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“THE SOFT POWER” OF EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES: GENDER AND SEXUALITY POLICIES ¹

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The article is devoted to the problematization and conceptualization of influence, as well as the potential for participation of higher education institutions, as educational and scientific centers, in the formation and implementation of gender and sexual policies in modern European countries, which are widely debated and ambiguously perceived in society. *Methods.* The article conceptualizes the concepts of gender and sexual policy in two senses: as a sphere of the struggle for power, as well as a system of technologies and actions in solving socially important problems. As a theoretical and methodological framework, the principles of social constructionism are used in interpreting the content, meaning and research of technologies for the formation of public representations and culture on issues of intimate and inter-sexual relations. Based on the use of general scientific methods and the heuristic potential of the Overton window concept, a scheme is proposed for explaining and studying the participation of universities in the “promotion” of relevant policies and politics. *Results.* The heuristic potential of the concept of “Overton’s Window” to the political science problematization, interpretation and explanation of the “soft power” potential of modern universities in shaping, discussing the social and political agenda on sexual and gender culture in Europe is revealed. It is shown that sexual and gender policies in society can be aimed at changing the values, perceptions and norms of the organization of interactions in the relevant areas of life, both at the level of individual practices and social institutions. Social and communicative technologies (informed discussion, events, creation of terms, name-calling) that are (un)intentionally used in the framework of higher education institutions to normalize and politicize ideas, perceptions and values regarding gender issues, the organization of sexual life can be interpreted as important tools for transforming unthinkable practices and beliefs into the category of not only acceptable, eligible on the existence of a pluralism of views, but also dominant in political discourse. *Discussion.* The issue of the ethical principles of the implementation of the “soft power” strategy by European universities, as well as the political and social sense and consequences of radical transformations in gender and sexual culture and the structure of society, present in the discourses of European academic science and education, remains open and poorly studied.

Key words: sexuality, gender, sexual policy, gender policy, cultural sexual scripts, Overton window, “soft power”.

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**«МЯГКАЯ СИЛА» ЕВРОПЕЙСКИХ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ:
ГЕНДЕРНАЯ И СЕКСУАЛЬНАЯ ПОЛИТИКИ¹****Сергей Анатольевич Панкратов**

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Статья посвящена проблематизации и концептуализации влияния, а также потенциала участия высших учебных заведений как образовательных и научных центров в формировании и реализации гендерной и сексуальной политики в современных европейских странах, которые широко дискутируются и неоднозначно воспринимаются в обществе. *Методы.* В статье раскрываются понятия гендерной и сексуальной политики в двух смыслах: 1) как сферы борьбы за власть; 2) как системы технологий и действий в решении общественно важных проблем. В качестве теоретико-методологической рамки используются положения и принципы социального конструкционизма в интерпретации содержания, смысла и исследовании технологий формирования общественных представлений и культуры по вопросам интимных и межполовых отношений. На основе использования общенаучных методов и эвристического потенциала концепции «окна Овертона» предлагается схема объяснения и изучения участия университетов в «продвижении» соответствующих политик. *Результаты.* Раскрываются эвристические возможности концепции «Окна Овертона» к политологической проблематизации, интерпретации и объяснению потенциала «мягкой силы» современных университетов в формировании, обсуждении социальной и политической повестки дня по вопросам сексуальной и гендерной культуры в Европе. Показано, что сексуальная и гендерная политики в обществе могут быть направлены на изменение ценностей, представлений и норм организации взаимодействий в соответствующих сферах жизни на уровне как индивидуальных практик, так и социальных институтов. Социокоммуникативные технологии (информированная дискуссия, проведение коммуникативных событий, «создание» терминов – новой лексики описания реальности и т. д.), (не)целенаправленно используемые в рамках деятельности высших учебных заведений по нормализации и политизации идей, представлений и ценностей в отношении вопросов гендерного порядка, организации сексуальной жизни могут интерпретироваться как важные инструменты трансформации немислимых практик и убеждения в разряд не только приемлемых, имеющих право на существование в условиях плюрализма взглядов, но и доминирующих в политическом дискурсе. *Обсуждение.* Открытым и малоизученным остается вопрос об этических принципах реализации стратегии «мягкой силы» европейскими университетами, а также политическом и социальном смысле, последствиях порой радикальных трансформаций в гендерной и сексуальной культуре, структуре общества, присутствующих в дискурсах европейской академической науки. *Вклад авторов.* С.А. Панкратов разработал концептуальную модель анализа формирования гендерной и сексуальной политики европейскими университетами на основе концепций «окна дискурса» и «мягкой силы». Л.С. Панкратова рассмотрела ключевые понятия гендерной и сексуальной политики, провела анализ технологий, используемых европейскими университетами для ее реализации, а также осуществила профессиональный перевод статьи на английский язык. О.А. Фокина выделила институциональные и культурные особенности современной европейской академической среды.

Ключевые слова: сексуальность, гендер, сексуальная политика, гендерная политика, культурные сексуальные сценарии, окно Овертона, мягкая сила.

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Introduction. The political space in the contemporary global world is characterized by ongoing, severe, prolonged, and multiple information, or also called hybrid wars, among different political forces both on the international and internal (state) arenas. The spectrum of socio-political issues under debate is various, but the majority of them are focused on the power (re)distribution among different political agents and groups, and, thus, suggestions and attempts to create and implement appropriate, supportive (re)configurations of social structure, that is possible only under the basis of the compliant ideological and cultural systems, frameworks. So, the political struggle is a cultural battle of inserting the "right" ideas, values, norms into public consciousness. The cultural change both on the level of society and individual is a time consuming process, that requires the use of special technologies and appropriate agents of influence. Universities has always been a center of political and social thought in Europe, which not only produce new ideas and interpretations, models of the common life organization as think tanks, but also disseminate values and believes among the public, which is nowadays, primary, young people. In the modern world, and especially in European countries, institutions of higher education play the key role as a "soft power" – non-violent – agent of cultural change and worldviews building for young generations.

One of the key issues in modern European states for public and political interest is (re)interpretation, (re)organization and regulation of gender and sexuality aspects of life. Gender and sexuality have become significant elements in the core of political and social ideologies, that lead to their politicizing. Social and cultural sex, as well as intimate identity and practices are considered as an important element of citizenship in European countries (sexual and gender citizenship [6]). The shifts in sexual and gender relations in society leads to the change of social bases of support and stability for political regimes and forces. In this sense, such cases as the 2018 Hungarian government announcement of the abandonment of gender studies programs at the Universities is of particular interest for political scientists as an example of public "battles" between some academic and political establishment over legitimate interpretations of sex

and intimacy in the country. Primary it concerned two organizations – one of the oldest Hungarian university Eötvös Loránd (ELTE)s and the Central European University (CEU) founded by George Soros. These programs were considered by the state authorities more as study of ideology than a science. So, recognition of the cultural power of a university leads to the need to scientifically problematize, understand and conceptualize it. This paper is aimed to introduce and present a political science perspective on broaching a question of the real and / or potential influence and role of universities in forming gender and sexuality policies in Europe.

Methods. The research methodology of the article is based on the principles of social construction of reality paradigm in analysis and interpretation of sexuality and gender policies, study of the role of European universities as agents in political agenda setting in contemporary society. While social construction perspective does not deny the physiological and biological mechanisms underlying the sexual drive and peculiarities of sexes, it indicates the social conditioning of the forms of expression of sexual desire and the organization of gender relations in society. In this theoretical perspective sexual relations are understood as social relations. It is impossible to imagine erotic practices outside the system of production of social meanings and interpretations. Sexuality and gender are included in the field of intersubjective and institutional relations, correlated with the social structure, social and cultural processes [16, p. 27-29].

Within the social sciences, a distinction is made between the biological sex, the social sex, also called gender, and sexuality, which is conceptually justified. But often the conceptual "boundaries" between sex, gender and sexuality are blurred and confused. Partly, some researchers explain it as a pitfall of ideological issue. Thus, in the Soviet period, to eliminate negative connotations and associations with the word "sex" (in a sense of sexual intercourse), "sexual", "sexual education" (that is, oriented to the physiology of relationships) the concept of "sex" (biological sex – transliterally "pol" in the Russian language), "sex education" ("polovoe vospitanie") (that is, oriented towards strengthening social norms, morality of male and female relations). However, the concept of biological sex is not

strictly synonymous with “sex”, “sexuality”, there are various interpretations of it. The most common in modern literature is the opinion that “sex” refers to the combination of physiological, physical and genetic, hormonal, mental, behavioral properties that distinguish men and women – biological sex. However, there is a view that in the broad sense “sex” indicates the presence of not only individual biological, but also socially fixed differences between men and women [7, p. 25]. More appropriate for this work seems to be the first definition of the concept “sex” – its interpretation as biological sex. At the same time, sexual diversity is noted, including the polarity of the male and female, as well as the existence of androgynous (hermaphroditic). Sexual behavior, in turn, is interpreted as actions associated with satisfying a person’s sexual need.

Gender or social sex indicates social and cultural differences between traditionally two biological sexes, enshrined in the norms, regulations, and patterns of behavior created in society for each of them. It is expressed in the expectation that men and women will fulfill the corresponding gender roles – patterns of behavior, as well as presentation of specific personality traits – masculine or feminine. Natural differences are used as the basis for the construction of social qualities and reinforcement of social hierarchy and order. Moreover, in modern societies, in addition to traditional gender roles and patterns, new and alternative ones – androgynous, transgender identities – are being created and constructed. The number of possible types of masculinity and femininity varies and increases in the context of pluralization of life styles, transformation of gender order and norms [10]. Sexuality in its turn we suggest to define in a broader sense, as a complex of erotic and emotional aspects of personality and social practices. Sexuality is a set, configuration and combination of socio-cultural aspects of intimacy (emotional, physical, intellectual, etc. closeness), eroticism, sensuality (emotions), and body of an individual that are interconnected with sexual desire [15, p. 29].

Gender and sexuality are one of the core issues in the social and political agenda of contemporary European societies, as there is a great transition – transformation of intimate cultures (values, norms, sexual and gendered scripts) – starting from the 1960s [22, p. 74-76],

that is publicly debated, institutionalized, and legitimized. So, gender culture, as a set of views and attitudes, norms and methods of social construction of a feminine and masculine, male and female, or other gender identity of a person, as well as sexual culture – a set of norms, values, behaviors expressing sociocultural aspects of intimacy, eroticism, sensuality, body of an individual, in relation to one’s sexual desire (sensation and its realization, alienation, denial, imitation) – have become the significant entities, elements of social construction of modernity. Gender and sexuality have really become political questions – politics (issue of power attainment and distribution) and policies (choice of vectors of development of society, management).

One of the possible goals of sexual and gender policies could be the transformation of social and cultural norms, values, and attitudes in a society, or institutionalization of changes in sexual and gender cultures in social, political, and legal entities. The agents of development could be different – state or local government, political parties, social movements, non-government or non-profit organizations, media, as well as educational institutions, etc. The various technologies (social, political, communicative) could be used to reach the goal. In the paper general scientific methods (analysis, synthesis, induction and deduction) and the heuristic potential of the concept of the Overton Window, also called as the window of discourse, to analyze and understand the possibilities and actual facts of influence of European universities on transformation of sexual and gender cultures in contemporary societies as part of the political processes is scrutinized. The Overton Window is a debatable notion in academic literature, as it has pragmatic (political technology) and ideological (evaluating assertions) bases and senses. However, we argue that it is possible to use the concept as an analytical tool, trying to get rid of its negative connotations.

Analysis. In the paper we suggest that European universities might be considered as agents (playing the role of experts) of public politics and policy in sexuality and gender issues, that indirectly (through educational process – hidden curriculum) or directly may influence the formation of agenda in not only scientific, but also socio-political space (state, international or regional

organization, political parties, social movements, media, academia, etc.) and working out perceptions of facts. In favorable conditions, the political agenda is the quintessence of the main problems of concern to broad groups of the public, which the authorities are ready to consider and solve [8]. In a different interpretation, the political agenda can be considered as a list of problems that are formed by power entities (the ruling political elite, the upper layers of the bureaucracy) that are in the zone of their interest and attention [17]. However, in this case either it seems possible and sensible to cooperate with other political entities of different levels, including academic and scientific representatives, for its formulation by the authorities. It might be publicly evident cooperation or a latent one. The result of a communicative action as a political action is the production of various discourses about different problems and issues that have a socially constitutive power through a linguistic form, generating or maintaining independent fields of meanings and senses [5], for example, the sexual and gender culture. These discourses can be defined as political discourses by virtue of their creation and existence within the framework of the political field. Moreover, discourses within the framework of the political field on the sexual and gender culture can be diverse and compete with each other because of the difference between the ideological and political views of the agents that create them.

The Overton Window concept marks the spectrum of acceptable interpretations, values and norms regarding any issue in a given time and society (e.g., ecological, economic, weapon, etc.). Based on the social constructionist paradigm and the insights of the discourse approach, the concept focuses on the fact that a set of ideas, public opinion regarding a social issue change over time. Moreover, political and social actors may influence, manage a process of cultural transformations. Thus, the Overton Window is considered as a technology that let change social consciousness (believes, values, norms) from unthinkable to sensible, and even develop and integrate "new ideas and interpretations" into real policy. This method includes a set of socio-communicative techniques (informed discussion, events, creation of terms, name-calling), which are in the center of discursive practices to create

other knowledge, interpretation of reality. The development of an unthinkable idea (like same-sex marriage in some states; incest; agenderness) goes through the stages that lead to its transformation into radical one (an introduction of the issue into scientific discourse), then acceptable (creation of a neutral term to get rid of previous negative associations), sensible (interpretation as an evitable, natural part of reality based on the evidence from history, culture, science), popular idea (active public debate, presented on media arena), and finally policy (legitimization, part of political agenda and discourse) [1; 21].

The existing scientific publications either scrutinize the specifics, analytical potential and flaws of the Overton Window concept [20], or use it as a theoretical tool to study empirical cases of media discourse legitimization of a problem (same-sex marriage in Russia [9], in the USA [3]). Methodologically some authors consider the Overton Window as a frame of political interactions, or manipulative technology. The main point is that the window of discourse is an analytical concept that allows to grasp and describe the process of values transformation in a society, its social construction that is quiet often manipulative, as it is done because of the interests of different social and political actors, focusing on the stages and agents of change rather than public opinion (recipients of the messages). From the above mentioned description of the technology it is evident that not only media, but also academic and scientific institutions and discourses play crucial role from the early stages of introducing new ideas and their development into policies. Despite the existing literature on the interpretation of university as an agent of social and cultural change [23], the Overton Window framework in relation to academic, scientific organizations and contemporary gender and sexuality policies is understudied. To be true to scientific research principles we argue not to evaluate the ideas that are legitimated with the help of this method both as dangerous or good, but to reveal its logic. The "soft power" of universities [13; 14], as the ability to (re)produce, transform the attitudes of groups of public by cultural and communicative means and methods of public consciousness formation through appeal and attraction, is a significant, quiet effective strategy in gender and

sexuality policies. To examine the role of universities in agenda setting, it is important to take into account modern social and political context.

Gender and sexuality policies, aimed at transformation, institutionalization, or legitimization of intimate cultures, need to focus on change of the further structural elements of the value-normative system: axiological (values, on the basis of which people interpret and construct their sexual practices and gendered interactions), symbolic (signs and symbols, through which it is customary to conceptualize sexuality and gender in culture), cognitive (knowledge and methods of obtaining perceptions about gender and sexuality), institutional (social and political institutions that regulate and provide the implementation of sexual and gender relations), normative (rules and regulations regarding sexual and gender relations, taboo is important), rituals and customs, praxeological or behavioral (typical patterns, patterns and forms of sexual and gender relations and practices). The presented structure of gender and sexual culture should be completed with two more elements – an information and communication unit, including mass media, the Internet, social networks, social media. It is these segments that actively affect the (trans)formation of ideas and practices in the sphere of sexuality and gender relations, determine the dynamism and diversity of modern sexual and gender culture. In different historical eras, depending on the sociocultural context of specific societies and social groups, the configuration of structural elements of sexual and gender beliefs and practices (for example, the hierarchy of values), their semantic content change. This can happen both gradually in an evolutionary way, and through sharp, fast radical qualitative transformations – sexual or gender revolution. In both cases it means the shifts or multiplication of cultural sexual and gender scripts in a society – “the mental representations individuals construct and then use to make sense of their experience, including their own and others’ behavior” [24, p. 7], as well as new ways of organization of social life.

The contemporary Western and European social sciences’ discussion of sexuality and gender is significantly shaped by feminist, queer, and postmodern approaches and methodologies [12]. This fact greatly influences on the choice of the

current circle of research questions and interpretations that are given, or are expected to be worked out from a specific perspective. In the sphere of political and social scientists working at European universities the idea of social activism, especially in gender and sexuality studies, is rather popular. It is considered to be a real contribution of science into public policy and civil society activity. That includes the popularization of the knowledge and ideas, working on local-level initiatives (educational and social projects, programs). Recent March, 2020 communicative action – the letter denying a thesis that transgender rights is a threat to women published in the column of the Guardian newspaper, was written and signed by more than 200 feminists (activists, journalists, artists, etc.) in the UK, among which a considerable amount of academicians from different cities and universities is listed.

The radical transformations of sexual and gender cultures and structures in European countries that had started from the 1960s were reflected and scrutinized in the academic sphere. The significant historical example of the UK social scientist and campaigner in the mid-20th century is Michael Schofield, who not only studied the homosexuality issue, but also took active part in Homosexual Law Reform Society. Previously unthinkable ideas, practices, and beliefs regarding intimate relations started to be introduced into scientific discussion. Thus, various feminist theories could be considered as rather radical approaches to understanding the sexual order in contemporary societies introducing some extraordinary ideas for that time regarding the absolute demolishment of patriarchy principles of organizing social relations in different spheres of life (education, work, family, sexuality), women’s liberation that was connected with the autonomy and the right of the women to make decisions concerning their body (abortion, sex work as act of liberation) and sex life (contraception, multiple sexual partners). The well-known French sociologist, cofounder of the scientific journal “Nouvelles Questions Féministes” (“New Feminist Questions”), theorist and campaigner Christine Delphy, who focused on issues of gender inequality, abortion in both scientific and public discussions, is one of the examples. The 1990s in Western European countries and the US were marked with the rise of queer theory and

studies of "other" genders and sexualities at research centers and universities that legitimized them and brought in the focus of social and political debate (sexual and gender minorities rights, discrimination, institutionalization like same-sex partnerships, child adoption, etc.). The communicative space for scientific discussion and educational space for younger generations allows through the means of academic events (conferences, forums, seminars, workshops, classes) and global scientific communication space (publications, discussions in the media, internet) to create a field of expert debate about gender and sexuality and lead to the cultural change. The most progressive European countries in the sense of sexual and gender policies are the Netherlands and Sweden. The European universities in Scandinavia and Western Europe do not only have the vast opportunities for education (the leading MA and Ph.D. studies in gender and sexuality), but also organized and supported scientific research projects and centers (e.g., The Centre for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Research in De Montfort University, Leicester, the UK; the Center for Women's Studies at the University of York). That is not the same for some Eastern European countries' higher education institutions, like Poland, Hungary, where conservative values are shaping the state policy regarding gender and sexuality. But the liberal bases that mostly drives the perspectives of queer and gender studies in European academic discourse is also presented there in the university field, where seminars, research, social activist (participation in pride parades, workshops) collaboration are supported.

The scientific discourse developed at the universities play an important role in the transformation of radical ideas about gender and sexuality into acceptable ones. The European academic community is participating in the development and dissemination of "new" language of description and interpretation of gender and sexual issues. That is a technology of getting rid of negative, emotionally unpleasant connotations associated with specific words that were historically used to name various phenomena (e.g., from "sodomy" to "same-sex love"). Thus, the vocabularies of gender terms, sexual dictionaries in different languages have appeared and are freely available on the internet. They include a large amount of already well-established and

widely used in political, public and everyday discourses notions (asexuality, gender discrimination, queer, sexual citizenship, etc.), as well as innovative ones that not only rename existing entities, but construct a new social reality with the neologisms of social division, identity and relations (polyamory, open relationships, cisgender, pansexuality, etc.). Thus, the term "cisgender" recently have started to widely spread not only in scientific, but also public rhetoric, after its usage by German sexologist and sociologist V. Sigusch in his article "The neosexual revolution" [18] that reveals the main transformations in intimate life of the western countries citizens in the late decades of the 20th century. The notion "cisgender" was included into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015 [19], which reflects its political importance in contemporary Europe. The term refers to individuals whose gender identity is the same as their biological sex assigned at birth. The socio-political sense and practical importance of the notion derives from the declared necessity to build a mental and, thus, linguistic pair of words opposition "transgender-cisgender" to point to the establishment of new types of gender identity (its fluidity and a matter of personal choice, not only institutional prescription) in European society.

The important part of the creation and legitimization of the discourse that would be appropriate for the policy debate and the implementation of the issue in political agenda is the support of public opinion surveys, research to demonstrate the importance of the issue in society. On the level of independent sociological survey centers, social activists (often in collaboration with universities' research representatives), as well as governmentally supported established research centers the monitoring of gender and sexuality policies is conducted. They do reflect the main positions of the Overton Window, meaning ideas that are considered to be already popular or to be likely integrated in the policy. Thus, according to the Gallup public opinion poll in 124 countries in 2014 the friendliest (meaning culturally and socially comfortable) countries for gay and lesbian people for residency are mostly Scandinavian and West European: first and second place for the Netherlands (87% respondents say "good place") and Spain (87%), in top eleven countries – Belgium (82%), Norway (80%), Luxemburg (79%), Sweden (78%), Ireland (77%), the United

Kingdom (77%), and Denmark (76%) [11]. The similar picture is reflected according to the World Values Survey results, conducted in the liberal democratization logic of society development: on the top of gender equality scale measured in spheres of work, politics, education, parenting, family / partnership are such European countries as Finland, Sweden, Norway [4, p. 33]. And also the countries ranking on social climate for gender and sexual minorities of 49 European countries regularly conducted by the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, which includes a number of universities departments / centers as its members [2].

Results. “The soft power” of universities in shaping gender and sexuality politics and policies in contemporary European countries lies in its ability of social construction, framing, meaning ability to create, introduce and promote interpretations of the world, as it could be conceptualized and studied based on the Overton window framework. As an agent with the status of an expert, academic and scientific community is able to participate in policy formation in formal and informal ways, directly and indirectly: participation in working out of laws, state programs and their expertise; creation of theoretical (non)ideologically based concepts that explain the place of gender and sexuality in the “good” or “right” way of social and political development; public consciousness formation through educational process with the means of hidden curriculum; search for scientific bases and evidences of social events in surveys and their normalization through scientific discourse; creation of a specific vocabulary for description of the phenomena. The socio-communicative abilities of universities might be considered as a competitive resource for helping to set political and social agenda in a society.

One of the main trends of the European academic discourse around gender and sexuality and their regulation nowadays is importance of liberal values. It is crucial to recognize the significance of the questions and issues that academic community rise regarding sexual and gender rights, sexual health, social relations in private life (family, couple, partnership). But on the other hand, the ethical questions arise concerning the social power of academic

research, its evaluating and ideologically determined bases (both – liberal or conservative), particularly in comparison and evaluation of sexual and gender cultures and politics in non-liberal states. Gender and sexuality studies are dominated by female oppression and emancipation discourse, fight against gender inequality, LGBTQ+ rights, which is important, but might trigger the more traditional and conservative response from the part of the society which is not seeking the radical transformations in gender order and sexual culture. The example of Hungarian authorities constrains on gender studies programs at universities demonstrates it. The possibilities / ability (“power”) of universities in the formation and implementation of gender and sexuality cultures and influence on policies in Europe is considered as a question of interest and further research to political science and sociology.

NOTE

¹ The article was prepared based on the results of studies carried out in the framework of the project “Youth Family, Gender and Sexuality in the Cyberspace of Modern Russia” (grant of the President of the Russian Federation for state support of young Russian scientists – candidates of sciences, project no. MK-3510.2018.6).

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