more strident traditionalist discourse helping shape the politics of emerging socially conservative movements and ongoing public debates on LGBTQI rights and even immigration. Likewise, Putin's rapprochement with the Orthodox Church over the last decade has given the Russian president a broader voting coalition by appealing to the morality of the faithful.^{xiv} This has given the Church a greater ability to shape public policy through the promotion of 'traditional morality' and 'traditional family values' which in turn shapes public attitudes and state policies towards body politics.^{xv} What these examples all illustrate is that religious moralisation can underpin a great deal of discourse within a culture war. Political authorities under threat from the rise of a new liberal order seek the support of the Church and the language of religious morality to justify policy decisions which are often perceived as illiberal and are aimed at shoring up their power.

Culture wars have different causal explanations. Culture wars can be explained by both demand and supply side accounts. There has been a continuing debate as to whether the rise in populism, illiberal politics and culture wars is driven by elites – nominally political elites - or by a 'silent revolution in cultural values' from below – nominally because of long-term structural changes.^{xvi} Contributions to our special issue of *Europe-Asia Studies* reflected both these perspectives. For example, Jon Wheatley's article on Georgia^{xvii} and Jasmin Dall'Agnola's comparative essay on post-Soviet states^{xviii}, used polling opinion data and world values survey data respectively to demonstrate how shifts in attitudes towards globalisation, ideational politics and immigration are shaping culture wars and establishing a divide between those who are at ease with the cosmopolitan character of globalisation and those who are not. In other words, their findings point to a fault line in values between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation or the 'somewheres' and 'anywheres' of cultural politics.^{xix} As alluded to above, we should be cautious of such dichotomies. Nonetheless, while global economic inequalities may have left some constituencies behind, allowing them to retreat to reactionary and parochial identities, such a structural shift in values is also rooted in declining trust in the politicians, institutions and organisations of the state that were originally there to create social cohesion. With public faith receding in such agents and bodies, social divisions between classes and communities have become sharper and more polarised. This is certainly the perspective from the vantage point of established liberal democracies like the USA and the United

Kingdom. At the same time, as Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter have argued, the shift towards social conservative values is an elite-led phenomenon where reactionary ideas have been used in the service of power.^{xx} In the case of the Latvian debate over the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the culture war was partly used by politicians and parties to achieve electoral advantage ahead of the 2018 parliamentary election.^{xxi} Other contributors to the *Europe-Asia Studies* special issue challenged the straightforward dichotomy of supply vs. demand side explanations. Jeremy Morris and Masha Garibyan adopting an ethnographic approach to the study of the Russian ‘cultural turn’ found that rather than Russians accepting on mass the socially conservative discourse perpetuated by elites pertaining to traditional values, homosexuality and so-called Western permissiveness, Russian public opinion was in fact highly diffuse on matters related to ‘cultural values’.^{xxii} Moreover, in their study, Morris and Garibyan found that their informants demonstrated agency in reappropriating the official socially conservative discourse to express their own dissatisfaction with the Russian state.

Culture wars are transnational. The language, discourse and policy of a culturally conservative morality, which typically advocates the sanctity of national borders, also traverses globally, with external agents seeking to influence the politics of states outside its borders. In the case of culture wars in the post-Soviet space, Russian actors and organisations have tended to play a considerable role in other non-Russian states. Matt Frear in his work on Belarus noted the influence of the Russian media space in cultivating homophobic discourses in the public sphere.^{xxiii} As such, this builds on existing scholarship which has identified Russia’s new morality politics is resonating on an international scale with religious and far right groups across Europe and even beyond.^{xxiv} But the influence of the Russian media and cultural space is not unidirectional. As Tatiana Zhurzhenko and Jon Wheatley noted in respect to Ukraine and Georgia, a such attempts of Russian organisations and actors to shape debates pertaining to cultural values in both countries have been met with resistance.^{xxv} In the case of Ukraine, there has been a clear *Kulturkampf* policy aimed at restricting the hegemony of Russian culture in the country. But it is important not to isolate Russia as the only external agent. The Holy See has been a deeply pervasive actor in relation to culture wars in the post-communist space and, for example, sought to intervene in the discussion around the Istanbul Convention, requesting the removal of sexual orientation and gender identity as impermissible grounds for discrimination.^{xxvi} Ultimately culture wars are transnational. Cultural clashes cut across national borders, and while it is easy to point to evangelical Christian groups proselyting against homosexuality, or Russian cultural actors and the Holy See in promoting ‘traditional Christian values, liberal human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also part of this equation – and have long been responsible for spreading specific liberal values pertaining to identity, rights and morality, which have not always sat easily with some communities in recipient states.^{xxvii} As with the multiplicity of actors and organisations involved in domestic culture wars, so it is that there can be a complex of external actors seeking to shape the narrative and discourse of cultural clashes on a transnational scale.

These seven statement-based reflections have sought to offer a window into analysing at a more granular level the ways we can think and speak of culture wars. It is important that if the term ‘culture war’ is to have any analytical use beyond a simple headline grabbing slogan, it needs to be clearly operationalised. Of course, it does not need to follow what has been set out above, but there does need to be deeper consideration of the conceptualisation necessary for analysing culture wars as a specific social and political phenomenon. What the above offers is an opportunity to move beyond the surface reading of culture wars and the simple dichotomies which characterise much analysis of the phenomenon to rather see these cultural clashes as more akin to political struggles between a panoply of actors and organisations. In this way, to

paraphrase Partha Chatterjee, we should always be asking whose culture war is it? In whose interests?

ⁱ Rico Isaacs, Jonathan Wheatley & Sarah Whitmore (2021) Culture Wars in the Post-Soviet Space, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1407-1417.

ⁱⁱ Bobby Duffy, Kirstie Hewlett, George Murkin, Rebecca Benson, Rachel Hesketh, Ben Page, Gideon Skinner and Glenn Gottfried, *Culture Wars in the UK*. London: Ipsos, The Policy Institute & Kings College London, June 2021, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/uks-culture-war-risks-leading-to-us-style-divisions-although-not-there-yet>

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds.) *Culture Wars: Secular–Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.

^{iv} James Hunter Davison and Alan Wolfe (2004) *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on the Values and American Public Life*. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, Brookings Institution Press.

^v Rico Isaacs & Liga Rudzite (2021) Conceptualising Culture Wars in the Post- Communist Space: Latvia, the Istanbul Convention and the Struggle for Power, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73 (8): 1418-1440.

^{vi} John Anderson (2011) Conservative Christianity, the Global South and the Battle over Sexual Orientation, *Third World Quarterly*, 32:9, 1589-1605

^{vii} Marcia Oliver (2013) ‘Transnational Sex Politics, Conservative Christianity, and Antigay Activism in Uganda’, *Studies in Social Justice* 7 (1): 83-105.

^{viii} Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff (2018) ‘Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”’: The Anti-Colonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43, 4; Dimitry Uzlaner. & Kristina Stoeckl (2019) ‘From Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” to Matilda: Orthodox Believers, Critique, and Religious Freedom in Russia’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 34, 3; David Goodhart (2017) *The Road to Somewhere The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: Hurst Publishers.

^{ix} The Istanbul Convention is The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

^x Zora Hesová (2021) ‘Culture Wars and the Battle for Hegemony’ 26 July <https://cz.boell.org/en/2021/07/26/kulturni-valky-boj-o-hegemonii>

^{xi} Neil Robinson (2017) Russian Neo-patrimonialism and Putin’s ‘Cultural Turn’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69:2, 348-366

^{xii} Matthew Frear (2021) ‘Better to be a Dictator than Gay’: Homophobic Discourses in Belarusian Politics, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1467-1486

^{xiii} Louise Perry (2021) The UK is immersed in a class-culture war – and Labour is incapable of winning it, *The New Statesman*, 22 June. <https://www.newstatesman.com/comment/2021/06/uk-immersed-class-culture-war-and-labour-incapable-winning-it>

^{xiv} Regina Smyth & Irina Soboleva (2014) Looking beyond the economy: Pussy Riot and the Kremlin's voting coalition, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30:4, 257-275

^{xv} Alexander Agadjanian (2017) Tradition, morality and community: elaborating Orthodox identity in Putin’s *Russia, Religion, State & Society*, 45:1, 39-60

^{xvi} Philippa Norris, P. & Ronald Inglehart (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge & New York, NY, Cambridge University Press).

^{xvii} Jonathan Wheatley (2021) The Politics of Culture and Identity in Postcommunist States: A New Political Cleavage in Georgia? *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1508-1530.

^{xviii} Jasmin Dall’Agnola (2021) Patriots or World Citizens: The Identity of Post-Soviet People in a Globalised World, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1531-1551

^{xix} David Goodhart (2017) *The Road to Somewhere The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: Hurst Publishers.

^{xx} Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020) *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (London & New York, NY, Verso).

^{xxi} Rico Isaacs & Liga Rudzite (2021) Conceptualising Culture Wars in the Post- Communist Space: Latvia, the Istanbul Convention and the Struggle for Power, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73 (8): 1418-1440.

^{xxii} Jeremy Morris & Masha Garibyan (2021) Russian Cultural Conservatism Critiqued: Translating the Tropes of ‘Gayropa’ and ‘Juvenile Justice’ in Everyday Life, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1487-1507.

^{xxiii} Matthew Frear (2021) ‘Better to be a Dictator than Gay’: Homophobic Discourses in Belarusian Politics, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1467-1486.

^{xxiv} Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2014) ‘The Pussy Riot affair and Putin’s démarche from sovereign democracy to sovereign morality’, *Nationalities Papers*, 42 (4): 615–621; Todd Helmus, Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William Marcellino, Andriy Bega, Zev Winkelman (2018) *Russian Social Media Influence: understanding Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe*. Santa Monica: RAND

Corporation, Triin Vihalemm, Jānis Juzefovičs & Marianne Leppik (2019) Identity and Mediause Strategies of the Estonian and Latvian Russian-speaking Populations Amid Political Crisis, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71:1, 48-70

^{xxv} Tatiana Zhurzenko (2021) Fighting Empire, Weaponising Culture: The Conflict with Russia and the Restrictions on Russian Mass Culture in Post-Maidan Ukraine, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1441-1466; Jonathan Wheatley (2021) The Politics of Culture and Identity in Postcommunist States: A New Political Cleavage in Georgia?, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:8, 1508-1530.

^{xxvi} Amnesty International (2011) *Time to Take a Stand: Amnesty International opposes that will weaken the Council of Europe's treaty on violence against women*. London: Amnesty International Publications; Timothy A. Byrnes (2017) Sovereignty, Supranationalism, and Soft Power: The Holy See in International Relations, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15:4, 6-20.

^{xxvii} Christopher McCrudden (2015) Transnational culture wars, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 13 (2), 434-462.