The scene at the restaurant was Monty Python-esque—sausage and meat skewer-wielding men attacking peaceful vegan diners. Except this was Tbilisi, Georgia, and the attackers were allegedly neonazi skinheads intent on harassing patrons with non-conforming identities. Kiwi Café, a Tbilisi restaurant known for being friendly to foreigners and LGBTQ people, was the site of the fraught confrontation on May 29. LGBTQ people have long been under siege in Georgia, where intolerance against a range of progressive social issues runs deep. And lately, conservative activists from outside the country are starting to take note.

Just two weeks earlier, from May 15-18, Tbilisi was host to the U.S.-organized World Congress of Families (WCF), which held its 10th international conference in the capital's massive glass and steel State Concert Hall. The WCF, a convening of right-wing activists, has, since its first congress in Prague in 1997, tapped into the highest ranks of government, church, and civil society in order to reshape global norms on gender and reproductive rights. And they do so by promoting the idea of family values.

Family values, as envisioned by its defenders, describes a religiously-oriented family, headed by a father who is the primary breadwinner, and his stay-at-home wife and their children. Anything outside this norm is considered anti-family values, including abortion, divorce, single-parent households, same-sex marriage and adoption, and secularism. This family values frame is used by conservative activists, both religious and secular, and their allied politicians to not just censor or denigrate issues with which they disagree, but to take away legal rights.

Religious conservatives in Western countries like the U.S., and in Eastern European countries like Russia, all lay claim to the original family narrative. Yet it gets complicated for U.S. promoters—who claim that family values are Western values—when Russia and its neighbors aggressively assert that the West is exporting dangerous “anti-family” values that include abortion and “gay lifestyles.”

This argument has become a staple of the international “pro-family” coalition—a community that draws on significant leadership from the U.S., even as it lambasts the cultural influence of the United States in promoting liberal attitudes to reproductive and sexuality issues around the world. In May, East met West when this coalition came together for a family values huddle in Georgia.

The previous nine international meetings of the WCF have been scattered around the world—some in socially conservative countries like Poland, others in hedonistically liberal capitals like Amsterdam. This year’s meeting appeared to be an effort to knit the various global spheres of influence closer together. Wedged between Europe and Asia, Georgia suggests a middle ground of sorts. The former Soviet Republic has long sought to disentangle itself from Russian influence while pursuing engagement with the European Union. Yet its social and policy positions on abortion and LGBTQ people are squarely Hard Right.

The confluence of political and religious powerbrokers at May’s meeting in Tbilisi was striking. It included the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Russian oligarchs, ambassadors, and members of parliament from Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. Featured prominently was Natalia Yakunina, a leading anti-abortion activist and the wife of Vladimir Yakunin, the former Russian Railways chief. Mr. Yakunin is on a U.S. sanctions list because of his close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Sending warm greetings was no less than President George W. Bush. The WCF network, which operates out of Rockford, Illinois, aims to create—they would argue revert to—a world where a man only marries a woman, solely for reasons of procreation, and where there is no abortion, no gay marriage, and no comprehensive sexuality education. They have little compunction about making common cause with marginal figures on the Far Right. This includes Scott Lively, a longtime anti-LGBTQ warrior. Lively is currently being sued in a U.S. court for human rights violations stemming from his involvement in Uganda’s so-

**Georgian Homophobia Sets the Stage for the World Congress of Families**

**This May the World Congress of Families X met in Tbilisi, Georgia.**

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called “Kill the Gays” bill. The WCF is sufficiently bigoted—members have supported criminalizing abortion and homosexuality—that the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated the network an anti-LGBTQ hate group.

Many of the organizations participating in the WCF hold similar views. Several countries, especially Russia, which leads in this area, are successfully codifying so-called family values in dangerous laws restricting individual rights and freedoms. Russia has criminalized abortion and homosexual “propaganda,” and arrested individuals, journalists, and artists thought to pose a threat to family values. Most famously, in 2012, several members of the protest punk band Pussy Riot were jailed for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” Some countries, including Russia and Lithuania, have imposed fines for contempt of family values, and others, like Georgia, the Slovak Republic, and Croatia, have proposed or passed laws restricting marriage to between a man and a woman.

In an effort to lure its former Soviet republics away from the European Union and the temptations of the indulgent West, Putin’s government is well known for tapping into rising nationalism and neo-conservativism and exporting homophobia5 to neighboring countries. Russia is particularly influential in countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, Latvia, and Slovakia, where it is fostering connections with far-right organizations and political parties with pro-Russia platforms.

Which raises the question: in choosing Georgia, was the WCF knowingly responding to Russia’s bidding? Radio Free Europe reported that Levan Vasadze, WCF’s Georgian organizer, a well-known anti-gay activist and Russia apologist, used his opening WCF address to foster solidarity between Moscow and Georgia.6 Or perhaps the relationship is symbiotic. WCF leaders often speak of Russia taking the helm on family values; in 2013 WCF Managing Director Larry Jacobs mused, “The Russians might be the Christian saviors of the world.”7

This October Georgia holds national elections and they are predicted to be contentious. Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia, the governing coalition, supports closer ties to the West; yet both Russia and the Orthodox Church exert considerable influence in Georgia, particularly in the media. While the U.S.-organized WCF conference was a Western invasion of sorts, it actually suited Russia’s agenda in Georgia, and the region, to spread its anti-Western, anti-EU message.

But really, on the issue of family values, right-wing Georgians don’t need much urging from Russian or U.S. conservatives. The climate against gay and trans people is not just hostile; it’s downright violent. Three years ago, in May 2013, as the LGBTQ community gathered in Tbilisi to commemorate the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, the Georgian Orthodox Church hierarchy called for counter-demonstrations. Right-wing activists, including armed priests and allegedly WCF’s Vasadze,8 responded to the appeal by attacking peaceful LGBTQ marchers, and smashing shop windows, heads, and minivans.9 Both the U.S. State Department and the European Union condemned the violence.

The WCF summit purposefully10 ended on May 17, three years to the day when the Orthodox Church led these attacks against LGBTQ Georgians, a day which Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II, WCF keynote speaker, has since renamed the “Day of the Family.”

The homophobic demagoguery at this year’s WCF, however, was quite unlike the muted rhetoric of WCF IX, which was held in Utah last year. Perhaps this was because the WCF was facing public criticism in the U.S. from human rights groups critical of the network’s stance against LGBTQ rights. WCF Utah was light on homophobia, which had the effect of reducing media attention, and perhaps emboldened them to speak more freely in Tbilisi. Certainly much of the anti-LGBTQ rhetoric in Tbilisi came from the Georgian hosts, but equally troubling were comments made by Russian and American speakers repeatedly linking homosexuality to fascism.

The American Orthodox priest Father Josiah Trenham’s comments were most inflammatory. When Trenham cited a Koran passage endorsing the death penalty

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