

## **Between Sovereignty and Universal Norms: An English School Analysis of Global Responses to Russia's Anti-LGBT Policies**

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### **Abstract**

*Since President Vladimir Putin enacted anti-LGBT laws in July 2023, Russia has received a variety of responses, especially those focusing on human rights issues. However, there are quite a few parties who have criticized Russia's policies. This study aims to understand the differences in global responses to Russia's anti-LGBT policies, using the English School perspective. This article uses a qualitative descriptive method. Data collection was carried out through literature studies, which came from Scopus journal articles, official Russian government documents, and credible media reports. Using the pluralism and solidarity approaches contained in the English School, the findings in this article can be summarized in two main premises. First, if based on the pluralism approach, the decision of countries that choose not to condemn Russia's anti-LGBT policies can be understood as a form of respect for Russia's sovereignty in an effort to maintain international order. Second, by using a solidarity approach, the opposition of some pro-LGBT countries and international organizations to Russia's anti-LGBT policies can be understood as an effort to uphold universal values in order to create international order.*

**Keywords:** *Anti-LGBT; English School; Pluralism; Russia; Solidarism.*

### **Abstrak**

*Sejak presiden Vladimir Putin menetapkan undang-undang anti-LGBT pada Juli 2023, Rusia menerima beragam tanggapan, khususnya yang berfokus pada isu HAM. Meskipun demikian, tidak sedikit pihak yang mempersoalkan kebijakan dari Rusia. Penelitian ini bertujuan memahami perbedaan respon global terkait kebijakan anti-LGBT yang diterapkan oleh Rusia, dengan menggunakan perspektif English School. Artikel ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui studi literatur, yang berasal dari artikel jurnal Scopus, dokumen resmi pemerintah Rusia, dan laporan media yang kredibel. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan pluralisme dan solidarisme yang terdapat dalam English School, temuan dalam artikel ini dapat dirangkum dalam dua premis utama. Pertama, jika berpatokan pada pendekatan pluralisme, keputusan negara-negara yang memilih untuk tidak mengecam kebijakan anti-LGBT Rusia dapat dipahami sebagai bentuk penghormatan terhadap kedaulatan Rusia dalam rangka upaya menjaga tertib internasional. Kedua, dengan menggunakan pendekatan solidarisme, penentangan sebagian negara dan organisasi-organisasi internasional yang pro-LGBT terhadap kebijakan anti-LGBT Rusia, dapat dipahami sebagai upaya menegakkan nilai-nilai universal demi menciptakan tertib internasional.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Anti-LGBT; Mahzab Inggris; Pluralisme; Rusia; Solidarisme.*

## Introduction

After World War II, many popular topics were discussed at that time, ranging from religion, law, and national and international politics to the behavior of gay and heterosexual people (Duxbury 2014). Issues of sexuality and human rights have increasingly attracted international attention in recent years, causing much controversy and division (Hayes and Nagle 2016). For example, in Russia, homosexuality has become the subject of administrative and legal regulations. Control over sexuality is carried out not only through law but also through the meanings displayed and distributed in public spaces (Kondakov 2017).

International law contains several provisions regarding the protection of a person's family and marital rights. The concept of "family", is understood as a union between a man and a woman. In recent decades, we have witnessed a distorted understanding of family. In the 20th century, this concept was slowly challenged by pro-LGBT groups. A phenomenon that throughout human history was considered an aberration, is now declared a universal value. Russia shows how the protection of human dignity becomes unreasonable when dignity is found in abusive relationships (Semenova et al., 2015a). Moreover, in Russia, LGBT people are more likely to support left-leaning parties and identify themselves ideologically with the left than heterosexuals (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020).

In 2013, Russia passed a law known as the "Anti-Gay Propaganda Law." This law controversially prohibits "gay propaganda" among children as well as proclaiming a focus on "traditional family values. This law prohibits the dissemination of information deemed to promote nontraditional sexual orientation among children. This includes publications, performances, or campaigns that could be considered an attempt to influence children with a positive view of nontraditional sexual orientations. Fines are also imposed on people or organizations that violate the law. The amount of the fine can vary depending on the violation committed and the perpetrator of the violation. This law also closed several LGBT organizations. LGBT organizations such as LGBT Network, Side by Side LGBT Film Festival, Equality Movement, Rakurs LGBT Youth Group, and Children (Lovett 2013).

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a new anti-LGBT law on Monday, July 24 2023 which prohibits gender changes and sex reassignment procedures. This law also contains several articles that are seen as steps by the Kremlin to suppress the LGBT community (Vasilyeva 2017). The law passed by Putin prohibits "any medical procedure aimed at changing a person's gender". Civil registry offices are also prohibited from changing gender on citizens' official documents. The prohibition on genital surgery is only excluded for medical interventions aimed at treating congenital birth defects (tu espacio). In addition, the law also makes marriages between

parties who change gender invalid. Transgender people are also prohibited from adopting or getting custody of children. Putin claims he intends to protect “traditional family values” (Kompas TV 2023) with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church. These regulations were agreed upon by the lower and upper houses of the Russian parliament which were then ratified by Putin into law on Monday, July 24, 2023. This ban is one manifestation of the Kremlin’s efforts to protect what they call “traditional Russian values”.

Previously, Russia decriminalized homosexual relations in 1993. According to The Council for Global Equality website, Russian citizens were also allowed to be transgender in 1997 even though this regulation had many obstacles. But in 2013, Moscow passed a new law banning “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations”. The “non-traditional” language in this law is a form of Russia’s opposition to LGBT people who have received protection from the UN. The UN on October 28, 2022, said it was deeply concerned to learn of the Russian parliament’s decision to toughen the 2013 “LGBT propaganda” law, and urged it to immediately repeal the law. The changes “expand the prohibition on discussing and sharing information about LGBT people and their human rights,” UN Office of Human Rights spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told reporters in Geneva (VOA Indonesia 2024). However, many countries that are also members of the UN Human Rights Council have chosen not to interfere with the anti-LGBT policies set by President Vladimir Putin.

The diverse responses to the anti-LGBT rules implemented by Russia show that the issue of LGBT has become a concern for the global community. This in turn has also become one of the discussions in the academic realm. In recent times, there have been many studies that focus on LGBT issues. The majority of literature highlights efforts to make LGBT acceptable and normalized by the public in various countries, such as the United States, England, Germany, Poland, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Sambas et al. 2024; Spruce 2022; Sjaiful 2024; Ploszka 2022; Carpenter 2024; DeNardis and Hackl 2016; Kartikaningdryani 2019; Rosyidah 2017; Langlois 2024; Radics 2024; Andi 2022; Kirey-Sitnikova 2024). Meanwhile, other literature focuses on the involvement of international organizations and the use of social media (Tama 2017; Charitoun Sarmawando Gawa et al. 2023; Febriani 2020; Khairani and Rodiah 2023) in fighting for LGBT rights in a country.

In the context of LGBT in Russia, there are quite a few studies that examine the motives and efforts of Russian LGBT activists in fighting for their rights after the enactment of the rule prohibiting homosexual propaganda in 2013, both through asking for help from fellow LGBT activists and international non-governmental organizations from other countries, propaganda on

social media and films, to the provision of educational scholarships that allow for academic discussion on the importance of accommodating LGBT rights (Buyantueva 2020; Lapina 2013; Verpoest 2017; Buyantueva 2020; Liinason and Sasunkevich 2024; Stoltz and Khlusova 2024; Buyantueva 2018; Jekatyerina 2021; Buyantueva 2018; Semykina 2019; Jones 2020; Irek 2024; Moss 2021). In addition, there is research that focuses on the implementation of the rule prohibiting homosexual propaganda in Russia, as well as the challenges faced by LGBT activists in Russia (Semenova et al. 2015; Novitskaya 2021; Edenborg 2023; Gause and Lorenz, 2024; Kirey-Sitnikova 2024; Suchland 2018).

Unlike previous literature, this study seeks to understand the differences in global responses to anti-LGBT policies set by Russia. Using the English School perspective, the global response to Russia's anti-LGBT policies is divided into two groups, namely the pluralist group who do not question Russia's domestic policies, and the solidarist group who oppose Russia's domestic policies because they are considered to violate human rights. For the pluralist group, the implementation of anti-LGBT policies implemented by the Russian government is an internal policy that only applies in areas that are Russia's sovereignty, and that is something that must be respected by every country. The theory of pluralism itself believes in the importance of every country to uphold sovereignty (Wahyuni Sagala 2022). Unlike pluralists, the solidarists believe that Russia's anti-LGBT policies must be stopped because they do not follow universal values regarding individual freedom to determine the direction of their lives, including their sexual orientation. Solidarism Theory considers the need to uphold universal values, regardless of the differences in each country (Rosyidin 2020). The next section of this paper will outline the research method and analytical framework, followed by the analysis. Finally, we will outline a conclusion that includes not only the findings and analysis, but also academic contributions and further research that can be developed from what we have conducted

## **Methods**

In this article, the method used is qualitative descriptive with references sourced from Scopus journal articles for the 2014-2023 period, several credible international news media, such as CNN, The Guardian, and the New York Times, as well as official Russian LGBT legal documents. The focus of data search and analysis is limited to the scope of discussion which only includes anti-LGBT policies in Russia, domestic phenomena that occur, domestic responses, to international responses that are reflected through the actions of individuals, international organizations, and governments of other countries. Qualitative descriptive methods are used to understand and describe phenomena or events in depth and detail. This method focuses more on understanding the meaning and

characteristics of research objects compared to methods that use measurement or statistics, so it is felt to be more appropriate to research needs.

### **Analytical Framework**

In order to understand the differences in responses to the phenomenon of the LGBT ban by the Russian government, this study uses the English School perspective. Unlike other perspectives, the English School is a middle-ground perspective. On the one hand, the English School agrees with the claim of realism that the state and national interests are important features of international relations. The key concept of the English School is the international community which is interpreted as a group of countries that are bound by rules in behaving. International relations based on international norms will create international order (Jackson 2000). International order will be disrupted when a country violates international norms. Sovereignty is the right of every country that must not be violated. Therefore, to create international order, the principle that must be adopted by the country is the principle of non-intervention. This is the main premise of the pluralism theory (Rengger 2015). Meanwhile, the solidarism theory assumes that sovereignty is not important. In solidarism theory, what is more important are universal values, regardless of the differences in each country (Inazu 2015).

In the context of this research, the international response to the LGBT ban by the Russian government can be divided into two groups, namely the pluralist group that respects Russia's domestic policy which is imposed on anyone and anything as long as it is within the territory of the Russian Government, and the solidarist group that opposes Russia's domestic policy on the basic argument that it violates human rights. The pluralism approach recognizes the diversity of views among the international community regarding LGBT issues. Different countries have different cultures, values, and social norms, which are reflected in the way they respond to this issue. Some countries support LGBT rights as part of recognition of diversity and human rights, while others have more conservative views. International media plays an important role in disseminating information and opinions about LGBT issues in Russia. A pluralist approach would look at how international media reported on this policy and how this influenced global perceptions of Russia.

Meanwhile, solidarism emphasizes the need for social solidarity and respect for universal human rights (Saeful et al. 2017). In this context, this theory criticizes Russia's anti-LGBT policies as a violation of universal human rights, including the right to free speech and the right not to experience discrimination based on sexual orientation. Solidarism highlights the role of government in facilitating social solidarity and protecting human rights.

Solidarism emphasizes the importance of social justice and equality in society. Policies that discriminate against LGBT people are seen as a violation of these principles, and countries that support solidarity will condemn them.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Countries Banned LGBT Propaganda**

Regulations regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) do not only exist in Muslim countries. Hungary is one of the countries in Eastern Europe that has an LGBT Anti-Propaganda Law. Hungary's ban on LGBT propaganda was passed by the parliament in Budapest in June 2021 (Deutsche Welle (DW) 2023). Even though there are regulations prohibiting anti-LGBT propaganda, LGBT people are still allowed to live in the country. In Romania, there is no legalization of marriage for LGBT people or same-sex marriage. However, Romania does not eliminate the individual rights of LGBT people as citizens. This can be seen in the LGBT Rights Law proposed by Parliament in 2000. In Japan, the government stated that the ban on same-sex marriage was a constitutional position. The Japanese Constitution defines marriage as based on the mutual consent of both sexes. Russia and Georgia, for example, not only have similar histories, but these two countries also have relatively similar negative views regarding LGBT rights (Tolkachev and Tolordava 2020).

Ghana is also one of the counter-LGBT countries. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights movement in Ghana became an interesting debate in 2006-2011. The counter-LGBT party became the majority, making it difficult for pro-LGBT activists to move (Baisley, 2015). Singapore still criminalizes homosexuality. Counter-LGBT attitudes also occur in countries in the Latin American region (Wong, 2016). Carlson, Gammage, and Barrientos (2015) concluded that stigma and discrimination against men who have sex with men (MSM) and transsexuals in Latin America increase their vulnerability to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Discrimination that occurs in hospitals, schools, and workplaces drives them away from information centers and services. This increased vulnerability is reflected in the prevalence of HIV in this community group which is higher than the national average for the general population.

### **Countries's Responses to Russia's Domestic Policies Regarding LGBT**

World countries have given mixed responses to Russia's domestic policy which prohibits the existence of LGBT in their country on the grounds of

maintaining the deeply ingrained traditional values of their nation and state. Many countries have pro-Russian domestic policies, such as the United States, Canada, European countries, Norway and Australia. However, many countries also oppose and criticize Russia's policies. Various acts of condemnation, threats, and sanctions were carried out by counter-countries under the pretext of human rights. The United States has consistently issued strong statements condemning Russia's LGBT ban. In 2013, when the Gay Propaganda Act was adopted, the United States expressed serious concerns and condemned the violation of human rights. The United States government has also imposed sanctions on several Russian officials involved in human rights violations, including those related to LGBT issues (Deutsche Welle (DW) 2023).

Canada is one of the most vocal countries in opposing Russia's LGBT ban (Reuters 2023). According to (Makarim et al. 2009), in 2017, Canada launched a global initiative, "Human Rights for All Campaign," one of the focuses of which was LGBT human rights in Russia and around the world. Canada is also active in protecting Russian LGBT individuals who face threats and discrimination. Several European countries, such as Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, have condemned Russia's LGBT ban and voiced their concerns. The European Union has collectively adopted policies condemning human rights violations in Russia, including LGBT issues. Several European countries also grant asylum to Russian LGBT individuals who experience threats. Norway is one of the countries active in supporting LGBT human rights in Russia. The Norwegian government has provided funding and support to non-governmental organizations in Russia fighting for LGBT rights. They have also held meetings with Russian LGBT activists and made this issue an important part of bilateral relations with Russia. Not only that, threats of boycotts, political statements, and symbolic protest movements were carried out to voice equal rights for LGBT people in Russia (Van Rheen 2014).

The Australian Government has raised concerns over Russia's LGBT ban and called on Russia to respect human rights (Equaldex 2023). They have also provided financial support to groups working for LGBT rights in Russia. Additionally, South Africa is one of the countries that openly supports LGBT rights in Russia and around the world. The South African government has issued statements condemning Russia's LGBT ban and has spoken out in international forums in support of LGBT rights (Reygan and Henderson 2019). In all of these examples, these countries have taken diplomatic action, voiced their concerns, and attempted to promote LGBT rights in Russia. The impact of this response has been increased international awareness of LGBT issues in Russia and increased pressure on the Russian government to adhere to higher human rights standards.

Many countries that have similar bans on LGBT tend to react little to policies implemented by other countries. The response of most countries that share Russia's views chose to reflect a more moderate foreign policy aimed at maintaining good diplomatic relations with Russia, such as China, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (DeNardis and Hackl 2016). China is one of the countries that has restrictions on LGBT within its country (Hammack-Aviran et al. 2022). Despite this, China tends to maintain good relations with Russia and has been less critical of Russia's LGBT ban. Their responses tended to be neutral, with an emphasis on "non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries." Saudi Arabia has very strict laws against LGBT people within the country but has not publicly criticized Russia on similar issues. Their diplomatic relations focus more on economic and security issues than human rights issues. And the last one is Egypt. Egypt has a long history of oppression of its LGBT community within the country. Despite this, Egypt also tends to maintain good relations with Russia and is not very active in criticizing Russia's LGBT ban (Acconcia et al. 2024).

### **International Organizations' Responses to Russia's LGBT Domestic Policy**

International organizations that oppose Russia's domestic policies include the UN, Amnesty International, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Front Line Defenders, UN Free & Equal Campaign, and the Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) (Amnesty International Australia, n.d.). The UN has issued several statements on LGBT human rights around the world, including in Russia. In 2014, the UN issued a report condemning Russia's Anti-Gay Propaganda Law and stating that the law violates human rights and criminalizes views of different sexual orientations. The UN also has a special agency, namely the UN LGBTI Core Group, which works to promote LGBT rights throughout the world (UN News 2013). The UN Free & Equal Campaign is an initiative of the United Nations (UN) that focuses on LGBT equality. The campaign voices support for LGBT rights in Russia and around the world through social media, video campaigns, and advocacy (United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, 2023). The European Union actively follows LGBT issues in Russia and has issued statements condemning the LGBT ban and advocating for LGBT rights. Decisions by international human rights institutions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), do not have much influence in Russia (Coleman et al. 2022).

Front Line Defenders, organization supports and protects human rights activists throughout the world. They have provided support to LGBT activists in Russia who face threats and repression (Front Line Defenders 2019). The European Union also uses LGBT issues as a factor in its



diplomatic relations with Russia and has considered human rights implications in its foreign policy. Human Rights Watch, an international human rights organization based in the United States, has conducted an active campaign to support LGBT rights in Russia. They have published reports, held press conferences, and spoken at international forums to promote LGBT equality in Russia (Human Rights Watch 2019). Amnesty International, a human rights organization based in the United Kingdom, has also voiced its concerns about Russia's LGBT ban. They have held campaigns and advocacy actions to support LGBT rights and criticize Russia's LGBT ban. ILGA is an international organization focused on LGBT rights and has carried out advocacy work to support the LGBT community in Russia. They also provide a platform for LGBT activists in Russia to share their experiences. The response of these organizations reflects a global commitment to promoting LGBT rights as part of universal human rights. They criticized Russia's LGBT ban and sought to increase international awareness and support for the country's LGBT community.

### **Analysis of Russia's Anti-LGBT Policy in the View of Pluralism and Solidarism Theory**

The response from the international community to the implementation of Russia's anti-LGBT domestic policies can be divided into two groups, namely pluralist and solidarist groups. Both are grouped based on analysis using the English School approach which produces two major understandings, namely pluralism and solidarism.

Pluralism theory is a view in international relations that recognizes and appreciates the diversity of actors and interests in the international world. In this theory, states and international actors are seen as sovereign entities, and diversity in views, goals, and interests is considered natural and legitimate (Rengger 2015). The theory of pluralism respects the principle of state sovereignty. This means that every country is recognized as having the right to regulate and have control over its internal affairs. This approach tries to strike a balance between state sovereignty and the need for global cooperation. In pluralism theory, it is considered natural that countries have different views and interests (von Benda-Beckmann and Turner 2018). As in political systems, values, ideologies, and policy strategies. This diversity is considered one of the aspects that make international society complex. Pluralism theory also includes the role of international organizations. Although states are the primary actors in international relations, organizations such as the UN and others can be forums where states interact, negotiate, and cooperate to achieve common goals. Although respecting state sovereignty, pluralism theory also recognizes the importance of human rights (Swenson 2018). Conflicts can arise when countries conflict over issues of human rights or universal values.

In the context of Russia's anti-LGBT domestic policy, pluralism theory refers to an approach in international relations that respects state sovereignty and the diversity of interests at the international level. Russia has the right to manage affairs within its borders and has control over its territory and population. Anti-LGBT policies implemented at the domestic level are considered Russia's prerogative as a sovereign state. Russia has specific views and interests that drive the implementation of this anti-LGBT policy, such as domestic cultural, social, or political factors. In particular his national views on the 'principle of the "traditional family"'. Pluralism recognizes that international actors, such as other states, international organizations, and civil society, may respond to Russian policies in different ways. Some countries criticized this policy as a violation of human rights, while others chose to maintain neutral diplomatic relations or even supported Russia on this issue. Such as China, Saudi Arabia, Uganda, Japan, Ghana and Hungary.

A theory that is quite the opposite of pluralism is the solidarism theory that considers international norms as an important part of international relations. These norms include human rights, justice, peace, and other moral principles (Inazu 2015). Solidarism says that countries should not only interact based on their interests but also based on internationally recognized norms. This theory holds that countries should strive to promote welfare and human rights throughout the world, even if doing so does not always align with their national interests. Solidarism attempts to resolve conflict and tension at the international level by encouraging states to commit to moral principles that can be achieved through diplomacy, international agreements, or the development of international institutions. In practice, the theory of solidarity faces challenges in overcoming disputes between the values and interests of countries (Bain 2010). Many countries are more likely to prioritize their national interests over universal values. However, solidarism theory remains an important view in international relations because it highlights the importance of ethical values and norms in efforts to create a more just and civilized world.

Based on the theory of solidarism, Russia's anti-LGBT laws can be considered a violation of universal human rights, given that the theory emphasizes the importance of human rights as an international norm that must be respected by all states. In this case, the law can be considered an act that is not in line with internationally recognized moral values. Solidarism emphasizes the importance of international norms that include the principles of justice and equality. Anti-LGBT policies that result in discrimination against the LGBT community can be considered as going against these norms. This then creates tension between Russia's domestic policies and the values upheld by the international community.

From the view of solidarism theory, international organizations such as the UN can play an important role in confronting Russian policies. They can impose diplomatic sanctions, facilitate international dialogue, or conduct investigations into human rights violations related to the law. One complex aspect in this context is the conflict between Russia's sovereignty to manage its internal affairs and global values. In practice, the theory of solidarity faces criticism from countries that prioritize their own domestic/national interests, such as Russia. Countries in the solidaristic group include the United States, Canada, England, France, Germany, South Africa, the European Union (EU), UN and the Human Rights Watch.

### **Conclusion**

This article examines how the international community responds to the anti-LGBT propaganda policy implemented by Russia, using the perspective of the English School of International Relations. The English school, especially the solidarism theory, emphasizes the importance of international norms and universal values. In the context of Russia's anti-LGBT policies, human rights and justice norms are considered the basis for a negative response from the international community. Although the English School respects international norms, it also recognizes state sovereignty and national interests. This is in line with the pluralism theory. This is what creates tension between Russia's right to regulate its internal affairs and universal values. Counter-reactions to Russian domestic policy took the form of diplomatic protests, economic sanctions, awareness campaigns, and attempts to influence Russia through diplomatic means. The UN, European Union, and other international organizations play an important role in efforts to address Russia's anti-LGBT policies by imposing sanctions or engaging in diplomatic dialogue.

Based on our findings, this article has an important contribution related to the implementation of the English School perspective in understanding the differences in views of global actors regarding the LGBT ban policy in Russia. In addition to Russia, there are quite a number of countries that also ban LGBT, especially in Islamic countries or countries with large Muslim populations. By using a different approach, further research can take case studies in these countries. In addition, further research can also focus on how Russia responds to external pressures received related to the LGBT ban policy by the Vladimir Putin government.

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