

Volume 7 · Issue 4 · 2021

RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE IN ILLIBERAL REGIMES

intersections

East European Journal of Society and Politics

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:
Margit Feischmidt

EDITORS:
Attila Bartha, Ákos Huszár
Nóra Kovács, Zsolt Körtvélyesi, Bence Ságvári, Gabriella Szabó
Miklós Könczöl (managing editor)

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER:
Arin Agich

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT:
Andrea Demeter

COPY EDITORS:
Simon Milton
Chris Swart

GUEST EDITORS OF THE THEMATIC ISSUE:
Michael C. Zeller & Zsuzsanna Vidra

PUBLISHED BY:



Centre for Social Sciences
Zsolt Boda
Director General

intersections.tk.mta.hu
E-ISSN: 2416-089X

Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics is an Open Access, double blind peer-reviewed online journal. When citing an article, please use the article's DOI identifier.

Table of Contents

EDITORIAL

- MICHAEL C. ZELLER & ZSUZSANNA VIDRA
Illiberalism, polarisation, resilience, and resistance:
Concepts in dynamic tension 1

SPECIAL ISSUE

- IVO STRAHILOV
National pride: Negotiating heritage, gender,
and belonging in times of illiberal ethnonationalism
in Bulgaria 13
- ALEJANDRO ESTESO-PÉREZ
Illiberalism, revolution and the 2016 Macedonian elections:
The effects of social movements on electoral accountability 32
- ESRA AYTAR & PETER BODOR
Coping strategies among an intersectional group:
Muslim women in Hungary 52
- DÁNIEL MIKECZ
The Living Memorial movement:
Building resilience based on grief 70
- BARBARA GRABOWSKA-MOROZ & ANNA WÓJCIK
Reframing LGBT rights advocacy in the context of the rule
of law backsliding. The case of Poland 85
- JANA HRCKOVA & MICHAEL C. ZELLER
The everyday abnormal and the quest for normalcy:
How Polish equality marches build protester resilience 104
- KIRYL KASCIAN & VIKTOR DENISENKO
Society in the authoritarian discourse:
The case of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus 124
- DUNAJEVA JEKATYERINA
Redefining patriotism and belonging in illiberal Russia:
Resilience and survival of othered groups 139
-

RICHARD MCNEIL-WILSON

Resilience against counterterrorism? The repression
and response of Crimean Muslim activism against Russian
counterterrorism and counter-extremism

154

BOOK REVIEWS

Ashe, S. D., Busher, J., Macklin, G. & Winter, A. (Eds.) (2020)
Researching the far right: Theory, method and practice. Routledge
Reviewed by HENRI POZSAR

174

Roggeband, C. & Krizsán, A. (2021)
*Politicizing gender and democracy in the context
of the Istanbul Convention*. Palgrave MacMillan
Reviewed by LYNDIA GILBY

177

MICHAEL C. ZELLER* & ZSUZSANNA VIDRA**

Illiberalism, polarisation, resilience, and resistance:
Concepts in dynamic tension

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.945>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* [\[Zeller_Michael@phd.ceu.edu\]](mailto:Zeller_Michael@phd.ceu.edu) (Central European University)

** [\[VidraZs@ceu.edu\]](mailto:VidraZs@ceu.edu) (Central European University; Eötvös Loránd University)

Recent years have witnessed a growing number of illiberal regimes around the world (Pappas, 2014; Brubaker, 2017; Csigó & Merkovity, 2016; Enyedi, 2016; Rupnik, 2016; Magyar & Madlovics, 2020). Among other features, such regimes undermine liberal norms that entail equal legal protections of citizens and social groups. Governments and leading political actors in these regimes typically propagate discourses and advance policies that represent extreme narratives and stigmatise or exclude targeted groups (Vidra & Fox, 2014; Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015; Cammaerts, 2018; Kaya, 2018), which in turn fosters a radicalising shift in the political mainstream (Minkenberg, 2017). This often leads to political actors intentionally adopting polarising strategies. Typically cutting along existing cleavages, polarisation shreds social cohesion and can act as an accelerant for illiberal movements, and as a cudgel against opponents of illiberal regimes. Yet polarisation and illiberalism are not unchallenged and irresistible forces; they exist in dynamic tension with resiliencies that defy polarisation and resistance that wilfully confronts illiberalism. This special issue is concerned with the interplay of these core concepts: *illiberalism*, *polarisation*, *resilience*, and *resistance*. Adopting the axiom that liberal democratic systems are preferable by virtue of their individual and minority group protections, we welcomed articles that explored attributes and measures that mitigate the impacts and confront illiberal discourse and policy, and instead work toward greater social inclusion of vulnerable groups (Krasztev & Til, 2015).

The articles in this thematic issue¹ are concerned with countries where illiberalism already sits in the seat of power, namely in Central and Eastern Europe, where the establishment and operation of illiberal regimes is conspicuous, where ‘pernicious polarisation’ (Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021) that strains resilience is often striking, and where resistance is

¹ We would like to thank several individuals who greatly contributed to the improvement of the articles in this special issue: Sofie Bedford, Austin Charron, Freya Cumberlidge, Elisabeta-Cristina Dinu, Perica Jovchevski, Joanna Krotofil, Kasia Krzyżanowska, Hayriye Özen, Tamas Peragovics, Federica Prina, Dorottya Rédai, Yelizaveta Rekhman, Júlia Szalai, Naum Trajanovski, Grant Walton, and Violetta Zentai. We would also like to thank Sophia Fehrenbach for her help in the preparation of this introductory article. And we especially thank Gabriella Szabó, Miklós Könczöl, and the staff of *Intersections* for all their hard work on this special issue.

crucial to halt or reverse illiberalisation. Taken together, developments in these countries offer a clearer view of how illiberal actors and their polarising strategies produce ‘hollowing’ or ‘backsliding’ (Greskovits, 2015) and how resistance and resiliencies stymie them.

In this introduction, we review the four key concepts that undergird the special issue’s articles. The special issue is focused on illiberal *regimes*, so we describe illiberalism and illiberalisation in state-centric terms, though acknowledging its social and sometimes movement manifestations. Similarly, resistance refers to well-known forms of contentious politics, such as protest, which confront the actions of the state. These two concepts concentrate on a clear and fairly discrete set of actors: illiberal parties and state institutions on the one hand, and liberal ‘resistors,’ such as social movement actors and non-governmental organisations, on the other. By comparison, polarisation and resilience describe more diffuse social phenomena. Political or social actors may exacerbate polarisation or enhance resilience, but both of these concepts refer to massive social conditions, more contextual than illiberalism and resistance. Building on this framework of concepts in dynamic tension, this introductory article draws upon extant research to present the insights to be gleaned from studies in this issue. And we highlight tools from the EU Horizon-2020 BRaVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation) Project,² which gave rise to this special issue, as they provide new findings about the degree and character of polarisation in some countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and about the resilience-building practices that counteract it. We address each concept – illiberalism, polarisation, resilience, and resistance – in turn and, in lieu of a separate section on the contributions, allude to how the papers of the issue address them (*italicising* contributing authors’ names).

Illiberalism

Research from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute confirms that the world is in the swell of an ‘accelerating and deepening’ wave of autocratisation (Maerz, Lührmann, Hellmeier, Grahn & Lindberg, 2020). Riding the crest of this wave, epitomising the trend, are illiberal regimes, which disregard or even abjure minority rights in favour of majoritarian (–inspired³) governance. Beyond this broad characteristic, illiberalism is amorphous. Indeed, as Laruelle (2020, p. 115) argues, illiberal movements ‘do not necessarily make up a coherent ideology; rather they represent an interconnected set of values that come together in country-specific patterns.’ Antipathy towards liberal values (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018), supranational institutions, globalisation, multiculturalism, and any of a variety of vulnerable groups (migrants, LGBT individuals, Roma, ethnic or religious minorities) are common – but manifest in varying primacies of antagonism. Opposition to foreign influence in defence of supposedly ‘native’ values and systems is the fundamental posture of illiberal actors. Pervasive corruption and clientelism, too, are widespread (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Pirro & della Porta, 2021; Vachudova, 2019) – but they are not distinguishing features.

² The Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRaVE) Project is an EU Horizon-2020 grant project. Further information is available at: <http://brave-h2020.eu/>.

³ Some illiberal regimes can scarcely be termed democratic. In such instances, autocratic or authoritarian regimes position themselves, often plausibly, as acting on majoritarian will.

As its contrarian name suggests – ‘illiberal,’ after all, is a label consciously adopted by several politicians – illiberalism is defined by what it is not, what it opposes. Foremost among illiberal opponents is ‘gender ideology’ (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Kováts, 2018); though it predates this wave of contention, recent illiberal activism against the ‘Istanbul Convention’ condemned it as the most recent iteration of creeping gender ideology. This straw man enemy, fabricated by illiberal actors, refers nebulously to non-traditional (e.g., non-binary) conceptions of gender and associated social roles, and to policies and activism that promote recognition and equal protection thereof. Krizsán and Roggeband (2021) – reviewed in this special issue by *Linda Gilby* – examine how anti-gender movements in several Central and Eastern European countries mobilised against the gender ideology supposedly enshrined in the Istanbul Convention. Nowhere was this variant of illiberal opposition more pronounced than in Poland. In their article, *Wójcik and Grabowska-Moroz* detail the parallel tracks of rule of law backsliding and vilification of the LGBT community; beyond denigrating liberal democracy itself, such targeting of minority groups is a barometer of wider deterioration. This finding echoes Roggeband and Krizsán’s (2020) contention that downgrading gender equality policies and marginalising their advocates is integral to the current wave of democratic recession.

Targeting LGBT communities and individuals permeates most of the illiberal movements and regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. *Dunajeva*’s study looks at the Russian case, where the ‘othering’ of LGBT organisations became entangled with particularly antagonistic foreign policy rhetoric, to wit, LGBT has been tarred as ‘amoral Western influence’ and another manifestation of ‘foreign agents.’ In other words, LGBT groups have been swept up in one of the Putin regime’s ploys to safeguard its survival.⁴ Whether inadvertently marred in broader machinations or purposefully targeted as antithetical to traditional morals probably matters little to Russian LGBT individuals facing harassment and discrimination. *Dunajeva* reveals how advocacy organisations are compelled to moderate and adapt to mitigate the effects of the state’s social control.

In societies where illiberalisation remains unconsolidated, LGBT toleration represents a central point of contention. As shown by the Bulgarian case in *Strahilov*’s article, illiberal (‘national-populist’) actors and the LGBT movement present duelling frames of national heritage. This theme of cultural history and whether it excludes or embraces LGBT individuals recurs in many contexts. Ayoub and Chetaille (2020) discuss how gay rights and anti-gay movements in Poland clash in sequences of framing disputes, as demonstrated in *Hreckova and Zeller*’s article. The study lays out how the illiberalising context generated by anti-gay movements, supported by the government, produces persistent distress, amounting even to trauma; in turn, this leads LGBT individuals to draw on sources of resilience, such as the equality marches in Poland.

But antagonism is not restricted to LGBT and gender. Illiberalism is charmingly inclusive in its antipathies. Anti-Muslim policies are also exceedingly common. In some instances, they are connected to native Muslim populations. *McNeil-Willson*’s study reveals how counter-terrorism narratives and policies, transplanted from Western countries, are used in the

⁴ On techniques of autocratic survival, which is closely connected to illiberal strategies, see Maerz (2020) on authoritarian regimes and Schneider and Maerz (2017) on electoral autocracies.

Russian-occupied territory of Crimea to persecute Muslim Tatars. More frequently, though, anti-Muslim policies go hand in hand with anti-migrant policy and rhetoric. Hungary is the foremost model of this variant of illiberalism (Halmai, 2017; Majtényi, Kopper & Susánszky, 2019). The regime's writ and rhetoric corrode public discourse and calcify hostility to Muslim residents. *Aytar and Bodor* unpack how patterns of discrimination and harassment push Muslim women in Hungary to adopt coping strategies. Such cases exemplify the way vulnerable groups are (further) stigmatised by illiberal actors.

Typically, illiberalism is a backlash against liberalism that was once prevalent in the country and that is denounced as having a destructive impact on the society. The concomitant denigration of liberal democratic institutions and procedures generates democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; McCoy et al., 2018; Vachudova, 2019; Fish & Abrams, 2020; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020; Somer et al., 2021). However, we should not misconstrue illiberalism as a wholly national phenomenon; it can spread across countries and regimes. Russia is often cast as the main supporter of illiberal systems and leaders through its disinformation campaigns (Vachudova, 2019; Laruelle, 2020), particularly in the former Eastern Bloc. Though that is not to say that Russia directly influences these regimes, but 'rather, it creates echo chambers that amplify homegrown illiberal voices' (Laruelle, 2020, p. 126). Within the EU, the Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) now form an illiberal bloc and facilitate Russia's expansionist strategy (Pappas, 2019). Illiberalism is a potent and diffusible political form, and its most conspicuous feature is strategic polarisation.

Polarisation

Polarisation 'refers to the process through which complex social relations come to be represented and perceived in Manichean "black and white" terms, as resulting from an essential conflict between two different social groups' (McNeil-Wilson et al., 2019, p. 6). It is a core feature, a conscious political strategy, of illiberal regimes. Illiberal actors deploy it, often with a populist-style false dichotomy between the people and vaguely described elites cast as their enemies, to portray themselves as the representatives of popular will.⁵ Never was this more clearly expressed than when Viktor Orbán, rejecting his party's electoral defeat in 2002, said, 'the nation cannot be in opposition' (*A haza nem lehet ellenzékben*).

That is not to say that polarisation is solely a manifestation of illiberalism. A degree of polarisation is present in every society (Carother & O'Donohue, 2019; Fish & Abrams, 2020). However, high degrees of polarisation can generate governmental stagnation and instability, and incentivise political extremism (Dreyer & Bauer, 2019). And the extent of polarisation in many illiberal regimes is alarming. In part, that is because intentionally divisive rhetoric and policy intensifies polarisation (Pappas 2019; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021). This breeds the 'pernicious polarisation' that McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018, p. 18) describe as 'a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in the society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "us" versus "them."'

⁵ See Körösnéyi and Patkós's (2017) study of the difference between liberal and illiberal variants of populism.

Illiberal regimes, as interested as any with staying in power, benefit from this process because it reinforces their claims to popular support and cements their electoral advantage.

Societal polarisation registers at the individual level. Illiberal actors employ rhetoric and discourses that stereotype, vilify, and dehumanise (Gerő et al., 2017; Kaya, 2018; Majtényi, Kopper & Susánszky, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018). The effect of polarising language is to enhance in-group loyalty and exacerbate out-group distrust. As distrust yields to threat perception, instituting discrimination against out-groups wins greater support as a necessary defence of the nation. Such measures are, of course, an assault on the liberal features of liberal democracy; and as illiberal leaders leverage their popular support to undermine and subjugate resistant institutions, those measures are often also an assault on democratic institutions and procedures.

Measuring polarisation has become a white whale in political science, fervently sought but elusive. A reliable measure could help identify which countries or contexts are at greatest risk of polarisation and thus democratic breakdown. Though several types of measures have been produced (e.g., Lauka, McCoy & Firat, 2018; Matakos, Terzi & Tsaparas, 2017; Wagner, 2021), the BRaVE Project⁶ Polarisation Indicators are unique in that they measure polarisation related to five specific social dimensions (Taylor & Prentice, 2020): ethnic/racial, religious, political, gender/sex/orientation, and socio-economic. As *Hrckova and Zeller* (p. 104) point out in their case study, 'Polish society is highly polarised [...] on "gender/sex/orientation" issues. In other words, Poland is uniquely unfit to cope with intense politicisation of LGBT issues.' Unsurprisingly, then, rhetoric from the government and other illiberal actors in Poland has impacted this area most, deepening the division between already opposed camps, particularly on abortion and LGBT issues.

Similarly, Hungary displays multidimensional polarisation. Society is polarised over gender/sex/orientation issues – Krizsán and Roggeband (2021) covers this area in detail – but polarisation of ethnic/racial issues is more conspicuous. For several years the Orbán regime has often directed its illiberal rhetoric at this divisive area. *Aytar and Bodor* assert that the government began its anti-immigrant campaign in 2015 during the refugee crisis. Previously, Muslims, a small segment of Hungary's population, were hardly ever the target of illiberal vituperation. That changed with the government's response to the refugee crisis. Orbán's great and growing emphasis on Hungary's 'Christian heritage' ostracised groups religiously and ethnically unaligned with that tradition. The greater the polarisation around ethnic/racial issues, the more dangerous the environment for non-native ethnic groups, including some of the Muslim women in *Aytar and Bodor's* study.

Illiberal regimes have many tools and tactics to shore up support and bolster their position; polarising rhetoric is the one used most often. Well-aimed polarisation strategy shifts party systems (Vachudova, 2019) and lacerates social cohesion (Molek-Kozakowska & Wanke, 2019). But its intent and usual effect is to strengthen the position of illiberal actors. Thus, guarding against and counteracting polarisation, that is, building resilience, forms an essential component to resisting illiberalism.

⁶ Available at: <http://brave-h2020.eu/toolkit>.

Resilience

The concept of resilience has attracted increasing attention in recent years. Web of Science records⁷ show a sharp rise in articles invoking it over the last decade. In part, as Brassett, Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2013) assert in their introduction to a resilience-focused special issue, that is due to its broad applicability, its ‘productive ambiguity.’ The BRaVE Project defines resilience as the ability ‘to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on various sources of strength and social resources to adapt and cope with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma’ (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019, p. 22). Individuals,⁸ groups, even regimes can possess and exhibit resilience. Adversity and challenges, moreover, take many forms: individuals can face radicalisation challenges; groups may struggle with fractionalisation; regimes meet threats to their survival. In other words, resilience is an overarching concept which can be specified into many subtypes. Given this broad applicability – just within social science! – resilience becomes conceptually meaningful only when we situate it in a bounded area of research.

This special issue is concerned with liberal manifestations of resilience; its articles address the social resilience that counteracts illiberal actors and regimes. By inferring from the examples in the issue’s articles, we observe that actions affecting resilience can be categorised as accumulating, applying, or corroding. *Accumulating* resilience refers to activities that enhance the liberal democratic esprit of a group and enhance its ability to cope with illiberal attacks. *Hreckova and Zeller* reveal how Polish LGBT protesters draw strength and encouragement from participating in equality marches. They feel better able to handle the daily challenges of illiberalism. *Mikecz* discusses the group solidarity that Hungarian Living Memorial activists created by sharing their grief. And *Aytar and Bodor* examine how immigrant Muslim women in Hungary participate in communal prayer as a way of processing discrimination. Through such collective actions individuals and groups accumulate emotional ideational strength to deal with the tensions stoked by illiberalism.

The effect of accumulation is exhibited when individuals and groups *apply* resilience. This refers to activities that cope with illiberal attacks; actors draw upon extant resources to deal with difficulties. As *Aytar and Bodor* discuss, unlike their immigrant peers, natively Hungarian Muslim women feel confident enough to apply their resilience by, for example, filing complaints in response to discriminatory behaviour. Similarly, *Dunajeva’s* article shows how Russian LGBT organisation change their names and slightly alter their operations to evade the worst effects of Russia’s anti-foreign agent and anti-LGBT laws. Applying resilience is thus deploying resources to surmount illiberal challenges.

However, accumulating and applying resilience do not occur in isolation; these actions exist in dynamic tension with illiberal and polarising actions that *corrode* resilience. For many institutions and vulnerable communities, illiberal regimes are a threat, straining the resiliencies to cope with non-recognition or vilification by governing actors and their supporters. Adversarial or simply independent state institutions, such as the judiciary, are

⁷ Results for a search of the term ‘resilience’: <https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/analyze-results/3e31bc99-a5a3-47e0-9c79-6470c0395696-00c2ea5f>.

⁸ On individual youth resilience, see Grossman and co-authors (2017), which informed the BRaVE Project’s conceptual framework of resilience (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

often illiberal government targets (Taggart & Kaltwasser 2016, p. 358). Part of *Wójcik and Grabowska-Moroz's* article discusses how the PiS government has worked to erode judicial constraints on its power, which in turn exposes LGBT individuals and groups to more discrimination and harassment. *Kascian and Denisenko's* piece exhibits the way, in Belarus, President Lukashenka berated and infantilised the opposition movement, undermining their legitimacy to protest fraudulent elections. And *McNeil-Willson's* article details the counter-extremism language and instruments used against Crimean Tatars that have not supported Russia's illegal annexation of the region. Sweeping arrests and repressive measures debilitated Crimean Tatars' capacity to accumulate or apply resilience. These sorts of illiberal tools, spanning the gamut between caustic rhetoric, detrimental policy, and directed violence, bolster regimes and corrode the resilience of certain segments of society.

Resistance

Whole societies do not blithely stand by as illiberalisation spreads. Many resist. In the countries covered in this special issue, most have experienced highly visible resistance to their governing illiberal regimes. For example, in the last decade Russia has experienced two major anti-regime movements, the For Fair Elections movement in 2011–2012 (Zeller, 2020) and the anti-corruption protests in 2017–2018 (Moroz, 2020); the illiberal machinations of PiS have sparked several waves of mobilisation in Poland (e.g., Bielinska-Kowalewska, 2017; Król & Pustułka, 2018); Belarus has experienced periodic resistance to the Lukashenka regime – all equally doomed, it seems – the most recent of which *Kascian and Denisenko* cover; and *Esteso-Perez* reveals how in Macedonia an illiberal government's corruption and clientelism, ubiquitous characteristics of illiberal regimes, became the focal points of an anti-corruption movement in Macedonia in 2016, which played a significant role in ousting the government and then ensuring its electoral defeat. Such examples epitomise resistance by movements aimed at regime change (cf. Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

Yet, while the term conjures images of mass demonstrations, resistance denotes a wide range of responses. Gene Sharp (1973) famously identified hundreds of non-violent protest actions. As illiberals rhetorically posture about opposing foreign influence and defending certain values and systems, resistance can take the form of counter-narratives. *Strahilov* shows how Bulgarian LGBT groups rebut the narratives of anti-gay movements by organising events that highlight inclusive aspects of national traditions, asserting the open and tolerant principles in Bulgarian heritage. When the Hungarian government erected a monument that abrogated Hungarian culpability in the Holocaust and Second World War crimes, resistance took the form of a 'living memorial.' *Mikecz* discusses how this movement purposefully juxtaposed the false depiction of the government's monument with inclusive remembrance through personal stories displayed in an improvised memorial around the monument. In Poland, LGBT equality marches resist government illiberalism – but, as *Hrckova and Zeller* describe, this resistance feeds back into the community's resilience, invigorating activists and protest participants.

Thus, resistance encompasses myriad forms of opposition to illiberal actors and the insidious creep of illiberalisation. Its intent is usually twofold, though. Resistance aims to counter illiberal regimes, and also to build resilience among the resisters. In this way, liberal resilience and resistance are at best symbiotic. Just as polarisation is a crucial tool of illiberal

regimes and actors, accumulating and applying resilience are the means by which resistance counters illiberalisation and promotes liberal democracy.

Taken together, the concepts of illiberalism, polarisation, resilience, and resistance cut to the heart of contemporary socio-political developments in Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, illiberal actors, vested with government power, use polarising rhetoric and policies to strengthen their political position and further their agenda: blocking or rescinding certain groups' rights and protections, and weakening sources of opposition. On the other hand, actors resist the deleterious social effects through practices that accumulate and apply social resilience. The articles in this special issue capture the dynamic tension represented by these concepts, the push and pull of countervailing socio-political forces. It is our hope that this special issue will add to scholarship and discussion of the important, and in several instances troubling developments in Central and Eastern European politics and society.

References

- Ayoub, P. M. & Chetaille, A. (2020). Movement / countermovement interaction and instrumental framing in a multi-level world: rooting Polish lesbian and gay activism. *Social Movement Studies*, 19(1), 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1338941>
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>
- Bielinska-Kowalewska, K. (2017). #czarnyprotest: The Black Protest for abortion rights in Poland. *New Politics*, 16(2), 53–60.
- Brassett, J., Croft, S. & Vaughan-Williams, N. (2013). Introduction: An Agenda for Resilience Research in Politics and International Relations. *Politics*, 33(4), 221–228. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2F1467-9256.12032>
- Brubaker, R. (2017). Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(8), 1191–1226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700>
- Cammaerts, B. (2018). The mainstreaming of extreme right-wing populism in the Low Countries: what is to be done? *Communication Culture & Critique*, 11(1), 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcx002>
- Carothers, T. & O'Donohue, A. (Eds.) (2019). *Democracies divided: The global challenge of political polarization*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. J. (2011). *Why Civil Resistance Works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. Columbia University Press.
- Csigó, P. & Merkovity, N. (2016). Hungary: Home of Empty Populism. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Stromback & C. De Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 309–320). Routledge.
- Dreyer, P. & Bauer, J. (2019). Does voter polarisation induce party extremism? The moderating role of abstention. *West European Politics*, 42(4), 824–847. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1566852>

- Enyedi, Z. (2016). Paternalist populism and illiberal elitism in Central Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21(1), 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1105402>
- Feischmidt, M. & Hervik, P. (2015). Mainstreaming the extreme: Intersecting challenges from the far right in Europe. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 1(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i1.80>
- Fish, M. S. & Abrams, N. A. (2020). The Polarization Paradox. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(2), 182–185. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0030>
- Gerő, M., Plucienniczak, P. P., Kluknavska, A., Navrátil, J. & Kanellopoulos, K. (2017). Understanding Enemy Images in Central and Eastern European Politics. Towards an Interdisciplinary Approach. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 3(3), 14–40. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v3i3.365>
- Greskovits, B. (2015). The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe. *Global Policy*, 6(S1), 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12225>
- Grossman, M., Ungar, M., Brisson, J., Gerrand, V., Hadfield, K. & Jefferies, P. (2017). *Understanding Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism: A Standardised Research Measure*. Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University and The Resilience Research Centre, Dalhousie University.
- Grzebalska, W. & Pető, A. (2018). The gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation in Hungary and Poland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68, 164–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.12.001>
- Grzymala-Busse, A. (2019). How populists rule: The consequences for democratic governance. *Polity*, 51(4), 707–717. <https://doi.org/10.1086/705570>
- Halmai, G. (2017). From a Pariah to a Model? Hungary's Rise As an Illiberal Member State of the EU. In W. Benedek, M. C. Kettemann, R. Klaushofer, K. Lukas and M. Nowak (Eds.), *European Yearbook on Human Rights 17* (pp. 35–45). NWV.
- Kaya, A. (2018). Mainstreaming of Right-Wing Populism in Europe. In M. Dragicevic & J. Vickery (Eds.), *Cultural Policy Yearbook 2017–2018: Cultural Policy and Populism* (pp. 14–30). İletişim Yayınları.
- Körösényi, A. & Patkós, V. (2017). Liberal and illiberal populism: the leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán. *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 8(3), 315–337. <https://doi.org/10.14267/cjssp.2017.3S.14>
- Kováts, E. (2018). Conservative counter-movements? Overcoming culturalising interpretations of right-wing mobilizations against 'gender ideology.' *Femina Politica: Zeitschrift für feministische Politikwissenschaft*, 27(1), 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.3224/feminapolitica.v27i1.07>
- Krasztev, P. & Van Til, J. (Eds.) (2015). *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*. Central European University Press.
- Krekó, P. & Enyedi, Z. (2018). Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's laboratory of illiberalism. *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3), 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0043>
- Krizsán, A & Roggeband, C. (2021). *Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of the Istanbul Convention*. Palgrave Pivot.

- Król, A. & Pustułka, P. (2018). Women on strike: mobilizing against reproductive injustice in Poland. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 20(3), 366–384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1460214>
- Laruelle, M. (2020). Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(3), 115–129. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0049>
- Lauka, A., McCoy, J. & Firat, R. B. (2018). Mass partisan polarization: Measuring a relational concept. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 107–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0002764218759581>
- Maerz, S. F. (2020). The many faces of authoritarian persistence: a set-theory perspective on the survival strategies of authoritarian regimes. *Government and Opposition*, 55(1), 64–87. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2018.17>
- Maerz, S. F., Lührmann, A., Hellmeier, S., Grahn, S. & Lindberg, S. I. (2020). State of the world 2019: autocratization surges—resistance grows. *Democratization*, 27(6), 909–927. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1758670>
- Magyar, B. & Madlovics, B. (2020). *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes: A Conceptual Framework*. Central European University Press.
- Majtényi, B., Kopper, Á. & Susánszky, P. (2019). Constitutional othering, ambiguity and subjective risks of mobilization in Hungary: examples from the migration crisis. *Democratization*, 26(2), 173–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1493051>
- Matakos, A., Terzi, E. & Tsaparas, P. (2017). Measuring and moderating opinion polarization in social networks. *Data Mining and Knowledge Discovery*, 31(5), 1480–1505. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10618-017-0527-9>
- McCoy, J., Rahman, T. & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0002764218759576>
- McCoy, J. & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0002716218818782>
- McNeil-Willson, R., Gerrand, V., Scrinzi, F. & Triandafyllidou, A. (2019). *Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe today: An analytical framework*. http://brave-h2020.eu/repository/D2.1_BRaVE_concept_paper_final_10Dec2019.pdf
- Meléndez, C. & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2021). Negative partisanship towards the populist radical right and democratic resilience in Western Europe. *Democratization*, 28(5), 949–969. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1883002>
- Minkenberg, M. (2017). The Rise of the Radical Right in Eastern Europe: Between Mainstreaming and Radicalization. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 18(1), 27–35.
- Molek-Kozakowska, K. & Wanke, M. (2019). Reproductive rights or duties? The rhetoric of division in social media debates on abortion law in Poland. *Social Movement Studies*, 18(5), 566–585. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1629279>

- Moroz, O. (2020). 'We Will Not Forget, We Will Not Forgive!': Alexei Navalny, Youth Protest and the Art of Curating Digital Activism and Memory in Russia. In S. Merrill, E. Keightley, P. Daphi (Eds.), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media* (pp. 249–274). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32827-6_10
- Pappas, T. S. (2014). Populist democracies: Post-authoritarian Greece and post-communist Hungary. *Government and Opposition*, 49(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2013.21>
- Pappas, T. S. (2019). Populists in power. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(2), 70–84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0026>
- Perry, V. (2020). Polarization, Illiberalism and the Nature of Extremisms: A Yugoslav Canary in an American Coalmine? *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 26(4), 440–450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2020.1837437>
- Pető, A. (2017). Roots of Illiberal Memory Politics: Remembering Women in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. *Baltic Worlds*, 10(4), 42–53.
- Pető, A. (2019). 'Non-Remembering' the Holocaust in Hungary and Poland. *Polin Studies in Polish Jewry*, 31, 471–480.
- Pirro, A. L. & Della Porta, D. (2021). On Corruption and State Capture: The Struggle of Anti-Corruption Activism in Hungary. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73(3), 433–450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1798684>
- Roggeband, C. & Krizsán, A. (2020). Democratic backsliding and the backlash against women's rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics. *UN Women discussion paper* No. 35, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/discussion-paper-democratic-backsliding-and-the-backlash-against-womens-rights>
- Rupnik, J. (2016). The Specter Haunting Europe: Surging Illiberalism in the East. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(4), 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0064>
- Schneider, C. Q. & Maerz, S. F. (2017). Legitimation, cooptation, and repression and the survival of electoral autocracies. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 11(2), 213–235. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-017-0332-2>
- Sharp, G. (1973). *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 Vols. Porter Sargent.
- Somer, M., McCoy, J. L. & Luke, R. E. (2021). Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies. *Democratization*, 28(5), 929–948. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316>
- Taggart, P. & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2016). Dealing with populists in government: some comparative conclusions. *Democratization*, 23(2), 345–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1076230>
- Taylor, P. J. & Prentice, S. (2020). *BRaVE Project: Toolkit of Cross-National Polarisation Indicators*. EU Horizon-2020 Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRaVE Project), <http://brave-h2020.eu/toolkit>
- Vachudova, M. A. (2019). From competition to polarization in Central Europe: How populists change party systems and the European Union. *Polity*, 51(4), 689–706. <https://doi.org/10.1086/705704>

- V-Dem Institute (2019). *Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) Annual Report 2019: Democracy Facing Global Challenges*. V-Dem Institute, the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg.
- Vidra, Z. & Fox, J. (2014). Mainstreaming of racist anti-Roma discourses in the media in Hungary. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 12(4), 437–455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2014.914265>
- Wagner, M. (2021). Affective polarization in multiparty systems. *Electoral Studies*, 69, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102199>
- Zeller, M. C. (2020). Rethinking demobilisation: concepts, causal logic, and the case of Russia's For Fair Elections movement. *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 12(1), 527–558.

IVO STRAHILOV*

National pride: Negotiating heritage, gender,
and belonging in times of illiberal ethnonationalism
in Bulgaria

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 13–31.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.826>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* i.strahilov@phls.uni-sofia.bg (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski)

Abstract

This article explores the relations between cultural heritage, gender, and national belonging. Using heritage as a perspective to these dynamics in Bulgaria, I examine the interactions between the national-populist actors that challenge the core of liberal democracy, and the LGBT+ movement which counters xenophobic and exclusionary politics. In particular, the study focuses on the tenth edition of Sofia Pride march held in 2017 that instrumentalised elements of traditional masked mumming and fused them with international queer symbolics for its visual identity and communicational campaign. National folklore was thus reclaimed to performatively contest ethnonationalist and heteronormative discourses and assert a more inclusive understanding of heritage and belonging. This strategic reinterpretation of masquerade revealed some persistent societal divides which materialised through the hostile reactions of radical-right parties and other conservative circles. Following this opposition, the paper sheds light on the local entanglements with the global illiberal wave and anti-gender mobilisations, while additionally provides a more attuned contextualisation of the Bulgarian terrain. It further emphasises the empirical and epistemological implications of gendered heritage for both the establishment of and the resistance to boundaries.

Keywords: intangible heritage, masquerade, ethnonationalism, anti-gender campaigns, LGBT+ activism, Bulgaria

1 Introduction

This paper addresses the entanglements between gender, national belonging, and heritage in relation to the growth of radical-right ethnonationalism and surrounding contestation in contemporary Bulgaria. By juxtaposing various overlapping and conflicting uses of cultural heritage, the article proposes a contextualisation of global anti-gender campaigns and traces local queer resistance. This nexus is rather overlooked, yet analysing it helps go beyond the backlash narrative (Paternotte, 2020) and avoid other essentialisations. As a starting point, I situate continuous heritage negotiations within the tension between the wave of

illiberal populisms and nationalisms, and the counterforces of civic activism opposing anti-diversity discourses and promoting inclusiveness (Siim, Krasteva & Saarinen, 2018; Rygiel & Baban, 2019).

A growing amount of literature highlights the ongoing global conservative mobilisations against women's and LGBT+ rights.¹ The emergence of powerful anti-gender campaigns on different scales and their persistence worldwide indicate new transnational developments (Köttig, Bitzan & Petó, 2017; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). They use radical-right ideologies of exclusion and polarising strategies, and simultaneously provide these ideologies with further political and discursive opportunities (Norocel & Szabó, 2019). In many cases such movements reaffirm long-lasting nationalistic sentiments based on heteronormativity (Renkin, 2009). Furthermore, they by turns coalesce and collide with populist movements and politics from across the political spectrum (Moffitt, 2016), which are often accompanied by the rise of democratic illiberalism (Krastev, 2007). While celebrating 'the people' as a quasi-natural and homogeneous entity, national majorities identify and exclude those who do not belong to their 'pure' nation (Rosanvallon, 2008, pp. 265–266).

These trends are also visible in Bulgaria where mobilisation against gender equality consolidated relatively late. Like other countries in Eastern Europe, however, Bulgarian society has witnessed illiberal tendencies well before the appearance of the 'gender panic' in 2018. Along with the attacks on democratic institutions, the post-socialist space exhibits another common feature: the rise of new nationalisms which represent complicated relations to the legacy of state socialism and earlier periods, and consequently affect the framing of gender. These processes often induce impulses of retraditionalisation, which recycle 'traditional' gender roles marked by heteronormative and religious models (Morell & Gradszkova, 2018, pp. 5, 11; cf. on Bulgaria Nenova, 2021). Again, the nation is crucial since it is the patriarchal family that would assure its continuation. Furthermore, dominant discourses of national identity exclude non-normative sexualities and the construction of this specific antagonism provokes greater resonance among the population (Mole, 2016). In this regard, the mainstreaming of the fluid 'traditional values' has deep socio-political implications that exceed the romanticised references to patriotism and morality (Gradszkova, 2020).

In addition, critical heritage theory suggests two more analytical paths which illuminate the Bulgarian case. Populisms instrumentalise cultural heritage for the fabrication of national distinctiveness and the maintenance of strict political, territorial, and cultural boundaries. Radical-right rhetoric grounded in the 'appropriate' past, identity, memory, and values thus shapes society and stokes anxieties about the disappearance of the nation (Kaya, 2019). This perspective can be revelatory, since anti-gender protests in Bulgaria exploit folkloric elements and mobilise their symbolic power to speak in the name of 'the people' and to demarcate its enemies on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation (Petkov, 2018). That also suggests that the construction of heritage is not gender neutral. Heritage, writes Laurajane Smith (2008, p. 161), is 'gendered in the way that heritage is defined, understood and talked about and, in turn, in the way it reproduces and legitimises gender identities and the social values that underpin them.' From its peripheral position, gendered heritage inter-

¹ The abbreviation LGBT+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and other related communities. I refer to this acronym since Bulgarian activists use it or some of its versions (namely LGBTI which includes the intersex persons) in their official communication.

sects with wider struggles and engages with 'issues at the very core of politics, society and economics' (Wilson, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, it can elucidate how boundaries are not only imposed but also questioned and negotiated. Approaching heritage as a complex cultural process related to the politics of representation and recognition constitute it as an arena of political action where powerful messages can be articulated and contested (Smith, 2008, pp. 163, 172). Of pertinence here is the performative potential of gender (Butler, 2011) and heritage which can challenge the dominant discourse of (non-)belonging.

These premises are particularly relevant to Bulgarian mumming, which appropriations this article explores. Mummer groups, generically called 'kukeri' (Figure 1), perform annually around New Year or Lent with door-to-door masked processions in numerous, mostly rural, areas throughout the country. Often seen as remnants from ancient rituals or connected to the agrarian cycle, nowadays they are vibrant festivities that contain important social meanings, including questions of sexuality and gender. Masquerade is perceived as an archaic male initiation rite and still only a male enterprise, whereby women's growing participation sometimes faces disapproval. Beyond the patriarchal implications of such interpretations, more complex gender relations, multiple forms of masculinities and femininities, and queering of heterosexist binaries are embedded in mumming. The latter includes also cross-dressing, transvestite figures, and homoerotic performances (Creed, 2011, pp. 70–104), which express and create alternative versions of gendered heritage despite or through the national heritage canon.

This paper resonates with these assumptions to explore the dynamics of democratic illiberalism by addressing both the establishment of nativist and xenophobic ideologies, and emerging activist initiatives that counter the exclusionary concept of a homogeneous national identity. The study focuses on the tenth Sofia Pride march as an emblematic case that illuminates a plethora of adverse messages and values, situated both in the local socio-political context and in its interconnection with global anti-gender mobilisations and transnational LGBT+ advocacy. This edition of the march, held in the Bulgarian capital in 2017, has been chosen because of its promotional campaign, which was based on a traditional masquerade deemed an essential element of the 'national folklore.' The reinterpretation of heritage met the hostility of conservative circles that immediately condemned it as a 'provocation,' and the case became a highly mediatised display of conflicting positions. This example is thus approached through the dialectical function of masking as a 'technology of identity' and as means of interrogating it (Tseñlon, 2001, pp. 11–12) in order to reveal existing boundaries and the complexity, which accompanies the competing heritage reappropriations in times of intensifying anti-gender tendencies.

By examining these collisions as interactions between opposing movements (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2017) alongside their repertoires and historical references, I argue that heritage nowadays plays an increasingly important role in the Bulgarian society where it is re-negotiated as public discourse and personal experience, and that provides us with a useful lens to engage with the amplifying gender divide. In the interplay between global influences and local phenomena, gendered heritage is strategically manipulated by rival groups despite the significant visibility and power imbalances between them: while illiberal actors co-opt masquerade as ethnic property, which further serves to police 'naturalised' gender norms, LGBT+ activists stage its intrinsic queerness and transform it into a symbolic vehicle of their agency and visibility. What is hypothesised is that this constellation poses inquiries into the criteria for belonging to the Bulgarian nation by negotiating the heritage canon and its

'legitimate' content, meanings, and bearers. Consequently, I am interested in the alternative versions of heritage consciousness and the effects on living traditional practices produced by such interactions. Creative rearticulations and political instrumentalisations of masked customs that reveal performatively a spectrum of wider social issues are thus accentuated to offer additional insights on the vernacularisation of anti-gender campaigns and the formation of counterforces to illiberal discourses and policies.



Figure 1: Kukeri from the region of Yambol, Southeastern Bulgaria.
Photograph by the author, February 2017.

My discussion draws upon a variety of qualitative data gathered between 2018 and 2021. It begins with the aforementioned edition of Sofia Pride, which I have not witnessed myself, after which I focused on Bulgarian LGBT+ organisations' other heritage-related projects and public reactions to the same. The background of these activities is also related to the moral panic against gender which started meanwhile regarding the Council of Europe 'Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence' (also known as the 'Istanbul Convention'). To approach this field, I use video documentation, press releases, media reports, publications and discussions in social media and websites, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal exchanges with LGBT+ activists. This study is further informed by close ethnographic attention to mumming and general heritage dynamics in the country. For the exegesis of the illiberal developments, I rely on existing literature by political and social scientists scrutinising the local situation.

The paper begins with a brief outline of expanding illiberal ethnonationalist activism in Bulgaria that also influences masquerade's heritagisation. The main empirical analysis consists of two parts. First, I present the strategic incorporation of heritage elements into the

aesthetics and publicity of Sofia Pride. Second, I examine the conservative backlash against the parade, while also acknowledging preceding illiberal transformations and posterior anti-gender mobilisations. Building on this case, the concluding section extends the discussion by contextualising the negotiations of mumming and some of the effects of these interactions.

2 Ethnonationalism and anti-gender campaigns

The national-populist shift in the Bulgarian post-socialist political scene is marked by the formation of the extreme-right party *Ataka* ('Attack') in 2005 and its immediate electoral successes (Smilov, 2008, p. 30; Genov, 2010; cf. on its leftist implications Ragaru, 2006). In parallel to the accession to the European Union in 2007, the new Eurosceptic party advanced a radical platform of intertwined ethnic and economic nationalism. What is important here is the application of discursive and rhetorical strategies that define the nation in monoculturalist ethnic terms, by cultivating and spreading phobias, as Sygkelos (2018) remarks. Among the principal 'menaces' articulated by *Ataka*, he underlines the 'national treachery and disaster' and the 'threatened national identity,' on the one hand, and the xenophobia against the substantial indigenous Turkish and Romani minorities, on the other. Despite entering the Bulgarian and the European Parliament, *Ataka* remained relatively marginal. Nevertheless, nativist sentiments have larger popularity than electoral support, and similar, yet more moderate, nationalist positions are normalised by 'soft' populist parties that have a decisive role in the last two decades (Smilov, 2008; Zankina, 2016, pp. 188–191). This is what Krasteva and Todorov (2020, p. 202) call mainstreaming and hegemonisation of radical right parties, whose discourse and political agenda are adopted by key political actors. Moreover, radical nationalist coalitions became part of two successive governments and were granted ministerial posts.²

These developments are not entirely novel for the post-1989 transition. Neo-nationalist parties emerged in early 1990s as a re-establishment of pro-fascist organisations or as a backlash to the restoration of minorities' rights, both of which had been suppressed by the socialist state (Genov, 2010, pp. 37). These extreme formations' impact was rather insignificant because of the considerably consensual direction towards liberal democracy and Euro-Atlantic structures. Yet the left-right dichotomy fuelled by the main political actors dominated the public sphere and opened—along some disappointment following the transition to a market economy—a space for populist and radical movements. According to Elitza Stanoeva (2017), this major 'divide preserved, through memory wars on the legacy of communism, the presence of political divergences, while the two poles of the spectrum converged in their support of economic neoliberalism and social illiberalism.' The 'consolidation of a patriotic consensus based on ethnic nationalism' is what frames the public discourse, which further enhances exclusionary policies and practices (ibid.; Behrensen & Stanoeva, 2019).

² The coalition Patriotic Front emerged in 2014, unifying two nationalist parties: IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Bulgarian National Movement) and NFSB (National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria). Then, it was part of the government coalition led by centre-right GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria). In 2016 *Ataka*, IMRO, and NFSB created the alliance United Patriots, which became part of the third cabinet of GERB one year later.

Political scientists affirm that this national-populist transformation has still not crystallised into an illiberal democratic project (Krasteva & Todorov, 2020, p. 192). The lack of an authoritarian consolidation, the formal existence of pluralist and democratic structures, the general pro-European orientation, and the rhetoric of stability make persistent domestic issues less problematic within the EU, especially in comparison to other member states (Rone & Junes, 2021, p. 231). Some analyses depict the situation in Bulgaria as stabilitocracy (*ibid.*), others as post-democracy (Krasteva & Todorov, 2020), but there is an agreement that important democratic achievements are being attacked.

Given the consistent illiberal trend, Stanoeva (2017) questions if 'transition to democracy and free market actually entail a commitment to liberalism in the sense of civic values and not just in economic terms.' This inquiry is particularly relevant to LGBT+ rights as the normalisation of homosexuality in Bulgaria was a nominal process of legislative changes, which has not necessarily considered the social opinion and which additionally allows for 'repathologisation of sexual difference' (Panayotov, 2013, p. 165). It is within the framework of this increasing illiberalism, social fragmentation, and general distrust in institutions that we should locate the anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria. When the latter emerged, they benefited from the opportunities provided by the debates on three legal documents: the Istanbul Convention (in 2018), the 'National Strategy for the Child 2019–2030' and the 'Social Services Act' (in 2018–2019). The 'idea of the sanctity of the family and its traditional values' underpins the three interconnected cases that can be jointly interpreted as an ongoing gendered process of de-democratisation (Gueorguieva & Petrova, 2021). These mobilisations of various political, religious, and civil actors appeared rapidly and—along with their transnational networking—at a national level 'uncovered and catalysed patriarchal, sexist and homophobic attitudes and notions which might have remained passive/invisible for a long time' (Darakchi, 2019, p. 1212). Due to the strong public protest and the powerful alliance of parties from the whole political spectrum, both ruling and in opposition, and not without media support, the government did not ratify the Istanbul Convention, while the National Strategy for the Child was blocked. Moreover, in this hostile context the Constitutional Court treated the Istanbul Convention as a conspiracy aiming to introduce a 'gender ideology' and declared it to be incompatible to the Constitution (Smilova, 2020). Lastly, this discourse subverted the concept of 'gender' into a deviant 'third sex' and attributed the term itself with a pejorative connotation used (without translation) for a derogatory Othering of LGBT+ people, activists, liberal elites, etc. (*ibid.*, p. 188; Darakchi, 2019).

These frictions based on 'politics of fear' reveal the deeper societal division between 'us' and 'them.' This divide stigmatises the 'foreign' elements (e.g., minorities, immigrants, human rights activists) and contributes to the legitimisation of an alternative illiberal project, by redefining the 'Bulgarian people.' The nation is understood as something natural and quasi-biological, the sovereignty, purity, and existence of which are threatened by an alleged coalition between local and international lobbies promoting external 'gayropean' values (Behrensen & Stanoeva, 2019). Typically, ethnic and religious minorities, especially Roma and Turks, are the enemies produced by the discourse of the ethnic and Orthodox Christian nation, which the 'patriotic' consensus over identity politics normalises. Correspondingly, LGBT+ persons are also defined as quasi-people; they are 'the ultimate terror pushing the limits of social acceptance to the extreme' (Panayotov, 2013, p. 165).

The foundations of this nationalistic rhetoric require a look into its relationship to the legacy of state socialism, even though the latter implies different premises. When the

Bulgarian Communist Party came to power in 1944, it first adopted a Soviet-internationalist stance and thus antecedent 'bourgeois chauvinism' was denounced, while ethnic and religious minorities' cultural rights were recognised. Shortly thereafter, however, those rights were not only restricted but categorically repressed during the post-Stalinist period. Ethnonationalist sentiments had been mobilised since the 1960s as a new symbolic glue supplanting the Marxist-Leninist discourse; and in the following decades they transformed into assimilation politics. It would be enough to mention the erasure of vernacular Muslim culture or the campaigns of forced Bulgarisation of Muslims' Turco-Arabic names, leading to massive displacements to Turkey. An essential feature of these developments is the co-optation of cultural heritage used for the consolidation of the socialist (monoethnic) nation, articulated through a large-scale programme that culminated with the 1300th Anniversary of the Bulgarian State (in 1981). This attempt by the regime to justify the present through the past Ivan Elenkov (2007, p. 39) terms 'historicisation of culture,' 'a formula that would mobilise and mythify discourse on national history by reformulating and representing communist symbols and mythology as a national cult that was open and included everything valuable and worthy from the thousands-year-long Bulgarian cultural tradition.' Not dissimilarly, folklore was reconceptualised ideologically: administered and purified, it became a powerful instrument for both international representations and domestic 'patriotic education.' This context encompasses also the popularisation of mumming which authorised its post-1989 transformation into a valuable resource and a vehicle of diverse messages.

3 Heritage for all?

Nowadays kukeri festivities are narrated as having a supernatural power to chase evil spirits away and invoke prosperity. Local practices are characterised by a variety of costumes, masks, bells, and choreography, but on a symbolic level they have been altogether resacralised as an embodiment of an imagined Bulgarian-ness grounded in an ethnonationalist framework. The post-socialist revitalisation of this romanticised mumming, according to Gerald Creed (2011, p. 205), is not simply a sign of neotraditionalism, but demonstrates that it has become a 'mechanism for asserting the resilience of rural residents and the value of village life,' a response to the 'insecurity and disappointment' of devastating post-1989 socio-economic repercussions. Certainly, the performative potential of masquerade provides its practitioners with an expressive tool to address contemporary issues, which is exemplified by kukeri's participation in multiple civil demonstrations. Given the demographic decline and heritage communities' fragility, however, the festivalisation and recent commodification foster mumming's popularity and simultaneously 'erode or weaken its distinctive cultural content' (ibid., p. 214). In 2015 one of the local masquerades was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which advanced the process of resacralisation in national terms. This prestigious label encourages Bulgarians' emotional attachment to mumming in a globalised world, but it also enables boundary-making by rearticulating heritage as a national property, whereby certain groups can be excluded from the category of 'authentic' owners (see Taylor, 2009). Two emblematic cases exemplify the tendency to juxtapose kukeri with what is perceived as 'foreign.' Mummies were used in 2017 by the nationalist coalition United Patriots to block the border with Turkey and stop Turks with Bulgarian citizenship coming to vote legitimately in the general elections.

Furthermore, nationalist organisations have recently organised events involving kukeri against the celebration of Halloween, attacked as a non-Bulgarian custom. Therefore, while local communities cultivate and sustain complex meanings of their living tradition, the canonisation of the latter as heritage also defines its appropriate forms and functions.

3.1 Reclaiming heritage for equality

Drawing upon kukeri's iconicity, Sofia Pride 2017 proposed performatively a new reading of heritage. The tenth anniversary march embraced kukeri stylistics and mobilised under the motto 'Let's Chase Prejudices Away.' By mobilising and modifying mumming rhetoric and symbolism, the organisers evoked the 'magic' power of masks as a means of achieving visibility and motivating a wider public debate on tolerance and prejudices. This intention seems particularly vital considering the lack of institutional support for the parade and the hostile annual counter-demonstrations that parallel it. Since its first edition in 2008 Sofia Pride has not been supported by national authorities but only by foreign ambassadors, though the number of participants has grown markedly (ca. 3000 in 2017). Hence, the queering of national heritage becomes a more radical act through which LGBT+ communities engage broader social circles.

The recuperation of mumming as a powerful symbol, initially suggested by two communications and advertising agencies working pro bono for the event and later adopted by the organising committee, was not accidental.³ On the one hand, it has been argued that masquerade occupies a prominent place in national symbolism. On the other, the last decade has been marked by an extensive retraditionalisation that reintroduced various elements of pre-modern rural culture in multiple domains of Bulgarian public and private life—from 'traditional' weddings to politicians in 'national' costumes. The representational charge of kukeri is also explicit: masks were staged in the Bulgarian performance at the Eurovision Song Contest 2013, whereas mummer groups participated in the opening ceremony of Plovdiv European Capital of Culture 2019. Therefore, Sofia Pride entered this trend of popular heritage-remaking that further intersected with topical issues such as equality and national belonging.

To do so, the organisers bought online—as many mummers also do—three artisanal masks, one of which had a sequin embroidery of the Earth and other planets, and redecorated them in LGBT+ recognised aesthetics (Figure 2). The communication campaign was centred around the rainbow-coloured masks which, along with the slogan, appeared on the event's banners, posters, and media coverage. During a photo-session for the visual materials, the person under the mask was female, as were also the designers who remade the masks. Another contrast to the official discourse was articulated prior to the march through the popular street photography page in Facebook, 'People of Sofia.' A photograph of a semi-nude man wearing black jeans and a colourful mask while standing in the middle of a main street in the capital was published together with a short interview describing him as 'the one who will lead Sofia Pride.' Rather than a hiding tool, the mask was reinvented as a critique

³ I discuss publicly accessible materials with emphasis on official messages, which do not necessarily consider the perceptions among broader LGBT+ communities and the internal debates within the organising committee.

towards ‘those who put on the mask of prejudice every day,’ and simultaneously ‘a call [...] for many more people to dare to be open about their non-heterosexuality and their gender identity.’⁴ This is namely the first target of the performative reconfiguration of heritage and it problematises intolerant and xenophobic attitudes. To quote the mummer,

The idea behind the transformation into a kuker, but colourful, in Pride colours, carries the message that our efforts to achieve equality must be aimed at removing internal barriers in people—prejudices. It is time for the evil spirit of homophobia and transphobia to leave Bulgarian society.



Figure 2: One of the masks used by Sofia Pride.

Photograph by Mihail Novakov, 2017. Source: Archive of Sofia Pride. Reproduced with permission

Thus, the reinvention of mumming both highlights existing boundaries and creates opportunities for visibility. It further targets the cardinal questions of equality and belonging, as the excerpt above also indicates. This position materialises through heritage: while honouring kukeri's importance and symbolic capital, Sofia Pride revisits the exclusionary concept of the nation and its culture. It contests the dominant discourse by reclaiming national heritage and redefining its boundaries, not only because of its metaphorical convenience, but also because of its mainstreaming. ‘We, too, value these traditions. Why do some people think that we don't value them?!,’ one member of the organising committee reflected a year after the march. The masks were used also during the event itself: one of them was worn successively by several participants while another one was installed on the stage. The organisers even tried to invite some mummer ensembles to join the parade but had no success in this initiative. Their strategy, however, performatively asserted an alternative inclu-

⁴ <https://facebook.com/PeopleOfSofiq/photos/a.179822025512718/757889184372663>

sionary narrative: 'Tradition and diversity are not contradictory: colourful kukeri will be a symbol of tackling prejudices towards LGBTI people, demonstrating them being part of the same whole' (Statement, 2017).

This interpretation moving beyond the restricted ownership of an established symbol was confronted with numerous contrasting reactions. For instance, the photo in 'People of Sofia' gathered more than 500 comments, many of which exposing the tension between gender and tradition. I will return to the opposing responses, but here I would like to quote two opinions from this discussion that defend the appropriateness of kukeri as a queer symbol, terrain of activism, resource, and media for the expression of messages that the dominant discourse silences.⁵ These reflections broaden the scope of heritage and its community: they reclaim normalcy while reminding that LGBT+ people are also heirs and bearers of national traditions, that they have always been an integral part of the national body:

[...] being LGBT+ is normal. Let me explain it with examples: there were gay kukeri, gay pastors, gay revolutionaries, gay everything. Pride aims specifically that, to show the world that being gay is normal, and moreover that gay people are everywhere and have been everywhere.

Such positions perceive the attachment of mumming to LGBT+ causes not as an appropriation but as a recuperation of their own heritage. They rationalise the strategy of Sofia Pride as a repossession of heritage that had been seized by a nationalist discourse and deployed for propagating the divide between 'us' and 'them.' In a disidentificatory gesture (Muñoz, 1999), they refuse such reading of heritage and, through the agency of the present, rewrite it as something resilient and not fixed, from which the possibility to explore its multivocality and invest it with new meanings can arise:

The kukeri mask is a great symbol for the Pride. Our beautiful ethnocultural symbols have been left to degrade in the paws of 'nationalists' for too long. The naked body makes the symbol our own in a wonderful way. It snatches the weapon from their hand and turns it against them. They make us seem as if we are outside the national culture, we prove to the world that we are part of it much more than they are, because we can manipulate, develop and give it a new face.

They like the facade, the clean copies, the banal outer mask of the surrounding world, whose simplicity is almost a pale parodic copy of the real multisignificant essence, which is underneath, an essence that we can [?] under the mask of banality and take, something that the 'nationalists' are too impotent to do, because they are only a copy of an imagination which is not theirs, incapable of reworking a symbol for the purposes of its message.

It is precisely their inability to see the truth that forces them to be mean and regressive.

Not us, but they are the evil spirit that needs to be driven out of the new cycle of time.

Social cleavages remain visible, but the insistence on patrimonial complexity adds another aspect to this reflection. Heritage and LGBT+ activism enrich one another by mobilising masquerade's resourcefulness, which 'unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions. It replaces clarity with ambiguity, certainty

⁵ The comments, originally in Bulgarian, belong to a public discussion under a photograph published by a public Facebook page (<https://facebook.com/PeopleOfSofiq/photos/a.179822025512718/757889184372663>).

with reflexivity, and phantasmic constructions of containment and closure with constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect' (Tseëlon, 2001, p. 3). This seems particularly meaningful given the traditional cross-dressing and the central figure of the transvestite bride in almost all kukeri groups, as well as abundant homoerotic implications of their performances, which are commonly disguised as tradition. Thus, Sofia Pride brought critical questions to the surface, contested the gender-neutrality of mumming and offered—not deliberately, nor comprehensively—a more explicit contextualisation of heritage within contemporary debates about gender and sexuality.

3.2 Anti-gender repertoires

Although some media reports and users' comments on the usage of mumming by Sofia Pride were rather neutral or positive, a considerable number of adverse reactions attacked LGBT+ communities and their campaign. Recurrent homophobic rhetoric was reinforced by arguments invoking heritage's sanctity. In what follows I will focus on such widely disseminated critiques, which reveal the interaction dynamics and some persistent anti-gender repertoires.

Radical-right parties were first to protest and, through their city councillors, reiterated the request to ban Sofia Pride as an 'assault against traditional Bulgarian values, morals, good manners and provocation against the family' (Topnovini.bg, 2016). In 2017, this delegitimation was framed as an act of heritage protection and opposition to the participants in the march who had 'an identity that is no longer Bulgarian.' Ataka, then a member of the government coalition, criticised the queer interpretation of mumming against which it elaborated an essentialist and patriarchal definition:

This year, the organisers have chosen the kukeri mask as their symbol. Thus, one of the oldest Bulgarian traditions will be disgraced in their procession. [...] This year the organisers tried to provoke to the maximum, by declaring the kuker their symbol. The kukeri, one of the oldest Bulgarian customs, related to the young man's preparation for matrimonial life, for marriage, will be used this year as a symbol of gays, lesbians, transgenders, and bisexuals. Thus, this year's procession will appropriate a purely Bulgarian custom—a symbol of the relationship between a man and a woman and will use it to unscrupulously impose its difference. (Alfa TV, 2017)

Another nationalist party and member of the ruling coalition, IMRO, also emphasised the alleged contradiction between national heritage and LGBT+ people. In line with the biological discourse, it had earlier condemned the Pride as an embodiment of 'the transmutation of blood into water, of human into hominid, whereby there is no longer a difference and a boundary between human and non-human, normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural' (Genova, 2011). Ignoring the variety of kukeri practices and the fact that—as in many countries in Eastern Europe (Renkin, 2009; Davydova, 2012)—the parade, despite growing festive features, represents a mainly political demonstration, the radical-right party attacked the event further (Contrera, 2017):

Using a kukeri mask is a new kind of provocation. In this way they activate the line of disgracing of Bulgarian traditions and values, because even without having seen it yet, imagining it, it will be a frankly brutal demonstration. Imagine a kukeri mask worn by naked men and women wiggling their bodies on some sort of platform. This, in itself, humiliates the tradition.

These parties have always been a vocal agent of politicised homophobia and their reactions are not surprising. It is also important to mention that their rhetoric shares common grounds with existing opposition against Roma's participation in mumming groups, discredited as 'Gypsyfication' of the custom. The anti-Pride front was, however, further supported by two prominent private folkloric ensembles, which wrote open letters and sharpened the heritage argument. The *Goce Delčev* Ensemble, connected to IMRO, explicitly postulated the antagonism, and denounced the use of kukeri masks and the very parade as a 'perversion' and 'insult':

We categorically declare that we are against the use of kukeri masks and any other Bulgarian folklore symbols during 'Sofia Pride.' The very identification of such a procession, which in its essence contradicts the traditional values and morals characteristic of Bulgaria, is unacceptable and crosses the boundaries of any tolerance. (Kanal 3, 2017)

The National Folkloric Ensemble *Bălgare* continued this discussion by qualifying the event as 'one more moral provocation, this time associated with Bulgarian cultural heritage' (ibid.). They positioned LGBT+ people out of the national body and indexed another constitutive element of anti-gender mobilisations—the neo-colonial portrayal of 'Europe' and its supposedly demoralising influence at a local level (see Korolczuk & Graff, 2018):

We face with great indignation the fact that the LGBT community, supported by their friends in our country, decides to encroach and use in their stylistics the symbols of the Bulgarian folkloric tradition, proven over the centuries and preserved through our folkloric heritage, namely—kukeri attire and our national costumes.

We categorically object to the use of these emblems of the primordial Bulgarian foundations in a context interpreting in an unhealthy direction their ritual and aesthetic messages, which had sustained our existence as a nation. We have a tolerant attitude towards people with non-heterosexual orientation, but we are extremely concerned about the intention of using the Bulgarian folkloric heritage in the service of a morality which is non-traditional for our national psychology, and also contrary to fundamental Christian values. (Kanal 3, 2017)

The letters were disseminated by the aforementioned political parties, which also claimed to have received similar messages by two kukeri groups. The wide circulation of these commentaries introducing a gender-specific notion of heritage illustrates the existence of a coordinated reaction and unequal power relations. As in other countries, 'radical nationalist movements have parliamentary representation, access to government, media and grassroots support' (Davydova, 2012, p. 33), unlike the LGBT+ community. Indeed, the alliance against Sofia Pride included also the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, members of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, nationalistic clubs, and numerous media. Furthermore, in proximity to the march the ultranationalist organisation 'National Resistance' held a counter-demonstration under the slogan 'Let's clean out Sofia's garbage,' the placards for which were reused in the anti-gender campaigns a few months later.

The folkloric ensembles' intervention is particularly important because it capitalises on their reputation as 'guardians of Bulgarian traditions,' tending to act as authorised spokespersons of national heritage and 'the people.' In relation to *Bălgare's* productions, Donna Buchanan (2015, pp. 10–11) has traced a 'moral lining [...] that espouses an old-fashioned perception of citizenship which is equal parts geography and subjectivity, and which is contributing to a larger emergent, nostalgic, protectionist, ultra-nationalist, and

even xenophobic discourse.’ The ensembles’ outrage, then, censures the Pride, which—unlike ethnonationalist instrumentalisations of kukeri—does not fit what Buchanan calls ‘a moral iconography of subjectivity—a certain way of thinking about how to be Bulgarian, a certain way of *appropriate* thinking, that suggests what is a permissible and even preferred way of constituting the self, here apropos the relation of ethnicity to citizenship and belonging.’ This framing legitimises the attacks against the parade and insists that institutions ‘preserve the authority and the traditional purpose of the Bulgarian folk costume within the messages for which it had been created by our ancestors and with which it is today one of our most successful advertisements to the world’ (Kanal 3, 2017). It further strengthens the illiberal rhetoric portraying the LGBT+ community as a foreign agent that imposes a new socio-political order.

4 Discussion and conclusion

Before concluding, I would like to further contextualise these heritage negotiations and note that the ‘gender panic’ affected mumming and its communities. When, in 2018, ‘gender’ was publicly stigmatised as ‘third sex,’ a kukeri group enacted this subverted meaning and personified it in a newly invented transvestite burlesque character (Figure 3).⁶ Anti-gender rhetoric reshaped masquerade also by additionally discrediting traditional transvestite brides (see Creed, 2011, pp. 70–104) and by denouncing supposedly unauthentic groups’ performance as a ‘gay parade.’ Moreover, while Sofia Pride’s interpretation of kukeri was condemned, a mummer participated in a demonstration against the Istanbul Convention. Given the overlapping anti-gender and anti-refugee discourses (Behrensen & Stanoeva, 2019), and the correspondence between anti-LGBT+ and anti-Roma interpretations of mumming, this context contributes to the understanding of anti-gender campaigns’ complexity, their local resources, and consequences.

In this regard, Sofia Pride could hardly alter the robust ethnonationalist repertoires, but it troubled and rendered visible their power to perpetuate the patterns of exclusion and omission. Due to the nationalistic co-optation of kukeri, LGBT+ activists engaged a disidentification process that, in Muñoz’s (1999, p. 31) terms, both ‘exposes the encoded message’s universalising and exclusionary machinations [of mumming] and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.’ Such an uneasy heritage-recycling is also revelatory of the current development of the Bulgarian LGBT+ movement and its growing visibility. Despite existing internal discussions, the queering of folklore manifests community’s efforts for political action while constructing a potentially powerful platform for self-representation and articulation of resistance. On the other hand, this performative act intertwines with global debates about nationhood and belonging among LGBT+ communities (Kulpa, 2011), which are not without controversies either. While in France the adoption of national symbols faced anti-homonationalist critiques (Puar, 2013, p. 336), in Central and Eastern Europe various initiatives, including Pride parades, fuse queer with national symbolism in different ways (Renkin, 2009; 2015; Davydova, 2012; Moss, 2016;

⁶ In a similar vein, during the carnival in the Croatian town of Imotski an effigy of a same-sex couple and their child was burned (Vladisavljevic, 2020).

Szulc, 2016; Ayoub & Chetaille, 2017; Uibo, 2019). Most of them embrace such strategies to revisit the heteronormative boundaries of nation and citizenship, to counter the accusation of foreignness, without necessarily appropriating homonationalism or exclusionary nationalism.



Figure 3: 'I am džendār': the kukeri Gender character.
Photograph by the author, January 2018.

Sofia Pride shares these features and yet intrigues with its unequivocal deployment of kukeri as a central theme that frames the whole campaign for visibility and equal rights. This tactic reflects the elasticity and popularity of mumming but also signals the contestation—despite its slow progress—of the national intimate citizenship regime's heteronormativity (see Pisankaneva, 2006; Roseneil & Stoilova, 2011). Simultaneously, it illuminates two other important tendencies for the Bulgarian LGBT+ movement. These are the queering of national heritage and the emerging heritagisation of vernacular LGBT+ history and archive-building through diverse activist and artist projects.⁷ For instance, in 2019 the masks from Sofia Pride

⁷ See also Kristian Chalakov's art that queers Balkan folklore (<https://instagram.com/kristian.chalakov>), or the GLAS Foundation's exhibition on homosexuality during socialism (Homosoc, n.d.).

were included in the exhibition 'Balkan Pride' showing photographs from Pride marches and counter-demonstrations in Southeastern Europe. This event, organised by the Bulgarian LGBT+ Foundation GLAS, also hosted a public discussion on traditional values and identity, and thus responded to conservative attacks. The heteronormative nationalist sanctity of heritage was contested, which raised a quintessential question: 'Hasn't every Bulgarian citizen the right of Bulgarian symbols?'⁸ Even more emblematic is Sofia Queer Forum 2020, a contemporary art event, which explored the history of drag performance in Bulgaria. More interestingly, it symbolically rooted drag culture in archaic cross-dressing practices traced on the national territory and thus mobilised Bulgarian folklore. By explicitly mentioning kukeri and other traditional customs, the Forum argued that these 'rituals and their comparative consideration of today reflect not only the plasticity of human sexuality, but also the polyvalence of gender roles in society' (Sofia Queer Forum, 2020).

To conclude, this paper has outlined the national-populist context that allowed for the anti-gender discourses' emergence and proliferation before the consolidation of anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria and their reinforcement by global illiberal impulses and networks. These entanglements, by instrumentalising cultural traditionalism and heritage symbolism, define 'the people' in narrow tribalist terms and challenge the foundations of liberal democracy. As the Istanbul Convention scandal demonstrates, this is 'not simply more populist politics but rather a retreat of the taken-for-granted values, knowledge and politics of the established liberal democratic order' (Venkov, 2020, p. 217). Furthermore, illiberal politics and xenophobic sentiments spread within liberal democracies themselves and exploit their premises (Krastev, 2007). On the other hand, these developments do not remain unchallenged since counterforces formulate strategies coupling local and international resources. Sofia Pride 2017 happened in this specific context: it continued the advocacy for equality and visibility, responded to escalating illiberal tendencies and asserted adherence to the national community. Questioning the ethnonationalist capture of heritage, LGBT+ activists explored—or rather highlighted—kukeri's polyvalence and draw from it to convey a message of resistance. While enacting traditional masquerade as a 'tool for self-definition and deconstruction' (Tsečlon, 2001, pp. 11–12), they destabilise the overdetermined boundaries of living heritage to articulate a self-representation within the national body. The kukeri's queering and the concept of belonging it expresses, however, are attacked by radical-right and conservative actors, which mix biological and heritage discourses. LGBT+ people and their interpretation of mumming are both denounced as 'unhealthy perversions' aiming to impose a foreign order (see also Renkin, 2009; 2015). Hence, negotiating ambiguous relations to national heritage as a pride reference within the existing power relations becomes crucial. The honouring of kukeri by LGBT+ activism thus requires but also permits a disidentificatory performance that defies and reworks normative meanings. In doing so, this strategy creates further possibilities, by making visible both the LGBT+ communities and some of the established boundaries they face.

⁸ One of the questions raised by Simeon Vasilev (GLAS Foundation) during the discussion 'Modern Values and Balkan Identity' held as part of the programme of 'Plovdiv 2019—European Capital of Culture.'

Acknowledgements

This article is a result of the project ‘Campagnes “anti-genre” en Europe : enjeux de savoir, enjeux de pouvoir’ funded under the AUF-IFA 2019-2020 cooperation program and carried out by the University of Bucharest in partnership with Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and Université Libre de Bruxelles. Fieldwork was conducted under the project ‘The New Festivity: Communities, Identities, and Policies in Bulgaria in the 21st century’ funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund (agreement № ДН 05/7, 14.12.2016). Research for this paper was further supported by the University of Illinois Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center (Summer Research Laboratory Associateship 2019 and Open Research Laboratory Associateship 2021). I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and the editors Zsuzsanna Vidra and Michael C. Zeller whose contributions improved the final version of the article. I wish to thank also David Paternotte, Yulia Gradszkova, Rossitsa Bolgurova, and especially Vladislav Petkov for their help and insightful comments at different stages of the research.

References

- Alfa TV (2017, June 9). Sofia Pride. Organizatorite s nova provokacija. Šte bādat oblečeni kato kukeri (Sofia Pride. The organizers with new provocation. They will be dressed as mummies). <https://alfa.bg/видео/софия-прайд-организаторите-с-нова-провокация-ще-бъдат-облечени-като-кукери-09-06-2017-г-с24270.html> Accessed: 11-05-2019.
- Ayoub, P. M. & Chetaille, A. (2017). Movement/Counter-movement Interaction and Instrumental Framing in a Multi-level World: Rooting Polish Lesbian and Gay Activism. *Social Movement Studies*, 19(1), 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1338941>
- Behrensen, M. & Stanoeva, E. (2019). Hypochondriac Identities: Gender and Nationalism in Bulgaria and Germany. In M. Behrensen, M. Heimbach-Steins & L. Hennig (Eds.), *Gender–Nation–Religion. Ein internationaler Vergleich von Akteursstrategien und Diskursverflechtungen* (pp. 147–188). Campus Verlag.
- Buchanan, D. A. (2015). Beyond Nation? A Thrice-Told Tale from Bulgaria’s Postsocialist Soundstage. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 33(1), 1–29.
- Butler, J. (2011). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Contrera, C. (2017, June 8). Sofia Pride se gavri s kukerite (Sofia Pride mocks mummies). <https://carloscontrera.bg/index.php?/media/view/47/sofiia-prajd-se-garvi-s-kukerite> Accessed: 23-01-2021.
- Creed, G. W. (2011). *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria*. Indiana University Press.
- Darakchi, S. (2019). ‘The Western Feminists Want to Make Us Gay’: Nationalism, Heteronormativity, and Violence Against Women in Bulgaria in Times of ‘Anti-gender Campaigns’. *Sexuality & Culture*, 23, 1208–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09611-9>
- Davydova, D. (2012). Baltic Pride 2010: Articulating Sexual Difference and Heteronormative Nationalism in Contemporary Lithuania. *Sextures*, 2(2), 32–46.

- Elenkov, I. (2007). 'The Second Golden Age'. Historicisation of Official Culture in the Context of Bulgaria's 1,300th Anniversary Celebrations (1976–1981). *Critique and Humanism*, 23, 31–58.
- Genov, N. (2010). Radical Nationalism in Contemporary Bulgaria. *Review of European Studies*, 2(2), 35–53. <https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v2n2p35>
- Genova, V. (2011, June 17). Ot tradicii kăm gej paradi (From traditions towards gay prides, June 17). VMRO. <https://vmro.bg/ot-traditsii-km-gei-paradi> Accessed: 11-10-2020.
- Gradszkova, Y. (2020). Recovering Traditions? Women, Gender, and the Authoritarianism of 'Traditional Values' in Russia. *Baltic Worlds*, 13(1), 31–36.
- Gueorguieva, V. & Petrova, V. (2021). 'Our Family – Our Rules': Mobilizations against Gender in Bulgaria (2018–2020). *Problems of Post-Communism*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Homosoc: Homosexuality during the communist regime in Bulgaria* (n.d.). GLAS Foundation.
- Kanal 3 (2017, June 10). Naj-golemite ni folklorni ansambli se objaviha sreštu Sofia Pride (Our Biggest folkloric ensembles stood against Sofia Pride). <https://kanal3.bg/news/55179-Naj-golemite-ni-folklorni-ansambli-se-objaviha-sreshtu-Sofiya-Prayd> Accessed: 11-05-2019.
- Kaya, A. (2019) *Populism and Heritage in Europe: Lost in Diversity and Unity*. Routledge.
- Korolczuk, E. & Graff, A. (2018). Gender as 'Ebola from Brussels': The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43(4), 797–821. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696691>
- Köttig, M., Bitzan, R. & Pető, A. (Eds.) (2017). *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Krastev, I. (2007). The Populist Moment. *Critique and Humanism*, 23(1), 103–108.
- Krasteva, A. & Todorov, A. (2020). From Post-Communism to Post-Democracy: The Visible and Invisible Political Transformations. *Southeastern Europe*, 44(2), 177–207. <https://doi.org/10.30965/18763332-04402004>
- Kuhar, R. & Paternotte, D. (Eds.) (2017). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kulpa, R. (2011). Nations and Sexualities – 'West' and 'East'. In R. Kulpa & J. Mizielinska (Eds.) *Decentring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives* (pp. 43–62). Ashgate.
- Moffitt, B. (2016). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford University Press.
- Mole, R. C. (2016). Nationalism and Homophobia in Central and Eastern Europe. In K. Sloopmaeckers, H. Touquet & P. Vermeersch (Eds.), *The EU Enlargement and Gay Politics* (pp. 99–121). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morell, I. A. & Gradszkova, Y. (2018). The Gendered Subject of Postsocialism: State-Socialist Legacies, Global Challenges and (Re)Building of Tradition. In Y. Gradszkova & I. A. Morell (Eds.), *Gendering Postsocialism: Old Legacies and New Hierarchies* (pp. 1–17). Routledge.
- Moss, K. (2016). Split Pride/Split Identities. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 3(2), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.3.2.0056>

- Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Nenova, G. (2021). Questioning the Retraditionalization Thesis: Gender Differences in Paid and Unpaid Work in Bulgaria (1970–2010). In K. Bluhm, G. Pickhan, J. Stypinska & A. Wiercholska (Eds.), *Gender and Power in Eastern Europe. Societies and Political Orders in Transition* (pp. 157–172). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53130-0_11
- Norocel, O. C. & Szabó, G. (2019). Mapping the Discursive Opportunities for Radical-Right Populist Politics across Eastern Europe. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 66(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2019.1537040>
- Panayotov, S. (2013). Neutralizing Visibility: Bulgarian Strategies for Justifying Inequality. In N. Fejes & A. Balogh (Eds.), *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures* (pp. 155–172). Intellect.
- Paternotte, D. (2020, March 30). Backlash: A Misleading Narrative. *Engenderings*, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/03/30/backlash-a-misleading-narrative/#_ftnref1 Accessed: 11-12-2020.
- Petkov, V. (2018). *Neo-populist Celebrations: Mobilizing Cultural Practices in Constructing 'Otherness' around Gender. The Case of the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Pisankaneva, M. (2006). The LGBT Movement in Bulgaria. In M. Chateauvert (Ed.), *New Social Movements and Sexuality* (pp. 75–82). Bilitis.
- Puar, J. (2013). Rethinking Homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45(2), 336–339. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381300007X>
- Ragaru, N. (2006). A Radical Nationalist Party in Bulgaria: Ataka, or the Tribulations of Post-Communism. *Critique internationale*, 1(1), 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.3917/cii.030.0041>
- Renkin, H. Z. (2009). Homophobia and Queer Belonging in Hungary. *Focaal*, 53, 20–37. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2009.530102>
- Renkin, H. Z. (2015). Perverse Frictions: Pride, Dignity, and the Budapest LGBT March. *Ethnos*, 80(3), 409–432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2013.879197>
- Rone, J. & Junes, T. (2021). Voice after Exit? Bulgarian Civic Activists between Protest and Emigration. *East European Politics and Societies*, 35(1), 226–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0888325420902246>
- Rosanvallon, P. (2008). *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge University Press.
- Roseneil, S. & Stoilova, M. (2011). Heteronormativity, Intimate Citizenship and the Regulation of Same-sex Sexualities in Bulgaria. In R. Kulpa & J. Mizielinska (Eds.), *De-centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives* (pp. 167–190). Ashgate.
- Rygiel, K. & Baban, F. (2019). Countering Right-Wing Populism: Transgressive Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity Movements in Europe. *American Quarterly*, 71(4), 1069–1076. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2019.0078>
- Siim, B., Krasteva, A. & Saarinen, A. (Eds.) (2018). *Citizens' Activism and Solidarity Movements: Contending with Populism*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76183-1>
- Smilov, D. (2008). Bulgaria. In G. Mesežnikov, O. Gyárfášová & D. Smilov (Eds.), *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 15–38). Institute for Public Affairs.

- Smilova, R. (2020). The Ideological Turn in Bulgarian Constitutional Discourse. The Rise Against 'Genders'. In A. Sajó & R. Uitz (Eds.), *Critical Essays on Human Rights Criticism* (pp. 177–197). Eleven International.
- Smith, L. (2008). Heritage, Gender and Identity. In B. Graham & P. Howard (Eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (pp. 159–178). Ashgate.
- Sofia Queer Forum (2020). *Bulgarian Drag History*. <http://dragbg.sofiaqueerforum.org/about> Accessed: 23-01-2021.
- Stanoeva, E. (2017). Illiberal Consensus without an Authoritarian Core: The Case of Bulgaria. *Cultures of History Forum*. <https://cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/focus/lex-ceu/illiberal-consensus-without-an-authoritarian-core-the-case-of-bulgaria> Accessed: 20-11-2020.
- Statement of Support to Sofia Pride 2017 from 17 diplomatic missions and representatives for Bulgaria of UNICEF and UNHCR* (2017). <https://en.sofiaprider.org/2017/06/16/statement-of-support-to-sofia-pride-2017-from-17-diplomatic-missions-and-representatives-for-bulgaria-of-unicef-and-unhcr> Accessed: 11-10-2020.
- Syngkelos, Y. (2018). Phobic Discourses of the Far Right: The Case of Volen Siderov. *East European Politics and Societies*, 32(3), 586–605. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0888325417736810>
- Szulc, L. (2016). Domesticating the Nation Online: Banal Nationalism on LGBTQ Websites in Poland and Turkey. *Sexualities*, 19(3), 304–327. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1363460715583604>
- Taylor, M. N. (2009). Intangible Heritage Governance, Cultural Diversity, Ethno-Nationalism. *Focaal*, 55, 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2009.550104>
- Topnovini.bg (2016, June 9). Obštinskite săvetnici ot VMRO i ATAKA iskat otmjana na "Sofia pride" (City councilors from IMRO and ATAKA demand the cancellation of "Sofia Pride"). <https://topnovini.bg/novini/711452-obshtinskite-savetnitsi-ot-vmro-i-ataka-iskat-otmyana-na-sofiya-prayd> Accessed: 23-01-2021.
- Tsečlon, E. (2001). Introduction: Masquerade and Identities. In E. Tsečlon (Ed.), *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Marginality* (pp. 1–17). Routledge.
- Uibo, R. (2019). Prides in Estonia: Struggling in the Centrifugal Pulls of Nationalism and Transnational Leveraged Pedagogy. In K. Wiedlack, S. Shoshanova & M. Godovannaya (Eds.), *Queering Paradigms VIII: Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide* (pp. 175–199). Peter Lang.
- Venkov, N. A. (2020). On the Retreat of Liberal Values and Access to Discourse: Extending Post-Foundational Discourse Theory. In M. Kranert (Ed.), *Discursive Approaches to Populism Across Disciplines* (pp. 199–223). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vladislavljevic, A. (2020, February 24). Torched Effigy of Gay Couple Causes Outrage in Croatia. *BIRN*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/24/torched-effigy-of-gay-couple-causes-outrage-in-croatia> Accessed: 23-01-2021.
- Wilson, R. J. (2018). The Tyranny of the Normal and the Importance of Being Liminal. In W. Grahn & R. J. Wilson (Eds.), *Gender and Heritage: Performance, Place and Politics* (pp. 3–13). Routledge.
- Zankina, E. (2016). Theorizing the New Populism in Eastern Europe. *Politologický časopis/Czech Journal of Political Science*, 23(2), 182–199. <https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2016-2-182>

ALEJANDRO ESTESO-PÉREZ*

Illiberalism, revolution and the 2016 Macedonian elections: The effects of social movements on electoral accountability

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 32–51.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.828>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* [\[a.estesop@gmail.com\]](mailto:a.estesop@gmail.com) (independent researcher)

Abstract

To what extent are social movements capable of steering voters' choices in illiberal societies? Through the empirical exploration of Macedonia's 2016 Colourful Revolution, this study examines the potential of Anti-Corruption Movements (ACMs) to inflict electoral punishment on illiberal leaders. It adopts a corruption-based conception of illiberalism, whereby 'the misuse of public office for private gain' in the shape of bribery, nepotism, clientelism, and misuse of public party funding presents itself as one of the foremost components of illiberal rule. Drawing from original survey data and a set of semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Colourful Revolution and members of the Macedonian civil society, this paper sheds light upon the effects of ACMs on electoral behaviour and, ultimately, on the political potential of ACMs in the reversal of a country's illiberal course. The study finds strong indicators pointing to the Colourful Revolution's encouraging role in stoking increasingly negative perceptions towards Macedonia's illiberal government ahead of the 2016 election, but primarily among voters that had not supported the main government party in the previous election.

Keywords: corruption, elections, illiberalism, Macedonia, social movements, voting behaviour

1 Introduction

The emergence and spread of illiberal democracy have given rise to a novel field within the study of contemporary politics. Illiberalism, located in a 'grey zone' between liberal democracy and autocracy (Kapidžić, 2020) as it arguably exhibits elements of both, is marked by several common traits. Illiberal politics and policies are often built upon regimes of weak governmental accountability, a poor and biased application of rule of law standards (Pech & Scheppele, 2017), and election manipulation (Bermeo, 2016). They furthermore have a high prevalence of corruption and clientelistic networks spanning across different levels of government and State administration (Rocha Menocal, Fritz & Rakner, 2008). In this light, many social movements, as organised actors of civil resistance, have become aware of the fight

against illiberalism and corruption (della Porta, 2017a; Pirro, 2017). These Anti-Corruption Movements (ACMs), besides being diverse and holding protests as their most common tactic, can contest political malfeasance from below—potentially, also in illiberal systems.

This article contributes to research into the effects of social movements on political and electoral outcomes. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), hereinafter ‘Macedonia’¹, provides a case of entrenched elite illiberalism where electoral accountability can prosper. The ‘Colourful Revolution’ refers to a series of protests that took place in Macedonia during the spring and early summer of 2016. This contentious episode showcased the features and repertoire of an ACM, where it played a critical role in calling out political corruption and, ultimately, in electorally punishing the governing party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Vnatreshna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija – Demokratska Partija za Makedonsko Nacionalno Edinstvo*, VMRO–DPMNE). The extent to which the Colourful Revolution contributed to changes in voting behaviour, leading to VMRO–DPMNE’s fall from grace, forms the core of this article.

Through a mixed-methods approach, the study draws from two different sets of primary data. The first data source consists of semi-structured interviews with representatives of Macedonian civil society, all linked, to different extents, with the 2015 political crisis and with the Colourful Revolution in 2016. The second data source consists of an original survey dataset featuring a sample of 1,066 respondents, all members of the Macedonian electorate, in order to measure large-scale political attitudes and voting habits at an individual level. The article analyses the interview testimony alongside the survey, providing qualitative support to the quantitative evidence.

2 Unravelling the link between illiberalism and corruption

Since the concept was first mainstreamed by Zakaria (1997), illiberalism has become recognised as a *sui generis* system of governance. Having comfortably settled in the ‘grey zone’ of the democracy-autocracy spectrum, illiberal polities occupy an unspecified, fluid space somewhere between a full liberal democracy and an outright authoritarian order. Illiberal systems, while maintaining a liberal-democratic façade through regular elections, showcase features that deviate from typical democratic standards. Through institutional and symbolic channels, illiberal systems tend to rely on nationalism as a legitimising source (Rupnik, 2016) and, through the steady dismantling of checks and balances, strive to shield electoral advantages for the incumbents (Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

Research claims that corruption and opaque clientelistic networks of exchange prevail among the ruling elites of illiberal regimes. Rocha Menocal, Fritz, and Rakner (2008, p. 34) argue that illiberal systems ‘are driven by personalised interests, and public officials often act to further their own gains without much concern about a broader sense of the public good’, the result being ‘the persistence of clientelistic structures and high levels of corrup-

¹ Usage as per its constitutional name before February 2019. In line with the Prespa Agreement of the 12th of June 2018, the country went on to adopt its current official name, i.e., ‘Republic of North Macedonia’. As this study refers to events prior to this Agreement, it uses the contemporary country name.

tion, especially when citizens have few means of holding elites to account.' Kubbe and Loli (2020) point out the overall rising corruption trends in countries with illiberal governments which, in some cases, have been described as pervasive (Krastev, 2018).

Defining corruption is a topic of debate in itself (Kurer, 2015; Philp, 2006). Several scholars rely on its most widespread normative outlining: 'the misuse of public office for private gain' (Jiménez and García, 2008; Kurer, 2005; Riera et al., 2013). Corrupt practices are usually characterised by double-party exchange relationships in either horizontal or vertical directions (Carvajal, 1999) and include such activities as bribery, nepotism, clientelism, misappropriation, and misuse of public party funding, among others (De Vries & Solaz, 2017; Nye, 1967). Several accounts offer insights into the impact of corruption on the economy and revenues of a country (Del Monte & Papagni, 2001; Pani, 2010; Rose-Ackerman, 1997), on its development (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2011; Mauro, 1995) and on its equality and poverty levels (Chong & Calderón, 2000; Gupta, Davoodi & Alonso-Terme, 2002). Higher exposure to corruption is also associated with a weaker political culture overall, including a lower belief in the political system (Caillier, 2010; Seligson, 2002) and lower voter turnout (Carreras & Vera, 2018; Chong et al., 2015). The rising migration of skilled workers (Dimant, Krieger & Meierrieks, 2013; Poprawe, 2015) and the weakening of the judiciary's independence (Buscaglia & Dakolias, 1999; della Porta, 2001) have likewise been identified as potential consequences of political corruption.

2.1 Illiberalism and corruption in the Western Balkans

During the 1990s, the seven republics that constitute the so-called 'Western Balkan' region—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia—initiated the establishment of their independent State structures, including the institutionalisation of their civil and political systems. During the early 2000s, several underwent the timid consolidation of competitive multi-party politics and the slow advancements towards democratisation and economic reform (Bieber, 2018; Crowther, 2017; Pavlović, 2019), mostly through progressively neoliberal agendas and support for integration into the European Union (EU). In the late 2000s, however, authoritarian patterns of governance re-emerged, marked by declining press freedom and by stronger and more informal control over State institutions. This governance shift has partly been interpreted as a consequence of the EU's lack of transformative power and direct support for democratic rule in the region (Bieber, 2018). The EU is the most influential external partner of the Western Balkan countries (Keil, 2013), but 'the [2007-8] economic crisis and a cascade of follow-up crises' (Bieber, 2020, p. 31) resulted in the member states becoming less engaged with democratic improvements in the region, and generally disinterested with the EU's enlargement policy (Szołucha, 2010; Vachudova, 2013).

For nearly two decades many governments in the region have moved toward perpetual power through the implementation of illiberal policies—many of which included the establishment and consolidation of corrupt networks and clientelistic structures. Scholars have unpacked empirical examples in, among others, Montenegro (Komar, 2020), Serbia (Keil, 2018; Pavlović, 2019), Croatia (Dolenec, 2013) and Kosovo (Beha & Hajrullahu, 2020; Coelho, 2018). Over the years, ruling parties have engaged in political practices aimed at undermining political opposition and institutional accountability, resulting (in most cases) in dimin-

ished electoral and judicial repercussions (Komar, 2020). These practices include electoral manipulation through voter intimidation (Kera & Hysa, 2020; Pavlović, 2019), biased media reporting (Micevski & Trpevska, 2015), the control of public resources for the benefit of party loyalists (Kapidžić, 2019), and the weakening of checks and balances through control over the judiciary (Crowther, 2017; Gjuzelov & Ivanovska, 2020).

Moreover, illiberal leaders in the Western Balkan countries tend to show similar traits in the way they consolidated themselves at the helm. As Bieber (2020, p. 33) explains, ‘leaders such as [Serbian President Aleksandar] Vučić, Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, president of the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska and later Serb member of the State Presidency Milorad Dodik, and Montenegrin Prime Minister and President Milo Đukanović were able to capture Western imagination as young, pragmatic reformers,’ whose rise to power as ideologically-moderate personalities was met with the approval of EU governments (Bennett, 2016).

3 Corruption voters and corruption challengers

3.1 Punishing corruption at the polls

As a factor that conditions a major share of today’s political, economic and social phenomena, top-down and bottom-up efforts to fight corruption have been diverse in implementation and results (Sampson, 2010). The holding of elections, a core element in liberal-democratic multi-party regimes, have occasionally proved an effective tool to combat corruption (Bågenholm, 2013b; Shabad & Słomczyński, 2011). By no means, however, has it been an infallible instrument (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2010). Research on the potential leverage of an electorate when deciding a corrupt incumbent’s political fate relates to ‘electoral accountability.’ This concept describes the process of an incumbent’s re-election or replacement through an electorate, whereby voters will—through retrospective assessment—consider their choice at the polls according to the incumbent’s performance (Ashworth, 2012; Svoboda, 1995). In this case, it is the perceived level of incumbent corruption that influences the electorate.

When analysing successful electoral accountability action—that is, the removal of a corrupt incumbent through an election—voting behaviour is the determining trigger. By drawing from experiments and surveys, previous literature on electoral accountability has identified a range of variables that condition choice at the polls vis-à-vis a corrupt political leader. At the macro-level, for instance, the economic voting premise holds that voters hold the government responsible for economic events (Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000). Thus, leaders’ performance in the economic realm is decisive for their political survival. Accordingly, even when a public office holder has engaged in corrupt or malfeasant behaviour, voters will judge their overall performance from an economic perspective despite public awareness of the scandal (Carlin, Love & Martínez-Gallardo, 2015).

At the micro-level, public perception of corruption can contribute to electoral accountability (Ecker, Glinitzer & Meyer, 2016; Seligson, 2002). Furthermore, the presence of a novel, less-corrupt alternative can compound electoral accountability pressure (Engler, 2016; Klačnja, 2015). Perception of corruption is often fostered by the media, which plays a substantial role in the portrayal of malfeasant leaders and their scandals (Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé & Sorribas-

Navarro, 2012). Furthermore, access to information conditions the level of political awareness of the electorate, which acts as an important trigger for electoral accountability (Klašnja, 2017). Riera et al. (2013) find some evidence for a positive correlation between voters' political sophistication and electoral punishment of corrupt incumbents, though in left-party voters only. Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz (2013) claim that more politically aware citizens are less affected by partisan influences when assessing corruption cases. As far as ideology and partisanship are concerned, most scholarly research suggests that the higher the level of partisanship, the higher the chances for a voter to support their own party regardless of it being involved in a corruption scandal (Ecker, Glinitzer & Meyer, 2016; Eggers, 2014). This correlation appears more salient in right-wing voters, who seem to be more tolerant of irregular activities when these affect their party (Anduiza, Gallego & Muñoz, 2013) and thus more partisan (Jiménez & García, 2018).

3.2 Accountability from below: Anti-corruption movements

A neglected aspect within the study of electoral accountability is the role played by agents of contentious politics and, more specifically, by social movements. Tarrow and Tilly (2009) define social movements as 'a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population [...] by means of public displays of that population's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.'

In recent years, many new movements have become aware of the fight against corruption and have adopted it as an ideology of their own. Donatella della Porta's (2015; 2017a; 2017b) accounts on what she terms 'anti-corruption from below' depict the birth of such movements as a consequence of neo-liberal economic privatisation and deregulation processes, among other factors. These have largely translated into a decline in both citizens' rights and institutional trust, interpreted as a crisis of legitimacy. Within this terminology, ACMs have been defined as 'varying forms of collective action in reaction to [...] high-level or political corruption' (Pirro, 2017, p. 775). The motivations behind ACM action are diverse: some action is encouraged by the high corruption levels (Margarit, 2015), while other is triggered by a perceived lack of government effectiveness (Gingerich, 2009; Peiffer & Álvarez, 2016).

ACMs' tools of action are no different from those deployed by other social mobilisations; and protest is their most visible representation (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). Demonstrations and other forms of street performance aim at conveying a message both externally, towards the authorities or the media, and internally, among the protestors themselves, be it with or without a violent component (Machado, Scartascini & Tommasi, 2011). Street demonstrations have played a significant role in European politics since the late twentieth century, particularly in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Murtagh, 2016; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017). Several authors have already pointed towards post-socialist societies' low levels of civic participation (Howard, 2003; Tarrow & Petrova, 2007), suggesting that that endows protests with a special relevance when they do take place.

Research on social movements' political repercussion has primarily focused on their effects over policy agenda-setting and governmental decision-making processes (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2005; Kitschelt, 1986; Murtagh, 2016; Pettinicchio, 2017); while movement impact on the electorate and their voting inclinations has received less attention (Amenta et al., 2010). Bågenholm (2009; 2013a) addresses the politicisation of corruption—that is, the adop-

tion of anti-corruption discourses for electoral purposes—and claims it is particularly salient in Central and Eastern Europe. His findings strongly hint at the idea that the overall success of anti-corruption parties in this region during the early twenty-first century was a sign of voters' general approval of platforms that held corruption as their prevalent issue.

While much of the literature seems to circumvent the gap between ACM activity and its effects on electoral accountability, it nevertheless provides insight into the potential of corruption-focused mobilisations and their ability to contest political malfeasance from below. While existing scholarly research has acknowledged the media's leverage on the electorate, for instance, it has generally failed to account for a similar electoral influence wielded by ACMs.

4 Corruption and revolution in Macedonia

From the start of the twenty-first century Macedonian political life revolved around the quasi-supreme rule of one party, VMRO–DPMNE, and one man, Nikola Gruevski. As party leader since 2003, Gruevski brought a modernising and youthful image to Macedonia's main right-wing force. His campaign built upon nationalist elements and a pro-European agenda including seeking membership in both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, which helped him win the 2006 parliamentary elections and become Prime Minister (Crowther, 2017).

The years that followed Gruevski's electoral victory were marked by a swift turn to the right alongside a visible crackdown on civil rights and freedoms (Grozdanovska Dimishkovska, 2012). Civil society and non-governmental groups critical of the regime were harassed and their independence undermined (Crowther, 2017); key media were taken over and transformed into a 'propagandistic setting' (Micevski & Trpevska, 2015); and the judicial authority had been rendered almost powerless against government elites. Additionally, aggressive rhetoric towards Macedonia's Albanian community, which makes up around a quarter of the country's population, intensified. The government concurrently launched the so-called 'Skopje 2014' architectural embellishment project, whereby more than 130 monuments and façade reconstructions in the capital were completed as part of a nation-building endeavour, ostensibly aimed at promoting classical Macedonian identity. VMRO–DPMNE's successive electoral victories in 2008, 2011, and 2014 suggested this program would continue.

May 2015 marked the beginning of the end for Gruevski's leadership. Zoran Zaev, the head of the country's main opposition party, the left-wing Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija*, SDSM), revealed that the VMRO–DPMNE government had been involved in a series of wiretapped conversations that confirmed accusations of 'widespread corruption, illegal influence on the judiciary [and] pressures on the media' coming from Gruevski's entourage (Petkovski, 2015, p. 45). Around 20,000 phone numbers had been surveilled and approximately 670,000 conversations illegally monitored (Reef, 2017), laying bare electoral fraud, extortion and abuse of power (Micevski & Trpevska, 2015). The tapes also revealed the government's responsibility for the cover-up in 2011 of the murder of young activist Martin Neshkovski, beaten to death by police forces—a controversial case that had already led to protests against police brutality (Marušić, 2011).

The tape scandal exposed institutionally-entrenched corruption affecting all layers of Macedonian administration—and directed by Gruevski's VMRO–DPMNE. After the release

of these ‘political bombs’, as they were called, protests erupted and were met with police violence. Demonstrations persisted and, two months later, a solution to the deadlock was brokered by the EU: the Przhino Agreement (Crowther, 2017). This deal included Gruevski’s resignation in January 2016 in favour of an interim government made of VMRO–DPMNE and SDSM members, and early parliamentary elections initially scheduled for 24 April, later re-scheduled to 5 June.

By March 2016, as fallout from the tape scandal, several of Gruevski’s entourage was under investigation by the newly-established Special Prosecution Office (SPO) (Petkovski, 2015). Yet the political crisis deepened: on 12 April President Gjorgje Ivanov, himself a member of VMRO–DPMNE, pardoned some party officials facing charges and criminal investigations linked with the wiretapped conversations. This was an attempt, Ivanov claimed, to overcome the deadlock and act in the country’s best interest (Marušić, 2016a; Reef, 2017). Notwithstanding his intentions, this move provoked outrage and triggered another massive wave of protests, starting in Skopje and rapidly spreading across the country. The opposition and many citizens understood Ivanov’s decision ‘as a clear intention to protect party officials from prosecution, exacerbating thus the perception of the impunity of political elites’ (Milan, 2017, p. 838).

This wave of anti-government mobilisations was a turning point in Macedonia’s history of contention, inasmuch as it displayed a new repertoire of action and showed remarkable differences with the 2015 demonstrations, namely an earlier episode of the same contentious cycle. The protest series became known as the Colourful Revolution (*Sharena Revolucija*) after protesters fired paintballs and hurled paint-filled balloons at government buildings and monuments in the centre of Skopje—itsself a symbol of Gruevski’s ‘Skopje 2014’ project. Street demonstrations took place almost every day all over the country into July, and online activism spread within and beyond its borders. The Colourful Revolution showed intersectional and interethnic components, bringing together ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians of all ages, as well as uniting protestors standing up for diverse series of demands, spanning from the improvement of the economic situation to the protection of sexual minority rights (Ozimec, 2016). By early July, President Ivanov had revoked the pardons (Marušić, 2016b) and a new date for early elections had been set for 11 December after another EU-brokered agreement between the parties.

The election results spoke to the ACM’s effect on the outcome: the gap between VMRO–DPMNE (38.14 per cent of votes) and SDSM (36.66 per cent of votes) was fewer than 20,000 ballots, equivalent to two seats in the 120-seat parliament—a remarkable difference from the parliamentary election two years prior, where VMRO–DPMNE won 42.97 per cent and SDSM 25.34 per cent. This time, though Gruevski still won 51 seats to Zaev’s 49, SDSM managed to form a coalition government with the Democratic Union for Integration (*Demokratska Unija za Integracija - Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*, DUI), the country’s largest ethnic Albanian party and formerly VMRO–DPMNE’s governing coalition partner. SDSM thus attained executive power and ended a decade of VMRO–DPMNE government.

5 Data and methodology

Through a mixed-methods approach, we can determine the extent to which the Colourful Revolution contributed to changes in voting behaviour, ultimately leading to VMRO–DPMNE’s fall from power. It draws on two sets of primary data. The first data source consists of

six semi-structured interviews with Macedonian civil society representatives—all linked, to different extents, with the 2015 political crisis and with the Colourful Revolution in 2016. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their high level of involvement with the movement, either through active participation at the protests or through substantive engagement in academic or journalistic terms. The interviews centred on the political and electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution, particularly on voter perceptions. The interview questions addressed the political context prior to the protests, the purposes and principles underpinning their creation, and their perceived consequences before and after the 2016 parliamentary election.

The second data source consists of an original survey dataset featuring a sample of 1,066 respondents. The online survey, conducted between July and September 2019, was circulated across the Macedonian electorate with the objective of measuring ordinary people's attitudes and behaviours—many of which, including individual-level voting patterns, are not directly observable through alternative methods (Halperin & Heath, 2012). The sample was restricted to Macedonian nationals above voting age on 11 December 2016, the date of the election. The survey included different blocks of questions in the Macedonian language, encompassing voting habits and party preference, perceptions of corruption, and individual attitudes towards the Colourful Revolution.

Online surveys imply some methodological limitations: a younger, urban, higher-educated and more computer-literate respondent profile will potentially prevail in the sample and, most probably, be overrepresented. Table 1 shows the sample demographics accord with these expectations. Of 1,066 respondents, only 24.5 per cent are 41 or older; those aged 26 to 30 alone make up 25 per cent of the respondents, followed by the 36 to 40 group (17.7 per cent) and 31 to 35 group (17.3 per cent). In terms of education, 76.1 per cent completed at least a bachelor's degree, meaning only 23.9 per cent of responses came from voters with no university education. Urban dwellers are well represented among the respondents: 71.7 per cent live in towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants—more than half in the capital, Skopje. Male participation in the survey was disproportional at 61.2 per cent, versus 38.5 per cent of females. Finally, in national-ethnic terms, an overwhelming 93.2 per cent identified as ethnic Macedonian.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (n=1066).

Age (%)

≤25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	56≥
15.5	25.0	17.3	17.7	11.1	7.0	4.0	2.4

Gender (%)

Male	Female	Other
61.2	38.5	0.3

Residence (%)

Urban	Rural	Abroad/Prefer not to say
71.7	18.6	9.7

Education (%)

Primary	Secondary	Technical/ Vocational school	Bachelor	Master	PhD
0.5	15.7	7.7	48.8	23.7	3.6

Ethnicity (%)

Macedonian	Albanian	Other
93.2	1.6	5.2

Source: original survey dataset.

6 Analysis

6.1 The many colours of Macedonia's 2016 protests

The political and social context in Macedonia during the years that preceded the Colourful Revolution was one where illiberal practices had flourished and where a significant sense of frustration and anger prevailed among segments of the population. Gruevski's time in power generated an opaque and unaccountable system of governance where police brutality, illegal State media financing and smear campaigns against political critics were widespread. An atmosphere of fear had emerged and, as a consequence, so had the feeling of growing humiliation and grievances towards the executive. In this context, corruption scandals involving members of the government or party loyalists were frequent—as was the perceived impunity surrounding their cases. Public perception of corruption, as an inherent feature of illiberal governance, was very high.

The 2016 Colourful Revolution represents the culmination of a years-long cycle of contentious politics in Macedonia. Even though its triggering moment was President Ivanov's decision to pardon officials involved in the illegal wiretapping scandal, the feelings stemming from the 2015 'political bombs' managed to resurface again in 2016. Although the illegally-taped conversations had been released a year before, they remained as a source of grievance that, over 2016, steadily contributed to intensifying frustration with and rejection of the government. The 'bombs' had an overwhelming effect on many, numbed by the astounding volume of information that had entered the public domain: 'I will use this metaphor of the dead frog experiment: you slowly boil the frog, and the frog doesn't realise it's being killed,' said an interviewee (Interview 2). The first days of the Colourful Revolution became the point of convergence for broad groups of unsatisfied citizens, a majority of which had protested against police brutality and other social issues in 2011, 2014, and 2015. In this febrile context, the taped conversation revealing the government's mismanagement over the brutal murder in 2011 of young activist Martin Neshkovski acted as an incendiary trigger.

The Colourful Revolution's anti-corruption message was overarching, providing reliable grounds to consider this movement an ACM. President Ivanov's controversial pardon decision exemplified both elite impunity and lack of justice, as the State's upper echelon moved to torpedo the SPO's criminal investigations of the wiretapping scandal. This move revealed

a deeply corrupt and clientelistic political system under the tight control of VMRO-DPMNE, where the rule of law and institutional independence were completely hijacked by the ruling elite. The Colourful Revolution constituted itself as an anti-impunity and pro-justice movement that channelled public outrage over corruption.

At the outset, the street protests emerged without a clear narrative or objective, but rather as an immediate response to injustice and corruption following Ivanov's pardons. Broadly, they sought to defend the SPO investigation of the wiretapped conversations scandal. Days later, following the gradual incorporation of political parties into the protests—as SDSM became a major driving force—it steadily evolved into an ideologically-uneven conglomeration of groups that conveyed different, even opposing, demands. Many civic-oriented factions rejected SDSM's involvement in the protests:

Many people reacted when they saw them [SDSM] in the protests. They didn't want them to be there as an opposition party. But after a while, people just softened their mood and acknowledged that somebody would be in power after VMRO-DPMNE fell. The lesser of two evils that we had back then were SDSM and its people. (Interview 5)

The movement, at risk of fracturing along political divergences and tactics, instead broadened its ideological scope and became an all-encompassing civic-political movement. Aware of its internal divisions, protest organisers opted for a practical and relatable path, namely bringing down the common enemy, the VMRO-DPMNE leadership. This option was also the most achievable in the short run:

People were ready to do whatever it took just to get rid of these bastards. That was the dominating feeling. Even accepting [SDSM leader Zoran] Zaev even though they didn't like him, even though they were suspicious [of him], because these bastards, this guy [President Ivanov] decided to pardon the criminals, decided to hamper the work of the SPO, which back then was much more popular than the political leaders of the opposition. (Interview 1)

Highly diverse civic participation represented the many colours of the movement. In time, the Colourful Revolution constructed itself as an ideologically, ethnically, and demographically cross-cutting mosaic of contentious politics where the fight against injustice and corruption was understood as the overarching motif. Through its demands, the movement aimed to topple Gruevski's government and bring officials involved in the 2015 wiretapping scandal to justice.

6.2 The electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution

Elections to parliament were held on 11 December 2016. The momentum of the Colourful Revolution had waned through the summer; political parties—both incumbents and opposition—campaigning intensely ahead of the vote. In the framework of the 2015 Przhino Agreement, a caretaker government had been installed to supervise the road towards elections.

As the election results came in, it became clear that SDSM had almost overtaken VMRO-DPMNE, which finished just 20,000 votes ahead (SEC, 2016). The tally contrasted sharply with the previous parliamentary election, held only two years before, where VMRO-DPMNE had obtained almost twice as many votes as SDSM. In 2016, predictably, SDSM benefited from the Colourful Revolution, gaining much of the ACM's protest vote against VMRO-

DPMNE. As the survey data in Table 2 illustrates, voting trends in the 2016 elections proved to be transformative and reflected the will of many for political change.

Table 2. Voting preferences at the 2014 and 2016 parliamentary elections in Macedonia.
Figures refer to number of respondents (n=1066).

	SDSM	VMRO-DPMNE	Other	Did not vote	Do not know/ Prefer not to say
2014	200	274	76	320	196
2016	311	204	69	300	182

Source: original survey dataset.

The survey data shows that SDSM expanded its support base while VMRO-DPMNE support shrank. The abstention rate decreased only slightly, though. This presents an intriguing case of vote transfer, displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Vote transfer between the 2014 and 2016 parliamentary elections in Macedonia.
Figures refer to number of respondents (n=1066)

		2014				
		SDSM	VMRO-DPMNE	Other	Did not vote	Do not know/ Prefer not to say
2016	SDSM	170	39	19	65	18
	VMRO-DPMNE	5	169	1	22	7
	Other	3	7	44	12	3
	Did not vote	21	49	8	202	20
	Do not know/ Prefer not to say	1	10	4	19	148

Source: original survey dataset.

Two main observations can be inferred from the vote transfer survey data. First, alongside electoral support from the party's traditional voters, SDSM gained a major share of 'new' 2016 voters that had refrained from voting in the 2014 elections, as well as winning over some former VMRO-DPMNE voters and voters from other parties. A common feature of many new SDSM voters, regardless of previous voting preference, was the conviction that VMRO-DPMNE had to be stripped of power. The political appeal of Zaev's party was uneven across different segments of the population—as many non-affiliated or traditionally-abstaining voters viewed SDSM with suspicion—but there was an explicit consensus around the idea that voting for SDSM was necessary in order to oust Gruevski: 'the polarisation that the circumstances of these elections created made a lot of those people aware to come out and [...]

punish Gruevski, and the only way to do this was to vote for SDSM' (Interview 4). As one of the interviewees put it, the 2016 elections presented a simple dichotomous dilemma: 'you either want VMRO[-DPMNE] to stay in power or SDSM to dismantle what they created' (Interview 1). Several interviewees confirmed the impact of politically independent voters and former abstainers, who played a large role in broadening SDSM's support base. This group included traditionally unaffiliated voters, members of the Macedonian diaspora who travelled back to the country in order to cast a vote, as well as voters that used to support other minor parties. An example of the latter came from many members of Macedonia's Albanian community, who in 2016 gave their vote to SDSM as a way to protest against the performance of DUI.

The second observation is that the relative decrease in VMRO-DPMNE's support in 2016 can be explained by the abstention of a considerable number of the party's traditional voters, rather than by a vote transfer to SDSM. All things considered, and as happens with traditional SDSM voters, most traditional VMRO-DPMNE voters remained loyal to the party. VMRO-DPMNE's ideological principles tend to lean towards identity-oriented questions, which engender an extremely loyal party support base among like-minded voters. As a result, the polarised political context preceding the 2016 elections did not contribute to a transfer of votes to SDSM. If anything, as one interviewee explains, 'the highest level of punishment that a traditional VMRO-DPMNE would provide to their party would be not going to the polls, or maybe [...] scribbling something on the ballot, but *not* voting for SDSM' (Interview 4).

Table 4 assesses the extent to which vote transfers were an effect of the Colourful Revolution. The survey data portrays a diverse array of voters' perceptions of the Colourful Revolution—and, more specifically, of whether this ACM impacted voter choice.

Among those voting for SDSM, unsurprisingly, a strongly negative perception of incumbent corruption prevailed. Irrespective of their voting choice in 2014, all segments overwhelmingly rated the VMRO-DPMNE-led government as 'corrupt' or 'extremely corrupt.' Furthermore, there is a clear indication in the data that individuals that also voted for SDSM in 2014 exhibited the highest rate of corruption perception towards VMRO-DPMNE (0.98). These voters, alongside those voting for Others in 2014 but supporting SDSM in 2016—closely followed by former abstainers—showed the highest participation rates in the Colourful Revolution street protests (0.58, 0.38). On the other hand, while former VMRO-DPMNE voters were not enthused by the demonstrations and rarely took part (0.18), they were the segment whose perceptions towards VMRO-DPMNE were the most negatively affected (0.49).

Predictably, rates for incumbent corruption perception, demonstration participation, and negative impact on incumbent perception were the lowest among those voting for VMRO-DPMNE in both 2014 and 2016. This segment had the least negative view of the incumbent government in terms of corruption awareness (0.52). Moreover, the Colourful Revolution had a very low impact on the way these voters came to perceive the VMRO-DPMNE-led administration (0.09). This suggests high rates of partisanship and party loyalty from VMRO-DPMNE voters, further confirmed by the low rates of demonstration participation and negative impact on incumbent perception exhibited by those voting for VMRO-DPMNE in 2014 but abstaining in 2016 (0.04 and 0.06, respectively). For over half of these voters the Colourful Revolution did not change their incumbent corruption perceptions (0.55). These perceptions were, at the same time, already considerably negative (0.79). This might be the reason why they decided to punish their party through abstention.

Table 4. Perceptions towards the Colourful Revolution according to vote transfer between the 2014 and 2016 parliamentary elections. Unless otherwise stated, decimal figures stand for percentage of respondents

2014	2016	Incumbent corruption perception	Participation rate	Negative impact on incumbent perception	Perception unchanged
SDSM	SDSM	0.98	0.58	0.42	0.40
VMRO-DPMNE		0.87	0.18	0.49	0.33
Other		0.97	0.58	0.37	0.42
Did not vote		0.92	0.38	0.35	0.42
SDSM	VMRO-DPMNE	0.90	0.20	0.60	0.40
VMRO-DPMNE		0.52	0.01	0.09	0.56
Other		0.90	0	1	0
Did not vote		0.61	0	0.18	0.68
SDSM	Did not vote	0.95	0.38	0.24	0.38
VMRO-DPMNE		0.79	0.04	0.06	0.55
Other		1	0	0.25	0.63
Did not vote		0.84	0.06	0.22	0.53

Source: original survey dataset.

Indicator 1. *Incumbent corruption perception.* Mean average of respondents' corruption rating of the VMRO-DPMNE/DUI government as a whole, and of VMRO-DPMNE as senior member of the government (0 = not corrupt, 1 = extremely corrupt).

Indicator 2. *Participation rate.* Rate of respondents claiming to have taken part as demonstrators in the Colourful Revolution street protests.

Indicator 3. *Negative impact on incumbent perception.* Rate of respondents claiming that the Colourful Revolution street protests contributed to a change in perception towards the government, either negatively or extremely negatively.

Indicator 4. *Perception unchanged.* Rate of respondents claiming that the Colourful Revolution street protests did not contribute to a change in their perception towards the government, neither positively nor negatively.

7 Conclusion

Macedonia's Colourful Revolution provides an interesting example of how an ACM targeting an illiberal incumbent can channel citizen frustration and foster electoral accountability. Furthermore, this study paves the way towards a deeper understanding of illiberal regime change. Given the paucity of research in this field, the article contributes to knowledge of the effects of ACMs on the electoral punishment of illiberal incumbents. Adopting a corrup-

tion-based understanding of illiberalism, the study has drawn from a set of semi-structured interviews with members and representatives of Macedonia's civil society as well as from an original survey dataset featuring a sample of 1,066 respondents from the Macedonian electorate. Future studies can provide further tests of this article's findings by relying on alternative data sources, such as official barometers and polls, or methods like focus groups, which can provide more accurate assessments of voting trends and attitudes. The article findings suggest that the electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution, although present to a certain extent, was highly contingent upon partisan and ideological criteria. Whereas the Colourful Revolution had a visible impact among certain segments of the electorate, especially in terms of encouraging increasingly negative perceptions of VMRO-DPMNE, this effect registered most among groups less loyal to VMRO-DPMNE. Simultaneously, the Colourful Revolution did not sway traditional VMRO-DPMNE voters. However, a large majority of traditional VMRO-DPMNE voters showed high corruption perceptions about their party—a logic that likely pushed some of these voters to abstain in 2016. Many, however, still supported VMRO-DPMNE at the polls.

The positive electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution was felt mostly among those who in 2014 voted for SDSM or Others, or among those who abstained. A considerable share of these voters saw in the Colourful Revolution's street protests the ideal momentum to oust VMRO-DPMNE. While some perceived this chance in their role of SDSM loyalists, others saw the unprecedented social convergence through a more pragmatic, less party-based lens—where the common goal was VMRO-DPMNE's and Gruevski's fall from power. Suspicion was high among non-SDSM supporters, but awarding electoral legitimacy to Zaev's party was understood as the way to rid the country of VMRO-DPMNE's corrupt polity. Even members of Macedonia's ethnic Albanian minority joined the protests and granted electoral support to SDSM as a way of protesting against DUI, the community's own corrupt incumbent.

Polarisation between the traditional electorates of the country's two main political parties, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, further complicated the process of rendering the party vote spectrum more permeable and porous—which could have contributed to a larger vote transfer from VMRO-DPMNE to SDSM. The findings confirm the difficulty in Macedonia of reaching out to voters who are part of the opponent's electoral body.

References

- Amenta, E., Caren, N., Chiarello, E. & Su, Y. (2010). The Political Consequences of Social Movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 287–307. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-120029>
- Anduiza, E., Gallego, A. & Muñoz, J. (2013). Turning a Blind Eye: Experimental Evidence of Partisan Bias in Attitudes Toward Corruption. *Comparative Political Studies*, 46(12), 1664–1692. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013489081>
- Ashworth, S. (2012). Electoral Accountability: Recent Theoretical and Empirical Work. *The Annual Review of Political Science*, 15, 183–201. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-031710-103823>
- Bågenholm, A. (2009). Politicizing Corruption. The Electoral Impact of Anti-corruption Discourse in Europe 1983–2007. *The Quality of Government Institute Working Paper Series*, 10. http://www.qog.pol.gu.se/working_papers/2009_10_Bagenholm.pdf

- Bågenholm, A. (2013a). The Electoral Fate and Policy Impact of “Anti-corruption Parties” in Central and Eastern Europe. *Human Affairs*, 23(2), 174-195. <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-013-0118-4>
- Bågenholm, A. (2013b). Throwing the Rascals Out? The Electoral Effects of Corruption Allegations and Corruption Scandals in Europe 1981-2011. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 60(5), 595–609. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-013-9482-6>
- Baumgartner, F. & Mahoney, C. (2005). Social Movements, the Rise of New Issues, and the Public Agenda. In D. S. Meyer, V. Jenness & H. Ingram (Eds.) *Routing the Opposition: Social Movements, Public Policy and Democracy* (pp. 65–86). University of Minnesota Press.
- Beha, A. & Hajrullahu, A. (2020). Soft competitive authoritarianism and negative stability in Kosovo: statebuilding from UNMIK to EULEX and beyond. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 103–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1709686>
- Bennett, C. (2016). *Bosnia’s Paralysed Peace*. Hurst.
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>
- Bieber, F. (2018). Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics*, 34(3), 337–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272>
- Bieber, F. (2020). *The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22149-2>
- Buscaglia, E. & Dakolias, M. (1999). An Analysis of the Causes of Corruption in the Judiciary. *Law and Policy in International Business*, 30, 95–116.
- Caillier, J. (2010). Citizen Trust, Political Corruption, and Voting Behaviour: Connecting the Dots. *Politics & Policy*, 38(5), 1015–1035. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2010.00267.x>
- Carlin, R., Love, G. & Martínez-Gallardo, C. (2015). Cushioning the Fall: Scandals, Economic Conditions, and Executive Approval. *Political Behaviour*, 37(1), 109–130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-014-9267-3>
- Carreras, M. & Vera, S. (2018). Do Corrupt Politicians Mobilize or Demobilize Voters? A Vignette Experiment in Colombia. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 60(3), 77–95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2018.25>
- Carvajal, R. (1999). Large-Scale Corruption: Definition, Causes, and Cures. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 12(4), 335–353. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022492112414>
- Chong, A. & Calderón, C. (2000). Institutional Quality and Income Distribution. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 48(4), 761–786. <https://doi.org/10.1086/452476>
- Chong, A., De La O, A. L., Karlan, D. & Wantchekon, L. (2015). Does Corruption Information Inspire the Fight or Quash the Hope? A Field Experiment in Mexico on Voter Turnout, Choice and Party Identification. *The Journal of Politics*, 77(1), 55–71. <https://doi.org/10.1086/678766>
- Coelho, J. (2018). Seizing the State under International Administration: The Case Study of State Capture and Corruption in Kosovo. *Southeastern Europe*, 42(1), 107–130. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201006>

- Costas-Pérez, E., Solé-Ollé, A. & Sorribas-Navarro, P. (2012). Corruption Scandals, Voter Information, and Accountability. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 28(4), 469–484. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2012.05.007>
- Crowther, W. (2017). Ethnic Condominium and Illiberalism in Macedonia. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 31(4), 739–761. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0888325417716515>
- De Vries, C. & Solaz, H. (2017). The Electoral Consequences of Corruption. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1), 391–408. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052715-111917>
- Della Porta, D. (2001). A Judges' Revolution? Political Corruption and the Judiciary in Italy. *European Journal of Political Research*, 39(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007134509892>
- Della Porta, D. (2015). *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*. Polity.
- Della Porta, D. (2017a). Anti-Corruption from Below. Social Movements against Corruption in Late Neoliberalism. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 10(3), 661–692. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v10i3p661>
- Della Porta, D. (2017b). Riding the Wave. Protest Cascades, and What We Can Learn from Them. In D. della Porta (Ed.), *Global Diffusion of Protest. Riding the Protest Wave in the Neoliberal Crisis* (pp. 9–30). Amsterdam University Press.
- Del Monte, A. & Papagni, E. (2001). Public Expenditure, Corruption, and Economic Growth: The Case of Italy. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 17(1), 1–16. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0176-2680\(00\)00025-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0176-2680(00)00025-2)
- Dimant, E., Krieger, T. & Meierrieks, D. (2013). The Effect of Corruption on Migration, 1985–2000. *Applied Economics Letters*, 20(13), 1270–1274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2013.806776>
- Dolenec, D. (2013). *Democratic institutions and authoritarian rule in Southeast Europe*. ECPR Press.
- Ecker, A., Glinitzer, K. & Meyer, T. M. (2016). Corruption Performance Voting and the Electoral Context. *European Political Science Review*, 8(3), 333–354. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773915000053>
- Eggers, A. C. (2014). Partisanship and Electoral Accountability: Evidence from the UK Expenses Scandal. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 9(4), 441–472. <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00013140>
- Engler, S. (2016). Corruption and Electoral Support for New Political Parties in Central and Eastern Europe. *West European Politics*, 39(2), 278–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1084127>
- Gingerich, D. (2009). Corruption and Political Decay: Evidence from Bolivia. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 4(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00008003>
- Gjuzelov, B. & Ivanovska Hadjievska, M. (2020). Institutional and symbolic aspects of illiberal politics: the case of North Macedonia (2006–2017). *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 41–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1672941>
- Grozdanovska Dimishkovska, L. (2012). *Nations in Transit 2012 – Macedonia*. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4fd5dd2a4d.html>
- Gupta, S., Davoodi, H. & Alonso-Terme, R. (2002). Does Corruption Affect Income Inequality and Poverty? *Economics of Governance*, 3(1), 23–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s101010100039>

- Halperin, S. & Heath, O. (2012). *Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills*. Oxford University Press.
- Holmberg, S. & Rothstein, B. (2011). Dying of Corruption. *Health Economics, Policy and Law*, 6(4), 529–547. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S174413311000023X>
- Howard, M. M. (2003). *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jiménez, J. L. & García, C. (2018). Does Local Public Corruption Generate Partisan Effects on Polls? *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 69(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-016-9671-1>
- Kapidžić, D. (2019). Subnational competitive authoritarianism and power-sharing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 81–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2020.1700880>
- Kapidžić, D. (2020). The rise of illiberal politics in Southeast Europe. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2020.1709701>
- Keil, S. (2013). Europeanization, state-building and democratization in the Western Balkans. *Nationalities Papers*, 41(3), 343–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.768977>
- Keil, S. (2018). The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. *Southeastern Europe*, 42(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201004>
- Kera, G. & Hysa, A. (2020). Influencing votes, winning elections: clientelist practices and private funding of electoral campaigns in Albania. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 123–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1709698>
- Kitschelt, H. (1986). Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 16(1), 57–85. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712340000380X>
- Klašnja, M. (2015). Corruption and the Incumbency Disadvantage: Theory and Evidence. *The Journal of Politics*, 77(4), 928–942. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682913>
- Klašnja, M. (2017). Uninformed Voters and Corrupt Politicians. *American Politics Research*, 45(2), 256–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1532673X16684574>
- Komar, O. (2020). The elephant in the room: illiberal politics in Montenegro. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 61–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2020.1703495>
- Krastev, I. (2018). *Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution: The Long Road to Democratic Decline*. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(3). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2018-04-16/eastern-europes-illiberal-revolution>
- Kubbe, I. & Loli, M. (2020). Corruption and populism: the linkage. In A. Mungiu-Pippidi & P. M. Heywood (Eds.), *A Research Agenda for Studies of Corruption* (pp. 118–130). Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789905007>
- Kurer, O. (2005). Corruption: An Alternative Approach to its Definition and Measurement. *Political Studies*, 53(1), 222–239. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00525.x>
- Kurer, O. (2015). Definitions of Corruption. In P. M. Heywood (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption* (pp. 30–41). Routledge.

- Lewis-Beck, M. & Paldam, M. (2000). Economic Voting: An Introduction. *Electoral Studies*, 19(2–3), 113–121. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794\(99\)00042-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794(99)00042-6)
- Machado, F., Scartascini, C. & Tommasi, M. (2011). Political Institutions and Street Protests in Latin America. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55(3), 340–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002711400864>
- Mărgarit, D. (2015). Ideology and Social Movements. A Comparative Analysis of the 2013 Protests in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. In G. Pleyers & I. N. Sava (Eds.), *Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 13–26). Bucharest University Press.
- Marušić, S. J. (2011). Macedonians Protest Over 'Fatal Police Beating'. *Balkan Insight*, June 7, <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/06/07/macedonians-protest-after-police-murders-youngster/> Accessed: 08-03-2021.
- Marušić, S. J. (2016a). Macedonia President Pardons Politicians Facing Charges. *Balkan Insight*, April 12, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/04/12/macedonia-president-abolishes-incriminated-politicians-04-12-2016/> Accessed: 08-03-2021.
- Marušić, S. J. (2016b). Macedonia President Revokes All Controversial Pardons. *Balkan Insight*, June 6, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/06/macedonia-president-fully-withdraws-pardons-06-06-2016/> Accessed 08-03-2021.
- Mauro, P. (1995). Corruption and Growth. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 110(3), 681–712. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2946696>
- Micevski, I. & Trpevska, S. (2015). What the Macedonian phone-tapping scandal tells us about clientelism in the media. *International Journal of Digital Television*, 6(3), 319–326. https://doi.org/10.1386/jdtv.6.3.319_1
- Milan, C. (2017). Rising against the Thieves. Anti-corruption Campaigns in South-Eastern Europe. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 10(3), 826–849. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v10i3p826>
- Mungiu-Pippidi, A. (2013). Controlling Corruption through Collective Action. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(1), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0020>
- Murtagh, C. (2016). Civic Mobilization in Divided Societies and the Perils of Political Engagement: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Protest and Plenum Movement. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 22(2), 149–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2016.1169060>
- Nye, J. (1967). Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-Benefit Analysis. *The American Political Science Review*, 61(2), 417–427. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953254>
- Olteanu, T. & Beyerle, S. (2017). The Romanian People Versus Corruption. The Paradoxical Nexus of Protest and Adaptation. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 10(3), 797–825. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v10i3p797>
- Ozimec, K. (2016). Macedonia: 'Colorful Revolution' paints raucous rainbow. *Deutsche Welle*, April 21, <https://www.dw.com/en/macedonia-colorful-revolution-paints-raucous-rainbow/a-19203365> Accessed: 08-03-2021.
- Pani, M. (2011). Hold Your Nose and Vote: Corruption and Public Decisions in a Representative Democracy. *Public Choice*, 148(1-2), 163–196. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-010-9651-4>

- Pavlović, D. (2019). The political economy behind the gradual demise of democratic institutions in Serbia. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1672929>
- Pech, L. & Scheppele, K. L. (2017). Illiberalism Within: Rule of Law Backsliding in the EU. *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies*, 19, 3–47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cel.2017.9>
- Peiffer, C. & Álvarez, L. (2016). Who Will Be the “Principled-Principals”? Perceptions of Corruption and Willingness to Engage in Anticorruption Activism. *Governance*, 29(3), 351–369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12172>
- Persson, A., Rothstein, B. & Teorell, J. (2010). The Failure of Anti-Corruption Policies. A Theoretical Mischaracterization of the Problem. *University of Gothenburg Quality of Government Institute Working Papers*, 19. <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/39039>
- Petkovski, L. (2015). Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing ‘the People’ in Macedonia’s Illiberal Discourse. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 3(2), 44–66.
- Pettinicchio, D. (2017). Elites, Policy and Social Movements. In B. Wejnert & P. Parigi (Eds.), *On the Cross Road of Polity, Political Elites and Mobilization* (pp. 155–190). Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0895-993520160000024006>
- Philp, M. (2006). Corruption Definition and Measurement. In C. Sampford, A. Shacklock, C. Connors & F. Galtung (Eds.), *Measuring Corruption* (pp. 45–56). Ashgate.
- Pirro, A. (2017). Screaming at a Wall. Societal Accountability from Below in Bulgaria and Hungary. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 10(3), 773–796. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v10i3p773>
- Poprawe, M. (2015). On the Relationship Between Corruption and Migration: Empirical Evidence from a Gravity Model of Migration. *Public Choice*, 163(3–4), 337–354. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-015-0255-x>
- Reef, P. (2017). Macedonia’s Colourful Revolution and the Elections of 2016: A Chance for Democracy, or All for Nothing? *Südosteuropa*, 65(1), 170–182. <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2017-0009>
- Riera, P., Barberá, P., Gómez, R., Mayoral, J. A. & Montero, J. R. (2013). The Electoral Consequences of Corruption Scandals in Spain. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 60(5), 515–534. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-013-9479-1>
- Rocha Menocal, A., Fritz, V. & Rakner, L. (2008). Hybrid regimes and the challenges of deepening and sustaining democracy in developing countries. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 15(1), 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220460802217934>
- Rose-Ackerman, S. (1997). The Political Economy of Corruption. In K. A. Elliott (Ed.), *Corruption and the Global Economy* (pp. 31–60). Institute for International Economics.
- SEC, State Election Commission of North Macedonia (2016). <https://rezultati2016.sec.mk/Parliamentary/Results?cs=en-US&r=r&rd=r1&eu=All&m=All> Accessed 08-03-2021.
- Rupnik, J. (2016). The Specter Haunting Europe: Surging Illiberalism in the East. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(4), 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0064>
- Sampson, S. (2010). The Anti-corruption Industry: From Movement to Institution. *Global Crime*, 11(2), 261–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440571003669258>

- Seligson, M. A. (2002). The Impact of Corruption on Regime Legitimacy: A Comparative Study of Four Latin American Countries. *The Journal of Politics*, 64(2), 408–433. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.00132>
- Shabad, G. & Słomczyński, K. (2011). Voters' Perceptions of Government Performance and Attributions of Responsibility: Electoral Control in Poland. *Electoral Studies*, 30(2), 309–320. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016%2Fj.electstud.2010.10.002>
- Svoboda, C. (1995). Retrospective Voting in Gubernatorial Elections: 1982 and 1986. *Political Research Quarterly*, 48(1), 135–150. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F106591299504800108>
- Szołucha, A. (2010). The EU and Enlargement Fatigue: Why has the European Union Not Been Able to Counter Enlargement Fatigue? *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 6(1), 1–16.
- Tarrow, S. & Petrova, T. (2007). Transactional and Participatory Activism in the Emerging European Polity: The Puzzle of East-Central Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, 40(1), 74–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0010414006291189>
- Tarrow, S. & Tilly, C. (2009). Contentious Politics and Social Movements. In C. Boix & S. C. Stokes (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (pp. 435–460). Oxford University Press.
- Tilly, C. & Tarrow, S. (2006). *Contentious Politics*. Paragon Press.
- Vachudova, M. A. (2013). EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years on. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52(1), 122–138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12081>
- Zakaria, F. (1997). The rise of illiberal democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6), 22–43.

ESRA AYTAR* & PETER BODOR**

Coping strategies among an intersectional group: Muslim women in Hungary

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 52–69.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.830>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* [\[esraaytar88@gmail.com\]](mailto:esraaytar88@gmail.com) (Eötvös Loránd University)

** [\[peter.bodor@gmail.com\]](mailto:peter.bodor@gmail.com) (Eötvös Loránd University)

Abstract

As members of a stigmatised intersectional group, Muslim women in Hungary not only receive unwanted attention but also verbal/physical attacks, assaults, and hate crimes. What kind of individual strategies and collective resilience patterns have they developed to cope with or to improve the hazardous situations they experience? This paper utilises participant observation data and qualitative interviews to study these issues. Two major dimensions of the participants' strategies were detected: active versus Passive and Individual versus Collective. Exposition of these coping strategies was also accompanied by discussing the relevance of the types of reactions to threatened identity as suggested by Breakwell's social identity theory-inspired model and Pargament's studies on religious resilience practices.

Keywords: Muslim women, resilience, coping strategies, minorities in Hungary.

1 Introduction

The goal of this research is to contribute to the existing literature on Muslims in Hungarian society with the help of a qualitative study. Specifically, our research is directed to a truly intersectional group of contemporary Hungary (Hankivsky, 2014; Sauer, 2009; Schiek & Lawson, 2011; Weber, 2015) insofar as our research participants are Muslim women: Muslim female immigrants living in Hungary, Hungarian female converts, and the daughters of mixed families. As our participants are part of an intersectional community, they experience the outcomes of relevant intersectional identities—Muslim, immigrant, female, convert, Hungarian, non-Hungarian—in multiple ways. Also, religious resilience (Pargament et al., 1998; 2000; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Peres et al., 2007) is pivotal in this study as the common identity of the participants is being Muslim and religion presumably plays a profound role in their reaction to the individual and collective experiences. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the possible resilience of the actors and uncover the Individual and Collective strategies applied by them to cope with discrimination, exclusion, hate crime, and intra- and intergroup oppression.

2 Self, identity, and threatened social identity

In sociology and social psychology, the self and identity has been considered as a multi-dimensional concept that consists of consistently changing components or aspects. Conceptually, identity can be considered as a discursive formation shaped by a complex of various orientations, schemes, and social prescriptions that people rely on during their daily lives (Bodor, 2012). In this paper, we rely primarily on Social Identity Theory because it focuses on the issues of relating self to its group memberships, on the aspects of the self that are shaped by one's multiple group memberships, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, family, etc. In their seminal work, Tajfel and Turner describe social identity as 'the knowledge that (one) belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance of the group membership' (Tajfel, 1972, p. 31). Breakwell (2015), Tajfel's former student, discusses the coping strategies of minority group members when their identity is threatened by external groups, namely by a higher status group. She suggests five possible coping strategies: Passing, Compliance, Negativism, Isolation, and Transition. Her typology is especially relevant for our present purposes since this study explore how the participants react when they are discriminated and feel disadvantaged due to their Muslim, convert, immigrant identities. Passing, as a strategy, suggests that the agents choose to leave their threatened identity position and move to a high-status group as it is proposed in the Individual mobility strategy. In the Compliance strategy, the low-status group member accepts the way he/she is perceived by the external groups and complies with their expectation from him/her to ensure his/her continuity, uniqueness, and self-esteem. For example, if the prejudice or judgment of a high-status group expects his/her group to be less educated, then he/she complies with this profile rather than challenging it. Negativism, as a coping strategy, implies an active and direct counter-reaction against the source of the identity threat. As opposed to Compliance, Negativism requires refusing the expectations of the external groups and instead confronting them. Isolation strategy focuses on minimising confrontation with the threatening source; to succeed in this, it proposes to avoidance, isolating the person to escape from negative experiences coming from external groups. Transition as a coping strategy suggests a transition from a low-status situation to a higher one, such as from a less educated status to a highly educated status. In this way, a member of a low-status minority group can cope with external threats to his/her identity; examples have been documented with regard to Roma in the Hungarian context (Bokrétás, Bigazzi & Péley 2007).

Additionally, Pargament and his colleagues' (1998) paper discussing the influence of positive religious coping strategies as resilience-building methods on trauma patients with a religious background is also relevant for this study. They list examples of positive religious coping strategies as benevolent reappraisal, seeking spiritual support, active religious surrender, seeking spiritual connection (Pargament, 1998; Peres et al., 2007).

The coping strategies identified by Breakwell and the positive religious coping strategies of Pargament and his co-workers are helpful for us to understand and categorise the resilience practices of Muslim women in Hungary. As we show below, our data attests that practices similar to Negativism, Isolation, Transition, and examples of positive religious coping strategies can be found among our participants' accounts.

The emancipation of immigrant women is another important issue when it comes to understanding the experience of immigrant women, especially women who are part of a religious group. Earlier it was thought that emancipation has a direct relation with modernisa-

tion and that immigration to European countries for Muslim women may eventually lead to emancipation, since modernisation has a direct relation to emancipation (Abadan et al., 2015). Abadan Unat describes ‘the decline of extended family relations, the adoption of nuclear family arrangements, fragmentation of the family structure, access to wage-paying work, exposure to the media, a decline in religious practices, and an increase in the adoption of egalitarian values for girls and boys in terms of education and the adoption of consumption-oriented behaviour’ (Ergün, 2016, p. 173). However, one can argue that if identification with religion increases among immigrants following their settlement in a non-Muslim host country, as Peek (2005) claimed, then it is possible to assume that the emancipation of women may be negatively influenced by the more salient religious identity. Therefore, in this research we argue that emancipation can also have a direct influence on the reactions or coping strategies that participants of this research build in the wake of negative inputs from the in-groups or host country members.

Research conducted in Hungary regarding Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular, is relatively scarce and mostly based on surveys which are not particularly sensitive to the lived experience of the members of a minority group—to say the least. There are several studies of immigrant and minority groups in Hungary on various topics (Fülöp et al., 2007; Bigazzi & Csertó, 2016; Nguyen Luu et al., 2019; 2009), but none specifically on the Muslim community despite the presence of ethnic groups, such as Turks and Arabs, that can be considered as predominantly Muslims. Previous research on immigrant groups has explored their experiences of discrimination (Sik & Várhalmi, 2012), their labour market status (Hárs, 2013; Várhalmi, 2013) and the social integration among them (Cartwright, Sik & Svensson 2008; Várhalmi, 2013). Additionally, plenty of academic studies also focus on ethnic minorities, particularly Roma people (Csepeli & Simon, 2004) and ethnic Hungarians from Transylvania; they mostly focus on examining their experiences as members of a minority group, their identity construction, the intergroup relations between them and Hungarian people and Hungarian institutions (Csepeli & Zavec, 1992).

Knowledge on the female members Hungarian Muslim community can be deepened. There are a couple of articles written about Muslim women; one of them regards the marriage of Hungarian and immigrant Muslims and how it can be explored as a process of appropriation (Belhaj and Speidl, 2014). Another study by Belhaj (2017) was based on the concept of modesty in Islam by evaluating the websites and discourses of two big Muslim institutions in Hungary, Magyarországi Muszlimok Egyháza (Church of Muslims in Hungary) and Magyar Iszlám Közösség (Islam Community of Hungary) to explore what modesty means for them and how they locate modesty within Hungarian context. Our paper adds to the qualitative studies on Muslim women in Hungary by exploring their lived experience and reconstructing their coping strategies for the negative experiences they encounter.

3 Methodological considerations

The target of this research is Muslim women in Hungary. This group has not been studied intensively per se and social scientific reflection of this group is still at the exploratory phase. Furthermore, it is a relatively closed group: due to a set of cultural and political factors it is not easily accessible for outsiders. In this way, it seemed to us, a qualitative research

design would be an appropriate and culturally sensitive option, both in the data gathering and analysis phase of the research. Therefore, this current research has an explorative and qualitative focus on the coping strategies of Muslim women who live in a non-Muslim and politically anti-immigrant country, Hungary.

The main applied methods in this study are participant observation and qualitative interviews. In terms of data gathering, we applied a triangulation of participant observation, qualitative interviews, and online documents such as articles, websites of Muslim associations in Hungary, and social media sharing of Muslim participants. Since the first author of this paper is a Muslim immigrant woman who was once a visible Muslim, practising hijab, she had the role of an insider and participant observant. During field research, she certainly had moments when she felt that she had the same experience and feelings voiced by the participants. Still, particularly in the interviews, she avoided sharing any of her emotions and did not prompt any of the interviewees during the interview. In the sessions of participant observations conducted predominantly in two Budapest mosques, she observed impassively. When she did reveal her ideas or feelings, the aim was to encourage the other participants to make clear their perspectives and emotions on the subject as the proponents of active interviewing advise (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

3.1 Remarks on participant observation

The researcher can choose among four ways of participant observation as Brewer (2000, p. 84) identified: (1) complete participant, the researcher takes the covert role and performs full participation; (2) participant as an observer, overt role is taken and researcher has full participation; (3) observer as a participant, overt role is taken with minimum participation; (4) complete observer, overt role with minimum participation. In all these four types, the researcher either assumes an overt or covert role, and passive or active participation—and each has its benefits and challenges (Atkinson et al., 2007; Borman et al., 1986; Brewer, 2000; Bulmer, 1982; Kawulich, 2005; McKenzie, 2017; Whyte, 1979).

Our field researcher adopted the posture of participant as an observer: full participation and in an overt role (Brewer, 2000). A significant amount of data was gathered during the field research, compiled in a research diary. In participant observation, keeping field notes is highly recommended to both record observations and also to enable the researcher to reflect upon them (Brewer, 2000; Emerson et al., 2001; Fabietti, 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Malinowski, 2003). Therefore, scratch and mental notes were taken during the participant observation sessions. The whole set of field notes and research diaries kept during participant observations include precise data related to actors, so they are kept on a PC to which only the first author of this paper has access with a password due to ethical concerns. She has changed and modified personal information such as names and professions or other details to safeguard participants' identities.

Not each approached person agreed to be interviewed. At the same time, note that the participant observation sessions were helpful to capture the daily communications of Muslim women regarding their lives in Hungary and provided us insights that one cannot easily get through interviews. These insights assisted us a lot at the phase of data analysis. After each encounter with the members of the given community and each participant observation session, the first author of this paper logged her observations, the dialogues she gathered, and

her position during these happenings. During the participant observation sessions, the field researcher was a mere Muslim participant, adopting the covert observer role; as a member of the Muslim community she was not prevented by any gatekeepers. One can discuss the ethical side of the covert role but it has been used and suggested by many prominent ethnographers and cultural anthropologists (Atkinson et al., 2007; Borman et al., 1986; Brewer, 2000; Bulmer, 1982; Kawulich, 2005; McKenzie, 2017; Whyte, 1979). Additionally, as stated above, we have taken steps to protect the anonymity of the actors by changing names and other profile details.

3.2 Characteristics of the qualitative interviews

The most efficient way to gather qualitative data among Muslim women was to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews. Observations and first contacts within the Muslim community indicated that they feel under investigation all the time. This research cannot prove if there are enough justifying reasons for their uneasy feelings, but it was the researcher's responsibility to put them at ease during the interviews. The field researcher built a rapport with the actors during the participant observation sessions, in which she took the covert role by not revealing her researcher identity and participating merely as a Muslim immigrant. Then she revealed her researcher identity to the actors she chose to interview. To ease their uneasy feelings and to obtain genuine replies, we arranged semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions practical and well-suited for the study. We believe that one of the advantages of qualitative research is that it is 'more similar to creating bricolage than to assembling some flat-pack furniture' (Bodor, 2013, p. 13).

This paper is part of a larger research project in which Muslim women in Hungary have been studied in terms of identity formation, group identification, hijab practices, and religious identity and coping strategies. 30 Sunni Muslim women participants were interviewed. 12 of the participants were Hungarian converts and 17 of them were immigrant Muslim women. The study included only one second-generation Muslim woman because the second generations of the Muslim community are mostly under the age of 18; among the adults, only one agreed to be interviewed. The ethnic backgrounds of our participants are diverse. To keep their anonymity we did not share their exact ethnicity. Our immigrant participants were from Middle Eastern, Gulf, Asian and former Soviet Union countries. The convert participants were all ethnically Hungarian.

Interviewing proceeded as follows. Firstly, networks were built among the Muslim community in Hungary by making acquaintances with Muslim women. The purposive sampling method was utilised to choose the potential interviewees who have different experiences and backgrounds to enrich the research data. The snowball technique was used to assist purposive sampling.

3.3 Analysis of data

In qualitative research informed by grounded theory, field research and interviews generally continue until the data saturation is reached and the researcher is confident that no new categories will emerge (Anells, 1996; Charmaz, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Walker, 2012;

Fusch & Ness, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Keeping memos, scratch and mental notes, and recordings of the interviews help the researcher to manage the data gathered during the field research (Fielding, 1993; Kvale, 1996; Newbury, 2001). As previously stated, we collected data employing qualitative interviews, participant observation, field research notes, and on-line documents. Simultaneous to data collection, we transcribed the interviews and created field research notes, including memos when advisable. After transcribing the data and populating the software with the available data documents, an iterative coding procedure was applied. Here we relied on ATLAS.ti, which is designed to assist the researchers to ascertain and systematically analyse complex data sets.

One of our principal analytical procedures was coding that can be taken as meaning condensation in our view. Indeed, it is a major procedure in systematic qualitative research (Charmaz, 2000). At the outset we coded the data with eight main codes, namely the thematic areas of Conversion Process, Becoming Religious, Hijab, In-group Relation, Out-Group Relation, Challenges, Advantages, and Strategies of Coping. Applicable codes were applied to all interviews and field research notes. In the second phase, relying on constant comparison, the initial codes were divided into sub-codes using the split code feature. After splitting the main codes into sub-codes, the main codes become code groups that include their subcodes. Participants' accounts regarding the identity-challenging experiences are typically followed by statements about how they react or behave in the face of such experiences, and how they cope with them. These types of discourse sections are labelled with the code Strategies of Coping as we explain below.

Being an interpretive project, the goal was to analyse the participants' own experiences. In appreciating these experiences, we benefited from the background of the field researcher, a Muslim woman, as an insider. At the same time, the background of the second author as an outsider was pivotal to balance the interpretations of the observations and field research data. Therefore, the direct accounts of interview participants, the coding scheme, and participant observations are utilised in the next section. One can argue that the relatively long extracts presented below unnecessarily complicate the study. However, providing space to our participants' voices is pivotal; without their presence, anything we claim would not be properly substantiated. Hence, the argumentation is based on the available accounts and their analysis with the help of related theories and concepts evolved in the coding processes.

4 Strategies for coping

Research data indicates that some Muslim women in Hungary feel that they are targets of unwanted attention or disturbing actions of host country members, and the members of their own-group (Aytar & Bodor, 2019). In that earlier study, we relied on interview extracts on the vicissitudes of wearing and not wearing a hijab and participant observation data. Here, we reconstruct the types of reactions Muslim women exhibit to the challenges they face with interview extracts and participant observation data. As we will see below, the relevant sections of the interviews provide testimony regarding how they react or behave in the face of challenging experiences, and how they cope with them. Accordingly, discourse sections and documents that featured coping were labelled and subsequently coded as Strategies of Coping.

Upon inspecting instances of coping in our sources, a new layer of coding emerged gradually. It relied on the insight that our participants produced either passive or active ways to handle the problems they encountered. A strategy of coping is Active if the actor(s) aims to change the behaviour of the person(s) or institution(s) challenging her identity. A strategy is Passive if the actor(s) engages in behaviour that aims to avoid, mitigate, or re-define the challenges to her identity.

Individual strategy manifests when a particular individual's action seeks to overcome or mitigate the effects of identity threat. At the same time, Collective strategies imply the concerted effort of some collectivity. Neither of these strategies implicates a lack of agency on behalf of our subject. A further note on our typology: we consider Active-Passive and individual-Collective properties as characteristic dimensions of coping strategies and to be taken ideal-types instead of ontologically fixed and exclusive features of reality. Indeed, we confer analytic value to the Individual-Collective distinction despite the fact that there is whole cluster of religious activity—such as praying—where determining actions' individual versus collective nature seems difficult. After some consideration we decided to label praying and connected spiritual activities as Collective ones.

We show examples of coping strategies applied by members of the given groups, but do not attempt to offer repertoires of strategies of any particular individuals. Four main types of coping strategies manifest among our participants: Passive-Individual, Active-Individual, and Passive-Collective, Active-Collective

Table 1: Summary of strategies of coping with recurring characteristics and examples

	ACTIVE	PASSIVE
INDIVIDUAL	Showing active resistance: Exc. 1; Exc. 2; Exc. 3; Exc. 4; Exc. 5 Defending themselves verbally on the spot: Exc. 2; Exc. 3; Putting forward Hungarian roots/identity: Exc. 3; Filing official complaints to authorities: Exc.1 Claiming the challenged (Muslim) identity: Exc. 4; Exc. 5;	Distancing themselves from the attacker: Exc. 6; Showing passive resistance: Exc. 6; Ignoring the attack/assault: Exc. 6;
COLLECTIVE	Organising events and gatherings: World Hijab Day; Walking tours; Minority Right workshop involving an NGO	Seeking solidarity among the Muslim community Healing themselves with spiritual means

Table 1 summarises our main findings. Among the four main types of coping strategies we identified, as we will see, examples of Breakwell's Negativism, Isolation, and Transition as well as Pargament's positive religious strategies can be found. Below we exemplify the coping strategies with excerpts from interviews and observational data, and highlight some of their further characteristics. We show examples for coping with identity threat that emanating from out-group and in-group alike. Furthermore, we reflect upon the issue of possible differences of applying Passive versus Active strategies by immigrant Muslim women versus

Hungarian-born and converted Muslim women. Demonstrating the differences in preferential use of strategies by immigrant versus locally socialised women is complemented with explicating the reasons our participants offered for using Passive versus Active strategies.

4.1 Individual strategies: Active versus Passive

Active-Individual Strategy. Among the Muslim immigrant interviewees, only two described an Active-Individual strategy attesting their resistance to a challenge of their identity. It is also characteristic of Breakwell's (2015) Negativism strategy when the agent directly confronts a threatening situation rather than accepting the expectations of the external source. In the first example, DA filed a complaint when staff at a government office mistreated her. She received an apology letter from the authorities.

Excerpt 1.:

DA: Sometimes I am having problems outside of my workplace because I don't speak Hungarian well. For instance, I didn't know that you could not get off the front door on the bus. The driver started saying something to me in Hungarian, and he was talking so fast, I didn't understand. When he noticed that I didn't understand, he pretended to speak Chinese (assuming that I was Chinese due to my physical appearance) and started laughing. [...] I felt really bad. I was going to take the plate number and file a complaint, but I didn't get it. I had the same situation at the post office once. [...] The working lady spoke so long that I could not understand her. [...] I thought there was a problem, so I called my Hungarian-speaking friend and asked him to talk to her. She got so mad at me, she kept staring at me badly when she was on the phone. [...] So I wrote a complaint, and I said I'm trying to learn Hungarian, but I don't have enough time due to work. They answered my letter and they apologised. [...] They sent a warning to this branch. I'm relieved when I file a complaint in these situations.

Another participant, GŞ shared her way of coping with assaults or offensive treatment. She found defending herself and not being intimidated as a way of coping. Thus, our next excerpt indicates an immediate interactional reciprocation of the verbal harassment.

Excerpt 2.:

GŞ: If I get assaulted, I always defend myself. For instance, if I am intentionally targeted with a joke or unnecessary discourse at my workplace by an ignorant colleague, I am clever enough to return the favour. As I am not hijabi, I am not getting directly verbal or physical attacks publicly. I have experienced a couple of discriminative acts in a hospital or other offices due to my lack of Hungarian knowledge. In such cases, I prefer to make myself stay emotionally stable. I am a hard-working person who knows three foreign languages. If the person I am interacting with knows only Hungarian that is her problem. Instead of blaming myself, I blame him or her. It is okay if she and I cannot find a common language to interact but if she keeps behaving to me like any other customer then I keep making an effort to explain myself in Hungarian. If she just prefers to discriminate against me or takes a negative attitude then I do the same to her. I can be an immigrant but I pay taxes more than Hungarian so I deserve equal service.

Hungarian converts tend to cope more actively, that is applying Active-Individual strategy against harassment by putting forward their Hungarian identity. One convert participant narrated as follows.

Excerpt 3.:

EH: I was on the bus with my son. I am a hijabi, so I am visibly Muslim. A man started talking to me in Hungarian, negatively, and clearly about me. Most probably he thought I don't speak Hungarian. I replied to him saying if you have genuine questions, please ask them nicely, [...] and otherwise please stop talking to me this way in front of my son. We are as Hungarian as you are. Before I stood up for myself I was discriminated by him because of my Muslim appearance. After I said I am Hungarian, then he called me a traitor. I kept arguing how I am a working and tax-paying Hungarian and my religion does not make me a traitor to my roots.

Even though this is not a Transition in the traditional sense, as suggested by Breakwell (2015), still it exemplifies Hungarian converts' preference for making the transition by referring to a specific component of themselves, to their Hungarian roots and identity (Bokrétás, Bigazzi & Péley 2007). The factors behind Hungarian converts' more skilful resistance to negative attitudes are that Hungarian is their mother language, they are Hungarian citizens, and they are comparatively more aware of their rights; they do not have to fear deportation and residential document problems, which makes them more daring.

Migrant Muslim women, it seems to us, behave more hesitantly as they are not Hungarian citizens, so they think they may face deportation or other official difficulties as they have the perception that the Hungarian government does not 'guard their rights' the same way they do for citizens. Even though there is no case in which a complaint was filed by a participant and got ignored by the legal system, the feeling of a biased legal system among some participants is understandable considering the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim policy of the current Hungarian government and rhetoric of mainstream media.

The previous examples are from experiences with host country members, originating from out-group representatives. There are examples of Active-Individual strategies they produced to cope with negative experiences they have with their in-groups, that is, fellow Muslims—Still, TH and RD5 shared how they took a stand against group members who try to interfere in their lives and always behave negatively.

Excerpt 4.:

TH: I really hate when my fellow Muslim friends criticise my way of dressing, praying, and reading the Quran. They say: 'Your skirt is not long enough to pray, you pray well but too quickly, you read the Quran but you have a couple of mistakes that need improving, etc.' I do not want to offend them but I feel uncomfortable when they do so. They excuse themselves by saying that 'I care for you so I warn you.' I am sorry, but I did not ask them about what they think or what they suggest. If I ask them, then they have the right to say so, but if I do not, then they should not interfere in my life.

Excerpt 5.:

RD5: There are many things I do not agree with my community. They can be very judgmental from time to time. They can criticise Muslim women like me who came to Europe and gave up the hijab. We are immoral or less Muslim according to them. On the other hand, I am a practicing Muslim and I am receiving jokes and odd attention when I pray at my workplace or do not drink alcohol when we gather up with non-Muslim friends. They try to appear open-minded but sometimes they are all same with my narrow-minded Muslim friends. These types of dilemmas cause me to feel alone and stressed but I would prefer to live a life in which I am honest to myself and to those around me rather than trying to be happy in a lie.

In these two cases the participants do not feel completely in sync with their in-group members and claim that they are not considered Muslim enough due to their appearances. Dynamic and social group-tied methods of categorisation, in our case identity ascription of being Muslim, is demonstrated by these examples. The way we categorise ourselves could shape the way we perceive and categorise the behaviour of others towards us, as happened in the case of participants RD5 and TH. TH categorises herself as a modern hijabi women while RD5 describes herself as a non-hijabi, modern, and a believer. Both consider themselves religious and modern; they are both emancipated women, but in different ways. From this emerges the argument that modernity and emancipation do not always imply distancing from religion as assumed by earlier researchers (e.g., Abadan et al., 2015; Ergün et al., 2016). Both participants, moreover, explained how they actively respond to negativity from their in-groups and how they do not let harassment prevent them living as they see fit. Their emancipation has an impact on their performance of Active coping strategies without decreasing their religiosity.

Passive-Individual Strategy. While immigrant Muslim women occasionally apply Active-Individual coping strategies, most of our other examples show Muslim immigrant participants more routinely use Passive-Individual strategies, such as distancing themselves from the attacker and the setting, showing passive resistance by ignoring the attack and assault. The following extract exemplifies the Passive-Individual reaction of a Muslim immigrant woman and provides some reasons for passivity.

Excerpt 6.:

TH: If I am targeted in public space, I mostly ignore them and distance myself from the perpetrator. Unfortunately, this is because I am not fluent in Hungarian and also because I fear that I would not be able to physically protect myself, especially if it is a man. I prefer not to complain to the police as a hate crime is not even a crime in Hungary, as the prime minister himself commits it daily. When I am offended by someone from my community, I just warn her/him if we are close, if not, I just write her/him off my life or I just avoid them.

The other immigrant participants who preferred a Passive Individual strategy often echoed the sentiments in excerpt six. Some stated they do not use public transport but drive their own cars or use other means to avoid possible conflicts or the uneasy feeling caused by outsiders. These are examples of Breakwell's (2015) Isolation strategy, enabling individuals to avoid the negative input from out-groups against their identity. Our data suggested that the main reason for the high number of Passive-Individual reactions among Muslim immigrant women is the lack of competence. They stated that they prefer not to reply or file a complaint as they lack competence in the Hungarian language. They also mentioned the lack of legal competence required to proceed in cases of assault or hate crime. It was also observed that they are not exactly aware of what constitute hate crime and assault.

The interview excerpts and our participant observation data indicate that immigrant participants mostly take defensive positions rather than trying to make a change. This is not because they do not want things to change in their inter- and intragroup interactions. Rather, they do not believe that the current circumstances are favourable for such changes, or they believe passivity is a better resilience strategy. Plus, some of them think they are not capable of carrying out these adjustments as they lack language proficiency, a factor frequently mentioned.

Only a couple of Hungarian convert interviewees mentioned reacting passively like the Muslim immigrant women. Yet their motivation is not a lack of linguistic or legal competence, rather they seem to demonstrate introverted personality characteristics; they prefer a positive religious coping strategy to build their resilience. Additionally, they mentioned that they prefer to forgive the wrongdoers (i.e., those who harass or attack them) in order to be forgiven themselves by Allah, an action we consider a re-definition of the challenge. These clear signs of positive religious coping strategies as a way of resilience-building (Pargament et al., 1998; 2000; Peres et al., 2007). The participants chose to follow the religious path to comfort themselves by practising ‘benevolent reappraisal, or seeking a lesson from God in the event and seeking spiritual support, or searching for comfort in God’s care’ (Peres et al., 2007, 98).

4.2 Collective strategies: Passive versus Active

This section documents Collective strategies, ways of acting with the concerted effort of some real or imagined collectivity. A Collective strategy is Active when it includes an active communication with an outer group, in our case with Hungarian society or with a non-Muslim group. A Collective strategy is Passive when it is only within the in-group and tends to soothe the group members or imbue them with solidarity.

Female members of the Hungarian Muslim community have benefitted from Collective coping strategies, both passively and actively. Several examples of Active-Collective strategies emerged during field research. For instance, the Muslim women’s community organised a ‘World Hijab Day’ (*A Kendő Világnapja*, 2018) open to everybody. There, Hungarian converts made a presentation about the hijab, fashion, and the life of a hijabi; and they encouraged non-Muslim women to try being a hijabi. Another example is when Hungarian converts and immigrant Muslim women organised walking tours to Islamic places in Hungary, inviting non-Muslims to these tours. These tours are also an example of the Collective coping strategy, attempting to improve the knowledge of non-Muslims in Hungary about Muslims and to build bridges to decrease the fear of the unknown (Than, 2017).

Still another example of an Active-Collective strategy was an event organised by a well-known NGO in collaboration with one of the Muslim associations in Hungary. The language of the event was Hungarian and English. The NGO informed participants, both Muslims and non-Muslims, about minority rights in Hungary and how they can provide assistance to protect these rights. However, they stressed that there is no quantitative or qualitative data about the cases Muslims have had in Hungary since cases are reported. The meeting aimed to inform the participants about hate crime, harassment, and discrimination. There were relatively few immigrant participants compared to Hungarian women. This may indicate that an event which can be taken as an Active-Collective coping Strategy was not particularly attractive for immigrant Muslim women.

The current research data suggests that Hungarian convert Muslim women seem to be more comfortable applying Active-Collective strategies. The situation of immigrant Muslim women is different. The main reason is that these Muslim women need solidarity among the Muslim community—that is a Passive-Collective coping strategy in itself—to build effective resilience for the problems arising from their intersectional identities in Hungary. Indeed, some of them benefit from Passive-Collective strategies by seeking spiritual connection

(Peres et al., 2007) within the Muslim community and through spiritual means such as praying and performing particular collective good deeds. Therefore, fighting in-group challenges, like negative, overwhelming attitudes, expectations from Muslim women, and the gender gap within the Muslim community, is a much less imminent concern for them.

Solidarity within the community is necessary to provide protect from negative experiences with out-groups. Particularly for minority groups, solidarity equates to protection in the wake of attacks against their group (Collins, 2004; Edwards, 2020). However, it was discussed that this solidarity might have been enabled by suppressing in-group conflicts. In an earlier study (Aytar & Bodor, 2019) we focused on the accounts of some converts, non-hijabi participants (particularly those who gave up hijab willingly), and participants who have an individualised way of practicing Islam that conflicts from time to time with traditionalist and conservative Islamic practice. Considering their accounts, it seems the way non-conservative practising Muslims and non-hijabi Muslim women benefit from the solidarity is not equivalent with traditionalist and conservative hijabi Muslims' experience (Aytar & Bodor, 2019). The solidarity level depends on the group favouritism of each actor and their conformity with the beliefs and practices of the majority. We infer that the majority of our participants will remain aware of issues among the Muslim community but may tend to postpone developing an Active strategy until they feel secure in Hungary and overcome the issues they have due to their Muslim identity.

We observe that, generally, convert women take leading roles in Active-Collective strategies because of their language competency and full citizenship rights. Citizenship as status thus seems to be a prerequisite of citizenship as practice (Piela, 2019). A related misconception has been documented among the narratives of Muslim immigrants in Hungary. They are hesitant in taking active roles in collective events as they believe that their residence permit renewal processes can be influenced negatively, even though no such action of the government has ever been proved.

Additionally, a common feature among the interviewees was that they do not let the unfavourable interactions and tensions, either from their community or the host community, prevent them from living as they wish. We also consider this a form of passive reaction. On the other hand, it also has a sense of active reaction as they carry on living the way they see fit, regardless of the negative attitudes towards them. Here, the active reaction is not directed toward suppressor or suppressing situation but rather the actor makes an active effort to prevent her life from being influenced by the negative input.

Nevertheless, they certainly experience various emotional difficulties: stress, emotional instabilities, fear, anxiety. To cope with these feelings, the Muslim community benefits from Passive-Collective strategies via spiritual means. Mostly, they find a remedy for these tensions and emotional problems by being together with amicable company who support them. In several observation sessions, participants discussed how *du'a* (prayer) can protect them from external attacks and help them to find inner peace. Such beliefs may have a positive influence on the group members so that praying together or for each other as their Passive Collective strategy can help them recover from emotional stress. In this way, they seek refuge in social cohesion and solidarity against social oppression. Some of them also mentioned that spiritual practices like praying, reciting the Quran, and protective prayers give them relief and strength. In this way, they are seeking consolation in religious and metaphysical powers (Durkheim, 1976).

5 Conclusions

The research documented various strategies that participants use to cope with negative experiences and challenges arising from their intersectional identities. These strategies can be categorised as Active-Individual, Active-Collective, Passive-Individual, and Passive Collective. Furthermore, we have confirmed the utility of Breakwell's (2015) typology to understand challenged, threatened identities. And the practices of positive religious coping were also present among the participants' Passive-Individual and Passive-Collective strategies (Pargament et al., 1998; 2000; Peres et al., 2007). As members of a small and disadvantaged minority group in Hungary, most immigrant participants were inclined to apply Passive strategies rather than active ones. They presented examples of benevolent reappraisal, seeking spiritual support, and seeking spiritual connection as effective resilience strategies. On the other hand, some Hungarian convert Muslim women participants showed a tendency toward more Active Individual and Collective coping strategies. As one part of their intersectional identity is being Hungarian, they are advantaged with the competencies of language and legal rights.

In a recent study on a predominantly female Muslim community in the U.S., Piela (2019) suggested differentiating citizenship as status versus citizenship as practise. She argued persuasively that the latter and not the former are required to exercise unorthodox religious plurality in the community she studied. Our data corroborate this argument, revealing the difference of Active versus Passive coping strategies applied by Hungarian versus immigrant Muslim women. In the contemporary Hungarian context, citizenship as a status, in most cases, seems a necessary though not solely sufficient condition for engaging in more active identity work. Furthermore, linguistic competence and knowledge of cultural lore enhance capacities to use Active coping strategies in facing identity threats.

Recent research discusses the emancipation of immigrant women. Some assume that decreased religiosity is a requirement for increased emancipation (Abadan et al., 2015; Ergün, 2016). However, there were Muslim women among our participants who describe themselves as practising Muslims and also took active stances against harassment. Therefore, we can claim that emancipation does not always requires lesser religiosity. Emancipation, moreover, can result in actors applying more Active coping strategies.

Solidarity is one of the main components that keep minorities, particularly religious ones, together and help construct positive in-group attachments (Collins, 2004; Edwards, 2020). In this study, some participants referred to the solidarity within the Muslim community as a way to cope with external negativities and also a feature that attracts the attention of non-Muslims, even leading to their conversion. However, this solidarity can be an 'imagined one' rather than a practised one (Aytar & Bodor, 2019). Solidarity is often premised on group favouritism and an individual's conformity with the majority beliefs and practises. Yet resultant in-group conflicts are mostly disregarded to protect the solidarity needed to cope with outer conflicts. Solidarity strengthens positive religious coping strategies toward attacks to their intersectional identities from out-groups. However, when it comes to building resilience to overcome in-group conflicts, such as the gender gap controversy and negative experiences within the Muslim community, both Hungarian and immigrant Muslim women are still in the phase of accepting the presence of these issues within their in-group, relying more on Passive rather than Active coping strategies.

This study offers insights into the challenges experienced by an intersectional minority group, female members of the Muslim community in Hungary and their ways of coping with them. For the majority, it can contribute to better understanding the vicissitudes of a stigmatised intersectional minority group, and perhaps to lessen discriminatory activities towards them. At the same time, it also provides a reflection of the Muslim community and an opportunity to improve their own activity, transforming imagined solidarity into a practiced one and avoiding discriminative practices towards in-group members.

Acknowledgements

The authors are thankful to the editors of the special issue for their cooperation and encouragement and to the two reviewers for their sound remarks. The second author's research activity was supported by the ELTE FIKP (1783-3/2018/FEKUTSRAT) in the period 07.01.2018–06.31.2019.

References

- Abadan-Unat, N. & Mirdal, G. (Eds.) (2015). *Emancipation in Exile: Perspectives on the Empowerment of Migrant Women*. Istanbul Bilgi University Press.
- Anells, M. (1996). Grounded theory method: Philosophical perspectives, paradigm of inquiry, and postmodernism. *Qualitative Health Research*, 6(3), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F104973239600600306>
- Ano, G. G. & Vasconcelles, E. B. (2005). Religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(4), 461–480. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20049>
- Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., Delamont, S., Lofland, J. & Lofland, L. (2007). Editorial introduction: Mapping ethnographic diversity. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (pp. 1–7). Sage.
- Aytar, E. & Bodor, P. (2019). Discourses of being a Muslim woman in contemporary Hungary and the hijab paradox. *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 80, 33–50. <https://doi.org/10.4000/qds.2609>
- Aytar, E., (2020). Convert Hungarian Women and Dynamics of Religious Conversion. In *Tavaszi Szél – Spring Wind 2019* (vol. 3, pp. 492–505). Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége. http://dosz.hu/_doc/dokumentumfile/2019/11/Tavaszi_Szel_-_Spring_Wind_2019_Tanulmany_kotet_-_III._kotet.pdf
- Belhaj, A. (2017). Parallel ethics, guilty encounters: Islamic modesty in Hungary. In V. Lajos (Ed.), *The Anthropology of encounters: A találkozások antropológiája* (pp. 206–219). <http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/202253>
- Belhaj, A. & Speidl, B. (2014). Marriage as Appropriation: Evidence from the Hungarian Muslim Community. In *Religion, Culture, Society* (pp. 129–154). MTA-SZTE Research Group for the Study of Religious Culture.
- Bodor, P. (2012). Identity in Discourse: The Case of Ascribing 'Schizophrenia' to Europe and Hungary.

- In M. Heller & B. Kriza (Eds.), *Identities, Ideologies and Representations in Post-transition Hungary* (pp. 117–153). ELTE Eötvös Kiadó.
- Bodor, P. (2013). Szavak, képek és a jelentés kutatása. In P. Bodor (Ed.), *Szavak, képek, jelentés – Kvalitatív kutatási olvasókönyv [Words, images, meaning: A qualitative research reader]* (pp. 7–15). L'Harmattan.
- Bokrétás, I., Bigazzi, S. & Péley, B. (2007). Átmenet–Identitás–Cigányság. I. Az értelmiségi lét felé haladó cigány fiatalok identitásalakulása (Transition – Identity – Gypsyism. I. The Identity Change of Roma Youth Heading Towards Existence in the Intellectual Sphere). *Pszichológia*, 27(4), 299–326.
- Borman, K. M., LeCompte, M. D., Goetz, J. P. (1986). Ethnographic and qualitative research design and why it doesn't work. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 30(1), 42–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F000276486030001006>
- Breakwell, G. M. (2015). *Coping with threatened identities*. Psychology Press.
- Brewer, J. D. (2000). *Ethnography*. Oxford University Press.
- Bulmer, M. (1982). *Social research ethics: an examination of the merits of covert participant observation*. Macmillan.
- Cartwright, A., Sik, E. & Svensson, S. (2008) Social Capital and the Integration of Minorities and Immigrants in Hungary. *Social Capital Working Papers*. <https://cps.ceu.edu/publications/working-papers/social-capital-and-integration>
- Charmaz, K., (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 509–535). Sage.
- Collins, R. (2004). Rituals of solidarity and security in the wake of terrorist attack. *Sociological Theory*, 22(1), 53–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1467-9558.2004.00204.x>
- Creswell, J. W., Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.
- Csepeli, Gy. & Simon, D. (2004). Construction of Roma identity in Eastern and Central Europe: perception and self-identification. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30(1), 129–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183032000170204>
- Csepeli, Gy. & Zavecz, T. (1992). Conflicting bonds of nationality in Hungary; national identity, minority status, and ethnicity. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 5(2), 77–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.1992.9968302>
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1–32). Sage.
- Durkheim, E. (1976). *The elementary forms of the religious life*. Routledge.
- Edwards, S. (2020). Building Solidarity with Religious Minorities: A Reflective Practice for Aspiring Allies, Accomplices, and Coconspirators. *Religion & Education*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2020.1815933>
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I. & Shaw, L. L. (2001). Participant observation and fieldnotes. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608337.n24>

- Ergün, D. B. (2016). Review of N. Abadan-Unat & G. Mirdal (Eds.) (2015), *Emancipation in Exile: Perspectives on the Empowerment of Migrant Women*. Istanbul: Bilgi University Press. 281 pp. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 2(4), 173–177.
- Fabietti, U. (2001). *Storia dell'antropologia*. Zanichelli.
- Fielding, N., (1993). Ethnography. *Researching social life*. 154–171.
- Fusch, P. & Ness, L. (2015). Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2281>
- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Hammersley, M. (2003). *Dilemma Qualitative Method*. Routledge.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge.
- Hankivsky, O. (2014). *Intersectionality 101*. The Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy, SFU.
- Hárs, A. (2013). Harmadik országbeli migránsok munkaerő-piaci helyzete [Labour-Market Position of Immigrants from Third World Countries]. In A. Kováts (Ed.) *Bevándorlás és integráció: Magyarországi adatok, európai indikátorok* (pp. 42–69). TK Kisebbségkutató Intézet.
- Holstein, J. & Gubrium, J. (2003). Active Interviewing. In J. Gubrium & J. Holstein (Eds.) (2003). *Postmodern Interviewing* (pp. 66–80). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412985437.n4>
- Kawulich, B. B. (2005). Participant observation as a data collection method. In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.2.466>
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Sage.
- Lawson, A. (2011) Disadvantage at the intersection of race and disability: Key challenges for EU Non-discrimination law. In A. Lawson & D. Schiek (Eds.), *European Union Non-Discrimination Law and Intersectionality: Investigating the Triangle of Racial, Gender and Disability Discrimination* (pp. 47–62). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315581040>.
- Malinowski, B. (2003). The diary of an anthropologist. In R. G. Burgess (Ed.) *Field Research* (pp. 318–327). Routledge.
- McKenzie, J. S. (2017). 'You Don't Know How Lucky you are to be Here!': Reflections on Covert Practices in an Overt Participant Observation Study. *Sociological Research Online*, 14(2), 60–69. <https://doi.org/10.5153/2Fsro.1925>
- Newbury, D. (2001). Diaries and field notes in the research process. *Research Issues in Art Design and Media*, 1, 1–17. https://icd.wordsinspace.net/course_material/mrm/mrmreadings/riadm Issue1.pdf
- Pargament, K. I., Smith, B. W., Koenig, H. G. & Perez, L. (1998). Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(4), 710–724. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388152>
- Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G. & Peres, L. M. (2000). The many methods of religious coping: Development and initial validation of the RCOPE. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 56(4), 519–543. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4679\(200004\)56:4%3C519::AID-JCLP6%3E3.0.CO;2-1](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4679(200004)56:4%3C519::AID-JCLP6%3E3.0.CO;2-1)

- Peek, L. (2005). Becoming Muslim: The development of a religious identity. *Sociology of Religion*, 66(3), 215–242.
- Peres, J. F., Moreira-Almeida, A., Nasello, A. G. & Koenig, H. G. (2007). Spirituality and resilience in trauma victims. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 46(3), 343–350. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-006-9103-0>
- Piela, A. (2019). ‘Religion Is Like Tofu, It Takes on the Flavour of Whatever It’s Cooked In’: Religious Citizenship and Pluralism Shaping Lived Religion Within a US American Women’s Mosque. In J. J. Bock, J. Fahy & S. Everett (Eds.), *Emergent Religious Pluralism* (pp. 222–249). Springer Nature. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13811-0_10
- Sauer B. (2009). Headscarf Regimes in Europe: Diversity Policies at the Intersection of Gender, Culture and Religion. *Comparative European Politics*, 7(1), 75–94. <https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2008.41>
- Sik, E. & Várhalmi, Z. (2012). Magyarországon élő migránsok diszkriminációs tapasztalatai 2009-ben [Discriminatory Experiences of Immigrants in 2009 Living in Hungary]. In E. Sik & B. A. Simonovits (Eds.), *A diszkrimináció mérése [Measuring Discrimination]* (pp. 130–145). ELTE TáTK.
- Tajfel, H. (1972). Social categorization. In S. Moscovici (Ed.), *Introduction à la Psychologie Sociale* (Vol. 1, pp. 272–302). Larousse.
- Tajfel, H., Billig, M.G., Bundy, R.P. & Flament, C. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1(2), 149–178. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420010202>
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin, & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–37).
- Than, K. (2015). Orban’s ratings rise as Hungarian fence deters migrant ‘invasion’. *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-idUSKCN0SV1J020151106> Accessed 08-04-2020.
- Than, K. (2017). Hungarians take walking tour to overcome fears of Muslims. *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-muslims/hungarians-take-walking-tour-to-overcome-fears-of-muslims-idUSKBN1D61PL> Accessed 08-04-2020.
- Turner, J. C. & Brown, R. (1978). Social status, cognitive alternatives and intergroup relations. In J. H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*, (pp. 201–234). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1037/E668292012-213>
- Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D. & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell.
- Turner, J.C. & Tajfel, H. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.
- Várhalmi, Z. (2013). Vállalkozó migránsok Magyarországon [Migrant entrepreneurs in Hungary]. In A. Kováts (Ed.), *Bevándorlás és integráció. Magyarországi adatok, európai indikátorok [Immigration and integration. Hungarian data, European indicators]* (pp. 89–100). TK Kisebbségkutató Intézet.
- Walker, J. L. (2012). The Use of Saturation in Qualitative Research. *Canadian Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, 22(2), 37–41.

-
- Weber, B.M. (2015). Gender, race, religion, faith? Rethinking intersectionality in German feminisms. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1350506814552084>
- Whyte, W.F. (1979). On making the most of participant observation. *The American Sociologist*, 14(1), 56–66.
- World Hijab Day Hungary – A Kendő Világnapja 2018. *Iszlám.com, Iszlám közösségi oldal*, <https://iszlam.com/hirek/item/2482-world-hijab-day-hungary-a-kendo-vilagnapja> Accessed 08-04-2020.

DÁNIEL MIKECZ*

The Living Memorial movement: Building resilience based on grief

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 70–84.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.903>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* mikecz.daniel@tk.hu (Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest)

Abstract

The paper investigates the emotional, grief-based resilience-building of a social movement, the Living Memorial in Hungary. The movement was initiated in 2014 as the Hungarian government announced the installation of a memorial of the German occupation of 1944, which denied the responsibility of the Hungarian state in the Holocaust. The Living Memorial aimed to contradict the government's memorial by offering an inclusive remembrance through telling personal, family stories. A grounded analysis revealed three different actions were realised by the Living Memorial, which all enhanced the resilience of the group on different levels. The discussion of personal and family stories and sharing grief reinforced the collective identity of the group. The personal remembrance also helped to deconstruct the government's memorial. The political discussions and presentations raised the political consciousness of the participants and strengthened their self-image as competent political actors. It is also revealed that resilience in the case of the Living Memorial was built by a continuous process of reframing and community-building and also by the simultaneous recall and rationalisation of grief and relating emotions.

Keywords: resilience, grief activism, grounded theory, Holocaust, politics of remembrance, social movements

1 Introduction

Since the early 2010s resilience has become a frequently discussed concept in various fields, from ecology to disaster management, development policy, and psychology (Hall & Lamont, 2013; Walsh-Dilley et al., 2013). In social-ecological systems the concept refers to the 'capacity of a system to experience shocks while retaining essentially the same function, structure, feedbacks, and therefore identity' (Walker et al., 2006). Especially in the UK resilience became a guideline for policy-making in order to mitigate the risks and consequences of environmental, technological, social hazards. Nevertheless, this concept of resilience as self-sufficiency in disaster management was criticised as a neo-liberal concept, which abandons vulnerable communities (Anderson, 2015). A different literature, in turn, wished to

identify the institutional and cultural sources of so-called 'social resilience,' which means the capacity of people, who are interrelated through organisational, social, or ethnic ties to face and overcome challenges (Hall & Lamont, 2013). While social scientists have studied the struggle of rural social movements for resilience-building through government support (Walsh-Dilley et al., 2013) and the institutional and cultural sources of social resilience (Hall & Lamont, 2013), the emotional sources of resilience have not been adequately researched. This paper wishes to fill this gap by focusing on the emotional and, more precisely, the grief-based resilience-building of an urban social movement, the Living Memorial. In this endeavour the paper relies primarily on social movement scholarship.

The 'Living Memorial' was originally a flash mob organised on 23 March 2014 against a memorial in Budapest's Szabadság (Liberty) Square commemorating the German occupation of Hungary in 1944. The Hungarian government had commissioned the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation for the 70th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust. However, the depiction of Hungary as the innocent Gabriel archangel attacked by a swooping Nazi eagle was interpreted by many as a falsification of history, as denial of the Hungarian state culpability for the deportation of Hungarian Jews. Even before the official memorial was erected the Living Memorial flash mob was already organised. This occurred some weeks before the 2014 general election in Hungary, when the Orbán government, which had initiated the memorial, was re-elected. The flash mob and the movement were initially based on grief and outrage.

This study investigated how emotions during the group's mobilisation and the emotion management process strengthened the resilience of the Living Memorial social movement. The research question can be formed as follows: Which factors and processes enabled the Living Memorial to build political resilience from emotional outrage and grief? To answer this question, the study applied a grounded theory approach, involving fieldwork, interviews, and content analysis. The following section presents the Living Memorial flash mob and the resultant movement. In the third section the paper reviews the literature on the role of emotions, and particularly of grief, in social movement mobilisation and protest. The aim of the review is also to identify the components of grief-based activism in the Living Memorial's resilience-building. The literature review is followed by the methods and the analysis. The article concludes with findings on the impact of emotion and grief-based actions for the resilience-building of the Living Memorial movement.

2 The Living Memorial flash mob

In the dawn hours of 20 July 2014, the controversial Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation was erected quietly on Szabadság square, located in central Budapest, three months after the general election. The 2014 election was held according to a new election law unilaterally instituted by the government and resulted in a second successive supermajority for the Fidesz party. At that time the protests against the memorial had been going on for more than a half-year.

The memorial resembles the 'Millennium Monument' statue complex on Heroes' Square in Budapest, which was erected in 1896 to commemorate the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin. A central figure of both the Millennium Monument and the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation is Archangel Gabriel. In the latter installation, Gabriel's

left wing is missing. An orb is slipping from the grasp of Gabriel's right hand, which resembles the orb of the Hungarian coronation regalia. An armoured eagle above and behind Gabriel is poised to catch the orb. On a ring on the eagle's right foot the date 1944, the year when German troops occupied Hungary, can be seen.

The place of the memorial, Szabadság square, is probably the most political public space in Hungary. While political rallies and demonstrations are usually organised at the Kossuth square, near the Parliament building, or at the abovementioned Heroes' Square, several contentious statues can be found at Szabadság square. Most conspicuous is the Monument of the Soviet Red Army, erected in 1946, damaged in the 2000s by radical right-wing groups. Not far from the occupation memorial, a bust of Miklós Horthy, Hungary's ruler in the interwar period, stands in the enclosure of the Calvinistic 'Church of the Return.' The church's pastor, Lóránt Hegedűs Jr., was an MP and vice-chairman of the radical right-wing party MIÉP.¹

On the day after the installation of the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán issued a statement stating the erection of the statue was the government's 'constitutional' duty towards the contemporary victims and present-day Hungarians. As the statement put it, 'from March 19, 1944, to 1991, occupying troops were continuously stationed in Hungary. During the long decades of occupation, terrible things happened to Hungary and the citizens of the Hungarian state, that would never have happened if we had our independence and national self-determination' (TK, 2014). The timeline of the statement also groups together the Nazi and the Soviet occupations, equating them. After the installation of the memorial, no inauguration ceremony was held.

The government's decision to commission the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation was published on 31 December 2013. The first protest, a political flash mob—that is a sudden, brief gathering—was organised on 3 January 2014 by the so-called 'Tolerance Group' (*Tolerancia Csoport*) (Bósz, 2014). The group held a protest rally on 1 February 2014 as well in which around 400 people participated and opposition politicians addressed the crowd (Botos, 2014). Meanwhile, Jewish organisations also condemned the project and ceased their cooperation with the government for the 70th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust (Nagy, 2014). Randolph L. Braham, distinguished Holocaust researcher, gave back his Hungarian state award; the Israeli ambassador declared that the statue killed the memory of the victims (Lengyel, 2014). Because of domestic and international protests, Prime Minister Orbán asked the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (MAZSIHISZ) to consult about the memorial after Easter, which in 2014 was two weeks after the general election. The construction itself started two days after the election on 8 April 2014 without any consultation with Jewish organisations (Lengyel, 2014).

On 23 March, another flash mob took place at the construction site. The organisers, the Human Platform coalitional organisation, asked participants to bring with them—as in Jewish customs—a stone, a small cross, or a personal object which can express the personal emotions and involvement of the participants. The organisers also asked participants to tell their own or their families' stories and memories about the different conflicts of the 20th century, share them with others and with the public ('Flash mob és mozgalom', 2014):

¹ That is, *Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*, or the 'Hungarian Life and Justice Party.'

Let us raise such a heavy pile of these many personal signs that it would be grossly offensive and scandalous if one day they were to be caught with machines to clean it up. At least that will stop those who want to abuse their power. We want as many of our compatriots as possible in the coming weeks to put their sacred sign – a symbol of readiness for repentance and forgiveness – on this forced tomb of our common history.

The main goal was to assemble an alternative memorial, built from personal memories and histories. The event did not end on the day of the flash mob, but it evolved into a permanent occupation of the memorial construction site. The activists also started direct action against the memorial: they removed the fence around the construction many times. However, they could not hinder the installation of the memorial, which was set up during the night at the end of July.

Even before the final erection of the memorial, a series of discussions were initiated with the same goal as the flash-mob: to elaborate, sustain, and reveal an alternative ‘memorial’ made of personal anecdotes and memories. After the installation of the memorial, these discussions became more important for the Living Memorial’s community. However, at these events not only personal histories were presented; academics, politicians and political analysts discussed current political events, policy issues, art, and aesthetics. Meanwhile, another series of events were organised, the so-called ‘Liberty Stage’ (*Szabadságzínpad*), which started one hour earlier at the same spot. Normally the stage was a platform near the construction site, used to collect signatures during political campaigns. A white banner with the red script ‘Szabadságzínpad’ hung from the platform. During major performances a wooden stage was installed on the spot. The antecedent of the Liberty Stage was the Clear Conscience (*Tiszta Emlékezet*) group, which had organised gatherings at the construction site since the beginning of 2014. On the Liberty Stage people read poems, performed acts, and held concerts. As part of these events, the participants sang together the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from Verdi’s *Nabucco* under the lead of the famous Hungarian conductor, Ádám Fisher. Unlike the discussions of the Living Memorial, the Liberty Stage gave space for emotions, pleasure, and subjectivity. According to one of the main proponents of the Living Memorial, András Rényi, an art historian, it was a great success of the movement that the memorial was not formally inaugurated, which is also a sign that the Hungarian government could not further associate with it. In his interpretation, the Living Memorial could transform the site of the memorial into an open ‘agora,’ where all personal historical narratives and grievances could be told (Teczár, 2014).

Since the memorial was already installed and there was little chance of removing it, the movement could not have a direct instrumental goal. In this situation, the main aim could be to ‘sustain a certain mental state’ of the participants and activists, as one of the discussants put it during one session of the Living Memorial. The discussions of the Living Memorial and art performances of the Liberty Stage continued well after 2014. As Eröss (2016) noted, the counter memorial was in constant motion; everyone could contribute to it with their own photos and memorabilia or by participating at the discussions. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic discussions were held online and the Facebook groups remained active as well. Activists of the Living Memorial later founded the Living Gyál group as well, which was a local advocacy community in Gyál, a district of the Budapest metropolitan area.

3 Grief and activism

The concept of social resilience emphasises the relevance of collective capacity, interrelatedness of individuals, external challenges, and an identified well-being of the group (Hall & Lamont, 2013). To understand how the Living Memorial could build grief-based on resilience, the paper relies on the literature of social movements, which operates with similar concepts, namely informal networks, solidarity, and conflictual issues (Diani, 1992). From this perspective the actions performed by a social movement aim to raise capacity to pursue well-being, hence building resilience. The role of emotions in the mobilisation of social movements became a research program after the new millennium (Aminzade & McAdam, 2002; Goodwin et al., 2001; Flam & King, 2004). Generally during social movement mobilisation, and particularly at the Living Memorial, emotions play a role throughout the whole process. Emotions can trigger spontaneous protest and can motivate supporters. Mass participation in collective action can generate and induce emotions. Emotions can also affect mobilisation goals. Social movement leaders can use emotions as means of mobilisation—but it could be also a goal to reach a certain emotional status. Emotions can have a serious impact on success, failure, and the actual strategy (Jasper, 2011). Political scandals can provoke and outrage, leading to spontaneous political protests and later to the emergence of a social movement. Grief, induced by tragic events, can also cause a similar process. Pride, fear, and happiness are all emotions, which could motivate participants of collective actions. In the case of the Living Memorial outrage and sorrow were the main emotional motivations to organise the flash mob. Telling personal stories and presenting keepsakes allowed participants to express their grief.

Emotions can be categorised according to the duration and the generality or particularity of the objective. Longer emotions with a specific objective, like love or hate, are presupposing a constant social relation, while shorter emotions are reactions to certain unexpected events. A mood is a general emotion without a specific object and can also endure longer, like disillusionment, pride, and optimism; or it can be shorter, like happiness or depression (Goodwin et al., 2001). All four types of emotions have significance in conventional and contentious politics. In the case of social movements, emotions can be sorted into a matrix where one dimension is the duration of the emotion, namely whether it is an ongoing disposition or a more immediate emotional response to an event. The other dimension is the place where the emotion developed, namely inside or outside the social movement (Jasper, 1998). Social bonds to home or family, fear of external threats (like an ecological disaster), prejudices, and trust or distrust in politicians and political institutions are emotions outside of the social movement. External, reactive emotions are typically those which are induced by powerful events (i.e., triggering events). Political scandals, outrageous decisions, disasters are all examples. Inside movements, long-lasting loyalty, sympathy, or antipathy with other activists, movement leaders, and allies can develop. Shorter emotions within movements are reactions to government actions and responses from other actors and the media. The outrage that the participants of the Living Memorial flash mob felt is a short emotion, developed outside of the movement. Grief is an emotion with a longer duration, which also developed outside of the movement.

Grief is not just long-lasting, but can be very intense and accompanied by anger, which stir impulses to vengeance. Grief is also a widely respected emotion; hence, repressive systems can acknowledge it to a certain degree, like in the case of anti-war women's move-

ments. Mothers and wives frequently became anti-war activists based on grief, through the process of mourning or searching for their sons and husbands. Such movements include the Israeli Women in Black, the Russian Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, and the Argentinian Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Flam, 2013). The acknowledgment of grief and, in some cases, revenge makes grief an emotion that enables social action. Even if revenge does not occur, social movement leaders can call attention to past losses. The social acceptance of grief, the empathy towards mourners can even create an opportunity to challenge even authoritarian regimes.

For the Living Memorial, beyond social acceptance, the long duration of grief helped consolidate their group, forging a movement of political activism, distinct from more brief protest forms. A core source of protest power stems from their disruptive nature. However, if a protest action becomes the norm, it no longer disrupts everyday life. Grief, on the other hand, can become part of an everyday experience, as embodied by survivors. The 'permanent scar' on the body can continuously signal the loss and injury of the individual (Pendleton, 2009). Mourning can create an opportunity for dissent, but it can also establish a space for democratic discussion. McIvor interprets mourning based on Melanie Klein's approach as a process of facing the limits of the self (2012). Grief can make people reflect on their norms, beliefs as they compare their own and others' losses, which inevitably leads to the possibility to refigure the frames of memorialising. This latter aspect was an explicit goal of the Living Memorial, however their aim to reconfigure dominant narratives appears in the case of other grief-based activism as well. Grief activists have similarly commemorated migrants and refugees who lost their lives on the way to Europe. Such initiatives aimed to challenge the rigorous distinction between Europeans and migrants by creating settings that bring closer the living and the dead (Stierl, 2016). Hence, grief activism concerning deceased migrants is the realisation of McIvor's concept of reconfiguration of reigning frames. Also, as Holst-Warhaft noted, while contemporary societies abandoned the mourning process, smaller and often marginalised communities, like anti-war groups and gay communities, express their political interests through grief (Holst-Warhaft, 2000). In the latter case, AIDS memorials successfully challenged the stigma of HIV-infected people by publicly commemorating the victims of HIV/AIDS (Power, 2009).

The Living Memorial can also be categorised according to the three types of politicisation of grief by Granek (2014). In the first category belongs the pathologisation of grief, which ultimately serves the needs of capitalism, as it incorporates the notion of continuous progress, which demands overcoming sorrow. The second category is the nationalisation of grief, where the main goal is to mobilise compatriots for revenge military actions. The third type of politicised grief according to Granek aims not to fuel conflicts, but to ease them, to forward a social justice agenda. The Living Memorial, like most of the above-mentioned cases of politicised grief, belongs to this category. Also, the activism during the Living Memorial project by children, grandchildren, and other relatives of Holocaust survivors can be understood not just as grief activism but also as victim activism. Psychological studies confirmed that the generation that followed Holocaust victims was also traumatised (Barocas & Barocas, 1979; Yehuda et al., 1998). Victim activists are individuals who became advocates of a given issue after being the victim of a certain phenomena, like domestic violence, crime, or sexual abuse. The reason for victim activism is to prevent secondary victimisation and empower victims (McCaffrey, 1998; O'Leary & Green, 2020).

4 Method

Grounded theory can be perceived as a reflective research process whereby the theory takes form during the data collection and the data is being collected on basis of the theory being elaborated. Central ideas in grounded theory are the sensitising concepts, which are the starting point and guidelines of research. In grounded theory, no hypotheses are tested, but the sensitising concepts help to initiate the reciprocal reflection process between theory and data (Bowen 2006). While grounded theory has rarely been applied in social movement research (Mattoni, 2014), it has been more frequently used in the last decade (Peters, 2014; Snow & Moss 2014; Castells, 2015; Reinecke, 2018).

The sensitising concepts of this research were grief-based activism and the act of re-configuration of the original memorial of the German occupation. Both concepts stemmed from preliminary knowledge of the field that originated from media news. Based on the sensitising concepts, the fieldwork started in September 2014 and lasted until December 2014. The insights of the fieldwork were the guidelines of the content analysis of the Living Memorial's program between June 2014 and December 2014. Here, the research was interested in the interplay between emotions and resilience-building. For this purpose, the weekly programme of the Living Memorial discussions was downloaded from the group's Facebook page. The categories were not predefined but established during the coding process; the discussions were coded according to the topic. Six categories of the 106 programmes could be distinguished: (1) Holocaust, history, remembrance; (2) politics, policies; (3) art, performance; (4) strategies of opposition; (5) democracy; and (6) self-reflection of the group. In the third phase, during the structured interviews in December 2020 the participants' interpretations about the reason and impact of the Living Memorial's discussions were analysed. The anonymised, structured interviews were made with ten participants of the Living Memorial discussion, who were recruited through the group's Facebook page. The literature review in this approach helped to elaborate the sensitising concepts and the data into conclusions on the general attributes of grief-based activism and resilience.

5 Managing emotions

This section assesses the emotion management process of the Living Memorial movement, which strengthened the resilience of the group. For this purpose the techniques of emotional management at the site of the memorial are overviewed, the topics of the themes of the Living Memorial's discussions analysed, and finally the interviews evaluated. Before the analysis, the concept of emotion management is presented briefly.

It is a general expectation that individuals behave according to social norms, which are secured by social and political institutions. Furthermore, institutions not only regulate behaviour but also direct the way people should act in different situations (Hochschild, 2012). In other words, institutions contribute to emotion management, which is also true in the case of less formal entities, like social movements. Performative protest forms are particularly suitable means for movement leaders to influence and manage the emotions of supporters and the wider public. The point of social movement mobilisation is, from a certain perspective, the successful management of emotions. The movement strategist has to manoeuvre

wisely between emotionally overheated and calmed moments. It is also important that the emotions of the mobilised supporters align with and further the aims of the movement. Outrage, sorrow, and anger brought from the outside of the movement should be channelled toward movement goals. Symbols with strong emotional content, playing on people's heart-strings can be effective instruments to recruit supporters, deepening and sustaining engagement. In some cases, vilification of adversaries, exploiting fear, can motivate. Other performative protest forms have the opposite effect: paper mache puppets, for instance, make politicians ridiculous, vincible.

In some cases, it is necessary to calm an overheated atmosphere. Intensifying emotions can mobilise supporters, activists, but for the wider public hot-headed politics can be repulsive. For the success of the movement, for the sake of long-term planning, and to elaborate a positive image for the public and deepen the engagement of activists, it is necessary to deal with emotions. Managing emotions does not necessarily involve the manipulation of movement activists; neither are activists, supporters easily manipulable targets. Consequently, managing emotions does not involve the exploitation of activists, but emotion management occurs in many cases with their consent. For instance, transforming shame, guilt, or fear into pride could be an effective strategy in the case of those movements where the aim is self-expression and the recognition of their collective identity by other societal groups. A good example is the LGBTQ pride movement—displaying worthiness is a common feature of contentious politics (Tilly, 2004).

However, social movement leaders and organisers of other political events are not omnipotent in the management of emotions. Their capacity to impact whether true emotional identification with the speakers and other participants develops is limited (Kiss & Szabó, 2015). Furthermore, protest participation can also be a source of fun and cheerful experiences, especially in the case of spectacular, performative action forms. Just like at carnivals, protesters can march at demonstrations in colourful costumes, often as boisterous music plays. Not only protests are becoming more like music festivals, but many festivals have acquired a distinctly political character. Hence, in the case of such protests, the participation itself satisfies the individual; participation is the source of pleasure.

5.1 Techniques of emotional management at the site of the memorial

Two main techniques were in use during the mobilisation of the Living Memorial, namely the deconstruction of the official memorial with the exhibition of family photos, relics, stones and the group discussions on various cultural, social, and political issues. The role of these techniques was not the simple regulation of certain emotional expressions, but to channel these to support the movement itself. Even the goal of the movement itself could not be easily defined since it was hardly imaginable that the government would dismantle the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation. However, as the activists noted at their meetings, the movement was successful in reinterpreting the memorial as political indoctrination, as faking Hungarian history. As the Living Memorial was initiated, it was an action with strong emotional content. At the flash mob, activists tried to deconstruct the memorial installed by the government, with their family memories, photos, stones, candles, personal objects, and banners. The various objects, placed on the ground and hung at hip, level distorted the front view of the official memorial, hence it disturbed the composition and the

political message. Through the ‘counter memorial’—as the initiators called it—resilience was realised in the physical space and symbolically at the same time. This technique of deconstruction was rooted in a previous Facebook campaign, where children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors shared their own stories on the social media site. Grief, sorrow, remembrance were used here to counterbalance the message of the government about the innocence of Hungarian state during the Holocaust. The counter memorial has been maintained since the 2014 conflict. Nevertheless, it was damaged in 2019, which triggered protest by the Living Memorial and other groups.

The emotion management on the spot involved the discussions on different issues, where people, activists of the movement were sitting in a circle, listened to the guests and later they could also ask questions. It was very important that the gatherings were held on the spot of construction and, later, of the memorial. This allowed deconstructing the official memorial with the collectivity, the bodies of Living Memorial activists. A main feature of the discussions was inclusiveness. This was realised inside and outside of the group. During the discussions the participants had to stick to rules that ensured equal opportunities to speak. Activists also distributed flyers for tourists in English language and invited Hungarians to join the discussion, thus aiming to include others from the outside. The remembrance was not just about telling the activists’ stories, but initiating discussions with others. It was the movement’s goal to promote a common basis for historical remembrance. It was also a widely contested act when a young radical right-wing man was invited to participate after he insulted the activists of the Living Memorial. Some members thought that it is not necessary to sit down for a talk with everyone; there are clear limits, while others argued that the Living Memorial is about both listening and being listened to. For many activists the self-disclosure of András Rényi was an important moment, where one of the main initiators of the Living Memorial spoke about his father, who was a high-rank cadre of the communist system in pre-1989 Hungary. Inclusiveness inside and outside raised the cohesion of the movement’s community and so contributed to the group’s resilience.

5.2 Discussion themes of the Living Memorial

The gatherings had different topics, which were crucial for emotion management. The content analysis of the discussions identified 106 programme topics. Seven overarching categories could be distinguished, as represented in Table 1. Events of the first category dealt mostly with inclusive remembrance politics in Hungary or with historical events and personal stories. Participants recalled stories of surviving or history of the ghetto in Budapest, like the so-called yellow-star houses, which were the designated residences of Jews during the German occupation. Not only Jewish history was discussed, but also the connection between Hungarian traumas, like the Holocaust, the Treaty of Trianon at the end of World War I, and the Pharrajimos, the Roma genocide during World War II. At one meeting the topic was the role of Jews during the 1956 Hungarian uprising.

In many cases, the activists invited well-known public intellectuals to discuss policy issues or current political events. The Living Memorial organised talks about, inter alia, unconditional basic income, Hungarian monetary politics, rule of law, the future of European integration, the election system. Political scientists and analysts were also invited to discuss the current political situation.

Table 1: Content analysis of the Living Memorial discussions, June–December 2014

Month	Holocaust, history, remembrance	Politics, policies	Art, performance	Strategies of opposition	Democracy	Self-reflection of the group	total
June 2014	6	0	4	0	3	0	13
July 2014	6	1	2	0	2	10	21
August 2014	5	0	2	1	8	4	20
September 2014	0	10	6	2	2	2	22
October 2014	7	4	3	2	3	1	16
November 2014	1	3	1	2	0	1	7
December 2014	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
total	25	18	18	9	18	18	106

Art and various performances were also integral parts of the events at the Living Memorial. Organisers were closely connected to the Budapest art scene; many were themselves artists or curators. A central theme at such events was the German occupation memorial itself, other politically sensitive statues in Liberty Square, and the ownership of urban spaces. Interactive, political sightseeing was organised at the square. The autonomy of art, particularly of film art from politics was also a recurring topic. Nevertheless, not only ‘serious’ events were organised, but once also a stand-up workshop with comedians.

‘Strategies of opposition’ were events when the chances of social movements and successful political protest were discussed. It is not surprising that the organisers of the Living Memorial and the participants of the events were interested in the possible outcomes of activism. They invited social movement leaders to discuss if it is possible to achieve positive outcomes with social movement activism. At these events, the activists of the 2012–2013 student protests and the 2014 ‘internet tax protests’ were invited.

Democracy issues refer to those events when activists discuss illiberal democracy, the freedom of the press, the state of democratic institutions, or the representation of marginalised groups. A central issue of the Living Memorial movement was to elaborate an inclusive remembrance politics. This claim presupposes an inclusive democracy as well. The activists discussed the above-mentioned different features of democracy. A distinct topic was the speech of Viktor Orbán at a summer festival, where he admitted that his government aimed to build an illiberal state, hence the high number of democracy-related discussions in August 2014.

In many cases, the group held gatherings where people could reflect on the purpose of the group, on ideal internal communication. The participants had here opportunities to evaluate the individual and collective impact of the discussions and the Living Memorial initiative, but also do-it-yourself sessions were organised. The activists held debate training as well, which is understandable since one aim of the movement was to promote an inclusive culture of dialogue.

The various topics contributed to the capacity and resilience-building of the Living Memorial in different areas. The most frequent topic, the Holocaust, history, and remembrance, and also art and performance, directly supported the reconfiguration of the official memorial's narrative. But it also strengthened the group's inner cohesion and maintained the grief-based collective identity in a similar way to the discussions about self-reflection. The topics related to politics, policy, democracy, and the strategies of the opposition encouraged resilience-building by enhancing the group's knowledge in political issues and self-image as a competent subject.

5.3 Activists' evaluation of the Living Memorial

In 2020, ten structured, anonymised interviews were made with activists and participants of the Living Memorial movement. The respondents were recruited through the movement's closed Facebook group. Since there was no information on the population of all Living Memorial activists and participants, the aim of the structured interviews was not to have a representative sample but to get information on the subjective evaluation of the outcomes of the movement. Among the respondents, seven were present at more than 20 gatherings, one individual between 11 and 20 times, one between six and ten times, while one between one and five times. Two, R4 and R6, were the initial organisers; the others were engaged through the media or during protest events. R6 spoke at almost every event; four others, in most cases, while the remaining five spoke sometimes when they were at one of the meetings. The respondents were all very active citizens. Three of them worked in more than three different civil organisations prior to the COVID-19 lockdown; seven of them in two to three organisations. Only R7 did not attend one of the major demonstrations after the 2018 elections; only two did not sign petitions; and three did not boycott certain products. The respondents had high levels of education, were mostly Budapest residents and their median age was 68 (Table 2).

Table 2: Respondents of the semi-structured interviews

Respondent	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Residence	Employment
R1	male	73	PhD	Budapest	retired
R2	female	48	high school diploma	other city	self-employed
R3	female	67	BA, BSc	Budapest	retired
R4	female	69	PhD	Budapest	part-time worker
R5	male	78	PhD	Budapest	retired
R6	female	69	PhD	Budapest	part-time worker
R7	male	64	PhD	Budapest	full-time worker
R8	female	53	higher vocational education	county seat	full-time worker
R9	female	64	MA, MSc	village	retired
R10	male	84	PhD	Budapest	retired

The respondents were asked about their feelings concerning the Living Memorial (Table 3). According to the data they were rather angry and worried, but afraid. Growing illiberal tendencies in the government made them concerned but not necessarily about their personal safety. While the memorial was not dismantled, the respondents were still not hopeless. It can be assumed that similar to András Rényi, they interpreted the cancelled inauguration and the mere existence of the Living Memorial as successes.

Table 3: Emotional reactions to the topic of Living Memorial, means of a 5 point Likert scale

Emotion	Mean (5 points Likert scale)
angry	3.5
worried	3.7
fearful	2.1
frustrated	2.7
hopeless	2.2

During the structured interviews, open questions were asked about the aim of the Living Memorial movement and the effects of the discussions on the respondent and the whole collective. Respondents R1, R3, R5, R8, and R9 stressed the relevance of dialogue, getting new information, and discussing different issues. According to R1, the aim of the Living Memorial was ‘organising dialogue initially due to politics of memory anomalies, later on other social policy issues, contributing to the organisation of resistance.’ For R2, R7, and R10 the main goals were to organise a community and maintain protest and ‘normality.’ R2 included ‘community building, expressing opinions, creating a common space of thought and thus putting pressure, building relationships, protesting, dialogue and many more.’ R4 and R6 considered awareness-raising particularly important. As R6 put it: ‘To discuss social problems in public, to listen to the stories of others, to sensitise people to the sufferings and traumas of others, to develop and strengthen the rules of public debate.’

When it came to the Living Memorial discussions’ effect on the self, the majority of respondents were satisfied. R2 reported that her social activism started during the Living Memorial movement. For others (R4, R8, R9, and R10) the discussions became routinised in their life and stabilised their political, social values. According to R1, R5, R6, and R10 the discussions were eye-openers, broadening their horizon. From the perspective of the whole Living Memorial community, R1 noted that after the polarisation the extremes dropped out: ‘It’s pretty much this: polarisation, extremes lagging behind, dropping out, not only right-wing “provocateurs,” but also those who think strongly in Judaism, this applies to all resistance groups at the Liberty Square.’ For R6, R7, R8, R9, and R10, the discussions created a real community, which enabled dialogue and maintained the Living Memorial itself. As R6 put it: ‘For many, these conversations are important. Societies and friendships developed. Many people say that their opinions on one issue have been influenced by the opinions and comments of others.’ Nevertheless, R2 was critical on this point and R3 felt some disappointment during the discussions since the composition and size of the participants changed from event to

event. To sum up, the participants' evaluation reinforced the results of the content analysis of the discussion topics. The gatherings strengthened the cohesion of the group, albeit at the expense of drop-outs.

6 Conclusions

The study investigated the grief-based activism and emotional management of the Living Memorial movement. The Living Memorial grew out of a flash mob, which protested against the one-sided historical interpretation of the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation erected by the Orbán government in Budapest after the 2014 general election. The Living Memorial aimed to contradict the government's memorial by offering an inclusive remembrance through telling personal, family stories. On the site of the memorial various discussions were held by the activists, which continued in an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic as well. According to the results, three different actions were realised by the Living Memorial, which all enhanced the group's resilience on different levels. The discussion of personal and family stories, sharing grief, reinforced the collective identity of the group. The personal remembrance also helped to deconstruct the government's official memorial. The political discussions and presentations raised the political consciousness of the participants and strengthened their self-image as rational political actors. The grief-based activism outlined in the literature influenced the Living Memorial from various aspects compared to the modular forms of protest against the illiberal regime in Hungary. Like in other cases, the activists aimed to reframe the government's interpretation of loss and mourning. It also involved the deliberate easing of social conflicts by endorsing different historical grievances and traditions of remembrance. At the same time, the participants wished to become agents rather than passive victims by protesting against the denial of the Hungarian state's responsibility during the Holocaust. The grief, the personal commitment helped to maintain the group since 2014; visiting the Living Memorial discussions became an everyday activity for the participants – without losing its political character. Thus, the resilience in the case of the Living Memorial was built upon grief and was realised by a continuous process of reframing, community building, and by strengthening the competencies, that is political knowledge, debate culture, and self-esteem of the group.

References

- Aminzade, R. & McAdam, D. (Eds.) (2002). *Mobilization*, 7(2). Special Issue on Emotions and Contentious Politics.
- Anderson, B. (2015). What kind of thing is resilience? *Politics*, 35(1), 60–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111%2F1467-9256.12079>
- Barocas, H. A. & Barocas, C. B. (1979). Wounds of the fathers: The next generation of Holocaust victims. *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 6(3), 331–340.
- Botos, T. (2014, February 1). Vadai: A nácik beszivárogtak a kormányzatba (Vadai: The Nazis infiltrated the government). 444, <https://444.hu/2014/02/01/szobor-tuntetetes> Accessed: 05-04-2021.

- Bowen, G. A. (2006). Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(3), 12–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F160940690600500304>
- Bósz, A. (2014). *Holokauszt-émlékév: súlyos hiba a német megszállás – mindent elrejtő – zubbonya mögé bújni!* (Holocaust Remembrance Year: it is a serious mistake to hide behind the German occupation's – all-encompassing – tunic!). https://boszanett.blog.hu/2014/01/04/holokauszt-emlekev_sulyos_hiba_a_nemet_megszallas_mindent_elrejto_zubbonya_moge_bujni Accessed: 05-04-2021.
- Castells, M. (2015). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. Wiley.
- Diani, M. (1992). The Concept of Social Movement. *The Sociological Review*, 40(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1467-954X.1992.tb02943.x>
- Erőss, Á. (2016). “In memory of victims”: Monument and counter-monument in Liberty Square, Budapest. *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin*, 65(3), 237–254. https://doi.org/10.15201/hungeo_bull.65.3.3
- Flam, H. (2013). Politics of Grief and Grieving “Mothers” Movements. In D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm480>
- Flashmob és mozgalom a német megszállás emlékműve felállításának megakadályozására (Flashmob and movement to prevent the erection of a monument to the German occupation) (2014). <https://hivatlanul.com/flashmob-es-mozgalom-nemet-megszallas-emlekmuve-felallitasanak-megakadalyozasara/> Accessed: 05-04-2021.
- Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M. & Polletta, F. (2001). Why Emotions Matter. In J. Goodwin, J. M. Jasper & F. Polletta (Eds.), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (pp. 1–24). University of Chicago Press.
- Granek, L. (2014). Mourning sickness: The politicizations of grief. *Review of General Psychology*, 18(2), 61–68. <https://doi.org/10.1037%2Fgpr0000001>
- Hall, P. A. & Lamont, M. (Eds.) (2013). *Social resilience in the neoliberal era*. Cambridge University Press.
- Head, L. (2016). Grief, loss and the cultural politics of climate change. In H. Bulkeley, M. Paterson & J. Strippel (Eds.) *Towards a cultural politics of climate change: Devices, desires and dissent* (pp. 81–93). Cambridge University Press.
- Holst-Warhaft, G. (2000). *The cue for passion: Grief and its political uses*. Harvard University Press.
- Jasper, J. M. (1998). The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements. *Sociological Forum*, 13(3), 397–424. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022175308081>
- Kiss, B. & Szabó, G. (2015). Crowding and feeling political communities: successful and failed mass demonstrations in Hungary 2013. In E. C. Torres & S. Mateus (Eds.), *From Multitude to Crowds: Collective Action and the Media* (pp. 223–246). Peter Lang.
- Lengyel, T. (2014, July 20). Szabadság téri emlékmű: a tervektől a megvalósításig (Freedom Square monument: from plans to implementation). *Origo*, <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20140720-aszabadsag-teri-nemet-megszallasi-emlekmu-kronologiaja.html> Accessed: 05-04-2021.
- Mattoni, A. (2014). The potentials of grounded theory in the study of social movements. In D. della Porta (Ed.), *Methodological practices in social movement research* (pp. 21–42). Oxford University Press.

- McCaffrey, D. (1998). Victim feminism/victim activism. *Sociological Spectrum*, 18(3), 263–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.1998.9982198>
- McIvor, D. W. (2012). Bringing ourselves to grief: Judith Butler and the politics of mourning. *Political Theory*, 40(4), 409–436. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0090591712444841>
- Nagy, É. (2014, January 22). Jewish groups denounce memorial to German invasion of Hungary. *The Budapest Beacon*, <https://budapestbeacon.com/jewish-groups-denounce-memorial-to-german-invasion-of-hungary/> Accessed: 05-04-2021.
- O’Leary, N. & Green, S. (2020). From Invisible to Conspicuous: The Rise of Victim Activism in the Politics of Justice. In J. Tapley & P. Davies (Eds.), *Victimology. Research, Policy and Activism* (pp. 159–183). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42288-2_7
- Pendleton, M. (2009). Mourning as Global Politics: embodied grief and activism in post-Aum Tokyo. *Asian Studies Review*, 33(3), 333–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820903153731>
- Peters, I. (2014). *Too abstract to be feasible? Applying the grounded theory method in social movement research*. GIGA Working Paper No. 247.
- Power, J. (2009). Rites of belonging: Grief, memorial and social action. *Health Sociology Review*, 18(3), 260–272. <https://doi.org/10.5172/hesr.2009.18.3.260>
- Reinecke, J. (2018). Social movements and prefigurative organizing: Confronting entrenched inequalities in Occupy London. *Organization Studies*, 39(9), 1299–1321. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0170840618759815>
- Snow, D. A. & Moss, D. M. (2014). Protest on the fly: Toward a theory of spontaneity in the dynamics of protest and social movements. *American Sociological Review*, 79(6), 1122–1143. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0003122414554081>
- Stierl, M. (2016). Contestations in death—the role of grief in migration struggles. *Citizenship Studies*, 20(2), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2015.1132571>
- Teczár, Sz. (2014, September 5). „Társadalmat építeni az állam ellenében” – Rényi András az Eleven Emlékműről és Schmidt Mária vádjairól (‘Building a society against the state’ – András Rényi on the Eleven Monument and the accusations of Mária Schmidt). *Magyar Narancs*, <https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/renyi-andras-az-eleven-emlekmurool-es-schmidt-maria-vadjairol-91410> Accessed: 05-04-2021.
- Tilly, C. (2004). *Social Movements, 1768–2004*. Paradigm Press.
- TK (2014, July 21). Orbán megszólalt emlékműügyben (Orbán spoke about the memorial). *Magyar Nemzet*, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/archivum/belfold-archivum/orban-megszolalt-emlekmu-ugyben-4055056/> Accessed: 05-04-2021.
- Walker, B., Gunderson, L., Kinzig, A., Folke, C., Carpenter, S. & Schultz, L. (2006). A handful of heuristics and some propositions for understanding resilience in social-ecological systems. *Ecology and Society*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-01530-110113>
- Yehuda, R., Schmeidler, J., Wainberg, M., Binder-Brynes, K. & Duvdevani, T. (1998). Vulnerability to posttraumatic stress disorder in adult offspring of Holocaust survivors. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 155(9), 1163–1171. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.155.9.1163>

BARBARA GRABOWSKA-MOROZ* & ANNA WÓJCIK**

Reframing LGBT rights advocacy in the context of the rule of law backsliding. The case of Poland

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 85–103.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.852>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* [\[grabowska-morozb@ceu.edu\]](mailto:grabowska-morozb@ceu.edu) (Central European University, Democracy Institute)

** [\[anna.wojcik@gmail.com\]](mailto:anna.wojcik@gmail.com) (Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of Legal Studies)

Abstract

Adopting the methods of institutional analysis and case law analysis, the paper answers how specific elements of rule of law backsliding impact advocacy for minorities' rights' recognition. The phenomenon is analysed in the case of Poland, a state that since 2015 has been experiencing directed erosion on rule of law standards. Between 2018 and 2020, governmental leaders in Poland targeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the context of electoral campaigns. The paper discusses long-term legal, political, and social factors contributing to creating an environment where such anti-LGBT campaigns are possible. It further demonstrates that specific elements of rule of law backsliding, such as politically subordinating the Constitutional Tribunal and the office of the Prosecutor General, enable authorities to apply discriminatory legal instruments to limit the targeted minority's rights and also make resistance to it with legal means more complex. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that human rights defenders' immediate responses—private civil lawsuits, artistic projects, and monitoring of discriminatory actions of the authorities—were key for drawing domestic and international attention to anti-LGBT campaigns, which later led to the European Union's institutions concrete actions and an independent Commissioner for Human Rights' legal actions. Cumulatively, these actions contributed to reversing elements of the anti-LGBT campaign in Poland.

Keywords: human rights advocacy, rule of law backsliding, LGBT, discriminatory legalism, Poland

1 Introduction

Recent examples from Poland and Hungary demonstrate that the destruction of democratic standards, notably the rule of law, goes hand in hand with restrictions to specific rights and freedoms of individuals, including freedoms of assembly and expression, reproductive rights, and minority rights, among others (Sadurski, 2019a; 2020).¹ Through political or economic

¹ We are grateful to anonymous reviewers and journal editors for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. All errors remain ours.

pressures and capture of critical institutions, including media (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020) authorities can circumscribe these rights and freedoms, and obstruct the operation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), limiting their capacity to legally and narratively challenge these restrictions (Ploszka, 2020, Buyse, 2018). Furthermore, illiberal governments also hinder expansion of specific social groups' rights, making it a prominent policy and element of political identification.

This paper seeks to answer how specific elements of rule of law backsliding in Poland impact lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights advocacy and how LGBT rights defenders adapt to changing institutional, legal, and political context.

The paper uses institutional analysis and case law analysis. Institutional analysis is employed to discuss changes to the composition and functioning of key institutions: the Constitutional Tribunal, the merger of the Prosecutor General and the Minister of Justice offices, and changes to public media. To this end, applicable legislation, sources from international institutions (the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, the EU Court of Justice Advocate General, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and relevant academic literature are analysed. Furthermore, case law analysis demonstrates involvement of the aforementioned institutions—changed through rule of law backsliding processes—in legal actions that were a part of anti-LGBT campaign. The discussed case law emerges from Poland's Constitutional Tribunal and common courts, with references to European human rights courts' case law where relevant.

This paper first discusses the extent of legal recognition of LGBT rights in Poland and its legal and socio-political determinants. Second, it explains specific elements of rule of law backsliding since 2015 that made pushback against anti-LGBT campaign more complex. Third, it presents examples of LGBT rights advocacy in the changed institutional context. The final part concludes.

2 LGBT rights advocacy determinants

2.1 The national and European legal framework

Poland offers the lowest level of legal protection to LGBT rights among EU member states (ILGA-Europe, 2021; Godzisz & Knut, 2018). There is no specific protection from homophobic hate crime and hate speech, no legal recognition of same-sex relationships in form of civil union or marriage, no right of same-sex couples to be recognised jointly as parents of a child. Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 has not provoked policy change in this area (O'Dwyer, 2018; 2012). At the same time, other EU member states expanded protection to LGBT rights (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2019), and LGBT rights recognition progressed significantly in some prospective EU member states (Godzisz, 2019; Swimelar, 2017). Consequently, some argue that a 'Rainbow Curtain' divides Europe (Robinson, 2020).

Poland's Constitution of 2 April 1997 does not provide specific guarantees against discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation bias. Article 32.2 of the Constitution entails that 'no one shall be discriminated against in political, social or economic life for any reason whatsoever.' Polish legislation affords protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation only in the area of employment, even though the Council of Europe's European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has repeatedly re-

commended authorities in Poland to adjust Anti-Discrimination Act to add gender identity as a protected characteristic (ECRI, 2015; 2018). Poland's criminal hate crime and hate speech laws lack sexual orientation and gender identity as protected characteristics (Godzisz & Rawłuszko, 2019). Consequently, no law explicitly requires penalty enhancements for crimes motivated by anti-LGBT bias.

Family law falls within the competence of EU member states and within the wide margin of appreciation that the European Convention on Human Rights grants to national authorities of its signatories. EU member states are free to determine whether to introduce civil partnerships or same-sex marriage. No EU institution, including the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), requires member states to adopt provisions regulating same-sex unions. Therefore, the regulation of these matters varies significantly across the bloc, from some of the most progressive states in the world in this regard (Denmark, the Netherlands) to states where the legislature rejects legalisation of same-sex partnerships in any form (Poland, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia).

Poland does legally recognise any form of same-sex relationships.² In 2016, the Supreme Court decided in the resolution I KZP 20/15 that same-sex relationships are legally considered cohabiting in criminal law matters. Consequently, same-sex partners have the right to refuse to testify and a number of other rights granted to the accused's family. However, state institutions do not issue a marriage eligibility certificate under the Civil Status Act to a Polish citizen wishing to conclude a same-sex marriage abroad. While no constitutional ban on same-sex marriage has been introduced, there is a heated doctrinal debate whether Article 18 of the Constitution, which protects marriage as a union between a man and a woman, excludes introducing marriage between people of the same sex (Łętowska & Woleński, 2013; Szydło, 2017).

Gender reassignment is legal in Poland, but there is no comprehensive bill regulating it. To change the sex and name on a person's birth certificate and national identification number, a transgender person must take legal action against the parents, the spouse, and children, when relevant (Bartnik et al., 2020).

2.2 Attitudes towards LGBT rights

Homophobia is widespread in Poland. However, acceptance levels of LGBT people and support for certain LGBT rights have been increasing in Poland in the last decade. According to a Pew Research Centre report, 47 per cent of Poles considered that homosexuality should be accepted by society (a seven percentage points increase from 2012); 42 per cent opposed it (Pew Research Center, 2020). The Eurobarometer Survey on the Social Acceptance of LGBTIQ

² The ECtHR in case from another state in the Council of Europe, Russia, found that lack of legal recognition of same-sex relationships in any form violates ECHR. In 2021, in *Fedotova and Others v. Russia* (applications nos. 40792/10, 30538/14, and 43439/14) the ECtHR held, unanimously, that there had been a violation of Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life) of the Convention in Russia, where the notice of marriage of the applicants, who are same-sex couples, was refused. The ECtHR held that Russia had an obligation to ensure respect for the applicants' private and family life by providing a legal framework allowing them to have their relationships acknowledged and protected under domestic law.

People in the EU (2019) demonstrates a gradual acceptance of LGBT visibility in Poland, even though Poles declare personal discomfort with lesbian and gay couples in the public sphere. However, most Poles are reluctant to grant LGBT persons certain rights: a significant percentage of respondents are against same-sex marriage. According to the Eurobarometer, 49 per cent of Poles agreed with the statement 'gay, lesbian and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people' (a 12 percentage points increase since 2015), while 45 per cent disagreed. Half of the respondents contested that 'same-sex marriages should be allowed throughout Europe,' while 45 per cent supported this idea. Moreover, most Poles disagreed with recognising the status of non-binary people in official state documents, for example birth certificates or passports. 53 per cent of respondents were against introducing an option in public documents to indicate that a person identifies as neither female nor male. 29 per cent of respondents agreed with this proposal.

Studies demonstrate a correlation between political party preferences and attitudes towards specific LGBT rights recognition in Poland. In the cited Pew Research Centre Report, the right-wing Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) party supporters were 23 percentage points less likely to say that homosexuality should be accepted by society than those who hold unfavourable views against PiS. According to a study based on data collected in 2019, most Poles do not support legalising same-sex partnerships, although the voters of left-wing parties and those declaring left-wing political views were more likely to accept the idea of legal recognition of same-sex unions. The study demonstrated that Poles with right-wing views, notably PiS voters, strongly reject the idea of legalising same-sex partnerships in any form (Tomczak, Iwański & Zawadzka-Witt, 2021).

2.3 LGBT rights expansion postulates

Poland was one of the European outliers in de-criminalising of adult consensual same-sex behaviours in 1932. However, in the communist period after 1945, the social stigmatisation of same-sex relationships and the surveillance of homosexual men by security forces compelled sexual minorities to live in the shadows (Basiuk & Burszta, 2020). Gays' and lesbians' open activism emerged only at the end of the 1980s (Szulc, 2018). In post-1989 democratic Poland, the human rights movement for the expansion of LGBT rights developed. Since the country acceded to the EU in 2004 the LGBT community has increasingly phrased its postulates in the language of European law (Struzik, 2020, p. 271), which was made possible due to developments in CJEU and ECtHR jurisprudence. Comparisons with LGBT rights protection standards in other EU member states have become common in public discourse due to grassroots civil society organisations and initiatives, including transnational LGBT rights organisations.

Polish LGBT activists' leading demands have been increasing LGBT visibility, fighting prejudice, exercising the freedom of assembly, improving protection from hate crime and hate speech by amendments to criminal law,³ legalising civil partnerships and equal mar-

³ Criminal law amendments have been one of the main postulates of a NGO, *Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii* ('Campaign Against Homophobia'), founded in 2001 (See *Kampania przeciwko Homofobii*, 2010).

riage for same-sex couples (a postulate since 2013),⁴ granting same-sex couples a right to be legally recognised as co-parents of a child, and introducing a comprehensive regulation of gender reassignment.⁵ There are also essential postulates in administrative law, such as making it possible to transcribe foreign birth certificates of children born to same-sex couples with Polish citizenship into the birth register in Poland. In 2018, the Supreme Administrative Court allowed it on the grounds of protecting children's right to Polish citizenship, but no relevant legislation on the national level followed (Mazurczak, 2018). There is a demand that administrative organs issue marriage eligibility certificates under the Civil Status Act to a person wishing to conclude a same-sex marriage abroad. In 2014 and 2016, complaints were lodged to the ECtHR in which the applicants argue that their rights were infringed because state institutions refused to issue such certificates (*Szypuła v Poland*, Appl. no. 78030/14 and *Urbanik and Alonso Rodriguez v Poland*, Appl. no. 23669/16). Civil society organisations, initiatives, and activists steadily advanced those postulates, making LGBT rights expansion a part of public debate in Poland.

2.4 Political context

Consecutive governments after 1989 have not expanded LGBT rights protection despite lobbying from LGBT advocacy initiatives, human rights NGOs, and international human rights monitoring bodies' recommendations. For example, the centre-right Civic Platform party (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO) governing from 2007 to 2015, refused to support bills on amending hate speech laws or introducing registered civil partnerships for same-sex and heterosexual couples (Jartyś, 2016; 2015).

Since 2015 anti-LGBT sentiment has translated into government policy. In May 2015, the PiS-affiliated candidate Andrzej Duda won the presidential election. In October 2015, PiS won the general elections and formed the United Right (*Zjednoczona Prawica*, ZP) coalition government. PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński described a bill on gender recognition of transgender people that had been passed in parliament in 2015 as 'a quirk and attack on the family.' During the campaign Kaczyński promised that his party's government would not change social mores in Poland.⁶ The newly inaugurated President Duda vetoed the bill.⁷

ZP has implemented illiberal policies including taking control of key institutions and rousing antagonism against specific vulnerable groups, first refugees and immigrants

⁴ A NGO, *Miłość Nie Wyklucza* ('Love Does Not Exclude') has campaigned for civil partnerships and equal marriage for LGBT in Poland since 2013. In 2020, Left party MPs tabled the first proposal to legalise same-sex marriage. The Sejm (lower house) rejected the proposal.

⁵ Case *Y. v Poland*, application no. 74131/14 (pending before the ECtHR) (see Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2020).

⁶ Kaczyński o osobach transseksualnych: Nie ma zgody na dziwactwa [Kaczyński on transgender people: There is no consent for quirks], *Dziennik Polska The Times*, 2 October 2015, <https://polskatimes.pl/kaczynski-o-osobach-transseksualnych-nie-ma-zgody-na-dziwactwa/ar/9021443>

⁷ Ustawa o uzgodnieniu płci – do ponownego rozpatrzenia [Bill on gender recognition – for reconsideration], *Prezydent. pl*, 2 October 2015, <https://www.prezydent.pl/prawo/ustawy/zawetowane/art,1,ustawa--o-uzgodnieniu-plci---do-ponownego-rozpatrzenia.html>

(Krzyżanowski, 2018), then focusing on fighting with ‘gender and LGBT ideologies’ as part of backlash against achieved levels of sex equality and LGBT rights (Gwiazda, 2020; Korolczuk, 2020; Kováts, 2018). Government rhetoric has framed LGBT ideology as a threat to the sovereign nation bound by shared values derived principally from Roman Catholic morality, a danger to traditional family and culture (Mole, Golec de Zavala & Ardag, 2021). Resistance to LGBT rights has been presented as a marker of religious, cultural, and political identity, a form of practising patriotism (Gressgård & Smoczy, 2020).

The governing parties’ leaders made acceptance of LGBT rights the new, central axis of political cleavage in the context of elections to the European Parliament, general elections, and presidential elections in 2018–2020. PiS and the United Poland (*Solidarna Polska*) party moved toward an extreme position against LGBT rights to mobilise their core base to vote (Szczygielska, 2019). The main opposition party, the Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska*), has been slowly shifting its position towards greater support for LGBT rights, though the pro-LGBT stance of 2020 presidential candidate Rafał Trzaskowski is an important exception. However, PiS rhetoric used Trzaskowski’s stance against homophobia and open—yet cautious—support to some LGBT rights to vilify him among conservative voters (Zagórski & Bértoa, 2020).

In Poland between 2018 and 2020, ‘LGBT ideology’ became the subject to an unprecedented smear campaign by politicians and state apparatuses, including government-controlled public media, significant parts of the Roman Catholic Church leadership and clergy as well as pro-government organisations that demand pushback on women’s and LGBT rights. Moreover, since March 2019, local authorities in Poland have adopted non-binding, declaratory resolutions to support traditional families and to protect children and youth from LGBT ideology (Korolczuk, 2020).

3 The rule of law backsliding in Poland

PiS’s official political program for the 2015 parliamentary campaign did not include changes to the state’s constitutional arrangements. Nevertheless, the United Right government, dominated by PiS representatives, has implemented a radical ‘anti-constitutional’ (Ziółkowski, 2019) plan to subordinate independent institutions. The post-2015 constitutional crisis in Poland stems from systemic capture of most constitutional organs and institutions that otherwise would provide checks and balances on political power: the Constitutional Tribunal (CT or ‘Tribunal’), the National Council of the Judiciary (NCJ), the prosecution service, the civil service, and public media (Kelemen-Pech, 2019; Pech, Wachowiec & Mazur, 2021; Sadurski, 2019a; Wyrzykowski, 2019; Ziółkowski, 2020).

The process, similar to changes introduced in Hungary after 2010 (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2019; Holesch & Kyriazi, 2021), is more than the sum of its parts. Considering the legal amendments, personnel changes, and changes in roles assigned and performed by institutions, it aims to reconstruct Poland’s constitutional model without formally changing the Constitution of 2 April 1997. Rule of backsliding is understood as ‘the process through which elected public authorities deliberately implement governmental blueprints which aim to systematically weaken, annihilate or capture internal checks on power with the view of dismantling the liberal democratic state and entrenching the long-term rule of the dominant party’ (Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

This paper argues that three key elements of rule of law backsliding in Poland after 2015—(1) the capture of the Constitutional Tribunal, (2) the political merger of the Prosecutor General and the Minister of Justice, and (3) direct political control of public media—were crucial in conducting the anti-LGBT campaign in 2018–2020.

3.1 Constitutional Tribunal

Immediately after winning elections, the United Right transformed the Constitutional Tribunal into a loyal helper. Three persons were appointed to the Tribunal in violation of Constitutional norms. Other new judges were linked to the ruling party. In 2015–2016, the government passed legislation that aimed to ‘neutralise’ the Tribunal. In December 2016, based on a new law, the new President of the Tribunal was appointed (Koncewicz, 2018). Since then, the Tribunal *de facto* has not acted as a genuine check and balance in cases where the governing majority’s political interests are at stake. It has become the ‘government’s enabler’ (Sadurski, 2019b, p. 79), confirming or facilitating the governing majority’s policies. Consequently, the Polish legal system lacks an independent, effective, centralised constitutional judicial review of legislation (Venice Commission, 2016). Transformation of the Tribunal into a loyalist supporter of the ruling majority and the sweeping changes to the judiciary prompted the European Commission’s activation of Article 7 TEU procedure against Poland in December 2017.

First, capturing the Tribunal made it possible that the provisions regulating new institutional arrangements after 2015, e.g., organisation of prosecutor service (case no. K 19/16) or civil service (case K 6/16) are still binding legal norms. Even though the Commissioner for Human Rights filed several motions to the Tribunal, arguing those changes are unconstitutional, the Tribunal has not invalidated any of them.⁸ Second, the ruling majority used the new Tribunal to legitimise changes to the state’s institutional framework. For instance, a judgment of 20 June 2017 (case no. K 5/17) was a pretext to introduce amendments to the National Council for the Judiciary. Third, the Tribunal affects the binding norms and how ordinary courts are applying the law. When a politically sensitive case is pending, or even when the common court has decided it, then the governing majority-controlled institution (e.g., Marshal of Sejm, Prosecutor General) initiates a case before the Tribunal to influence the pending or decided case.⁹ The Prosecutor General/Minister of Justice employed this strategy to undermine the finality of the ordinary courts’ rulings relating to the anti-LGBT campaign.

⁸ In December 2018 the Constitutional Tribunal discontinued the case no. K 19/16 and in November 2019 – the case no. K 6/16.

⁹ The case of Mariusz Kamiński was discontinued after interpretation provided by the Tribunal in a case initiated by the Marshal of Sejm (judgment of 17 July 2018, case no. K 9/17), despite the fact that the Supreme Court based their decisions on a different interpretation of the binding law (resolution of 31 May 2017, case no I KZP 4/17). In 2020 the Constitutional Tribunal ruled that the Supreme Court resolution (Resolution of the Civil, Criminal and Labour & Social Insurance Chambers of the Supreme Court of 23 January 2020, case no. BSA I-4110-1/20) dealing with implementation of the CJEU ruling (joined Cases C-585/18, C-624/18, and C-625/18) is incompatible with the Constitution despite the Tribunal’s apparent lack of powers to do so (decision of 20 April 2020, case U 2/20).

3.2 Prosecutor General

The Prosecutor General (PG) and the Minister of Justice (MoJ) office merger was introduced in March 2016. As a result, a politician, a Member of Parliament, appointed as the MoJ, is entitled to decide on any aspect of any current, past, or future criminal investigation. The PG was granted powers to transfer, appoint, and promote prosecutors (Makana & Allsop, 2019; Szeroczyńska, 2017). The MoJ was granted new powers regarding the administration of ordinary courts. In such an institutional regime, an active politician is entitled to influence any decision of the prosecutor service and indirectly influence the courts' work. As a consequence, cases concerning the ruling coalition's members or associates' accountability may not reach the court, whereas the political opponents may be dealing with criminal charges for years without being sentenced by the court.

The Venice Commission found that the MoJ and PG offices merger 'creates a potential for misuse and political manipulation of the prosecutorial service, which is unacceptable in a state governed by the rule of law' (Venice Commission, 2017, para. 111) and concluded that the two offices should be separated; if not, the competence to intervene in individual cases should be excluded. The Venice Commission concluded that such an accumulation of powers for one person has negative consequences for the judiciary's independence and separation of powers. The Polish government did not reply to the Venice Commission's opinion. The CJEU Advocate General found that the fact that a member of the government wears 'a double hat' produces 'an unholy alliance between two institutional bodies which should function separately' (Opinion of Advocate General Bobek of 20 May 2021, Cases C-748/19 and C-754/19, para. 188).

3.3 Public media

In December 2015, Poland's media law was amended to allow the government both to appoint public media management and to name Jacek Kurski, the acting deputy minister of culture, as the head of Polish public television (TVP). International organisations criticised the changes (OSCE, 2015). Since 2016, the newly established National Media Council (*Rada Mediów Narodowych*), appointed mostly with loyal politicians of the ruling party, has been tasked with powers of oversight of public media, which in the light of the Constitution were reserved a constitutional body, the National Broadcasting Council (*Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, KRRiTV*) (Sadurski, 2019a, p. 139). Thus, public media can disseminate biased narratives, presenting them as objective information, without any fear of an independent monitoring body.

After mass dismissals of journalists from the public broadcaster (Otwinowski, 2016), TVP's main news programme effectively became a propaganda outlet for the government (Chapman, 2017). The government has also attempted to exert control over private media. In 2020, a state-controlled oil company bought the majority of regional media; and in 2021 a draft amendment targeting the biggest private broadcaster was proposed.

In 2019, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) analysed the TVP's role in spreading anti-LGBT narratives in the context of parliamentary elections. The monitoring pointed out instances of homophobic speech in some contestants' campaign messages, which 'provoked a sense of threat and elicited negative emotions towards the LGBTI community' (OSCE-ODIHR, 2020a, p. 12). ODIHR observed several cases of

‘inflammatory political language against the LGBTI community.’ Finally, TVP1 and TVP Info aired a 30-minute film entitled ‘Invasion,’ which targeted the LGBT community and portrayed it as a threat to Polish culture and identity. The ODIHR asserted that the film was ‘echoing a primary campaign message of PiS’ (OSCE-ODIHR, 2020a, p. 19).¹⁰

The OSCE’s presidential elections monitoring in 2020 found that the public broadcaster ‘failed in its legal duty to provide impartial coverage, which could offset the editorial bias of the private media. Instead, TVP acted as a campaign vehicle for the incumbent’ (OSCE-ODIHR, 2020b, p. 3). Furthermore, ‘some reporting was charged with xenophobic and anti-Semitic undertones’ (ibid., p. 20). It was also emphasised that President Duda and his campaign ‘made some oblique though often explicit negative references to the LGBTI community, implying an ideology juxtaposed to what they perceive as traditional Polish values’ (ibid., p. 14). As a result, the ODIHR noted ‘instances of intolerant rhetoric, particularly by the incumbent’s campaign and the public broadcaster, that was xenophobic, homophobic, and anti-Semitic.’ ODIHR underscored that the lack of transparency and procedures of appointing and dismissing its senior management ‘could make TVP content more susceptible to government pressure’ (ibid., p. 18). TVP replied to the ODIHR 2020 report that ‘conclusions regarding the work of journalists of Telewizja Polska included in the preliminary evaluation of the elections prepared by the OSCE are biased and harmful’ (TVP, 2020).

4 Battle for (law and) justice? Remedies against the anti-LGBT campaign

4.1 The Prosecutor General’s anti-LGBT politics: discriminatory legalism in practice

The PG has statutory powers to intervene in almost all cases, not only in criminal ones. The institutional arrangements allow the MoJ/PG to direct the prosecution service’s work. A case in point is the so-called ‘printer from Łódź’ case, concerning a situation when the owner of a printing company refused to print promotional materials for an LGBT activist. The printer was accused of committing a petty offense: intentionally refusing to perform a service without reasonable cause (Article 138 of the Petty Offences Code). In July 2016, the District Court for Łódź-Widzew issued a penal order against the printer and imposed a fine. The defendant appealed. In March 2017, a court found the printer guilty of committing the petty offense, but refrained from imposing a penalty. On 26 May 2017, the Regional Court in Łódź upheld the printer’s conviction, and the Supreme Court rejected the cassation filed by the PG, so the case became final (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2017).

However, the PG subsequently brought a case before the Constitutional Tribunal, arguing that Article 138 of the Petty Offences Code violates the Constitution (the principle of proportionality). The Tribunal ruled that the provision (1) does not aim to protect against discrimination since usually penalties are low, (2) does not have preventive nor educational

¹⁰ In June 2020, the court issued an interim measure and ordered the film’s removal from YouTube. The Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH) initiated the case, arguing that the film violated personal rights. The Commissioner for Human Rights supported the NGO’s claim.

values, and (3) does not perform a repressive function. In the Tribunal's reasoning, Article 138 was inadequate to the assumed goals and violated Article 2 of the Constitution (Constitutional Tribunal judgment of 26 June 2019, case K 16/17). After the Tribunal's decision, the Appellate Court that had discontinued the case reopened it. The Supreme Court underlined that the PG brought the case to the Tribunal because he had 'certainty of quick judgment,' which was a 'temptation impossible to refuse' (Ambroziak, 2020).

The prosecution service has presented charges in numerous cases concerning the LGBT community. For instance, criminal charges of violating religious feelings (Article 196 of the Criminal Code) were presented against a furniture company manager for firing an employee who had called homosexuality an 'abomination' and quoted excerpts from the Bible referring to death as the fate awaiting homosexuals on the company's intranet. The case is pending (Ambroziak, 2020a). Criminal proceedings on violating 'religious feelings' were also conducted against LGBT rights activists for distributing stickers with an image of Virgin Mary with rainbow halo. The activists were acquitted by court in February 2021 (Szymczak, 2021). By contrast, no charges were presented against Bishop Jędraszewski who described the LGBT community as 'a rainbow plague' (Taranek, 2019). Spontaneous protests in August 2020 against the detention of LGBT activists resulted in numerous arrests (Ptak & Gocłowski, 2020). The National Prevention Mechanism report showed disproportionate use of coercive measures and revealed a systemic problem with access to a lawyer after being arrested by the police (The Commissioner for Human Rights Office, 2020).

In our view, these developments warrant can be best described as the use of discriminatory legalism (Weyland, 2013) in the anti-LGBT campaign. Discretionary use of the law for political purposes ('For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law!') may not only cause a chilling effect among those who criticise public authorities but also promote an authoritarian narrative targeting social groups and describing them as 'enemies.' It is the 'weapon used against anyone who does not share the point of view of populist politicians' (Demczuk 2020, p. 133). As Weyland found, 'with the government controlling all avenues of appeal and avoiding blatant violations of formal rules, those targeted find few chances for domestic recourse or the gathering of international support' (Weyland 2013, p. 23). To avoid discriminatory legalism becoming a tool of oppression, the Venice Commission's recommended the depoliticisation of the prosecutorial system.

Allowing politicians to influence the criminal justice system can create an environment of legal harassment. It is not decisive in this context that many judges and courts remain independent from the executive since even pending pre-trial criminal cases may cause harm to individuals. Seeking justice in such an environment is time- and money-consuming. And the lack of viable legal remedies increases the chilling effect resulting from ongoing criminal investigations and enables further attacks on the LGBT community.

4.2 Local resolutions discriminatory to LGBT individuals

In March 2019, Polish local councils started adopting the non-legally binding Charter of the Rights of the Family, elaborated by a legal think tank, Institute for Legal Culture *Ordo Iuris* (*Ordo Iuris*, 2020), and other declaratory acts against 'LGBT ideology.' TVP Info initially reported on the resolutions as establishing 'LGBT free' zones, later changing the description to 'LGBT-ideology free' zones (Erling, 2020).

Private pro-government media, subsidised by public funds through state-owned companies advertising, promoted the 'LGBT free' message. In July 2019, the publisher of the right-wing *Gazeta Polska* newspaper planned to attach to each printing a sticker showing a circular field filled with rainbow colours crossed out with two black stripes, encircled by the inscription 'LGBT free zone.' An LGBT activist, Bart Staszewski, filed civil lawsuits against the publisher on personal rights' infringement grounds and applied for an injunction that would prohibit the newspaper's distribution. The court decided that a sticker's publication with the slogan 'LGBT free zone' may have far-reaching effects, such as excluding the applicant and other persons belonging to the LGBT community from the public space, further harassment, and discrimination. 'It is therefore unacceptable to cause a situation where a certain part of society, due to its belonging to social groups [...], becomes a victim of repression in the form of reluctance, aggression, or deprivation of the right to use public space freely', the Warsaw court ruled (Regional Court in Warsaw, 24 July 2019, Case no. IV Co 130/19, *Bartosz Staszewski v. Niezależne Wydawnictwo Polskie sp. z o.o.*).

The claimant was represented by lawyers from the 'Free Courts' (*Wolne Sądy*) initiative, who have been active in rule of law defence since July 2017 through communication campaigns and legal actions.¹¹ This is but one example of cooperation between rule of law and LGBT rights' defenders. In the past, the question of LGBT rights in Poland had been discussed in terms of minority rights. However, the anti-LGBT campaign occurred during the long-term rule of law crisis and after vicious campaigns against government critics and specific professional and social groups: judges, attorneys, doctors, teachers, persons with disabilities (Freedom House, 2020). Consequently, media critical of the government framed attacks against LGBT as part of dismantling constitutional democracy norms and a concern for all pro-democracy Poles.

LGBT rights defenders responded to anti-LGBT resolutions with artistic and monitoring projects. Bart Staszewski posted 'LGBT-free zone' signs in several towns and photographed non-heterosexual people living there in front of the signs. He posted the portraits online, attracting attention from the European Parliament's lawmakers, some of whom initially wrongly assumed that the signs were official. Other LGBT activists created an interactive online 'Atlas of Hate,' depicting areas of Poland that the creators say have adopted anti-LGBT resolutions.¹² They were nominated for the European Parliament's 2020 Sakharov Prize. Several local municipalities, helped by Ordo Iuris and the Polish League Against Defamation, sued Staszewski and the 'Atlas of Hate' creators.¹³

Although legal remedies at the international level are limited to mechanisms under the Council of Europe (application to the European Court of Human Rights) or the United Nations (application to the Human Rights Committee), 'international support' can be found among more general diplomatic tools, including refusal of funding. Polish LGBT activists exposed and publicised anti-LGBT resolutions, which were then covered in international

¹¹ See <https://wolnesady.org/en/>

¹² The Atlas of Hate is available at <https://atlasnienawisci.pl/>

¹³ In March 2021, a court in Nowy Sącz acquitted B. Staszewski in a case initiated under Article 97 of the Infractions Code, Article 45.1.10 of the Road Traffic Act, i.e., the arbitrary placing of any signs, inscriptions, or symbols on the road. In April 2021, Mielec court acquitted him in another case concerning a petty offense of damaging a road sign. Several cases against Staszewski and the 'Atlas of Hate' creators are pending before courts in Poland as of submitting the paper.

media and provoked condemnation from the European Commission's President. The President of the EC said that 'LGBTQI-free zones are humanity-free zones' that 'have no place in our Union' (State of the Union, 2020). EU institutions answered with legal and political actions. In December 2019, the European Parliament (EP) adopted a resolution on public discrimination and hate speech against LGBT people, including 'LGBT free zones' (European Parliament, 2019). In July 2020, the EC decided to withhold EU funds to some Polish communities that adopted anti-LGBT resolutions to ensure that the funds will be spent following the EU values (European Commission, 2020). On 11 March 2021, the EP adopted a resolution declaring the EU a LGBTI Freedom Zone (European Parliament, 2021) and called on the EC to assess whether the creation of anti-LGBT zones amounts to a violation of freedom of movement and residence in the EU. On 7 July 2021, the EC launched EU law infringement proceedings against Poland for failing 'to fully and appropriately respond to its inquiry regarding the nature and impact of the so-called "LGBT-ideology free zones" resolutions adopted by several Polish regions and municipalities' (European Commission, 2021).

In addition to EU-level actions, the French Region of Loire decided to suspend the economic cooperation with the Polish region of Lesser Poland (*Małopolska*) because of resolutions discriminatory to LGBT adopted there (Pankowska, 2020). In September 2020, ambassadors from 50 countries urged the Polish authorities to end discrimination against sexual minorities. Norway announced that funds from the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism (EEA Funds) would not be awarded to municipalities that adopted resolutions discriminating against LGBT (Stortinget, 2020). From March 2021, some local municipalities in Poland, including villages of Nowa Dęba and Kraśnik and the city Przemyśl (Kulczycka, 2021), withdrew the resolutions discriminatory against LGBT, citing the risk of not receiving funds and reputational concerns (Tilles, 2020).

EU and international pressure was supplemented by the Commissioner for Human Rights. In December 2019, the Commissioner challenged the first six local anti-LGBT resolutions in courts, arguing they violate the principle of legality, discriminate, and limit the rights and freedoms of community residents (Sześciło, 2019), and are incompatible with EU law. In 2020, regional administrative courts found some of the resolutions discriminatory and invalidated them. However, some administrative courts rejected the motions on formal grounds, arguing they lack jurisdiction because the resolutions do not concern public administration issues. In July 2021, the Supreme Administrative Court overruled those rejections and ordered them to hear the cases on merits (Supreme Administrative Court rulings of 2 July 2021, cases no. III OSK3682/21 and no. III OSK 3353/21). At time of submission, 92 municipalities in Poland retain anti-LGBT resolutions (Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii, 2021).

Conclusions

This article demonstrated that a system with weakened rule of law standards allows the government to translate a political agenda against a minority into state policy. It demonstrated that specific elements of rule of law backsliding in Poland after 2015 profoundly impacted LGBT rights advocacy.

First, the politically subordinated Constitutional Tribunal ensures that new laws (e.g., the merger of the offices of Prosecutor General and Minister of Justice) remain binding. The Tribunal's interpretation of constitutional and statutory norms allows the executive to challenge cases heard and decided by ordinary or administrative courts.

Second, the amalgamation of the prosecutor's service and political leadership significantly affects the law's execution. Specific norms are implemented to serve an anti-LGBT rights function. Authorities use legal means in a discriminatory way to harass or discourage LGBT defenders. In this context, the independence of courts is fundamental to challenge the executive's actions. However, it is difficult to separate judicially the political and legal links in the prosecutors' actions at the pre-trial stage. Nevertheless, independent courts remained the last resort for human rights protection during the anti-LGBT campaign.

Third, the government-controlled public media attempted to secure public support for the anti-LGBT campaign, including through promotion of homophobic views and presenting them as objective facts.

The paper found that when institutions that check the government and verify constitutionality, legality, and factuality are politically captured, arbiter becomes enabler. The public prosecutor enforces the law to implement a particular political agenda and public media outlets attack instead of informing.

In this context, grassroots efforts by human rights defenders and actions by the Commissioner for Human Rights were crucial to push back against some national and local authorities' anti-LGBT actions. In an environment characterised by rapid dismantling of rule of law, including executive aggrandisement and subjugating key institutions to a political agenda, it remains possible to counter some anti-LGBT rights actions with recourse to legal means as long as independent courts endure.

References

- Ambroziak, A. (2020, December 8). Sąd Najwyższy: Ziobro użył Trybunału Konstytucyjnego, by obronić drukarza homofoba, *OKO.press*, <https://oko.press/ziobro-wykorzystal-trybunal-konstytucyjny-w-sprawie-drukarza-homofoba/>
- Ambroziak, A. (2020a, July 23). Za zgodne z prawem pracy zwolnienie aktywnego homofoba nawet dwa lata więzienia? *OKO.press*, <https://oko.press/skandal-za-zgodne-z-kodeksem-pracy-zwolnienie-aktywnego-homofoba-nawet-dwa-lata-wiezienia/>
- Ayoub, P. & Paternotte, D. (2019). Europe and LGBT rights: A conflicted relationship. In M. Bosia, S. McEvoy, & M. Rahman (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of global LGBT and sexual diversity politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190673741.013.11>
- Bartnik, P., Kacperczyk-Bartnik, J., Próchnicki, M., Dobrowolska-Redo, A. & Romejko-Wolniewicz, E. (2020). Does the status quo have to remain? The current legal issues of transsexualism in Poland. *Advances in Clinical and Experimental Medicine*, 29(3), 409–417. <https://doi.org/10.17219/acem/115294>
- Basiuk, T. & Burszta, J. (Eds.) (2020). *Queers in State Socialism: Cruising 1970s Poland*. Routledge.
- Bátorfy, A. & Urbán, Á. (2020). State advertising as an instrument of transformation of the media market in Hungary. *East European Politics*, 36(1), 44–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1662398>
- Batory Foundation, Journalist Society, Journalists Association, Monitoring of the 2019 European Parliament election campaign in the main news programme of Polish public TV, Warsaw, June 10, 2019.

- Belavusau, U. (2020). Legislative and Judicial Politics of LGBT Rights in the European Union. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1309>
- Belavusau, U. & Alkiviadou, N. (2021). Rien que des mots. Counteracting homophobic speech in European and US law. *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law*, 21(4), 374–400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F135822912111043420>
- Bernatt, M. & Ziółkowski, M. (2019). Statutory Anti-Constitutionalism. *Washington International Law Journal*, 28(2), 487–526.
- Buyse, A. (2018). Squeezing civic space: restrictions on civil society organizations and the linkages with human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 22(8), 966–988. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2018.1492916>
- Chapman, A. (2017). *Pluralism Under Attack: The Assault on Press Freedom in Poland*. Freedom House.
- Demczuk, A. (2020). The Discriminatory Legalism Strategy and Hate Speech Cases in Poland. The Role of the Commissioner for Human Rights in Fighting Discrimination. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, 27(2), 127–148. <https://doi.org/10.17951/k.2020.27.2.127-148>
- Drinóczi, T. & Bień-Kacała, A. (2019). Illiberal Constitutionalism: The Case of Hungary and Poland. *German Law Journal*, 20(8) 1140–1166. <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.83>
- Erling B. (2020, December 10). Tvp.info zmienia tytuły tekstów o tzw. strefach wolnych od LGBT, uderzając w aktywistę [Tvp.info changes titles of texts about so-called LGBT-free zones, targeting activist], Press.pl, https://www.press.pl/tresc/64201,tvp_info-zmienia-tytuły-tekstów-o-tzw_-strefach-wolnych-od-lgbt_-uderzając-w-aktywistę
- EU Fundamental Rights Agency Report Hate Speech and Hate Crimes against LGBT Persons (2012).
- Eurobarometer on the social acceptance of LGBTIQ people in the EU (2019).
- European Commission, Responsibility of the Managing Authorities and beneficiaries of EU cohesion policy funds to comply with the principle of non-discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, EMPL/REGIO/JC/db (2020) 8845638.
- European Commission (2021). EU founding values: Commission starts legal action against Hungary and Poland for violations of fundamental rights of LGBTIQ people. Press release 7 July 2021.
- European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (2015). Report on Poland. Fifth monitoring cycle. Adopted on 20 March 2015, CRI(2015)20.
- European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (2018). Conclusions on the implementation of the Recommendation in respect of Poland subject to interim follow-up. Adopted on 21 March 2018, CRI(2018)25
- European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021 on the EU's declaration as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone (2021/2557(RSP)).
- European Parliament resolution of 18 December 2019 on public discrimination and hate speech against LGBTI people, including LGBTI free zones (2019/2933(RSP)).
- Freedom House (2020). Nations in Transit: Poland. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland/nations-transit/2020>

- Godzisz, P. (2019). The Europeanization of anti-LGBT hate crime laws in the Western Balkans. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 71(3), 291–306. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-019-09818-9>
- Godzisz, P. & Knut, P. (2018). *LGBTI rights in Poland. Measures to combat discrimination and violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics*. Kampania Przeciw Homofobii, Lambda.
- Godzisz, P. & Rawłuszko, M. (2019). Responding to Anti-LGBT Hate Crimes in Poland: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? In P. Godzisz & G. Viggiani (Eds.), *Awareness of Anti-LGBT Hate Crime in Europe* (pp. 221–243). Lambda.
- Godzisz, P., Pudzianowska, D., Schweppe, J. & Walters, M. A. (2016). Do some identities deserve more protection than others? The case of anti-LGBT hate crime laws in Poland. In J. Schweppe & M. A. Walters (Eds.), *The Globalisation of Hate: Internationalising Hate Crime* (pp. 174–189). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785668.001.0001>
- Gressgård, R. & Smoczy, R. (2020). Noble Polish Sexuality and the Corrupted European Body. *Intersections*, 6(3), 13–32. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v6i3.656>
- Gwiazda, A. (2020). Right-wing populism and feminist politics: The case of Law and Justice in Poland. *International Political Science Review*, 42(5), 580–595. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F0192512120948917>
- Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2020). *Y v Poland*, application no. 74131/14. Written comments by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 28 February 2020. https://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2489_001.pdf
- Holesch, A. & Kyriazi, A. (2021). Democratic backsliding in the European Union: the role of the Hungarian-Polish coalition. *East European Politics*, online first. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1865319>
- ILGA-Europe (2021). Rainbow Map and Index 2021. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope/2021>
- Jartyś, J. (2015). Europeanisation and Internationalisation of LGBT Rights in Poland. *Reality of Politics. Estimates-Comments-Forecasts*, 6, 9–19.
- Jartyś, J. (2016). Kwestie obyczajowe w programie i działalności Platformy Obywatelskiej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (The Moral and Ideological Worldview in the Civic Platform's Political Programmes and Activities). *Acta Politica Polonica*, 35, 59–66. <https://doi.org/10.18276/ap.2016.35-05>
- Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii (2010, May 6). Mowa nienawiści przestępstwem. Zmiany w kodeksie karnym dotyczące przestępstw motywowanych mową nienawiści (Hate speech a crime. Changes to the Criminal Code regarding hate speech crimes). Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii, <https://kph.org.pl/mowa-nienawisci-przestepstwem/>
- Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii (2021, June 28). Zespół Atlasu Nienawiści stanie przed sądem. Pierwsze dwie rozprawy już w lipcu (The Hate Atlas team will stand trial. First two hearings in July). Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii, <https://kph.org.pl/atlas-nienawisci-przed-sadem/>
- Kelemen, R. D. & Pech, L. (2019). The uses and abuses of constitutional pluralism: undermining the rule of law in the name of constitutional identity in Hungary and Poland. *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies*, 21, 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cel.2019.11>

- Koncewicz, T. T. (2018). The Capture of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal and Beyond: Of Institution(s), Fidelities and the Rule of Law in Flux. *Review of Central and East European Law*, 43(2), 116–173. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15730352-04302002>
- Korolczuk, E. (2020). The fight against ‘gender’ and ‘LGBT ideology’: new developments in Poland. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 3(1), 165–167. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X15744244471843>
- Kováts, E. (2018). Questioning consensus: Right-wing populism, anti-populism, and the threat of ‘gender ideology’. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(2), 528–538. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1360780418764735>
- Krzyżanowski, M. (2018). Discursive shifts in ethno-nationalist politics: On politicization and mediatization of the “refugee crisis” in Poland. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(1–2), 76–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1317897>
- Kulczycka, A. (2021, May 28). More Polish Towns Repeal Their Anti-LGBT Resolutions. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,173236,27137914,more-polish-towns-repeal-their-anti-lgbt-resolutions.html>
- Łętowska, E. & Woleński, J. (2013). Instytucjonalizacja związków partnerskich a Konstytucja RP z 1997 r. (Institutionalisation of civil partnerships and the Polish Constitution of 1997). *Państwo i Prawo*, (6), 15–40.
- Makana, E. & Allsop, J. (2019, October 11). Poland Is Purging Its Prosecutors. *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/11/poland-is-purging-its-prosecutors>
- Mazurczak, A. (2018, December 18). Poland’s Supreme Administrative Court recognizes Same-sex Parents, *VerfBlog*, <https://verfassungsblog.de/polands-supreme-administrative-court-recognizes-same-sex-parents>
- Mole, R. (2011). Nationality and sexuality: homophobic discourse and the ‘national threat’ in contemporary Latvia. *Nations and Nationalism*, 17(3), 540–560. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00476.x>
- Mole, R., Golec de Zavala, A. & Ardag, M. M. (2021). Homophobia and national collective narcissism in populist Poland. *European Journal of Sociology*, 62(1), 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975621000072>
- Nuñez-Mietz, F. G. (2019). Resisting human rights through securitization: Russia and Hungary against LGBT rights. *Journal of Human Rights*, 18(5), 543–563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2019.1647100>
- O’Dwyer, C. (2012). Does the EU help or hinder gay-rights movements in post-communist Europe? The case of Poland. *East European Politics*, 28(4), 332–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2012.721094>
- O’Dwyer, C. (2018). The benefits of backlash: EU accession and the organization of LGBT activism in postcommunist Poland and the Czech Republic. *East European Politics and Societies*, 32(4), 892–923. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0888325418762051>
- Ordo Iuris (2020, March 8). Are there LGBT-free zones in Poland? Report, *Ordo Iuris*, <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/family-and-marriage/are-there-lgbt-free-zones-poland-report>

- OSCE-ODIHR (2020a). *Poland – Parliamentary Elections, 13 October 2019: Final Report*, 14 February 2020.
- OSCE-ODIHR (2020b). *Republic of Poland Presidential Election 28 June and 12 July 2020, ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission, Final Report*, Warsaw 23 September 2020.
- OSCE (2015). *OSCE Media Freedom Representative Urges Poland’s Government to Withdraw Proposed Changes to the Selection of Management in Public Service Broadcasters*, 30 December 2015.
- Otwinowski, M. (2016, May 9). Poland’s ‘political cleansing’ of journalists. *Index of Censorship*, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2016/05/polands-political-cleansing-of-journalists>
- Pankowska, M. (2020, February 25). Francuski region Loary zawiesza współpracę z Małopolską. Za „strefę wolną od LGBT” (The French Loire region suspends its cooperation with Małopolska. For an ‘LGBT-free zone’). *OKO.press*, <https://oko.press/francuski-region-loary-zawiesza-wspolprace-z-malopolska-za-strefe-wolna-od-lgbt>
- Pech, L. & Scheppele K. L. (2017). Illiberalism Within: Rule of Law Backsliding in the EU. *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies*, 19, 3–47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cel.2017.9>
- Pech, L., Wachowiec, P. & Mazur, D. (2021). Poland’s rule of law breakdown: a five-year assessment of EU’s (in)action. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 13(1), 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-021-00151-9>
- Pew Research Center (2020). The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/06/PG_2020.06.25_Global-Views-Homosexuality_FINAL.pdf
- Ploszka, A. (2020). Shrinking Space for Civil Society: A Case Study of Poland. *European Public Law*, 26(4), 941–960.
- Ptak, A. & Gocłowski, M. (2020, August 8) Thousands protest in Poland demanding release of LGBT activist. *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-lgbt-idUSKCN2540DM>
- Robinson, D. (2020, November 21). Life beyond Europe’s rainbow curtain. *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/11/21/life-beyond-europes-rainbow-curtain>
- Sadurski, W. (2019a). *Poland’s Constitutional Breakdown*. Oxford University Press.
- Sadurski, W. (2019b). Polish constitutional tribunal under PiS: from an activist court, to a paralysed tribunal, to a governmental enabler. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 11(1), 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-018-0078-1>
- Sadurski, W. (2020). Populism and Human Rights in Poland. In G. L. Neuman (Ed.), *Human Rights in a Time of Populism: Challenges and Responses* (pp. 60–80). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108751551.005>
- State of the Union (2020). Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary, 16 September 2020.
- Stortinget (2020). Skriftlig spørsmål fra Anniken Huitfeldt (A) til utenriksministeren, 9 September, <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Sporsmal/Skriftlig-sporsmal-og-svar/Skriftlig-sporsmal/?qid=80886>

- Struzik, J. (2020). Framing queer activism in Poland: From liberal values to solidarity. In R. Buyantueva & M. Shevtsova (Eds.), *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 265–288). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20401-3_11
- Swimelar, S. (2017). The journey of LGBT rights: Norm diffusion and its challenges in EU seeking states: Bosnia and Serbia. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 39(4), 910–942. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2017.0054>
- Szczygielska, M. (2019). ‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Responses to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland. In A. Krizsan & C. Roggeband (Eds.), *Gendering Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe: A Comparative Agenda* (pp. 120–160). CEU Press.
- Szeroczyńska, M. (2017). Międzynarodowy standard statusu i organizacji prokuratury a najnowsze zmiany polskiego porządku prawnego (International standard for the status and organisation of public prosecutors and recent developments in the Polish legal system). *Czasopismo Prawa Karnego i Nauk Penalnych*, 21(2), 109–139.
- Sześciło, D. (2019, September 30). Opinia w sprawie dopuszczalności zaskarżenia przez Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich uchwał rad niektórych jednostek samorządu terytorialnego w sprawie „powstrzymywania ideologii LGBT” (Opinion on the admissibility of challenges by the Commissioner for Human Rights to resolutions of councils of certain local government units on the ‘suppression of LGBT ideology’). <http://bip.brpo.gov.pl/sites/default/files/Opinia%20dla%20RPO%20dr.%20hab.%20Dawida%20Sze%20C5%9Bci%20C5%82o.pdf>
- Szulc, L. (2018). Homosexual Activism in Communist Poland. In *Transnational homosexuals in Communist Poland* (pp. 91–122). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58901-5_4
- Szydło, M. (2017). Instytucjonalizacja związków partnerskich w świetle art. 18 i 32 Konstytucji RP (Institutionalization of civil partnerships as regards to Article 18 and Article 32 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland). *Zeszyty Prawnicze BAS*, 56(4), 9–30.
- Szymczak, J. (2021, March 2). Aktywistki uniewinnione. Zakończył się proces o obrazę uczuć religijnych w Płocku (Female activists acquitted. The trial for insulting religious feelings in Płock has ended), *OKO.press*, <https://oko.press/aktywistki-uniewinnione-zakonczyly-sie-proces-o-obraze-uczuc-religijnych-w-plocku/>
- Taraneck, P. (2019, October 17). Jędraszewski nie złamał prawa. Prokuratura odmawia śledztwa za „tęczową zarazę” (Jędraszewski did not break the law. Prosecution refuses to investigate for ‘rainbow plague’), *Radio Zet*, <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/Polska/Abp-Marek-Jedraszewski-nie-zlamal-prawa.-Prokuratura-odmowila-sledztwa-ws.-slow-o-LGBT>
- The Commissioner for Human Rights Office (2020). KMPT wizytuje policyjne miejsca detencji po nocnych zatrzymaniach w Warszawie (National Torture Prevention Mechanism visits police detention places after night-time arrests in Warsaw), 8 August 2020, <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/pl/content/kmpt-wizytuje-policyjne-miejsca-detencji-po-nocnych-zatrzymaniach-w-warszawie>
- Tilles, D. (2020, April 29). Polish town withdraws anti-LGBT resolution over concern at losing Norway Grants. *Notes from Poland*, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/04/29/polish-town-withdraws-anti-lgbt-resolution-over-concern-at-losing-norway-funds>
- Tomczak, Ł., Iwański, R. & Zawadzka-Witt, K. (2021). Attitudes in Poland Towards the Legalization of Same-Sex Registered Partnerships in the Context of Political Preferences. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, online first. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-021-00566-x>

- Tryfonidou, A. (2018). The impact of the framework equality directive on the protection of LGBT persons and same-sex couples from discrimination under EU law. In U. Belavusau & K. Henrard (Eds.), *EU Anti-Discrimination Law beyond Gender* (pp. 229–248). Hart Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781509915033.ch-010>
- Tryfonidou, A. (2020). Positive state obligations under European Law: a tool for achieving substantive equality for sexual minorities in Europe. *Erasmus Law Review*, (3), 98–112. <https://doi.org/10.5553/ELR.000149>
- TVP (2020). TVP press release 30 June 2020, <https://centruminformacji.tvp.pl/48760056/oswiadczenie-telewizji-polskiej.sa>
- Venice Commission (2016). Opinion on the Act on the Constitutional Tribunal, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 108th Plenary Session, (Venice, 14-15 October 2016), CDL-AD(2016)026-e.
- Venice Commission (2017). Opinion on the Act on the Public Prosecutors Office as amended, adopted at its 113th Plenary Session (Venice, 8-9 December 2017), CDL-AD(2017)028.
- Weyland, K. (2013). Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(3), 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0045>
- Wyrzykowski, M. (2019). Experiencing the Unimaginable: The Collapse of the Rule of Law in Poland. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 11(2), 417–422. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-019-00124-z>
- Zagórski, P. & Bértoa, F. C. (2020, June 27). Five paradoxes ahead of this Sunday's presidential election in Poland. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) blog*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/06/27/five-paradoxes-ahead-of-this-sundays-presidential-election-in-poland>

JANA HRCKOVA* & MICHAEL C. ZELLER**

The everyday abnormal and the quest for normalcy: How Polish equality marches build protester resilience

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 104–123.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.817>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* [Hrckova_Jana@phd.ceu.edu] (Central European University)

** [Zeller_Michael@phd.ceu.edu] (Central European University)

Abstract

Illiberal regimes and societies test resilience and provoke resistance, especially from targeted minority groups. But this abstraction can obscure the complexity of specific events and participants' emotional motivation. What are the emotional and cognitive responses of protest participants within illiberal contexts? This article investigates this question by focusing on LGBT-rights protest participants in contemporary Poland. Using testimony from in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants from 2019 equality marches, we identify emotional and cognitive responses that centre around a quest for normalcy. Illiberal politics in Poland, especially when contrasted with perceptions about LGBT acceptance in neighbouring countries, have made everyday life 'abnormal', whereby LGBT individuals fear increasing violence and feel unable to act normally. Protest participation opens a space where LGBT individuals and allies can feel normal. This experience of normalcy effectively claims recognition of one's 'normal' humanity. In turn, this builds resilience within participants to endure the deterring effects of everyday life and to continue their advocacy for LGBT rights.

Keywords: illiberalism, social movements, emotions, resistance, resilience, normalcy

*Whatever, you take the street, it's your demo, you play the queens,
Gaga and Cher... a feeling of pride, pride on behalf of the kids, who, besides
homophobic parents, living in such a city, they come, march and have fun.*
(Jolanta)

1 Introduction

This paper understands illiberal democracy as a regime system exhibiting majoritarian characteristics and a concomitant denigration of minority rights. When targeted at vulnerable minority groups, illiberal politics – especially when embodied in government and state institutions – dehumanise and traumatise. This is the case in Poland, where an illiberal government voices and fosters hostility to LGBT individuals, fuelling politicisation and polarisation about LGBT rights (ILGA, 2019; Taylor & Prentice, 2020). Within this peculiar context, what are the emotional and cognitive responses of LGBT-rights protest participants in Poland?

The emergence of illiberal democratic regimes, particularly within the European Union, has coincided with some of the largest protest mobilisations in the post-communist era. Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, with its policies and its rhetoric, has thrust pre-existing and emerging LGBT activism and protesters into a transformed context. This study explores and analyses protester emotions under these conditions and thereby contributes to the literature on a set of 'extreme cases' wherein protest participation is fundamentally shaped by strong politicisation of the issue area and broader illiberalisation of the political sphere.

This article's main contribution is to add to the literature on protester resilience and the emotional effect of protest participation within illiberal contexts. Resilience is the ability 'to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on various sources of strength and social resources to adapt and cope with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma' (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Given the persistent distress, amounting even to trauma, imposed on many LGBT individuals due to the growing illiberalism in Poland, resilience is precisely what is needed to continue LGBT rights advocacy.

Our study identifies the emotional and cognitive responses of participants in 2019 equality marches for LGBT rights in Poland and a quest for normalcy as their overlying narrative. Informed by anthropological literature on normalcy, the article explores how normalcy is used to articulate hope and aspiration for ordinary lives (Kelly, 2008; Jansen, 2015), unoppressed by illiberal governments or severe Catholic mores. In the interviewees' narratives, the quest for normalcy is identified with a clear temporal and geographical direction, progressing and moving towards the West, which accordingly denies Polish society's coevalness with the protesters' movement. Building on studies that examine Eastern bloc citizens' desire to join the imagined normality of the West, oftentimes linked to dreams of consumption (Fehervary, 2002; Galbraith, 2003; Plakans, 2009), the article reveals how participants wish for liberal democracy and a concomitant recognition of their 'normal' humanity in their own country. Illiberal politics, especially when contrasted with perceptions about LGBT acceptance in neighbouring countries, have made everyday life 'abnormal'; LGBT individuals fear increasing violence and societal radicalisation. Protest participation opens a space where LGBT individuals and allies can feel normal but also, just as importantly, where they can signal what they perceive to be normal to wider society, through partial self-censorship. They use the events to demonstrate their solidarity and act in ways they might otherwise suppress, such as holding hands or kissing. At protests, participants can escape the distresses of everyday lives and instead live out an imagined normality; they can directly challenge the hegemonic order in Poland. This builds resilience within participants to endure the deterring effects of everyday life and to continue their advocacy for LGBT rights. Relying on in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants from 2019 equality marches, we detect this division after identifying persistent themes in participants' emotional and cognitive experiences of protest.

2 Methods

This study is an outgrowth of the EU Horizon-2020 BRaVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation) project, which examined violent extremism and polarisation in ten EU countries. In recent years, journalistic commentary and scholarly analysis have occa-

sionally identified examples from Poland as representative of radicalising and polarising trends. Our research, situated at the micro-level, reveals protest participants' perceptions of and responses to these trends.

To identify the emotional and cognitive responses of LGBT-rights protest participants in contemporary Poland, we conducted eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants¹ from 2019 equality marches. In part, these interviews explored protester biographies that illuminated some mechanics of their protest mobilisation (e.g., prior activism and network embeddedness, consideration of movement strategy, action mobilisation). More importantly, the interviews focused on protesters' emotions before, during, and after participation in an equality march.

Interviewees were selected for their participation in 2019 equality march events in Warsaw (8 June 2019) and/or in Białystok (20 July 2019). This criterion ensured that testimony reflected the protest experience of equality marches both in Warsaw and other large cities and in more peripheral locales where the immediate, street-level conditions are not as welcoming for LGBT-rights protests. The Białystok march was unique, as it was the first time the event took place in a city considered a conservative stronghold. The march involved massive social unrest as opponents of LGBT rights mobilised counter-demonstrations to confront the equality march, including the archbishop of Białystok, Tadeusz Wojda, who called on inhabitants to defend the church and reject the demonstration's postulates. Interviewees also attended equality marches in other cities (e.g., Łódź, Poznań, and Wrocław), but they were asked specifically to reflect on participation in Warsaw and/or Białystok, as well as to reflect on the divergence (if any) between well-established events like the one in Warsaw and newer events in hostile contexts like Białystok.

Demographically, the interviewees' ages ranged from 26 to 40; though originally from settlements of varying sizes, most now live in large cities (in Poland or Germany); and most possess a higher education degree. Furthermore, interviewees included both members of the LGBT community and people who see themselves as allies. Some of the interviewees had organiser roles during the marches and extensive experience with activism, while others were new to the protests.

The temporal selection criterion – march participation in 2019 – ensured uniformity in the socio-political landscape. As the following section reviews, Poland in 2019 featured a politically polarised context characterised by the illiberal and autocratising agenda of the ruling government, and distinguished by singularly strong politicisation of LGBT-rights issues. Protester emotions in a polarised, autocratising context have been little explored in the budding social movement scholarship on emotions; hence, this paper's central contribution.

The results relate to research about protest participation within illiberal contexts, as well as protest activity motivated by the desire for recognition.² Rather than offering generalizable results,³ the more robust contribution of this study is its generation of case-specific insights about emotional and cognitive facets of LGBT-rights protest participation in contemporary Poland. Notwithstanding the case-specific design of the present study, LGBT pro-

¹ We have changed the name of interview participants and excluded any uniquely identifying information.

² Such as the American Civil Rights Movement, anti-apartheid activism, the Black Lives Matter movement.

³ Projects organised around large-scale surveys of protesters provide the most robust generalisable findings – for example, the 'Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation' (CCC) project.

test in Poland belongs to a set of ‘extreme cases’ wherein protest participation is fundamentally shaped by strong politicisation of the issue area and broader illiberalisation of the political sphere. The intense politicisation of LGBT-rights issues in Poland fits this mould.⁴

3 Context

Our study must be read alongside recognition of the *illiberal democracy* emerging in Poland. Initially coined by Fareed Zakaria (1997), the term describes dismantling of rule of law, a shift from constitutional liberalism towards increasing disregard for civil liberties, while keeping democratic procedures intact. Illiberalism could also be understood as a nationalist and majoritarian counter-hegemonic movement that rejects liberal democracy and globalisation, in Poland best represented by the EU (Grzebalska & Petó, 2018, p. 165). Moreover, Polish illiberalism includes devout Catholicism and conservatism, particularly involving LGBT (and abortion) issues. To a certain extent these elements are distinctive of Poland, but both further the denigration of minority rights that is essential to illiberalism.

Despite the increasingly repressive context surrounding protests, it would be counter-productive to contextualise Poland as being among more authoritarian regimes, such as those of China or Russia. Rather, Poland remains embedded in transnational institutions and the government endeavours to maintain the country’s good repute on the international stage. This pertains to protest activities, resistance, and resilience, as participants can presume they will not face extreme violence or persecution. This makes Poland a curious – but not atypical – case: the context is increasingly hostile, but the opportunity to protest is not closed or encumbered by the threat of direct state repression.

Regressive gender and LGBT equality policies have been observed in several countries in the EU and beyond, linked to rising illiberalism (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018). Poland is regularly listed among the least LGBT-friendly countries in the EU.⁵ According to a 2019 benchmarking tool on LGBT equality laws and policies (ILGA Europe, 2019), Poland ranked second to last among the EU countries. Polish LGBT people do not enjoy equal rights, as homosexual marriages or civil partnerships do not exist. At the same time, there are numerous cases of homophobic and transphobic violence every year (Melnychenko, 2020). Poland does not have sufficient instruments for prosecuting hate speech against LGBT persons, however, as the penal code (Journal of Laws, 1997) only covers crimes perpetrated on national, ethnic, racial or religious grounds. Advocacy groups, as well as the Polish Ombudsman’s office (Bodnar et al., 2010), regularly highlight the omission, but so far to no avail.

Recent years have borne witness to increasing discussion of Polish LGBT rights. A Google trend analysis for ‘LGBT’ (Figure 1), which displays how frequently the term has been searched for, reflects the sudden intensification in Poland. Similarly, the BRaVE project’s polarisation indicators (Taylor & Prentice, 2020) reveal that Polish society is highly

⁴ Other examples abound; for instance, Muslim-rights protests in India, LGBT-rights issues in Brazil, gender studies education in Hungary.

⁵ Several researchers have examined LGBT issues and contention in Poland. By focusing on the cognitive and emotional experience of equality march participants, this article adds to scholarship that unpacks the dynamics of LGBT protest in Poland (e.g., Peterson, Wahlström & Wennerhag, 2018). It is also informed by research that dilates on transnational and EU facets of LGBT contention (e.g. Ayobu, 2016, and O’Dwyer, 2018).

polarised and has the lowest societal resilience with regard to ‘gender/sex/orientation’ issues. In other words, Poland is uniquely unfit to cope with the intense politicisation of LGBT issues.

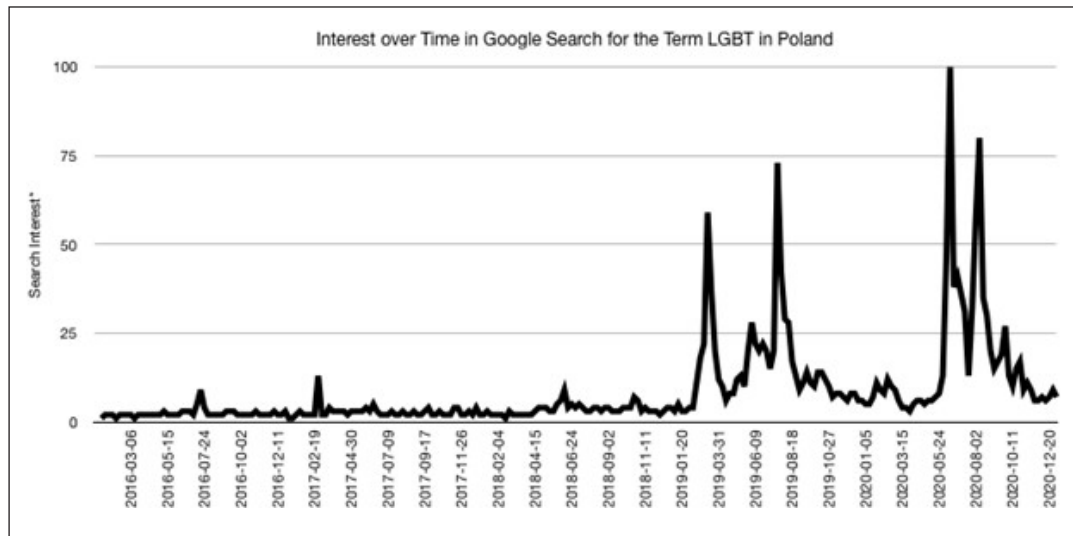


Figure 1. Google trend analysis for ‘LGBT’ in Poland.

Y-axis numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term.

A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular.

A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.

Entering a national election cycle, with parliamentary elections in October 2019 and presidential elections in June 2020, the PiS party used LGBT issues as a central theme in their campaign. Aided by the influential and notoriously conservative Catholic Church⁶ hierarchy, the party advanced the narrative of a choice between traditional, ‘pro-family’ values and the threat of ‘LGBT ideology’; this accelerated intense politicisation of LGBT rights in the political discourse. In this atmosphere, more than 80 municipalities in Poland proclaimed themselves LGBT-free zones in 2019. Leading PiS politicians were unambiguous in their public statements. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the PiS chairman, suggested that Warsaw mayor Rafał Trzaskowski’s support for LGBT rights was an attack on ‘Polish children and families’ (TokFM, 2019). During the presidential election campaign, President Andrzej Duda proclaimed that ‘LGBT are not people, it’s an ideology’ (Bartejka, 2020).

⁶ The Catholic Church in Poland is a central actor within a network of organisations and individuals that promote a slate of socially conservative policies. This network’s opposition to LGBT rights parallels its advocacy against gender-sensitive policymaking (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021).

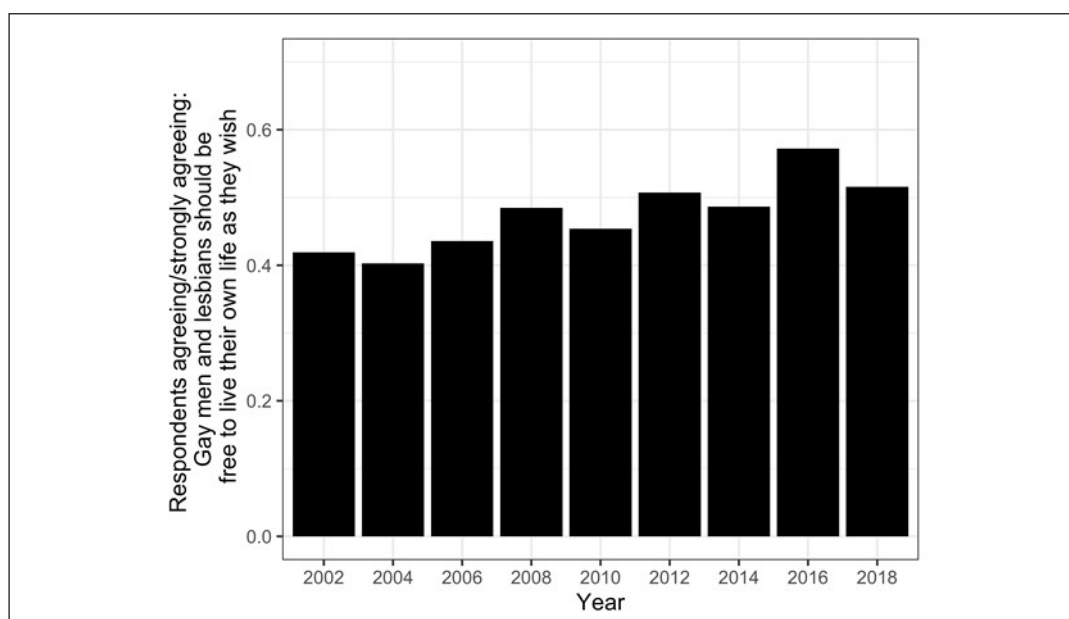


Figure 2. Longitudinal European Social Survey responses from Poland on acceptance of LGBT individuals (European Social Survey Cumulative File, 2020)

Despite conservative politicians' rhetoric, survey data, such as the European Social Survey (Figure 2), suggests increasing acceptance of LGBT rights. Looking at changes in attitudes in CEE countries from Eurobarometer surveys in 2015 and 2019, Poland is the only one to exhibit a significant increase in the social acceptance of LGBT people. Slovakia, Hungary, as well as the Czech Republic⁷ all recorded backsliding in this regard (Eurobarometer, 2015; 2019). The comparative lens thus reveals that Poland is an outlier in the region in terms of societal development.⁸ Increasing visibility and information availability have sheared away the opacity surrounding LGBT issues and compelled Poles to 'choose sides' in the polarised political environment. The scale of LGBT protest in Poland also reflects this politicised context: the Warsaw parade routinely draws tens of thousands of participants, dwarfing similar events in neighbouring countries. Moreover, Poland is exceptional for the diffusion of LGBT marches to smaller cities and towns. In sum, to examine LGBT protest in contemporary Poland is to examine a case of protest participation in an autocratising context in strongly politicised issue areas.

⁷ The Czech Republic remains the most accepting in the region.

⁸ Even though a deeper examination is beyond the scope of this article, these survey results also suggest that the processes at play might not be necessarily bound to the rise of the new illiberal regimes in Poland and Hungary only.

4 Trauma and pride

Longstanding conservatism (specifically, conservative Catholicism) combined with PiS invective against 'LGBT ideology' have rendered LGBT individuals and allies a vulnerable group. Interviewees attest to this vulnerability in the first part of this section. They describe encountering individual harassment as well as menacing opposition when publicly advocating for LGBT rights, which effects a measure of repression, discouraging demonstrative affiliation with the LGBT community. Protest participation is one highly visible instance of demonstrative affiliation. Yet, as the section continues, several interviewees conveyed a feeling of prolonged distress or even trauma, whether from participation in fraught protests or from a sustained attack on the 'normality' of LGBT rights (see following section). By referring to 'trauma', we do not mean to denote a psychodynamic or neuroscience conception of the phenomenon, but rather a species of 'political trauma', similar to Matthies-Boon's (2017) conception. This view conceives of trauma as potentially resulting from 'structural, continuous and ongoing' (ibid., p. 624) socio-political factors; the source of trauma is the 'experience of a shattering worldview' (ibid., p. 623), which is often prompted or intensified by violent socio-political context. However, as the last part of the section argues, this distress and trauma does not appear to have a demobilising effect; instead, protest participants emphasised affective commitments and moral emotions that ultimately imbued them with resilience against trauma and imparted a sense of pride.

First, interviewees described recent developments in Poland – socio-politically, but also criminally, referring to hate crimes against (perceived) LGBT individuals – as cause for alarm. A term that interviewees frequently used to describe the instrumentalization of the topic by the PiS party was '*nagonka*', meaning a hunt or violent persecution of people associated with LGBT. Augustyna, a married heterosexual woman, described her concerns for friends:

I have a lot of gay friends, either lesbian or gay. And I'm very frightened to see how they are coping with the situation in Poland and [in] what direction it is going in Poland; I'm very frightened and very scared as to what will happen.

Yet such perceptions generally formed part of the motivation for protesting; that is, part of their *action mobilisation*⁹ process. Pawel explained,

As the political situation in Poland deteriorated, I felt more of an obligation to go and join the march [...] changes in the political situation in the past year, increased attacks on the LGBT community by the government, I'm sure you heard what was going on in Poland. When I heard about the parade in Wrocław, I felt that I must join, also to a good friend of mine from Warsaw arrived only because of that, to show support. Many people came from other cities, simply to show their support.

This explanation suggests that the increasingly repressive socio-political environment and the elevated risk of being assaulted for perceived LGBT affiliation is grievance-forming

⁹ Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013, p. 895): 'Action mobilization is further broken down into four separate steps: people need to sympathize with the cause, need to know about the upcoming event, must want to participate and they must be able to participate'.

and mobilising rather than demobilising. This would corroborate the finding of Van Stelelenburg and Klandermans (2013, p. 892) that ‘emotions function as accelerators or amplifiers’, spurring individuals to act and making them more resolute in that action. To be sure, interviewees expressed ideological-, instrumental-, and identity-based motives (van Stelelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk, 2010) for protest participation, but affective commitment was central, propelling our interviewees to engage in solidary protest.

Participation in equality marches presents both the opportunity to demonstrate affiliation as well as the risk of exposure to group-based opposition. Here, a stark division emerges between established marches in cosmopolitan cities and new marches in more conservative, peripheral cities. The oldest march, initiated in 2001, takes place in Warsaw. Although the annual event has encountered various challenges in the past – from small-scale, violent counter-protest to (ultimately unenforced) municipal bans¹⁰ – by 2019 Warsaw’s equality march had become a massive ritual with tens of thousands of participants. Protesting in this environment is associated with no serious risk, possibly even becoming banal:

You just go there; there are people protesting, I mean like peacefully, laughing, singing, dancing. Mostly, it’s just walking, you know. It’s very boring in the end: you pass the streets you already know; you go through the centre of Warsaw. Sometimes you have some protesting groups, but they are usually very small and weak. You have thousands of people walking, so even if there are some clashes from time to time, they are really minor. [...] You don’t care and it’s totally not about them. (Janek)

Their size, annual persistence, relatively favourable local environment, and (recently) sponsorship from politicians and businesses make events like the one in Warsaw stable fixtures. Emotions as well as moods and reflexes that protesters restrain elsewhere for fear of abuse or harassment become unfettered within the space of the equality march. The weight of the daily suppression of certain behaviours lifts.

By contrast, in less accommodating local contexts, where the illiberal rhetoric of PiS finds greater traction, this emotional and behavioural weight lifts less – or even becomes heavier. Unlike the liberated carnival of the Warsaw event, marches like that which occurred in Białystok in 2019 engender confrontation that is acutely distressing or even traumatising to protest participants. There, on a sheerly tactical level, protest is more endangered; as Luiz explained, in comparison to Warsaw,

The number [of counter-protesters] was bigger than ours. Even 15 years ago the opposition against the march, against the pride parade in Warsaw, was smaller than that of its members. So it was something new: the scale and their aggressiveness was unexpected, and it didn’t meet my expectations, it crossed them, that the scale and number of the people was as it was.

Met by a numerically superior mass of counter-demonstrators, many socialised in the chanting and intimidation practices of football stadiums,¹¹ the equality march participants confronted a direct and immediate threat. This provoked cascades of reflexes and urges:

¹⁰ As mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński imposed a ban on the parade in 2004 and 2005.

¹¹ Cf. Pilkington et al. (2018, pp. 134–135).

It was very scary, I mean, I was not that scared in my life ever, really [...] if you see very pissed off dudes who are very dangerous dudes who want to beat whoever they find with rainbow flags, I wanted to go out as quickly as I could. [...] I was so devastated. I was so devastated. (Augustyna)

There were some fragments [of the march] when the music was playing, when we tried to dance or have fun, but all of it was really surrounded by fear. [...] Being in the city centre, twenty-first century, two in the afternoon on a Saturday and I can be attacked by some people just because I am in a march. Simply so absurd, impossible. Especially since this is a march in defence of human rights... and there was a helicopter flying over us, so low... the trees seemed like they were falling... really like during the war. (Maria)

Moreover, for people from such locales (as opposed to the participants who reside elsewhere), the trauma of participation can extend beyond the space of the march. Participants from elsewhere leave after the event, while locals can face continued contestation after the event. Zoja recalls the following from the day of the march in Białystok:

This was painful, and especially when we come back home and I realise that the kids in the family of my fiancée are celebrating because they won the – how do they call it, *tęczowy*, it's a fancy word in the mouths' of the kids, they say *tęczowy*, it's like those 'rainbow people', so when they say *tęczowy*, it's like, it seems like an attack: 'yay, yeah, we pushed the rainbow people back'. And I'm like, 'you know that I'm a rainbow person, that I was there...' And they were shocked: they were really surprised, like, 'why?! What's wrong with you?'

Outside of Poland's largest cities and longest-running LGBT events, participating in an equality march does not promise the same liberation, the same expressive freedom. Participants expose themselves to confrontation in a dissimilar way to when taking part in more established marches. Inevitably, this sort of exposure prompts participants to reconsider their participation.

Following marches, protesters reflect on their participation. Traumatizing experiences can discourage further participation, but even after events like the Białystok march, participants express a willingness to continue. Interviewees express anger that such aggressive counter-protest happens, both at marches in places like Białystok and Warsaw.

To be honest, I'm really pissed off. Like, I'm really angry that it happened – that counter-manifesters were so aggressive. This is my main emotion when I'm thinking about the march. And then, I have a fear: I fear that it will happen again; and to be honest, after the march last year, I was really hesitant to come to the next marches because I was not prepared for what was going to happen. For me, it was really... I had like... I needed a good two or three weeks to get myself together after this march because I never faced so much aggression. (Augustyna)

Both the disappointment associated with the confrontational parts of protests and the slow, simmering trauma of seemingly greater threats to the LGBT community can spur 'burnout' or 'lost commitment' – individual-level factors that drive declining participation (Zeller, 2020). Indeed, some interviewees, taking stock of their participation as well as attacks on LGBT individuals, expressed their intention to escape the dangers of LGBT life and activism in Poland:

The scope of violence grew really rapidly and the state is not really counting that in any way because they don't want to have those statistics. I'm very concerned, and I'm also concerned about my own safety in Poland. This is the reason why I have decided to stay in Berlin for the time being at least. I don't know how it is going to change, how it is going to evolve. [...] I mean, many straight people, for instance, were hanging rainbow flags from their apartment windows. Those windows were smashed, people would throw paint on those flags. People don't want to have their windows smashed, so they take their rainbow flags back [inside]. (Janek)

A cost is imposed on LGBT-rights activists and protest participants. It registers on material, physical, and emotional levels. However, most interviewees articulated defiance against these hindrances and dissuasions:

I'm proud. I'm proud. I'm deeply proud. And I know that many of my friends are proud of this thing that they know a person who was [in Białystok]. I'm very happy that I showed to my friends how it was to be there. [...] I'm more sure that we should organise such demonstrations in every possible part of this country because I think it would be much more effective than doing only gatherings in Warsaw, Krakow. (Luiz)

Participants consider the experience, juxtaposed with their moral emotions and affective commitments, and reaffirm their intent to protest. When asked about attending future equality marches, Maria's answer is typical:

One hundred per cent. Definitely. I decided already, even if I was really scared, I will go regardless. I have to win over my fear, because it's just fear, but they, people [LGBT] are scared even more.

The government's illiberal rhetoric has generated a more febrile environment for LGBT-rights protests. The politicisation of LGBT issues polarises public opinion, fosters radicalisation, and makes demonstrative affiliation, ordinarily and in states of exception, perceptibly more hazardous for the targeted group. But enduring moral emotions, convictions about supporting LGBT rights, affective commitments and solidarity with LGBT friends and acquaintances instils participants with resilience against routine and exceptional forms of strain. This confirms Klandermans's (1997, p. 97) assertion that affective commitment is predominantly driven by 'interactions with the organisations one is a member of. The more satisfactory their interactions are, the stronger the affective commitment'. This resilience, in turn, spurs further mobilisation and resistance.

5 Normalcy

One of the recurring tropes in the narratives of the interviewees was linked to 'normalcy'. It is worth unpacking what 'normal' stands for, as the repeated use of the term points to a link between moral emotions and the shock of the protest participants. Our discussion of normalcy relates to Bakhtin's (1984) reflections on carnival. Equality march participants can act out their natural behaviour; they become part of a collectivity freed from 'normal' or usual social strictures; and they can be renewed by the carnival-like experience. But Bakhtin (1984, p. 7) points out that 'carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it'. This is not the case with Poland's equality marches: there are

vociferous, castigating opponents outside the marches. With their marches, participants instead create a safe space to experience an idealised normalcy. This section explores how protesters use the latter term, revealing a sense of geographical and temporal dissonance in a polarised Poland. It identifies the moral shock of seeing inhabitants perceived as normal, ordinary citizens taking part in the counter-protests and examines how a quest for normalcy sometimes leads to a degree of self-censorship among the protesters.

Participants often cast equality marches in the mould of normalcy as both a condition of the marches and a strategic goal to pursue. Pawel, reflecting on the parade in Warsaw, said 'It's also not strictly an LGBT party, there are many families, supporters. Everyone who cares about Poland being normal'. Furthermore, at the march, 'we can meet each other, [show] that we're brave and that it can be normal'. For the interviewees, 'normal' translates into being able to show their support or belonging to the LGBT community without fear of being attacked or ostracised, an experience available through participation in marches. This experience of normality in marches is an act of resistance against the illiberalism espoused by the government and evident in societal radicalisation. A majoritarian conception of democracy and a rejection of liberal protections for minorities are the hallmarks of illiberalism. As elsewhere, illiberalism targets vulnerable minorities, such as LGBT persons in Poland, and effectively de-humanises them. PiS MP Przemysław Czarnek's comments exemplify this de-humanisation: 'Let's stop listening to these idiocies about human rights. [LGBT] people are not equal with normal people.' Thus, march participants' quest for normalcy is fundamentally about asserting their 'normal' humanity.

Unlike in English, where 'normal' is used to suggest that something conforms to a standard or is as expected, in most Slavic languages 'normal' has an additional, more positive, often aspirational meaning, denoting what life should be like; what should reasonably be expected. Fehervary (2002) wrote about how families in post-socialist Dunaújváros, Hungary heavily invested in kitchen and bathroom renovations before claiming that their homes were finally 'normal'. Residents of Sarajevo who yearned for a reliable state presence and the possibility to plan their future in the years after the war also hoped for things to be 'normal' again (Jansen, 2015). Simply put, normal stands for 'sanity'; normal stands for what 'ought to be' (ibid., pp. 38–39). In Jansen's framework, 'normality' has a clear temporal dimension, denoting predictable progression in people's lives, echoing a modernist understanding of time.

Among the protesters, 'abnormality' also finds its articulation within a sense of geographical and temporal displacement, with 'normality' perceived as ideals of equality and fair treatment that protesters associate with Western Europe and the twenty-first century. By extension, Poland, and particularly the counter-protesters at the marches, are discursively relegated into a different time¹² and space, highlighting the highly polarised context in which contention takes place. Tellingly, the sense of displacement is not only associated with Poland as such, but sometimes also in order to contrast the carefree parades in Warsaw and more contentious marches in regional towns.

When I was on this parade, it felt like a piece of London or a piece of New York was brought there to Białystok. This is [gesturing to indicate the LGBT parade], like, you know the future of de-

¹² For more on the denial of coevalness, or denying that others share their time with us, see Fabian (1983).

mocracy in Europe, and this [gesturing to the counter-protesters] is Białystok. Like at some point, it will be merged, but now it's like really, really far in terms of the views and opinions. (Zoja)

Warsaw lies where it lies, still it is a Western European capital... However, in Białystok, it's like 15 years ago in Warsaw – but still, it is an extremely conservative city, full of hate... (Luiz)

Another participant, Maria, identified a particularly distressing moment in Białystok: realizing that a large number of normal, ordinary people were taking part in the counter-protests. In her words: 'I didn't expect so many counter-demonstrators and that ordinary inhabitants would join them, that was completely shocking for me'.

There is a striking division in societal responses with regard to established marches in large cities and new marches in more peripheral locations. While in Warsaw counter-protests are mostly composed of right-wing activists, in Białystok the situation looked very different in 2019. Maria described how shocking it was to see 'grandmas holding grandkids who would make obscene gestures'. Again, a realisation that what she views as 'abnormality' does not only pertain to a small group of conservatives or hooligans had a strong effect on her experience of the protest.

Though a source of indignation, the quest for normalcy also seems to have a disciplining facet to it. According to Jolanta, an organiser of the Warsaw event, one of the aims of the marches is to show Poles that LGBT people are 'okay... and just want to live normally in this country'. Similarly, Augustyna said it is important to emphasize that 'LGBTQ people are not dangerous and they are normal people'. Interviewees highlighted that the marches in Poland have so far been more subdued (e.g., almost no nudity, very few drag queens) than their counterparts in Western Europe, underscoring their claim of normalcy and mutual recognition. Such emphasis on appearing 'normal' could be interpreted as tactical, with the participants maintaining forms of protest and appearance that they deem more palatable to wider society. The narratives of the interviewees thus reveal a contradiction, with the parades never being as free as the latter sometimes present them at other moments. In this manner, marching for normalcy imposes boundaries on what could otherwise be carnivalesque, autonomous zones of protest; the oppressive society and its expectations always lurk in the background.

6 Space and protest

Spatiality and visibility are inextricably connected to the interviewees' equality march experience. Marches open a safe space for participants, a rare opportunity to generate public and prefigurative association (Polletta, 1999). The sensation of dominating the streets is central in several accounts, especially for interviewees who identify as LGBT. Effecting the domination of a public space, even for a short period, endows marches with a regenerative potential to encourage further protest participation.

Untrammelled by the everyday restrictions on LGBT individuals' behaviour, the marches present an opportunity to demonstrate affiliation and to act on moral emotions and affective commitments (Jasper, 2018) without fear of violence. Being there together, being proud and standing strong and feeling safe were all characteristics of the protests that interlocutors emphasised as important elements of their experience. Several interviewees described a liberating effect; equality parades can often have the characteristics of a 'collective

coming out' (Valentine, 2003). While on normal days Jolanta expressed fear of publicly showing affection for her partner, she talked about the empowering feeling of being able to do openly so during the parade:

The power of being able to walk [in] your own city, the main street and in Warsaw it's always the main street, supported by people around you, feeling safe and you can do whatever you like. You can dance, you can shout, whatever. It's one day when the streets are ours. We are free to do anything. We can hold our hands, we can kiss in the street, nobody can do anything to us. And the dimension of getting to know other people. (Jolanta)

Several interviewees highlighted how important this might be, especially for LGBT youth:

You see those young people who are teenagers, who come from little towns. They go to Warsaw. They take from their backpacks all kinds of paraphernalia: rainbow clothes, make-up. You see that for them this is a true celebration of their identity, that this is the day in which once in a year they can be themselves, that they can find friends. (Janek)

Many protesters expressed unequivocal feelings of pleasure, even euphoria, fuelled by the feeling of togetherness and solidarity during the protest activities, the feeling of going 'wild' together¹³ (Pilkington, 2017). Protesters who described the parade in Warsaw all alluded to this aspect of their experience, sometimes expressed in terms of reverse power relations: during the parade, it is they who feel safe, who outnumber the counter-protesters, and have the power to ridicule them. For example, interviewees described how they would ironically 'greet' the counter-protesters or blow them kisses. Such empowerment speaks to the restorative, almost therapeutic effect of march participation: it is both a relief from the distress of suppressing one's identity and an invitation to express that identity within a community. This experience, in turn, bolsters individual resilience.

Marches not only offer a safe space for LGBT individuals and allies, but also increase the visibility of the LGBT community; the marches assert a claim to exist in public space that can otherwise be unwelcoming and alienating (Weeks, 1998). Some of the interviewees clearly recognised the events' dual effects; as Jolanta put it, they are both 'internal', tending to participants' emotional well-being, and 'external', having strategic importance for the movement. The latter facet seeks to achieve societal change through the increased visibility of the cause (Valentine, 1996; Wagner, 2013). In this sense, equality marches and pride parades are conspicuous events that advance the cause of an LGBT presence in the public space (Wahlstrom et al., 2018). Moreover, they can act as catalysts, clearly manifesting politicised and polarised issues. The 2019 march in Białystok is a case in point. According to several interviewees, the violence at the march prompted some neutral observers in Poland to rethink their positions, as the intensity of the event necessarily sparked emotional reactions, including outrage and shock, as noted previously.

¹³ Interestingly, while such emotions pertain to the LGBT protesters, the same description would often fit football hooligan groups, in this case standing on the other side of the barricade. One interviewee even explained that, as a football fan, he could not be easily intimidated by counter-protesters, as he was used to hooligan theatrics from the stadiums.

Crucially, however traumatising protest experiences might have been for the interviewees, as in instances like Białystok, they repeatedly expressed a strong resolve to participate in future marches. While the atmosphere of politicisation and the above-mentioned perceived ‘hunting’ of the LGBT community play a crucial role in this, the interviews clearly interpret the protests themselves as a source of mobilising power:

I took part in the demonstration defending Margot¹⁴ and it really opened me up to the issue of a protest as such. I felt that my disgust towards what’s happening is much stronger than if I just read about it. [...] Normally, you feel it’s sort of a simulation, a game happening elsewhere. But when you participate, it changes. (Kaz)

The immediacy and experience of emotional elevation as a result of participating provides strong impetus for further engagements in protests, generating resilience. This is especially significant considering the proliferation of LGBT marches throughout Poland in recent years. An organiser of the Warsaw parade suggested that many LGBT persons who can afford it attend several pride events in Europe and elsewhere, seeking the rush and excitement linked to the marches. With more and more marches in Poland, the feeling of togetherness and an actualised experience of a more tolerant society is available for more Poles than ever.

7 Perceptions of politics and society

While the equality marches serve individual and collective-strategic purposes, participants situate their protest activity within two broader spheres: politics and society. Popular opinion can drive political actors to adopt certain rhetoric and policy, just as political rhetoric and policy can stimulate changes of importance and opinion in society. Of great concern for LGBT advocates, apart from anti-LGBT policies, is that PiS’s illiberalism can nurture a hostile political environment that encourages or accommodates group-focused enmity (Heitmeyer, 2002). Dunin-Wasowicz (2016) observed such a pattern in a case involving a public artwork that revealed and perhaps stimulated polarisation between progressively liberalising publics and increasingly radical homophobic right-wing fringes. At several points, interviewees positioned themselves and the equality marches at this intersection of political and societal developments and considered the outlook for LGBT rights in Poland.

Since winning an outright parliamentary majority in 2015, the PiS government has legislatively pursued and rhetorically promoted an agenda that conspicuously includes Catholic social conservatism. Disapproval of LGBT rights and further restrictions on abortion are only the most notable example of this. One interviewee, Maria, noted the stark break with the liberal orientation of preceding governments, calling it ‘a completely different world’ and suggested that there has been a steady escalation in the socio-political furore surrounding LGBT issues. Anxiety and anger toward the PiS government is not an abstraction from equality marches but instead intrinsically linked to protest participation. An organiser of the Warsaw event sees increasing state support manifesting in counter-mobilisation against the equality marches:

¹⁴ A non-binary LGBT rights activist arrested and held in pre-trial detention by the police for attacking a truck displaying anti-LGBT propaganda.

We crowdfund for the speakers all year long, they [the counter-protesters] just have it [the funds]. Supported by the state! [...] Since 2015, we had less and less counter-protest; and now, boom! Also, it was surprising for me that they were well organised. With speakers and stuff [...] I see a huge difference in the character and size of the counter protests compared to past years. (Jolanta)

Ultimately, developments in the political sphere, both in policy and rhetoric, are evidently dispiriting. About this point there is little ambiguity. Yet interviewees frequently voiced optimism about societal developments related to LGBT issues. One participant from multiple marches summarised this contrast in sharp terms:

I think that it's getting better. I think that, finally, people are aware of these issues. And it's much more difficult to be as aggressive as it was years ago. Of course, you know, our government tends to believe that there is something like 'LGBT ideology' and 'gays are paedophiles' and things like that. It's awful and disgusting. [...] I think that nowadays mainstream people, mainstream voters tend to believe that 'maybe civil partnerships are okay', maybe these people aren't as bad as they tended to think years ago. I think that this homophobia is not as powerful as it was years ago. (Luiz)

Societal developments are interpreted more ambiguously, though: they are not an unqualified source of optimism. Considerable cause for concern arises from the threat of violence against LGBT individuals. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU-FRA) 2019 survey of LGBTI individuals reported that 15 per cent of the latter had experienced a physical or sexual assault in the last five years, including 8 per cent in the preceding year. Janek connected the level of violence to the state's wilful ignorance:

The scope of violence grew really rapidly and the state is not really counting that in any way because they don't want to have those statistics. I'm very concerned, and I'm also concerned about my own safety in Poland. This is the reason why I have decided to stay in Berlin for the time being at least.

In Janek's case, like two other interviewees, he had taken the opportunity to leave Poland, partially burdened by concerns for his and his partner's safety. This opens the question of whether the positive effect of equality march participation and optimism about societal development is enough to stave off lost commitment and instead generate resilience.¹⁵

However, for those who remain in Poland and remain engaged, protest participation may become a refuge for expression that is increasingly closed off in everyday life. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents to the EU-FRA survey said that prejudice and intolerance against LGBTI people had increased a lot (44 per cent) or a little (24 per cent). This perception, it seems, motivates some behavioural precautions. Pawel explained, 'You need to pay attention to what you're wearing, if you laugh in a wrong way, so for the first time we were surprised that really we need to pay attention. So, changes for the worse'. The survey data support this view, finding that 83 per cent of respondents often or always avoid holding hands with their same-sex partner in Poland.

¹⁵ NB: this study's interviewees reflect the demographics of equality march participants, including being relatively well off economically. Though plenty do not, many participants have the resources to emigrate; so the act of voicing opposition to increasing hostility against LGBT individuals often arises alongside consideration of the option to exit the arena of contention.

In every context, marches are an opportunity to show that being LGBT is ‘normal’ and ‘nothing scary’, as Pawel said, ‘and slowly society is beginning to understand that’. However, the pace and constancy of that development is far from certain – the marches are not part of a simple linear progression toward ever more acceptance. Interviewees frequently distinguished between discouraging political developments and encouraging societal development. On the one hand, PiS has secured its hold on national political power at least until late 2023 and continues implementing its anti-LGBT agenda. On the other hand, interviewees point to declining church attendance and faltering religious commitment (Koschalka, 2020) as a sign that equality for LGBT individuals is a matter of time. Of course, there is no clear division between politics and society: PiS wins elections through pluralities of votes, and their political power is rooted in a segment of society. Nevertheless, this *repeated narrative* among interviewees is intriguing, since the prospect of a long-term attitudinal shift toward LGBT acceptance seems meagre consolation – especially when the short-term political situation appears increasingly dire. PiS government action, moreover, may halt or reverse the secularising trends on which equality marchers’ optimism depends (Campbell, 2020). Equality marches then take on greater importance as acts of resistance and as one of the few group-based generators of resilience for LGBT individuals and supporters.

8 Conclusion

Our research offers two main contributions: it identifies the emotional and cognitive responses of participants in 2019 equality marches for LGBT rights in Poland, and it instantiates how vulnerable groups resist the dehumanisation of illiberal socio-politics and instead build resilience.

First, the interviews revealed ubiquitous perceptions of increasing political polarisation, an increase in the risk of violence against LGBT individuals, and the increasing salience of equality marches. In other words, there is a general intensification of LGBT issues in Poland which, beyond perception, is reflected in several independent surveys. Our interviewees repeatedly expressed moral outrage and shock over the resistance to LGBT rights in Poland. Within this context, marches have become crucial for building resilience among LGBT individuals and supporters.

Second, the resilience-building effect of marches centres on conceptions of normalcy. A divide emerges between protest days and the everyday (see Table 1): whereas everyday life is increasingly weighted with emotional, cognitive, and indeed sometimes physical burdens that deter advocacy and activism, protest days are characterised by feelings of liberation, happier normalcy, and pride that build resilience. *The everyday is distressingly abnormal; protest days offer the chance to ‘be normal’*. On the one hand, as our interviewees explained, the lack of rights and acceptance of LGBT individuals is ‘abnormal’; PiS and other hostile political actors (including the Polish Catholic Church) exacerbate this problem by dehumanising LGBT persons; and assault and harassment against LGBT individuals is rising. On the other hand, the marches offer opportunities to take over public space, assert the LGBT community’s right to exist in it, and resist the dehumanisation of illiberal socio-politics. Marches create safe spaces to demonstrate their affiliation and to act upon identity-based urges that they must otherwise suppress, such as holding hands or kissing. That public displays of affection can be made without fear and one can ‘be normal’ has a therapeutic

effect, especially during large events like Warsaw's parade. Thus, the quest for normalcy translates into claiming recognition of one's 'normal' humanity.

Table 1. Summary of study findings categorised by those elements that are *detering* or *resilience-building* in *everyday* and *protest* settings

	Detering	Resilience-building
Everyday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Abnormal' lack of LGBT rights • Hostile political actors in power • Increasing risk of assault and harassment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing tolerance and acceptance of LGBT individuals and rights
Protest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risks of violence from radicalised or emboldened counter-protesters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling 'normal' and exhibiting the normality of LGBT persons • Feeling liberated within the safe space created by the protest • Pride of demonstrating affiliation

Although our interviewees remain optimistic about wider societal developments, their accounts point to a bleaker, deteriorating everyday experience. The everyday threat of violence is a significant deterrent. Several interviewees have considered leaving or actually left the country in order to escape the daily, abnormal oppressive reality. The marches certainly have positive emotional effects and foster resilience among participants, but there is little hope of them generating immediate changes. Survey data reveal a steadily growing acceptance of LGBT individuals, but that is a remote consolation based on long-term prospects. Hence, people like our interviewees must contend with a wobbly balance between the encouraging normalcy provided by protest activity and the difficult abnormality they face in their everyday lives.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank our interviewees for their reflections, Dorit Geva for comments on an early draft of this article, and two anonymous reviewers for their critiques and suggestions for improvement. Any errors or deficiencies remain our own.

References

- Ayoub, P. (2016). *When states come out: Europe's sexual minorities and the politics of visibility*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press.
- Bartejka, P. (2020, June 13). Andrzej Duda o LGBT: Próbuje nam się wmówić, że to ludzie, a to ideologia. <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/andrzej-duda-o-lgbt-probuje-nam-sie-wmowic-ze-to-ludzie-a-to-ideologia-6521010473220225a?c=96&nil=&src01=6a4c8>

- Bodnar, A., Gliszczyńska-Grabias, A., Sękowska-Kozłowska, K. & Śledzińska-Simon, A. (2010). *Legal Study on Homophobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*. EU Agency for Fundamental Rights.
- Campbell, E. (2020, April 29). Poland's government is leading a Catholic revival. It has minorities and liberals worried. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-28/poland-catholic-church-revival-lgbt-rights/12180704>
- Dunin-Wąsowicz, R. (2016). The *Rainbow Is Burning*: Analysing Public Contemporary Art as Site of the Polish Symbolic Conflict Over LGBT Rights, the Nation and Europe. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 16(1), 20–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12174>
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (2015). *Special Eurobarometer 437, Discrimination in the EU 2015, Report Spring 2015*. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d629b6d1-6d05-11e5-9317-01aa75ed71a1>
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (2019). *Eurobarometer on Discrimination: The Social Acceptance of LGBTI People in the EU*. Report September 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-equality/eurobarometer-social-acceptance-lgbtiq-people-eu-2019_en
- European Social Survey Cumulative File, ESS 1-9 (2020). Data file edition 1.0. NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC.
- Galbraith, M. (2003). “We Just Want to Live Normally”: Intersecting Discourses of Public Private, Poland, and the West. *Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe*, 3(1), 2–13. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsae.2003.3.1.2>
- Grzebalska W. & Pető, A. (2018). The gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation in Hungary and Poland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68, 164–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.12.001>
- Heitmeyer, W. (2002). Gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit. Die theoretische Konzeption und erste empirische Ergebnisse (Group-related hostility: Theoretical concept and first empirical findings). In W. Heitmeyer (Ed.), *Deutsche Zustände*, Folge 1 (*German Conditions*, Vol. 1) (pp. 15–36). Suhrkamp.
- Fabian, J. (1983). *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. Columbia University Press.
- Fehervary, K. (2002). American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a ‘Normal’ Life in Postsocialist Hungary. *Ethnos*, 67(3), 369–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184022000031211>
- ILGA Europe (2019). *Rainbow Index 2019*. ILGA-Europe. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/rainbow-europe/2019>
- ILGA Europe (2020). *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe and Central Asia 2020*. ILGA-Europe. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/Annual%20Review%202020.pdf>
- Jansen, S. (2015). *Yearnings in the Meantime: Normal Lives and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex (Dislocations)*. Berghahn Books.
- Jasper, J. M. (2018). *The Emotions of Protest*. University of Chicago Press.

- Kelly, T. (2008). The Attractions of Accountancy: Living an Ordinary Life during the Second Palestinian Intifada. *Ethnography*, 9(3): 351–376. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1466138108094975>
- Koschalka, B. (2020, March 24). Most Poles religious but few “strongly committed” to their faith, new data show. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/03/12/most-poles-are-religious-but-few-are-strongly-committed-to-their-faith-show-new-data/>
- Lundberg, A. (2007). Queering Laughter in the Stockholm Pride Parade. *International Review of Social History*, 52, 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859007003185>
- McNeil-Willson, R., Gerrand, V., Scrinzi, F. & Triandafyllidou, A. (2019). *Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe today: An analytical framework*. http://brave-h2020.eu/repository/D2.1_BRaVE_concept_paper_final_10Dec2019.pdf
- Melnychenko, N. (2020). *How Hate Kills*. Open Dialogue Foundation. <https://en.odfoundation.eu/a/27959,report-how-hate-kills-hate-crimes-in-poland-in-2019/>
- O’Dwyer, C. (2018). *Coming out of communism: The emergence of LGBT activism in Eastern Europe*. NYU Press.
- Peterson, A., Wahlström, M. & Wennerhag, M. (2018). *Pride parades and LGBT movements*. Taylor & Francis.
- Plakans, A. (2009). Latvia: Normality and Disappointment. *East European Politics and Societies*, 23(4), 518–525. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0888325409342112>
- Pilkington, H., Omelchenko, E. & Perasović, B. (2018). ‘One Big Family’: Emotion, Affect and Solidarity in Young People’s Activism in Radical Right and Patriotic Movements. In H. Pilkington, G. Pollock & R. Franc (Eds.), *Understanding Youth Participation Across Europe* (pp. 123–152). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59007-7_6
- Polletta, F. (1999). ‘Free spaces’ in Collective Action. *Theory and Society*, 28(1), 1–38. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006941408302>
- Roggeband, C. & Krizsán, A. (2018). Reversing gender policy progress: Patterns of backsliding in Central and Eastern European new democracies. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1(3), 367–385. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510818X15311219732356>
- Krizsán, A. & Roggeband, C. (2021). *Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of the Istanbul Convention*. Palgrave Pivot.
- Taylor, P. & Prentice, S. (2020). *EU H-2020 BRaVE Project: Toolkit of Cross-National Polarisation Indicators* (Rep.). University of Lancaster. <http://brave-h2020.eu/toolkit>
- TokFM (2019). ‘Mówimy “nie” atakowi na dzieci’: Jarosław Kaczyński o zarzutach opozycji i karcie LGBT. <https://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,103087,24532730,mowimy-nie-atakowi-na-dzieci-jaroslaw-kaczynski-o-zarzutach.html>
- Valentine, G. (2003). Sexual Politics. In J. Agnew, K. Mitchell & G. Toal (Eds.), *A Companion to political Geography* (pp. 408–420). Oxford University Press.
- Valentine, G. (1996). (Re)Negotiating the ‘Heterosexual Street’ – Lesbian Productions of Space. In Duncan, N. (Ed.), *Bodyspace – Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (pp. 145–154). Routledge.

- Van Stekelenburg, J. & Klandermans, B. (2013). The social psychology of protest. *Current Sociology Review*, 61(5–6), 886–905. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0011392113479314>
- Van Stekelenburg, J., Klandermans, B. & Van Dijk, W. W. (2011). Combining motivations and emotion: The motivational dynamics of protest participation. *Revista de Psicología Social*, 26(1), 91–104. <https://doi.org/10.1174/021347411794078426>
- Wagner, R. (2013). On (Not) Choosing between Mobility and Visibility: Crossing Sexual and National Borders in Israel/Palestine. *Borderlands*, 12(2), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000121490>
- Wahlström, M., Peterson, A. & Wennerhag, M. (2018). ‘Conscience Adherents’ Revisited: Non-LGBT Pride Parade Participants. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 23(1), 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-23-1-83>
- Weeks, J. (1998). The Sexual Citizen. *Theory, Culture, Society*, 15(3–4), 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0263276498015003003>
- Zakaria, F. (1997). The rise of illiberal democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6), 22–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>
- Zeller, M. C. (2020). Rethinking demobilisation: concepts, causal logic, and the case of Russia’s For Fair Elections movement. *Interface: A Journal on Social Movements*, 12(1), 527–558.

* [\[zibens@gmail.com\]](mailto:zibens@gmail.com) (General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania)

** [\[viktor.denisenko@lka.lt\]](mailto:viktor.denisenko@lka.lt) (General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania)

Abstract

In August 2020, the presidential election took place in Belarus, followed by unprecedented mass protests due to apparent election fraud. Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the country's long-term authoritarian leader, faced the biggest electoral challenge since his first election in 1994. This article analyzes his official rhetoric during the campaign and after the election focusing on the image of the society. For this purpose, discourse-historical approach is applied to understand his political vision of the developments in Belarus and to explore changes in his rhetoric caused by the unprecedented challenge to his power. The research demonstrates that Lukashenka acts as a classical authoritarian ruler with respective discursive strategies. The text shows that he adopted the imaginary role of Belarus's strict father, who has assumed full responsibility for its fate and offensively reacts to every challenger of this role. It also reveals that Lukashenka sees his personal contract with the Belarusian society as a stable and durable instrument that does not require changes and *per se* implies his personal engagement as a party to it. Finally, the analysis of Lukashenka's rhetoric in 2020 suggests that a voluntary transition of power in Belarus remains rather wishful thinking.

Keywords: Belarus, authoritarian regime, elections, political communication, hegemonic discourse

1 Introduction

This article analyzes the image of the Belarusian society in the official rhetoric of Aliaksandr Lukashenka during the 2020 electoral campaign and the post-election period. The protests were an attempt to terminate the social contract between Lukashenka and the society which have existed in Belarus since 1994. Social contract is a central concept of the political legitimacy because it implies the society's consent to temporarily cede its sovereignty to the leader 'on the basis of understandings and expectations of competence and capacity' (Renshon, 1992, p. 577). Yet, the notion 'contract' also suggests that its parties are bound by enforceable

mutual obligations. Within this patronal contractual relationship, Lukashenka embraced the role of the personal guarantor of the country's security, stability and development and in exchange required the society's full subordination. Lukashenka's official rhetoric accompanied by brutal use of violence demonstrated a clear border between 'us' (those ready to continue the patronal social contract) and 'them' (those who wished to discontinue it). The post-electoral developments in Belarus demonstrated the irreversibility of this shift due to the repeating alienation pattern determined by the authorities' unwillingness to maintain a dialogue with the protesters. Based on the analysis of Lukashenka's official rhetoric, this text identifies his main thematic discourse paradigms for further elaboration. First, his verbal attacks against the white-red-white flag as the visual symbol and the color spectrum of the 2020 protests were an element of his regime protection because the official red-green flag symbolizes his political victories and visually embodies the social contract. Second, Lukashenka's rhetoric about the lack of necessary presidential competences among his contenders was an evidence of his unwillingness to change the social contract on his part, as it emphasized his irreplaceability. Third, Lukashenka's deliberately offensive statements towards the protesters was a strategy that signified his reluctance to accept any changes of the social contract on the society's part.

The current contour of things in Belarus comprises a combination of the country's Soviet legacy and its political system, for over a quarter of a century associated with Lukashenka's personality (Kascian, 2018, p. 87). The former is linked with a mere allegation of the nation's weak identity and the fact of the country's participation in several integration initiatives led by Russia. Belarus is frequently designated as a 'denationalized nation' (Marples, 1999), 'a perpetual borderland' (Savchenko, 2009), or 'the last Soviet republic' (Parker, 2007) that faces an internal 'struggle over [its divided] identity' (Bekus, 2010). The latter involves a common perception of Belarus as Europe's last dictatorship (Bennet, 2011; Wilson, 2011) characterized by consistent abuses of human rights, electoral frauds, and repressions against political opposition.

Political commentators agree about the authoritarian and populist character of Lukashenka's regime. Yet, like other academic studies (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011, p. XIV) on the non-democratic regimes, this paper uses the notions of authoritarianism, dictatorship, autocracy, and similar terms in the Belarusian context interchangeably. Lukashenka's regime 'in particular derives its legitimacy from maintaining a Soviet-style welfare state' and tries to sustain it 'in a rapidly changing external environment' (Fritz, 2007, pp. 103, 212). His populism has *per se* been defensive because it was placed in 'a quite unfavourable international environment, which regards it as an evil deviation from normal post-communist transitions' (Matsuzato, 2004, p. 240). That is why his regime had to constantly prove the viability of its socio-economic model in comparison with Belarus's neighbors. The official propaganda started exploiting the concept of national unity and welfare state embodied in a series of inclusive slogans, such as 'For a strong and prosperous Belarus' (Belarusian: *Za mocnuju i kvitniejučuju Bielaruś*) or 'The state for the people' (Belarusian: *Dziarżava dlia naroda*).¹

¹ Belarusian People's Congress. *Belarus.by: Official website of the Republic of Belarus*, n.d., <https://www.belarus.by/en/government/all-belarusian-peoples-congress/>. Accessed: 13-01-2021.

A more overarching slogan, 'For Belarus' (Belarusian: *Za Bielaruś*), has been materialized in the numerous billboards placed throughout this country in the attempt to deliver 'a strong message of the population's unity behind the idea of the Belarusian state' led by Lukashenka (Leshchenko, 2008, p. 1424).

The assessments of Lukashenka's personality fall into the 'range between dismissive and stridently negative to approvingly unctuous' (Ioffe, 2014, p. 156). During his quarter-century rule, Lukashenka embraced the role of Belarus's 'father' (Belarusian: *baćka*), and the country 'rests its stability and future on the relationship – it is often referred to as a contract – between the president and the people' (Marples, 2014, p. 17). Within this patronal relationship, Lukashenka acts as a strict father who provides immature and feminized Belarusian society with all its needs in exchange for its full subordination. Lukashenka perceives Belarus as a society incapable of making its own decisions and demands not to question 'the genuineness of his good intentions' (Brzozowska, 2007, p. 194). It denotes Lukashenka as an example of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity, as his endeavors are 'intensely focused on accumulating power for domination' (Martín, 2020, p. 227). Moreover, behavioral patterns of an authoritarian politician imply a rejection of the democratic rules of the game, denial of the opponents' legitimacy, toleration or even encouragement of violence, and willingness to abridge the opponents' civil liberties (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 18–19). The political system in Belarus can be described as the single-pyramid patronalistic structure with the elections as a tool to 'generate incentives for other networks in society to coordinate around [the presidential] authority, thereby underpinning single-pyramid politics' (Hale, 2015, p. 73). Under Lukashenka, Belarus never had free and fair elections², while all electoral campaigns were an imitation of democracy rather than the real struggle for power (Bedford, 2016, pp. 390–391). Until the 2020 election, there was an overall consensus among commentators about Lukashenka's popularity among Belarus's population that would secure his victory even in a free and fair election (McAllister & White, 2016, p. 361).

The fraudulent presidential election on 9 August 2020 and its aftermath significantly changed the political situation in Belarus. It posed a serious threat to Lukashenka's power to the extent he had never faced before. Being challenged, Lukashenka changed his rhetoric towards more radical statements and sanctioned brutal use of power against the protesters accompanied by persecution of political opponents. Fitted in the 'us vs. them' dichotomy, they were aimed at the protection of the political system created during his rule, and insulting and exclusion those who oppose him as a leader.

This article is a case study that focuses on one specific election in one country. Every election is *per se* unique, as it involves different combinations of contenders, issues at stake, and voters' responsiveness towards the candidates and their agendas (Guber, 1997, p. VII). Additionally, none of Lukashenka's contenders in the 2020 election had previous experience in running for presidency. Combined with the unprecedented political developments in Belarus during and after the election, it also explains the study's focus on Lukashenka's rhetoric starting only from the beginning of the official electoral campaign. Studies on the recent de-democratization patterns in Hungary and Poland conclude that the cases of these two countries are somewhat extreme to be representative for portraying the entire region of

² Urgent need for electoral reform in Belarus. Resolution 2371 (2021). *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*. April 21, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29170/html> Accessed: 25-04-2021.

East-Central Europe (Enyedi, 2020, p. 364). This approach could be extended to Belarus under Lukashenka, as his practices, rhetoric, and agendas are somewhat extreme in a wider regional context.

The text neither attempts to understand the political regime in Belarus, nor to explain it. Lukashenka's logic cannot be evaluated within the framework of a democratic political system because it was crucial for him to keep the previous social contract between him and the people unchanged. Thus, it focuses on Lukashenka's rhetoric based on the premise that 'communication is utilized by political actors as a means to achieve their goals' (Sheafer et al., 2014, p. 211). The structure of the text is designed accordingly. After a brief description of the research design, the image of the Belarusian society in Lukashenka's rhetoric is analyzed in the empirical part to elaborate the three above-mentioned main thematic discourse paradigms.

2 Research design and data selection

The research model involved the analysis of Lukashenka's public statements and addresses available at the section 'President' of the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA) website, the state-run company that serves as the official news agency of the Republic of Belarus.³ Discourse-historical approach (DHA) was applied to process the relevant data. The grounds behind this choice are twofold. First, DHA is based on the principle of triangulation and 'tak[es] a whole range of empirical observations, theories and methods as well as background information into account' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). Being issue-focused, it addresses distinctive features of the specific society and has 'power' among its central concepts to investigate relationships of the major actors within the existing social contract. Second, DHA's triangularity rests upon the concept of 'context' which brings together textual, intertextual, social, and historical levels of discourse (ibid., p. 93). The textual level enables the identification of the relevant contents, strategies, and forms of realization. Constructive strategies are aimed to emphasize unity and at the same time draw the lines between 'us' and 'them' by ascribing specific characteristics to the social actors and explaining the shifts of internal borders within society (Wodak, 2006, pp. 112–113). The role of *topoi* is to bring together an argument with the targeted conclusions, exploiting such issues as a threat, authority, or history. Means of realization refer to the rhetorical content used to fill in the *topoi*. It includes such devices as positive and negative attributions or metaphors aimed to emphasize the categorization and highlight the divisive lines between different segments of society. The intertextual level addresses the connection between different texts by involving its main actors, specific events, or topics covered. The social level merely refers to the events and similar contexts where the discourse is transmitted, whereas the historical level produces the contextual links to the historical developments.

In the context of the developments around the 2020 election in Belarus, the DHA enables analyzing how 'linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations

³ All Lukashenka's quotations related to the 2020 election come from the English version of the BelTA website (<https://eng.belta.by>). Specific references are omitted to spare space.

of power' treating the language as 'a means to gain and maintain power by the use 'powerful' people make of it' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88–89). Second, DHA's triangularity is beneficial for the analysis of the hegemonic discourse of the single-pyramid regime because of its strong focus 'on the historical dimension of institutions and situational frames' (Boukala, 2019, p. 88). Following this logic, this text operated within the two-level model summarized by Krzyżanowski (2010, p. 81–89). Its entry level comprised an inductive analysis of Lukashenka's speeches to identify the main thematic discourse paradigms for their further elaboration. It was followed by the in-depth analysis of the specific units of his speech within these paradigms focusing on Lukashenka's discursive strategies in ensuring 'positive *Self* and negative *Other* presentation' (Wodak & Boukala, 2014, p. 179) with identification of the *topoi* he employed to back his authority.

The data selection was determined by the factor of time. In the single-pyramid regimes, the presidential election is rather a political stage play and not a contested event. The main Lukashenka's goal was to deliver a message about his power and operability of the current social contract to renew it by the fact of election. At the same time, a fraudulent election can empower people, because '[i]f falsification flies blatantly in the face of public opinion, individual voters will be more willing to take to the streets in outrage' (Hale, 2015, p. 73). Hence, it is the content of the electoral campaign that determines the society's demands and capacities to revise or terminate the existing social contract with the authoritarian ruler. The official electoral campaign started 80 days before the election with the nomination of presidential candidates. During this period, the potential contenders became known to the public and electoral campaigning took place. As the nomination period started on 21 May 2020, this date is a starting point for the data analysis. The election day on 9 August served as a game-changer that determined the capacities of Lukashenka's regime. Before this date, the regime fully controlled the situation, whereas it started facing challenges after the preliminary election results were announced and its official rhetoric was a reaction to these processes. The final date of the analysis was 31 December that wrapped up all events of 2020. Its choice was determined by the contents of Lukashenka's New Year address in which he suggested to remember the lessons of 2020, 'turn this page and start writing a new chapter of independent Belarus together'.

Three main thematic paradigms were identified⁴ shaped by the context of the long-established patronal contract between Lukashenka and the society. Since the social contract was put at stake, the special focus was made on the *topos* of competence in Lukashenka's speeches. As Guriev and Treisman (2015, pp. 2–3) observe, authoritarian regimes want to 'convince citizens of their competence to govern' because '[i]f enough citizens infer [...] that the incumbent is incompetent, they rise up and overthrow him in a revolution'. Bunce and Wolchik (2010, p. 74) demonstrate that authoritarianism's effective functioning depends on the ability to persuade the society that the regime's contenders are 'both incompetent and

⁴ The research model identified the fourth thematic paradigm designated as the role of foreign actors vis-a-vis imaginary or real challenges and threats for Belarus. It deserves a special article with substantial analysis of Belarus's foreign policy and alliances, whereas this text is focused on the country's domestic developments and interactions within its society. Although the foreign, and particularly Russia's (Denisenko, 2020), factors are important for the assessment of the post-electoral situation in Belarus, the actual effect of the foreign states on the developments within the Belarusian society is limited.

compromised'. In other words, this *topos* seems crucial for understanding Lukashenka's strategies aimed at keeping the social contract between him and the Belarusian society unchanged and countering the attempts of the protesters to discontinue it.

3 Symbols as a visual manifestation of the social contract

The white-red-white flag became the visible symbol and the color spectrum of the 2020 protests aimed at the revision or termination of the social contract between Lukashenka and society. It was used as the official symbol of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918, and in 1991–1995 served as the flag of the Republic of Belarus, being replaced with a Soviet-like red-green flag as a result of a controversial referendum initiated by Lukashenka (Silitski & Zaprudnik, 2010, pp. 209–210). An important element of the Belarusian national identity, the white-red-white flag has been used since 1995 as a visual symbol of struggle against Lukashenka's regime.

In his post-electoral speeches, Lukashenka appealed to the results of the 1995 referendum claiming that the current symbols were supported by 'the nation' or 'an overwhelming majority [of the population]'. He used the *topoi* of strong popular support and his personal authority to remind the population about that referendum as a mechanism for approval of the existing social contract. In his speech, he exploited a binary formula to achieve a targeted conclusion. First, he underlined that it was him who immediately after his first election as the president put the choice of the state symbols to the referendum. Then, he excluded any personal responsibility for the people's choice with the phrase 'you [i.e. the people] cannot blame me for it.' These *topoi* also demonstrate Lukashenka's strategy to emphasize positive self as the leader who caters the society's needs.

Another part of his strategy was the portrayal of the negative other. Before the election, Lukashenka mentioned the white-red-white flag only as an attribute of the alternative candidates who used it at their rallying points. After the election, Lukashenka's rhetoric about the white-red-white flag changed significantly, as he repeatedly blackmailed it as 'collaborationist', '(pro-)fascist' symbol that was used by the Belarusian Nazi collaborators during WWII to march around the cities and accompany Hitler's portraits. This peculiar enmity towards the white-red-white flag is nothing new for Lukashenka. During the 1995 referendum campaign, Lukashenka used similar rhetoric about the connection of the white-red-white flag with the Nazi collaborators to gain popular support in favor of the alteration of the state symbols (Silitski & Zaprudnik, 2010, p. 35). After the 2020 election, Lukashenka reminded that the white-red-white flag became the official symbol of independent Belarus because the 'nationalists had lobbied for [it]' and the parliamentary communist majority 'accepted it under pressure' of their nationalistic fellow MPs. He precariously claimed that '[a] surge of extreme nationalistic movements had emerged in Belarus in the wake of the [1986] Chernobyl catastrophe,' and accused nationalism of bringing 'a lot of sorrow to the [post-Soviet] nations, particularly Belarusians.' To strengthen his pre- and post-electoral argumentation, Lukashenka repeatedly contrasted his rule to the political, social, and economic situation in Belarus before his first election back in 1994, emphasizing his competence, necessity, and efficiency for the country. He compared his accomplishments with the situation in the early 1990s. In the post-Soviet political slang, this period is labeled as 'the roaring nineties' (Russian: *likhie devianostye*) with 'both negative and positive connotations

at the same time' (Gel'man et al., 2014, p. 87). The former approach emphasizes the economic inequality, poverty, and dismantlement of the Soviet welfare system, while the latter focuses on the urgent need for economic reforms and democratic changes. Lukashenka consistently presented himself as a person who was asked 'to pull people back from the brink' and was competent enough to subsequently built a sovereign independent country with 'an effective model of a social state that helps defend national interests.' Lukashenka's rhetoric throughout the 2020 electoral campaign and after the election extensively exploited the *topoi* of fear and insecurity caused by economic deterioration and political instability by using such grammatical structures as 'we will never get back to that again,' 'I do not want to return to this time,' or 'the return to the wild 1990s is out of the question.'

To highlight the divisive lines between 'us' and 'them', Lukashenka filled his speeches with derogatory or pejorative denotations that primarily targeted Belarusian nationalism. For instance, he used the form *nacmieny* (i.e. persons belonging to national minorities, Belarusian: *nacyjanal'nyja mienšasci*) to designate the Belarusian nationalists and accuse them of turning the country into shreds. The BelTA translated this term as 'nationalists'. The term *nacmieny* has clear derogatory connotations in the Soviet and post-Soviet political slang (Shumsky, 2002, p. 159), and Lukashenka put it in the wrong use within the Belarusian context. Thus, Lukashenka tried to demonstrate his disdain towards his political opponents and emphasize their numerical inferiority and incompetence to attract public support and offer any vision of the country's constructive development. Lukashenka's mythomania around the white-red-white flag became an essential element in the campaign for discrediting his current opponents by portraying them as the ideological successors of the Nazi collaborators and connecting them with his 'nationalist' political rivals from the early 1990s. In contrast, Lukashenka designated himself as 'a calm person, who is no nationalist but a complete internationalist.'

The usage of the *topoi* of strong popular support and his personal authority in Lukashenka's rhetoric was aimed at emphasizing his positive self, whilst the *topoi* of fear and insecurity served as tools to depict the negative others. The derogatory denotations were used by him to emphasize the divisive line and highlight the resiliency and effectiveness of the social contract he offered to the Belarusian society. The centrality of the white-red-white flag for the visual manifestation of the protests triggered the increase of Lukashenka's verbal attacks against it after the election. As a symbol of those who wanted to revise or terminate the existing social contract between Lukashenka and the Belarusian society, the white-red-white flag embodies a threat to Lukashenka's personality as a paternalistic leader whereas all identity-related issues are secondary. In contrast, the official red-green flag symbolizes his political victories over his rivals in the mid-1990s followed by the celebration of the current social contract in the Belarusian society, and the subsequent formation of the country's state machinery centered around Lukashenka.

4 The incompetent others: Lukashenka's depiction of political contenders

As Hale (2014, p. 75) observes, 'much of public politics in patronalistic societies with contested elections is about creating both real popularity and, critically, the *impression* of popularity.' Whether fair or manipulated, elections are important for the authoritarian leaders as a symbolic tool that renews their contracts with the societies. Yet, the context of each election in

the single-pyramid regimes involves different need for and the scope of manipulation caused by the combination of contenders and the main issues at stake. These specifics also determine the discourse of the patronal leaders who use the election to renew their popular mandates.

In the 2020 election, none of Lukashenka's actual or potential rivals had previous experience to run for the presidency. This factor predetermined Lukashenka's focus on the *topoi* of competences and personal qualities required for the country's leader. They were supplemented by the additional *topoi* subject to the candidate's professional background and gender. His discursive strategies were focused on portraying the negative others, while means of their realization were personalized depending on the specific rival.

Viktar Babaryka and Valery Tsapkala were well-known public figures in Belarus. Babaryka was the banker and philanthropist, while Tsapkala was former Lukashenka's aide, diplomat, and chairman of a hi-tech park. As for Babaryka, the situation was significantly dominated by the investigation in the criminal case involving Belgazprombank top executives, including himself. On 10 June, Lukashenka instructed the prosecutor general and other agencies to inspect 'these potbellied bourgeois' to bring the country's private businesses 'to their senses'. An allusion to Babaryka's body type was guessable in this statement but without direct references to his personality. Lukashenka also underlined that Babaryka and his entourage 'are not a source of danger or fear' and emphasizing that 'a thief belongs to prison'. Just before the election, Lukashenka accused Babaryka of planning to go into politics just to become a political prisoner and labeled his qualities as 'no president material'. When inquired about rumors on the possible Babaryka's appointment as the country's prime minister before the election, Lukashenka assured that he never made this offer and instantly counter-attacked by asking '[w]hat kind of experience does he have to become prime minister?' Lukashenka occasionally demonstrated his disdain towards Babaryka by avoiding mentioning his name and referring to him as to 'a [certain] banker' or mockingly calling him 'a great philanthropist indeed'. Thus, the linguistic content of Lukashenka's statements about Babaryka was aimed to portray him as an incompetent person with a bad professional record who lacks both personal qualities and professional experience to make it to the country's upper post. Lukashenka also exploited the *topos* of corruption underlining Babaryka's dishonesty and claiming his own omniscience with manifold options to control his contenders.

Lukashenka's rhetoric about his former aide Tsapkala very similar, though more personalized. Lukashenka called him 'a sly one' who 'doesn't say why the president fired him'. This assessment dealt with the alleged Tsapkala's lack of honesty to disclose full information about his previous professional activities. It also implied Lukashenka's confidence in having the situation under control embodied in the phrase '[i]f we have to, we will tell [the truth about Tsapkala's past] but we don't want to indulge in smear campaigns.' Lukashenka depicted Tsapkala's professional competencies in livestock-raising terms, claiming that '[i]f a boar is like this person, there will be stillborn piglets.' After the election, Lukashenka underlined that the main purpose of Tsapkala's run for the presidency, as designed by 'foreign strategists,' was aimed at 'sowing dissent among the government elite' by testing their loyalty towards Lukashenka.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenka's main contender, had never been in the public eye before the 2020 election. She decided to run for the presidency because her husband, videoblogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski was detained and denied registration as a candidate. She was rather an accidental candidate. This predetermined the content of the linguistic means of realization used by Lukashenka to portray her. Before the election, Lukashenka spoke

about her as a victim of circumstances and a laughingstock. On 29 May, Lukashenka accused Tsikhanouski of being ‘root[ed] for his wife’ and emphasized that nobody in Belarus would vote for her. On 16 July, after Babaryka and Tsapkala were denied registration as candidates, their campaign teams joined their forces with Tsikhanouskaya’s team. This meant substantial changes in the context of the electoral campaign because Lukashenka was challenged by the electoral team led by three women, namely Tsikhanouskaya flanked by Maryia Kalesnikava (director of Babaryka’s team) and Veranika Tsapkala (Valery Tsapkala’s wife and director of his team). This fact partially resulted in the change of Lukashenka’s rhetoric about Tsikhanouskaya. Just before the election, Lukashenka described them as ‘three poor girls’ who ‘do not understand what they read’ and are used by those who want to destabilize the situation in the country. Lukashenka felt sorry for Tsikhanouskaya as the person who ‘is simply used’ by the people behind the joined electoral team. Lukashenka’s post-electoral rhetoric about Tsikhanouskaya and her team largely remained the same. On the next day after the election, he emotionally exclaimed that ‘[t]hese sheep [...] have no idea what one wants from them.’ After Tsikhanouskaya was forced to leave Belarus on 11 August, Lukashenka continued to call her ‘a normal woman [who] loves her children’ and emphasized that ‘she has been thrown out into this futile fight, and today she is treading water’. In post-electoral Lukashenka’s messages, Tsikhanouskaya was depicted as a person who has consistently been used by the foreign ‘centers of power’ as a sort of ‘a female Belarusian Guaidó’, by the analogy with the Venezuelan example. Lukashenka claimed that Tsikhanouskaya was about to become ‘a sacred sacrifice’ and it was he who saved her from this hard luck. Lukashenka viewed her as a person ‘who is doing everything to damage Belarus now’ and underlined that he would not discuss anything with her. She became the subject of cynical jokes publicly made by Lukashenka. In November, when Lukashenka met Tsikhanouski at the detention facility, the latter reportedly asked him when Lukashenka could release him. Lukashenka answered that ‘your president [his wife, Sviatlana] is in Lithuania’ and underlined that ‘everybody [who attended this meeting] started laughing’ after this phrase. The linguistic content of Lukashenka’s statements about Tsikhanouskaya depicts her as a prey to circumstances and simultaneously holds her up for public derision to stress her incompetence and rawness as a public figure. Lukashenka also articulated the *topos* of patriarchy to emphasize Tsikhanouskaya’s inability to bear full responsibility for her own actions.

The analysis demonstrates that Lukashenka’s rhetoric about his contenders exploited the *topoi* of president’s competences and personal qualities required for the country’s leader. The discourse was adjusted to the specific contenders and aimed to reveal them as the negative others. The *topos* of corruption was used against the male contenders, Babaryka and Tsapkala. The *topos* of patriarchy was targeted against Tsikhanouskaya based on her gender and background. The goal of this strategy was to demonstrate Lukashenka’s irreplaceability and hegemonic power through negative portrayal of the political alternatives being incapable to inherit his role as a party to the contract with the Belarusian society. This indirect presentation of positive self confirms Lukashenka’s unwillingness to change the social contract on his part.

5 Lukashenka’s portrayal of the Belarusian electorate

The role of a strict *baćka* embraced by Lukashenka under his contract with the Belarusian society implies two elements necessary for the hegemonic patronal control. The first one is

the ability to designate and neutralize ‘them’, i.e. those segments of the who demand the revision or termination of the existing social contract. The second one is his own interpretation of the social contract and the vision of society’s role in it. This section analyzes Lukashenka’s discourse related to these elements.

While designating ‘them’, Lukashenka spoke about the opposition supporters as essentially the same people whose numbers had not changed. He also argued that ‘no new protest movement has emerged’ as this process ‘takes years’. After the election, Lukashenka’s rhetoric exploited two *topoi*. The first one was the foreign entrenchment with the main message about the protests being manipulated by some foreign masterminds that could violate the country’s sovereignty and even territorial integrity. His discoursed strategies were consistently focused on the portrayal of the negative other by using derogatory or pejorative denotations and attributions. They also promoted his positive self as a person who looks after society and knows how to cater to all its needs.

In Lukashenka’s view, ‘even if they [his opponents] calm down today, they will crawl like rats out of their holes some time later.’ Later, he emphasized that ‘*zmahary* [Belarusian: fighters] living abroad keep inventing new tricks against the Belarusian state’. The English version of the BelTA website used this notion without translation or explanation. In the Belarusian propaganda slang, the notion *zmahary* refers to a wide range of Lukashenka’s opponents typically affiliated with pro-democratic political or civil organizations. He underlined that the core of the most active protesters comprised ‘people with the [decent] criminal past and currently unemployed people.’ He claimed that many protesters ‘were under the influence of alcohol or drugs.’ In November 2020, Lukashenka argued that ‘most of those coming to the streets earn big money.’ Lukashenka argued that the way of life, needs, and behavior patterns of these groups differ from those of common people. He also underlined the numerical inferiority of the protesters vis-a-vis an imaginary silent majority. To stand in stark contrast to his contenders and emphasize his positive self as a leader, Lukashenka argued that people ‘say [that Belarus before the election] was the country they wanted to live in, and it will always be so as long as I am President.’ In his view, Belarus’s efficient development without revolutions could be ensured only if three conditions are met, namely ‘if people stay united, the government remains strong and the social and political system is stable.’ He presented himself as the only competent person who could ensure it, being a central element of this architecture.

Equally important in Lukashenka’s discourse was the designation of the victims of the opposition’s endeavors to emphasize the immaturity of the Belarusian society to make its own decisions and its vulnerability before the external influences. Lukashenka called the protesters ‘sheep [...who] do not understand what they are doing’ and promised to ‘deal with every one of those who were provoking and pushing young people into the streets.’ He argued that some segments of society, particularly young people, could be easily influenced. Lukashenka tried to portray the situation, not as a mass conscious movement, but as manipulation of his contenders and their foreign allies against an immature Belarusian society. His message to the public was to ‘use your head until it is too late, otherwise, others will think for you.’

His interpretation of the social contract can be exemplified by the contrast between his hegemonic patriarchal masculinity and the feminized nature of the Belarusian society. He used the *topos* of his personal authority to demonstrate to the population that Belarus needs

a male president who is strong and competent enough to take care of the immature and vulnerable society. In late May, Lukashenka expressed his absolute certitude that the 2020 election would result in the election of a male president. He specified that the society 'is not ready to vote for a woman' while the Constitution 'is not suitable for a woman' because it 'gives strong authority to the president'. To back his argument, he brought a domestic and a foreign example. He argued that Natallia Kachanova, Chairwoman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly and former head of the Presidential Administration, would fail to win the election, 'although she is a hard-boiled, ready president already.' Lukashenka's words about Kachanova imply that he could not see any real political contender among Belarusian women whatsoever. He also exemplified the case of Dalia Grybauskaitė, Lithuania's president from 2009 to 2019, who 'came, smiled, sat a bit and went away' as 'she was not responsible for anything because it is a parliamentary republic over there,' though scholars classify Lithuania as a semi-presidential democracy (Raunio & Sedelius, 2020). He used these contrasts to underline his irreplaceability for Belarus's political system. Lukashenka's inaccuracy in the description of Lithuania's political system serves as a manifestation of his mythomaniac populism when the reliability and credibility of arguments are irrelevant for his discourse strategies.

Lukashenka's words about the inability of a woman to hold office as Belarus's president had a two-fold effect. First, these statements were counted against him in the situation when he was challenged by an alliance personified by three independent and confident women – Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava, and Tsapkala. However, Lukashenka still did not perceive them as independent politicians with their agendas, as he called them 'three poor girls' used by those who want to overthrow the stability in the country. This attitude implicitly suggested that Lukashenka did not treat them seriously as real challengers to his power, being convinced that a feminized society requires a patriarchal president. Second, he appropriated the women's factor for his benefit to emphasize his positive self. Thus, he demonstrated 'his ability to identify with the mood of the general public' (Ioffe 2014, p. 126). Less than a week before the election, Lukashenka described Belarus in the likeness of a woman as 'a clean and light, honest and beautiful, hardworking, a bit naive, and slightly vulnerable country,' emphasizing that 'you don't give away your beloved'. On 17 September, during the state-sponsored women's forum, Lukashenka nearly repeated this emotional message saying that '[w]e will not part with Belarus' because '[we] love it and loved ones are not to be parted with!' Later, he also labeled himself as a 'women's president' claiming support of the female electorate, recalling that he was brought up by a single mother, and accusing the opponents of misinterpreting his words about women's inability to be president in Belarus. By portraying Belarus in the likeness of a beloved woman, Lukashenka tried to emphasize his necessity and centrality for its protection and prosperous development vis-a-vis his contenders.

The above evidence demonstrates that Lukashenka's offensive statements towards the protesters embodied his discursive strategies that signified the relationship within the social contract between Lukashenka and society. Lukashenka's designation of the protesters as people with different from the majority way of life and behavior patterns present them as negative others whose goal was to terminate his social contract and deteriorate the country. Yet, Lukashenka's designation of victims of these endeavors emphasizes the *topos* of the foreign entrenchment against an immature and vulnerable society that allegedly requires Lukashenka as a strict father to ensure its efficient development. The debate around the

women's factor in the election was centered around the *topos* of Lukashenka's personal authority. Besides, it demonstrated his vision of the parties of the social contract in Belarus that, in his view, shall comprise a hegemonic patriarchal president who, as a strict father, takes care of a feminized Belarusian society.

6 Conclusion

The 2020 presidential election in Belarus and its aftermath formed a series of unprecedented events in Belarus's recent history, as they posed the biggest threat to the long-standing social contract between president Lukashenka and the Belarusian society. Within this relationship, Lukashenka embraced the role of a strict patriarchal father who effectively exercises his personal hegemonic control over the immature, vulnerable, and feminized Belarusian society. By doing so, Lukashenka expresses his masculinity, manifests his irreplaceability, and conveys his omniscience about society's needs and demands.

As the article demonstrated, Lukashenka's rhetoric during the 2020 election and its aftermath provided substantial evidence about him as a classical authoritarian ruler with respective and well-developed discursive strategies. being capable to swiftly identify and react to the private nuisances, and act as per wider public's mood.

His disdain towards the white-red-white flag was merely caused by its role as a visual color spectrum of the protests that posed a threat to the official red-green flag that, in Lukashenka's view, was a symbol of his personal political victories and the current social contract. His discursive strategy employed the *topoi* of strong popular support and his personal authority to emphasize positive self by reminding the population about the popular mandate it gave to Lukashenka. Those who want to dismantle the social contract were depicted through the *topoi* of fear and insecurity served filled with diverse derogatory denotations to emphasize Lukashenka's personal effectiveness as a party to the current social contract he offered to the Belarusian society. Lukashenka's rhetoric about his contenders was dominated by the *topoi* of competences and personal qualities necessary to act as Belarus's president with the discursive strategy aimed at portraying the negative others to discredit and disdain them. Adjusted to specific contenders, his discourse distinguished the female and male candidates. Lukashenka felt more danger from his male contenders, Babaryka and Tsapkala, as they could potentially challenge his position as an omniscient strict father. He employed an additional *topos* of corruption against them to demonstrate manifold options to control the situation. Lukashenka's attitude towards female contender Tsikhanouskaya was patriarchal, if not chauvinistic, as he perceives her not as real opponents but as a puppet of a third power, 'sheep,' and victim of circumstances.

While his contenders were depicted as persons as the persons incapable to inherit Lukashenka's role as a party to the contract with the Belarusian society, the core of the discontented electorate was depicted as the people with different behavior patterns and ways of life to contrast them from the silent majority and create an impression of Lukashenka's popular support. In contrast to these negative others, Lukashenka's portrayal of his positive self was achieved through the *topos* of foreign entrenchment to deteriorate an immature and vulnerable Belarusian society. To back this, he also extensively exploited the women's factor to emphasize the *topos* of his personal authority. By doing so, Lukashenka clearly demonstrated his unwillingness to change the social contract between him and the Belarusian

society which he depicted in the likeness of a beautiful, somewhat naive, and vulnerable woman. By taking on this task, Lukashenka assumed full and unlimited responsibility for everything that happens in the country. He offensively responded to every attempt to challenge this role by the others which resonated with his phrase ‘you don’t give away your beloved.’

This article demonstrated Lukashenka’s vision of Belarus’s political reality. It implied that all post-electoral debates about the peaceful and voluntary transition of power were wishful thinking due to his unwillingness to change the social contract and renounce the role of the country’s strict father. This study suggested at least two topics for additional research. The first one includes the role of foreign actors vis-a-vis imaginary or real challenges and threats for Belarus, identified as the fourth thematic paradigm but omitted in this text. The second one brings domestic and foreign issues together, as it suggests the analysis of the relative irrelevance of the geopolitical factors on Belarus’s domestic developments.

References

- Bedford, S. (2017). The Election Game: Authoritarian Consolidation Processes in Belarus. *Demokratizatsiya*, 25(4), 381–405.
- Bekus, N. (2010). *Struggle over Identity: the Official and the Alternative Belarusianness*. CEU Press.
- Bennett, B. (2011). *The Last Dictatorship in Europe: Belarus Under Lukashenko*. Hurst & Co.
- Boukala, S. (2019). *European Identity and the Representation of Islam in the Mainstream Press: Argumentation and Media Discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brzozowska, A. (2007). Deficient Belarus? Insidious Gender Binaries and Hyper-feminized Nationality. In J. E. Johnson and J. C. Robinson (Eds.), *Living Gender after Communism* (pp. 185–202). Indiana University Press.
- Bunce, V. J. & Wolchik, S. L. (2010). Defeating dictators: Electoral change and stability in competitive authoritarian regimes. *World Politics*, 62(1), 43–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109990207>
- Denisenko, V. (2020). Ar Rusija turi planą Baltarusijai? (Does Russia have a plan for Belarus) *Voras online*, <https://www.voras.online/naujiena/politika/Ar-Rusija-turi-plana-Baltarusijai/> Accessed: 13-01-2021.
- Enyedi, Zs. (2020). Right-wing authoritarian innovations in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*, 36(3), 363–377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787162>
- Ezrow, N. M. & Frantz, E. (2011). *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*. Continuum.
- Fritz, V. (2007). *State-building: a comparative study of Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia*. CEU Press.
- Gel'man, V., Travin, D. & Marganiya, O. (2014). *Reexamining Economic and Political Reforms in Russia, 1985–2000: Generations, Ideas, and Changes*. Lexington Books.
- Guber, S. (1997). *How To Win Your 1st Election*. CRC Press.

- Gurieva, S. & Treisman, D. (2015). How modern dictators survive: an informational theory of the new authoritarianism. *NBER Working Paper*, 21136. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21136/w21136.pdf Accessed: 27-12-2020.
- Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal Politics Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ioffe, G. (2014). *Reassessing Lukashenka: Belarus in Cultural and Geopolitical Context*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kascian, K. (2018). Belarus: does Europeanisation require a geopolitical choice? In P. Flenley & M. Mannin (Eds.), *The European Union and its eastern neighbourhood: Europeanisation and its twenty-first-century contradictions* (pp. 86–98). Manchester University Press.
- Krzyżanowski, M. (2010). *The Discursive Construction of European Identities: A Multi-level Approach to Discourse and Identity in the Transforming European Union*. Peter Lang.
- Leshchenko, N. (2008) The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(8), 1419–1433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130802292234>
- Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. Crown.
- Marples, D. R. (1999). *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*. Harwood.
- Marples, D. R. (2014). 'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society. Ibidem Press.
- Martin, S. (2020). *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort*. Routledge.
- Matsuzato, K. (2004). A Populist Island in an Ocean of Clan Politics: The Lukashenka Regime as an Exception among CIS Countries. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56(2), 235–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966813042000190515>
- McAllister, I. & White, S. (2016). Lukashenka and His Voters. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 30(1), 360–380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325415599826>
- Parker, S. (2007). *The last Soviet republic: Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus*. Trafford.
- Raunio, T. & Sedelius, T. (2020). *Semi-Presidential Policy-Making in Europe Executive Coordination and Political Leadership*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reisigl, M. & Wodak, R. (2009). The discourse-historical approach (DHA). In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 87–121). Sage.
- Renshon, S. (1992). Some Observations on Character and Privacy Issues in Presidential Campaigns. *Political Psychology*, 13(3), 565–585. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791615>
- Savchenko, A. (2009). *Belarus—A Perpetual Borderland*. Brill.
- Sheafer, T., Shenhav, S. R. & Balmas, M. (2014). Political actors as communicators. In C. Reinemann (Ed.), *Political Communication* (pp. 211–230). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Shumsky, D. (2002). Ethnicity and Citizenship in the Perception of Russian Israelis. In D. Levy & Y. Weiss (Eds.), *Challenging ethnic citizenship: German and Israeli perspectives on immigration* (pp. 154–178). Berghahn Books.

- Silitski, V. & Zaprudnik, J. (2010). *The A to Z of Belarus*. Scarecrow Press.
- Wilson, A. (2011). *Belarus: the last European dictatorship*. Yale University Press.
- Wodak, R. (2006). Discourse-analytic and Socio-linguistic Approaches to the Study of Nation(alism). In G. Delanty & K. Kumar (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (104–117). Sage.
- Wodak, R. & Boukala, S. (2014). Talking about Solidarity and Security in the Age of Crisis: The Revival of Nationalism and Protectionism in the European Union – a Discourse-Historical Approach. In C. Carta & J.-F. Morin (Eds.), *EU Foreign Policy through the Lens of Discourse Analysis: Making Sense of Diversity* (pp. 171–190). Ashgate.

DUNAJEVA JEKATYERINA*

Redefining patriotism and belonging in illiberal Russia:
Resilience and survival of othered groups

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 139–153.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.831>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* [\[dunajeva.jekatyerina@btk.ppke.hu\]](mailto:dunajeva.jekatyerina@btk.ppke.hu) (Pázmány Péter Catholic University)

Abstract

This study advances the argument that contemporary Russian illiberalism can be characterised through immense societal polarisation, generating a language of ‘othering’ and equating groups with critical political attitudes as ‘agents of the West’ or ‘foreigners.’ In the name of eradicating ‘amoral Western influence’ and shielding Russia from ‘foreign penetration and propaganda’ that spreads immoral values, political control over ‘foreign’ groups and organisations has intensified. In a similar vein, patriotism is increasingly equated with loyalty to the Russian state. In this article, based on the example of LGBT organisations, I show how othered groups strive to (re-)define themselves as part of the Russian nation—as patriotic and socially useful members of society. Employing institutional, political and social strategies, groups such as pro-LGBT organisations try to resist being pushed outside of Russian society, and in the process prove their patriotism and rootedness.

Keywords: Russia, civil society, patriotism, LGBT, rootedness.

1 Introduction – narratives of belonging and discursive polarisation

A discussion of Russia’s place between East and West has been ongoing for centuries, making these opposite poles reference points in Russian identity, geopolitical position, and cultural orientation (e.g., Lukin, 2003). Throughout history, Russian political leadership has oscillated between promoting Western forms of progress or rejecting those; the latter either marked Russian civilisation as unique on its own right or placed it within Eastern civilisation. While many scholars have been concerned with the East-West dichotomy in Russian political discourse and the recently intensified anti-Westernism (e.g., Noviko, 2009; Umland, 2012; Papava, 2014), fewer have inquired into how the consequent social polarisation excludes entire groups in Russia, and how these groups develop strategies of resistance and survival. This research does not follow theoretical pursuits, but rather wishes to contribute to our empirical understanding of how excluded groups in the context of illiberal regimes develop survival strategies. Through analysis of ethnographic data, I also provide direction for further research.

The East-West divide is not merely a political debate; it can be ‘appropriated by ordinary citizens in their everyday life,’ generating narratives of national identity and belonging (Pfoser, 2017, p. 26). This tendency has engendered a strong and growing social polarisation within Russia, differentiating ‘us’ (*nashi* or *svoi*) and ‘them’/‘others’ or (*chuzhie*). This discursive practice is neither new, nor unique to Russia; rather, distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them’ may be seen as a general nature of the intergroup relationships (e.g., Verkuyten et al., 2020). Yet in Russia, the ‘us versus them’ discourse has become so politicised that some argue it has been elevated to the country’s national or unifying idea (Fadeicheva, 2006; Solovyev, 2010; Snegovaya, 2014); it is mobilised to equate ‘ours’ with loyalty to the government, and labelling those critical of it as ‘not ours,’ but ‘them.’

In the recent years, among the ostracised groups cast as ‘others’ or ‘foreign’ are several rights groups and NGOs. The word ‘liberal’ became a ‘swearword in Russia,’ explained a former human rights activist in an interview; they are dismissed as ‘*liberasty*’ and ‘*tolerasty*,’ a portmanteau of liberal/tolerant and pederast (Interview No. 3). In recent years topics like the LGBT¹ have moved into public discourse, ‘forcing the population to choose sides: to support liberal organisations and be labelled as *liberast*, or to condemn them, and be seen as supporters of the state’ (Interview No. 3). The question then arises: when some groups within Russia are labelled as ‘others,’ on what coping mechanisms or survival strategies do they rely?

In answering this question, this article inquires about Russian ‘politics from below,’ rather than engaging in a state-centric analysis (see Cheskin & March, 2015, p. 262). Its contribution is to fill an analytical gap on how current political narratives exclude certain groups in Russian society, and how those groups cope. I argue that in contemporary Russia the West and its liberal principles are seen as a threat not only to preservation of traditional values, but also of Russian identity. In this political climate, partition of the society into ‘us versus them’ becomes a tool of social control, marginalising those groups who are critical towards the government or its conservative ideology. This weaponised polarisation, in turn, generated rhetoric of othering that labels groups or individuals within society as strangers, foreigners, or even traitors. By examining the examples of LGBT organisations, which must navigate several political and economic challenges in the illiberal context of contemporary Russia, the article identifies a set of institutional strategies employed by groups labelled as ‘outsiders.’

2 Methodology

This article builds on research conducted in 2015 and 2021 about LGBT organisations in Russia, and compares it to findings of an earlier study with a focus on non-Orthodox Christian groups.² For the purposes of this article I provide a brief summary of our findings from

¹ Aware of other variants, in this study I use LGBT as an umbrella term to inclusively reference all members of non-heterosexual identities.

² In 2015 with Dr Karrie Koesel we conducted an extended study and fieldwork during July-August in three large Russian cities. Fieldwork included interviews with religious leaders and adherents, as well as with local government officials, lawyers, NGO representatives and scholars. This study was funded by the Templeton Foundation as part of the ‘Under the Caesar’s Sword’ project. Professor Koesel acted as the principal investigator of this study. IRB (Institutional Review Board) permissions were issued for field research. For this article, I summarise the findings based on the

earlier research, focusing on institutional survival strategies that these groups developed as a result of their marginalised position within an illiberal political climate. I then test these strategies in relation to LGBT organisations. The purpose of the study is to understand the contemporary challenges that LGBT organisations face in Russia, and analyse how they respond to various forms of oppression and marginalisation.

To that end, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with leaders or representatives of LGBT organisations, as well as scholars and activists, three in 2015³ and seven in 2021. All interviews were conducted online. Respondents were informed about the secure storage of anonymised data and my aim of collecting data for academic studies. In order to guarantee interviewees' anonymity, I made no voice recording of conversations and instead took verbatim notes, complemented with interview scripts drafted directly after the interviews.⁴ Interviews were conducted in Russian and translated by the author. The anonymised table below summarises the full list of interviews. Though not all interviews are quoted in this study, each informed the analysis and argument in this article and was imperative for grounded, in-depth understanding of institutional resilience in illiberal Russia.

In all cases respondents granted their informed consent to participate in the interviews. I took the anonymity of interviewees particularly seriously, considering their precarious situation and the sensitive nature of the topic. As one interviewed NGO leader and an activist aptly declared, 'even our interview can be called "political activity,"' referring to the 'foreign agents' designation applied to those who engage in political acts and receive foreign funding, 'because any communication critical to the government can be called political activity' (Interview No. 10). The organisations represented by interviewees are fairly broad in their regional coverage of Russia, including organisations in the Far East, and in north-western and central parts of Russia, but excluding the North Caucasus and Siberia. Among interviewees, the north-western region was somewhat overrepresented as it is known for its 'liberal electorate,' with Saint Petersburg as its administrative centre, a city with flourishing NGOs⁵ (e.g., Petrov, 2002, p. 77; Von Neef, 2017). For interviews, I compiled a list of Russia-wide pro-LGBT organisations whose contact information was publicly available online. I then contacted by email a total of 15 organisations, of which six responded and were open for interviews; one suggested a renowned scholar in the field of LGBT rights in Russia, with previous experience working for civil society.

publications already available (Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018; Dunajeva & Koesel, 2015; 2017), but do not focus on religious minorities in Russia. Crucially, the comparison of cases must not imply that LGBT groups need to be viewed in comparison to the non-Orthodox churches' strategies. Instead, I treat both groups as examples of marginal communities that need to develop survival strategies. In future, I intend to study further marginal groups and compare their coping strategies as well.

³ Three interviews were conducted as part of a larger study by Political Capital Institute and published as Kreko et al. (2016).

⁴ In fact, research demonstrates that 'data quality between audio-recorded transcripts and interview scripts written directly after the interview were comparable in the detail captured,' and ideas may even be better organised in the script rather than transcript (Rutakumwa et al., 2020, p. 565).

⁵ According to the most recent BTI Transformation Index (2020), 'NGOs are unevenly distributed [in Russia], flourishing mainly in the two largest cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg.'

Table 1: List of interviewees

Year of interview	Interviewee	Type of organisation and its mission	Interview code
2015	Programme organizer	National NGO with a mission to end all forms of gender/sex-based discrimination, with the help of generating a positive dialogue especially in cultural spaces	Interview No. 1
2015	Director and programme organizer	Regional NGO, equality in human rights to sexual/gender minorities	Interview No. 2
2015	Activist and representative	Former chairperson of national board on LGBT rights and human rights activist in an NGO	Interview No. 3
2021	Director	Local NGO, Integration of stigmatised groups into society, ending forms of prejudice	Interview No. 4
2021	Activist and director	Regional NGO, provides support to LGBT-community	Interview No. 5
2021	Director	National NGO, research and support network for transgender communities	Interview No. 6
2021	Programme organizer	Regional feminist and LGBT group providing psychological, mental, educational support	Interview No. 7
2021	Representative	Umbrella organisation supporting LGBT groups and pro-LGBT NGOs	Interview No. 8
2021	Scholar	Researcher of LGBT-related issues in Russia and former Soviet Union	Interview No. 9
2021	Director	Human rights LGBT organisation	Interview No. 10

This paper is centrally concerned with institutional survival strategies, rather than individual activist actions (which some interviewed persons admittedly engaged in, in their personal capacity). It is also essential to note that during interviews, the line between initiatives, NGOs, or other formal or informal institutional forms was ambiguous. In some cases, NGOs may have decided to forgo their NGO status to avoid bureaucratic harassment and yet continued referring to themselves as an NGO during our conversation, even though they are not officially registered. For example, one interview participant commented that ‘we are not registered as such, but I call ourselves an NGO’ (Interview No. 4). In all cases, however, interviews reflect institutional experience, regardless of the official status and form of registration. All the represented organisations have faced some form of institutional discrimination due to their mission and were operating relatively independently; several interviewed subjects stated that they occasionally apply for state grants to fund their projects, but that they can only receive state support if they frame their operations in ‘acceptable terms,’ referring to publicly beneficial activities (Interview Nos. 4 and 5). In addition to the interviews, I also analysed websites of LGBT organisations, focusing on their projects, forms of cooperation and their representation in mass media.

3 Discursive othering: Russian illiberalism and social polarisation

Marlene Laruelle aptly pointed out that there is no coherent illiberal ideology that countries adhere to; instead, illiberalism comes in ‘country specific patterns’ and ‘stress different issues’ (Laruelle, 2020, p. 115). What is nevertheless common among illiberal regimes is a worldview that stands in opposition to liberal values, usually associated with the West. This worldview generates a rhetoric of othering, which labels groups or individuals within society as strangers, foreigners, or even traitors. What is particular about the Russian illiberal agenda and its othering rhetoric, is the claim to defend morality; the elevation and even official establishment of certain moral values is increasingly used to frame foreign and national politics in Russia. Laruelle characterises ‘us’ in terms of the conservative state posture, which is often echoed in the language of patriotism, morality and national culture, and anyone who challenges this posture is targeted and penalised (2016, p. 209).

Russia is portrayed as the foremost fighter for morality, a bulwark against Western decadence. This position ‘clearly distinguishes Russia from the West; it reinforces the idea that Russia is the only authentic alternative to Western ideology; and it positions Russia as pious and in contrast to an immoral West’ (Dunajeva & Koesel, 2015). Fernando Nuñez-Mietz pointed out the links between morality, anti-Westernism and exclusion of ‘othered’ groups, such as the LGBT, but also how this discourse constitutes patriotism and Russian identity today:

The construction of nontraditional SOGIs [sexual orientations or gender identities] as a moral disease is built into a conservative campaign for the preservation of ‘traditional values.’ It is also built into an anti-West campaign fuelled by Russian nationalism. In this context, ‘to be properly Russian is to be Orthodox Christian and against homosexuality’ (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 368, quoted by Nuñez-Mietz, 2019, p. 552)

Analogously, Western liberalism is also derided in mass media as ‘Gayropa,’ counterpoising ‘Holy Russia’ and ‘sodomitic America’ (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019), where the latter has lost its civilisational roots to ‘genderless’ family values and ludicrous political correctness. Consider the title of a newspaper article about returning Russian compatriots in RIA Novosti, a Russian state-owned news agency: “‘Their main holiday is gay parades.’ Why Russians are running away from the US and Europe.”⁶

Indeed, this sense of morality is not only framing political discourse, but also saturating public debate, generating profound social polarisation, dividing the society ‘into pro-regime patriots and foreign agents’ (Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018, p. 223). In other words, *nashism* in contemporary Russia redefines the meaning of patriotism, belonging and loyalty. It redefines who is rooted in Russian society—and who is not. It also serves as a tool to demobilise certain social groups, seen as critical of the regime or its conservative agenda. In such a climate, anything associated with the West and critical of Russia is denigrated and delegitimised. Subsequently, “‘human rights defender’ (*pravozashchitnik*) became almost a term of abuse, laden with xenophobic connotations’ and the ‘human rights movement [became] an [...] innocuous vehicle for infiltrating foreign values into the national polity’ (Horvath, 2016, pp. 868–869). The us versus them dichotomy also divided Russia’s civic sphere into ‘ours’—those

⁶ The article was published on 2018.02.10 and is available at: <https://ria.ru/20180210/1514337857.html>

who are neutral or loyal to the regime—and ‘others’—those who are critical of the regime and challenge its ideology—with the latter groups systematically marginalised (Gilbert, 2016, p. 1572).

In contemporary Russia, there is a legal basis for differentiating ‘them’ from ‘us’: the infamous ‘Foreign agent law’ (officially ‘On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent’), introduced in 2012 and expanded in 2020. At first, this law only referred to non-governmental organisations who engage in ‘political activity’⁷ and receive assistance from abroad; now it applies to all citizens as well. This law was widely criticised for stigmatising and prosecuting government-critical groups.⁸ An NGO with a focus on LGBT rights explained that they have gone through ‘a 16-month trial as a result of being labelled as a foreign agent,’ a stigma that discredited the organisation and cast them as ‘promoters of foreign values in the eyes of the population’ (Interview No. 10).

This political and legal uncertainty—a characteristic of illiberal regimes that can serve as a ‘tool of indirect repression’ (Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018, p. 201)—is a technique of co-optation, making the civil sector dependent on state (Skokova, Pape & Krasnopolskaya, 2018). For instance, an LGBT NGO leader complained of ‘pseudo-NGOs,’ those organisations that are ‘to the regime’s liking and are designed as window dressing, just to show the rest for the world that we have [NGOs]’ (Interview No. 4). Indeed, to improve state control of the civil sector and demobilise critical groups, the Russian state established so-called GONGOs (government organised non-governmental organisations) (Gilbert, 2016), and rewarded ‘useful’ NGOs that operate within the ‘prescribed boundaries’ with Kremlin-sponsored grants (Bindman, 2014). Alluding to these practices, some interview participants shared that there is a widely known phenomenon of ‘fake’ NGOs throughout the country that are created as part of a corruption scheme: they get government grants but in fact the NGO has no office, no base, no projects (Interview Nos. 6 and 9). In general, another LGBT NGO leader complained, it is hard to plan for the future in Russia, posing a rhetorical question: ‘How can NGOs or anyone plan for the next year if we don’t know what will happen tomorrow?’ (Interview No. 7). Furthermore, in an effort to demobilise and discredit some groups, ‘key officials publicly refer to specific organisations as either unpatriotic or as tools of foreign governments’ (Gilbert, 2016, p. 1556).

In this political climate, for many groups and organisations regarded as ‘foreign,’ ‘amoral,’ or even spies,⁹ leaving the country became a safe means of escaping persecution. Russian media has widely documented NGOs liquidating their institutions or moving

⁷ According to the Foreign Agent Act (‘On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent’) contains a rather broad, loose definition of ‘political activity’ as ‘any activity seeking to influence government policy or public opinion with regard to government policy’ (see Russia’s NGO Laws explained by Freedom House, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet_0.pdf; full law in Russian is available at <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/102766-6>).

⁸ Such criticism was voiced by the Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle>), the European Parliament (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0258_EN.html) or Amnesty International (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ACT3096472019ENGLISH.PDF>), among other critics.

⁹ See, for example, the case of Memorial, a human rights organisation (Goncharenko, 2017).

abroad.¹⁰ Some, nevertheless, decided to stay. I asked all interviewed NGO leaders why they kept their doors open. Each prominently expressed a sense of duty, a responsibility they felt towards their society and towards their nation. Most listed beneficiaries of their programmes, the individuals and families they have assisted with their work. With sorrow, one NGO director inquired: 'If we leave who will take over? We don't want to throw away what we have started. People need us' (Interview No. 4).

Non-state groups or institutions that continue to work in Russia must adapt to the political climate. Many LGBT organisations who decided to stay in Russia actively 'resist silence,' as Kondakov (2013) put it, but do not necessarily develop a resistant attitude towards authorities. Kondakov shows that in some cases LGBT organisations developed favourable attitudes towards authorities and strove for civil partnerships. Moser and Skripchenko's (2018, p. 592) study demonstrated that under current restrictions, 'foreign agent' labelled NGOs develop survival strategies that focus on creating 'supportive ecologies within their adverse political environment' and 'generating new sources of legitimacy.' In a study of non-Orthodox Christian churches and groups in Russia, which tend to be treated as 'foreign agents,' as well as seen as 'religious others' or faiths with foreign ties, we found marginalised religious communities developed a strategy of moving themselves to the mainstream by stressing their rootedness and patriotism (Dunajeva & Koesel, 2017, p. 57). We categorised strategies within three groups—social, political and institutional ones—summarised in Table 2 below. In the following section, I test whether these strategies are similar for LGBT organisations, who are perhaps the most targeted groups in contemporary Russia. Indeed, LGBT organisations became the archetype of 'foreign' organisations, considering that 'homosexuality is seen as a fashion, spreading due to Western influence, which is alien to Russian culture and threatens indigenous Russian values' (Gulevich, Osin, Isaenko & Brainis, 2016, p. 96).

Table 2: Survival Strategies of non-Orthodox Christian Churches

Social Strategies (Rootedness)	Political Strategies (Patriotism)	Institutional Strategies (Networks)
Display federal registration, which signals that churches are both legal and Russian entities	Religious leaders articulate a patriotic agenda, stressing love for their homeland and open support for Vladimir Putin	Joining umbrella organisations to represent their interests to those in power and provide protection
Robust online presence (as un-censored arena) that help identify churches as rooted in Russia and Russian-led	Patriotic projects (e.g., assistance for refugees from Donbass, participation in projects with United Russia)	Turn to state institutions to protect their rights and freedoms
Rooting churches in Russia through serving communities and social outreach programmes	Promotion of traditional values (e.g., marriage, religious education, large families)	Joining umbrella organisations that help with the transfer of information (e.g., interpretation of national and international regulations)

(Source: Dunajeva & Koesel, 2017; Koesel & Dunajeva, 2018)

¹⁰ See, for example, the case of the recently liquidated For Human Rights movement as a result of tightening Foreign Agent Act (Snegov, 2021).

4 Resilience and survival: LGBT groups in Russia

Jennifer Suchland (2018) in her study cited the 2009 European Court of Human Rights case, when Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov banned the organising of marches by Nikolai Alekseyev, a gay rights activist and lawyer. To justify the ban, Luzhkov claimed ‘that’s the way morals work. If somebody deviates from the normal principles [in accordance with which] sexual and gender life is organised, this should not be demonstrated in public’ (Suchland, 2018, p. 1080). Suchland concluded that the Russian state evidently took on a responsibility to protect what the author calls the ‘moral majority.’ Given the state’s explicit anti-LGBT agenda and positioning Russia in opposition to ‘Gayropa,’ LGBT organisations became a political target.

LGBT organisations operate in a landscape of political and legal uncertainty, shaped by uneven and often arbitrary government penalties. Consider the example of ‘Side-by-side,’ a group known for organising international LGBT film festivals, whose November 2020 film screening event was blocked ‘10 minutes [...] before the opening ceremony’ in order to ‘check measures in relation to COVID-19’ (Side by side, n.d.). In the case of a LGBT organisation called ‘Parni Plus’ (Парни ПЛЮС), their website was recently blocked by *Roskomnadzor* (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media), the Russian federal-level executive body that oversees compliance with media and telecommunications law. Oddly, blocking the website came after a 2018 decision of the Barnaul court (Altai region) to rescind the previous blocking of the website by *Roskomnadzor* (MBK Media, 2021). Another example was shared during an interview, when the founder of an NGO explained the extent of legal arbitrariness throughout the country, especially when it comes to LGBT rights:

Once we had an open event where we decided to release rainbow-coloured balloons. After the event I received a complaint and I was asked to come to the prosecutor’s office. The complaint was from the MVD [Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs] about our alleged ‘political activity’ and the letter said: ‘Rainbow balloons in the air are propagating same-sex relationships [...] and these relationships do not lead to children because it is physically impossible, and so it contributes to a demographic crisis in the country, which is against the government’s doctrine on demographics.’ So the logic goes like this: rainbow balloons lead to a demographic catastrophe. Isn’t that absurd? (Interview No. 6)

The interviewee’s tone oscillated between amusement and dismay while sharing his recollections of this incident.

Many pro-LGBT organisations have been officially labelled as ‘foreign agents’; many of those that have not expect that dubious honorific soon. As the director of a LGBT organisation suggested with a smile, ‘We have not been marked as a foreign agent yet, but I think it will be our fate soon; I think next year we will become foreign agents and then there will be a lot more bureaucratic work for us’ (Interview No. 4). Another interviewee’s organisation has already received this designation, which devastated their professional network and debilitated their financial stability. Reflecting on the past, when the organisation was well-integrated with local government structures, the organisation’s leader lamented their current precarity and dislocation from society due to discriminatory policies towards NGOs:

In the [late 2000s], the government understood who we work with; yet despite this we were invited to meetings, supported or organised by the government, on various topics, such as human

rights and the like. We were members of a local youth network with direct ties to the regional Committee on Youth. We were well integrated into government structures. [...] Then with the wave of NGO repressions [in mid-2010s], we became 'foreign agents,' and after that [...] we no longer had any dialogue with government structures. [...] Now we don't have a high status or reputation to mobilise in order to fight for our cause and in the interest of improving the situation in our country. Our [earlier partner organisations] chose to stop cooperating with us because of the 'foreign agent' status; they said they were not allowed to work with us anymore. (Interview No. 5)

Once the stigma of 'foreign agent' was applied, a local NGO member explained, some decided to give up their status as NGO and find other, creative ways of generating income, whether through crowd funding, donations, cooperation with foreign consulates (if there were any nearby) or even receiving support from 'undesirable organisations' by 'using our own channels' (Interview No. 10). The 'undesirable organisations law' (officially Federal Law of 23.05.2015 N 129-FZ 'On amendments of some legislative acts of the Russian Federation') was enacted in 2015 and allows for closing down organisations deemed as 'undesirable' in the country.¹¹ Some organisations withdrew from Russia before being labelled as 'undesirable.' Commenting on that, one interview participant lamented that 'some foreign organisations don't see hope in Russia and have given up, leaving us on our own' (Interview No. 4).

I found that LGBT organisations at times engage in self-censorship in order to 'play by the rules.' One LGBT organisation director explained their process of registration: they learned from the experience of other institutions that including 'LGBT' in their name resulted in delays or outright rejection for registration, usually with 'made-up excuses,' such as 'unclear wording in the registration documents' or 'imprecise definitions of staff roles' (Interview No. 10). 'We need the registration more than any particular name,' the director explained, so the organisation chose a 'neutral name' and only referenced 'anti-discrimination work' in documents, which resulted in fewer complications in the bureaucratic process (Interview No. 10). Another organisation, which used to hold several public events, has turned to online spaces only; in part, this was due to Covid restrictions, but it also allowed them to screen and censor their own content more efficiently. Some forms of self-censorship were instrumental: one NGO explained that they have been vigilant about following the rules so they are not labelled a 'foreign agent,' as it is important for them to keep their good standing and apply for government grants. To do so, they frame their work as educational, without mentioning LGBT, hoping to receive some funding to continue their work (Interview No. 7). As organisations that are seen as critical of the government and its ideology have indeed been 'crowded out' of the civic sphere (Gilbert, 2016), neutral or even loyal appearances have become a survival strategy.

Similar to findings on marginalised Christian religious groups, I found that LGBT organisations developed particular coping mechanisms; namely, they engage in institutional, social, and political strategies that allow them to operate in the precarious political and legal landscape of contemporary Russia. They build institutional networks by joining umbrella organisations and form ties with other organisations, as well as turning to state judicial institutions for protection, even though state politics have been manifestly homophobic. One LGBT organisation has a community space, which they share with other organisations—

¹¹ The Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation published a list of such organisations, available at: <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7756/>

many of which are also labelled as ‘foreign agents’—and with those that do not have their own spaces for public events. ‘We build strong alliances that way, we can develop cooperation and mutual understanding,’ shared an event organizer, offering examples of such fruitful cooperation with local feminist organisations, green movements or even the Red Cross (Interview No. 7). ‘Human rights organisations used to be our major partners,’ the organizer continued, ‘but they have all been liquidated [after the ‘Foreign Agent Act’] and the city was cleansed of human rights activists, too.’

Most of the interviewed organisations are members of the Russian LGBT-Network that, among other services, provides assistance to regional LGBT organisations countrywide. The network is a crucial resource, several interviewees suggested, to support local organisations and their work, especially in terms of sharing resources and generating visibility. Visibility is key, given that the mass media—largely controlled by the state—generally portrays these organisations negatively. Visibility of the actual work and true mission of LGBT organisations in online platforms and social media offers an opportunity to counter accusations and position their work as socially important and patriotic. The network also has a staff of lawyers, on which regional LGBT organisations regularly rely for legal assistance. Few lawyers take on LGBT cases, one interviewee claimed, and lawyers’ fees can be prohibitive for NGOs’ small budget, added another interviewee.

Curiously, even with hostile courts, LGBT organisations persistently appeal to the rule of law for protection of their rights and freedoms. A regional LGBT NGO leader, who otherwise has ‘great contacts’ due to their previous work for the regional administration, shared their experience with the courts:

We have a subjective court and often we hear about decisions that are sickening—these decisions are based on homophobia completely. Once a judge said that ‘we propagate amorality,’ and the [LGBT] community propagates these amoral values. [...] Many lawyers are afraid to take on cases [concerning LGBT]. [...] In district courts it is impossible to win. It seems like there is an internal agreement, an informal rule among the judges that we shouldn’t not win. Sometimes we appeal to the regional [krai] courts, but also unsuccessfully. [...] Some say that judges are afraid to go against ‘established principles’ [regarding morality] and no one wants to be seen as the ‘enemy’ if they challenge these principles. We were actually never able to reach the Supreme Court of Russia. That could be our next step. (Interview No. 6)

This response suggests two conclusions. First, the framework of morality is instrumental in delineating between ‘us and them,’ a division that operates as a pervasive informal standard throughout the judiciary. Second, despite legal and political uncertainties, LGBT groups and institutions continue turning to legal institutions for protection, although this is a costly strategy that not many can afford. This might be because they still hope for a positive outcome in court, or to make a statement with the very appeal to court (regardless of outcome) that they will fight human right violations with all means possible (Interview No. 9).

In all cases, LGBT groups stressed their patriotism. Though they are cast as ‘foreigners,’ several respondents nevertheless saw the very existence of their organisation and the work they do as a patriotic duty. During interviews, many shared their sense of pride and courage: ‘as our opponents say, “suitcase – train – Europe”, but why should I leave my own country? I think I am more of a patriot [given the work I do] than those who only wear national symbols for holidays,’ said one NGO leader and activist (Interview No. 3). Similarly, another NGO director pointed out that resilience is, in a sense, a ‘human factor’ and ‘those who are brave

to stay, they stay and keep their organisation afloat' (Interview No. 4). These sentiments were echoed in a 2018 op-ed in *The Moscow Times* by Zoya Svetova, a human rights activist, where she concluded that 'Russian civil society still counts many brave, talented, and charismatic people among its ranks. They are true patriots' (Svetova, 2018).

There was indeed an explicit attempt by all interviewees to position themselves as not only patriotic, but also useful organisations that serve their community in order to improve the society as a whole. Akin to non-Orthodox Christian groups, who made attempts at 'consciously rooting their churches locally [to] demonstrate that their communities are "authentically Russian"' (Dunajeva & Koesel, 2017, p. 60), leaders of LGBT organisations explained that their work often extends beyond LGBT communities, and in all cases serves the entire community. For instance, one NGO provides assistance to LGBT individuals as well as all women because they noticed a sharp increase in female victims of violence who sought their help (Interview No. 7). This organisation had an advantage compared to medical institutions: they did not require any medical documents or other 'papers,' hence they were able to react immediately and provide urgent support, without any preconditions.

Another NGO helps those infected with HIV, who often feel stigmatised in state institutions and search for tolerant, accepting institutions for support. The majority of studied NGOs—contingent on their funding and resources—assisted the LGBT community and their families during the pandemic with groceries and hygiene products. One NGO considered clinics and doctors their main beneficiaries, for whom they hold workshops and seminars on ethical topics. This NGO also described the tensions they experience in their work: doctors and medical staff are pleased to attend their lectures and find the content particularly useful for their practice, while their superiors and the administration is wary (Interview No. 6). The NGO director explained: 'we often hear that our work is valuable and beneficial, but there is nothing the administration [in clinics] can do formally include our lectures [...] they are afraid of being reprimanded "from the top".'

In all cases, NGOs stressed that they work *with* the local authorities or towards the same goals—not against them. This sense of mutual objectives was at the core of legitimating the purpose of LGBT organisations as well as positioning them as socially useful, patriotic groups. Two interviewees' NGOs hold educational seminars and workshops for professionals, such as doctors, psychologists, educators, and journalists. The ambition of one NGO director is to 'make the police and lawyers' interested in learning from them, especially in the field of domestic violence and homophobia. 'In fact, it is not us who need them, it is they [police and lawyers] who need us,' the director added, having shared petrifying stories of domestic violence, directed at women or LGBT members, when victims relied on the NGO as their only safety net (Interview No. 6). Another NGO representative commented that 'we don't want to be in a ghetto, we want to socialise, we want to be part of the society' (Interview No. 7).

Labelling LGBT groups as 'foreign agents' engaging in 'political acts,' one interviewee stressed, makes them into an 'oppositional force,' which they insist they are not. Seizing the occasion to communicate a message to the 'West,' the interviewee proceeded with a plea not to cast human rights and LGBT organisations as 'acting in their interest':

We don't want to be involved in or be associated with any anti-Russian statements or movements. We are Russian citizens; we love our country and act in her interests. We don't want LGBT issues to be used as points of contention between Russia and the US. [...] We keep stressing that we are criticising human rights violations and not Russia. (Interview No. 3).

5 Conclusion

This paper proposed that contemporary Russian illiberalism, associated with ant-Westernism, a traditionalist moral framework, and the rhetorical tool of ‘us versus them,’ polarises society and generates a language of ‘othering,’ equating non-desirable (or critical) groups as ‘agents of the West’ or ‘foreigners.’ In the name of eradicating ‘amoral Western influence’ and shielding Russia from ‘foreign penetration and propaganda’ that spreads immoral values, political control over ‘foreign’ groups and organisations has intensified. In a similar vein, patriotism is increasingly equated with loyalty to the Russian state. Alongside other research, this article showed how othered groups strive to (re-)define themselves as part of the Russian nation—as patriotic and socially useful members of society. Employing institutional, political, and social strategies, these groups try to resist being pushed outside of Russian society by reifying and proving their patriotism and rootedness.

The study revealed that pro-LGBT organisations strove to root themselves within their local communities through service and community support programmes. Many hoped to improve relations and develop cooperation with local authorities, stressing that they work towards the same goal. A central caveat to this study is that survival strategies were not always successful. For example, in some cases community outreach and support programmes, such as assistance during the pandemic, instead of challenging ‘otherness’ and the negative societal perceptions of LGBT, inadvertently reinforced them. During an interview, the founder of a small LGBT group explained that media accounts of their activities during the pandemic stressed that they helped ‘only “theirs,”’ referring to the LGBT community as ‘they’ (Interview No. 4). This instance not only shows the vulnerable position of ‘othered’ groups in Russia, but powerfully demonstrates the power of the ‘us versus them’ discursive division.

Finally, within its limited scope, this study did not focus on the *bytovoj uroven*, or ‘everyday level,’ the viewpoints among the general population towards LGBT groups. During several interviews with LGBT organisations, I heard about the tolerant youth that gave feelings of hope. One respondent, who is also enrolled in a graduate programme at a university in a major city and who holds ad hoc presentations about LGBT-related topics, averred that it is not only in big cities that young people are open to difference; most people are neutral or ‘listen in awe—they have never heard about anything related to LGBT’ (Interview No. 6). This might indicate that, beyond the hostile political climate, on the *bytovoj uroven* there may be more openness and tolerance for LGBT people.

So far, research and surveys of Russian youth have been inconclusive. On the one hand, a 2018 report of the Human Rights Watch, entitled ‘No Support Russia’s “Gay Propaganda” Law Imperils LGBT Youth’ shows that LGBT youth experience ‘intense fear,’ isolation, harassment, and bullying (Human Rights Watch, 2018). On the other hand, a 2019 study conducted by Mikhailov & Partners, a consultancy company involving 1057 respondents between the ages of 10 and 18 across 52 regions of Russia revealed that Russian youth is predominantly tolerant: 17 per cent reported negative attitudes towards members of LGBT community; 13 per cent claimed to trust them and 68 per cent had ‘normal views’ (in the Russian text described as ‘spokoynoe’, or calm, neutral) of LGBT (Kommersant, 2019; The Moscow Times, 2019). An article in *The Moscow Times* (2019) summarised the study: ‘Russian Kids Are Patriotic, Apolitical and Tolerant of LGBT People.’ This raises the intriguing question as to whether youth with such qualities are compatible with illiberalism. Future research may inquire into this topic.

Bibliography

- Bindman, E. (2015). The State, Civil Society and Social Rights in Contemporary Russia. *East European Politics*, 31(3), 342–360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2015.1063488>
- Bryanski, G. (2012, 02. 08). Russian patriarch calls Putin era ‘miracle of God’. *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-putin-religion-idUKTRE81722Y20120208> Accessed 08-04-2020.
- BTI Transformation Index (2020). <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-RUS-2020.html>
- Cheskin, A. & March, L. (2015). State-Society Relations in Contemporary Russia: New Forms of Political and Social Contention. *East European Politics*, 31(3), 261–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2015.1063487>
- Dunajeva, J. & Koesel, K. (2015). Reflections from the field From Godless Communists to Holy Russia and the Immoral West. *Under Caesar’s Sword*, <https://ucs.nd.edu/learn/russia/>
- Dunajeva, J. & Koesel, K. J. (2017). ‘Us Versus Them’: The Politics of Religion in Contemporary Russia. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15(1), 56–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1284402>
- Fadeicheva M.A. (2006). Идеология и дискурсивные практики “нашизма” в современной России (The Ideology and the Discursive Practices of Nashism in Modern Russia). *Polis: Political Studies*, 4, 53–60. <https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2006.04.06>
- Franklin, S. (2004). Identity and religion. In S. Franklin & E. Widdis (Eds.), *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction* (pp. 95–115). Cambridge University Press.
- Goncharenko, R. (2017). NGOs in Russia: Battered, but unbowed. *DW*. November 21. <https://www.dw.com/en/ngos-in-russia-battered-but-unbowed/a-41459467>
- Gilbert, L. (2016). Crowding Out Civil Society: State Management of Social Organisations in Putin’s Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(9), 1553–1578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1250250>
- Gulevich, O., Osin, E., Isaenko, N. & Brainis, L. (2016). Attitudes to homosexuals in Russia: Content, structure, and predictors. *Journal of the Higher School of Economics*, 13(1), 79–110. <http://doi.org/10.17323/1813-8918-2016-1-79-110>
- Horvath, R. (2016). The Reinvention of ‘Traditional Values’: Nataliya Narochnitskaya and Russia’s Assault on Universal Human Rights. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(5), 868–892. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1184230>
- Human Rights Watch. (2018). *No Support Russia’s ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law Imperils LGBT Youth*. Human Rights Watch.
- Koesel, K. & Dunajeva, J. (2018). Repression, Restriction, and Response in Contemporary Russia. In D. Philpott & T. S. Shah, *Under Caesar’s Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution* (pp. 199–228). Cambridge University Press.
- Kommersant (2019). Shkolniki uvazhayut Vladimira Putina i Aleksandra Urganta (Students respect Vladimir Putin and Ivan Urgant), October 30. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4142527>
- Kondakov, A. (2013). Resisting the Silence: The Use of Tolerance and Equality Arguments by Gay and Lesbian Activist Groups in Russia. *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, 28(3), 403–424. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cls.2013.3>

- Kreko, P., Gyori, L., Dunajeva, J., Janda, J., Kundra, O., Meseznikov, G., Mesik, J., Szylar, M., Shekhovtsov, A. (2016). The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin's traditional agenda and the export of values to Central Europe. A study by Political Capital Institute. http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_reactionary_values_CEE_20160727.pdf Accessed 08-04-2020.
- Laruelle, M. (2016). Russia as an Anti-liberal European Civilisation. In P. Kolstø & H. Blakkisrud (Eds.), *The new Russian nationalism* (pp. 275–297). Edinburgh University Press.
- Laruelle, M. (2020). Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(3), 115–129. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0049>
- Lukin, A. (2003). Russia between East and West: Perceptions and Reality. Paper presented at the Joint Session of the European Consortium for Political Research, Edinburgh. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/lukin20030328.pdf> Accessed 08-04-2020.
- MBK Media (2021). Roskomnadzor snova zablokiroval LGBT-sayt 'Parni plus' (Roskomnadzor blocked an LGBT site 'Parni Plus' again), March 5. <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/news/lgbt-blokirovka/?amp>
- Moser, E. & Skripchenko, A. (2018). Russian NGOs and Their Struggle for Legitimacy in the Face of the 'Foreign Agents' Law: Surviving in Small Ecologies. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(4), 591–614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1444145>
- Noviko, D. (2009). 'Anti-Westernism' as a Strategy: Distinctive Behaviors of the Contemporary Russian Elite. *Russian Social Science Review*, 50(2), 41–49. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940460602>
- Núñez-Mietz, F. G. (2019). Resisting human rights through securitisation: Russia and Hungary against LGBT rights. *Journal of Human Rights*, 18(5), 543–563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2019.1647100>
- Owen, M. (2014. 02. 22). Vladimir Putin's New Plan for World Domination. *The Spectator*, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/02/putins-masterplan/>
- Papava, V. (2013). The Eurasianism of Russian Anti-Westernism and the Concept of 'Central Caucaso-Asia.' *Russian Politics & Law*, 51(6), 45–86. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940510602>
- Petrov, N. (2002). Seven Faces of Putin's Russia: Federal Districts as the New Level of State—Territorial Composition. *Security Dialogue*, 33(1), 73–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0967010602033001006>
- Pfoser, A. (2017). Nested Peripheralisation: Remaking the East–West Border in the Russian–Estonian Borderland. *East European Politics and Societies, and Cultures*, 31(1), 26–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0888325416665157>
- Putin, V. (2013). Vladimir Putin Meets with Members the Valdai International Discussion Club. Transcript of the Speech and the Meeting. September 20. https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_international_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech_/?sphrase_id=701234
- Putin, V. (2013). Interview for the documentary film *The Second Baptism of Rus*. TV interview on Rossiya 1 channel. July 22. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18872>.

- Rutakumwa, R., Mugisha, J. O., Bernays, S., Kabunga, E., Tumwekwase, G., Mbonye, M. & Seeley, J. (2020). Conducting in-depth interviews with and without voice recorders: a comparative analysis. *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 565–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1468794119884806>
- Side by Side. (n.d.). Side by Side Opening Stormed by Police and Surrounded by Nationalists. <https://bok-o-bok.com/en/news/side-by-side-opening-stormed-by-police-and-surrounded-by-nationalists> Accessed 04-08-2020.
- Skokova, Y., Pape, U. & Krasnopolskaya, I. (2018). The Non-profit Sector in Today's Russia: Between Confrontation and Co-optation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(4), 531–563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1447089>
- Snegov, E. (2021). 'Oni prodolzhat rabotat' pravozaschitnikami.' Sobirayutsya li zakryvatsya NKO, obyavlennye 'inoagentami' (They will continue work as human right defenders.' Will NGOs close who are labeled as 'foreign agents?'). *MBH News*, March 2. <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/suzhet/prodolzhat-rabotat-cheloveka/>
- Snegovaya, M. (2014). Anti-Western Sentiment as the Basis for Russian Unity. Carnegie Moscow Center, April 11. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/57115>
- Solovyev, A. (2010). Ideologicheskie mirazhi - ugroza gosudarstvu i obschestvu (Ideological mirage – Threat to government and society). In A. Solovyev & S. Sulakshin (Eds.), *Sravnitelnyj analiz gosudarstvennogo upravleniya perehodnymi socialno-ekonomicheskimi sistemami: Rossiya – Kitay* (*Comparative analysis of governance in transitional socio-economic systems: Russia and China*) (pp. 116–126). Nauchnyj ekspert.
- Stoner, K. & McFaul, M. (2015). Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin. *The Washington Quarterly*, 38(2), 167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064716>
- Suchland, J. (2018). The LGBT specter in Russia: refusing queerness, claiming 'Whiteness.' *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25(7), 1073–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1456408>
- Svetova, Z. (2018. 02. 12). NGOs in Russia: Do They Still Stand a Chance? *The Moscow Times*, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/02/12/ngos-do-they-still-stand-a-chance-russia-svetova-a60471>
- The Moscow Times. (2019). Russian Kids Are Patriotic, Apolitical and Tolerant of LGBT People – Study. October 31. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/31/russian-kids-patriotic-apolitical-tolerant-lgbt-study-a67985>
- Umland, A. (2012). Russia's New 'Special Path' After the Orange Revolution. *Russian Politics & Law*, 50(6), 19–40. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940500602>
- Verkuyten, M., Yogeewaran, K. & Adelman, L. (2020). Toleration and prejudice-reduction: Two ways of improving intergroup relations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(2), 239–255. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2624>
- Von Neef, C. (2017). St Petersburg: Russia's City of Rebels. Spiegel International, February 3. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/saint-petersburg-the-city-of-rebels-a-1132379.html>
- Wilkinson, C. (2014). Putting 'traditional values' into practice: The rise and contestation of anti-homopropaganda laws in Russia. *Journal of Human Rights*, 13(3), 363–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.919218>

RICHARD MCNEIL-WILLSON*

Resilience against counterterrorism? The repression and response of Crimean Muslim activism against Russian counterterrorism and counter-extremism

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 154–173.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.856>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

* [\[richard@mcneilwillson.eu\]](mailto:richard@mcneilwillson.eu) (European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)

Abstract

This article examines how repression is being wielded by the Russian Federation in Crimea against Muslim Tatar communities under the guise of countering terrorism and violent extremism, and how non-violent resistance and grassroots resilience is being fostered as a means of countering securitisation. The case demonstrates how language developed within a Western security context are co-opted by authoritarian actors, how Islamic activist groups engage in activities that can be framed as ‘resilience-building’ through the language of human rights, freedom of press and democracy, and the issues raised by applying the term ‘resilience’ within a counterterrorism context—both in illiberal and liberal settings. The article finds that techniques comparable to concepts of resilience-building are being conducted in an illiberal setting by communities in response to, and as a counter against highly repressive articulations of counterterrorism. It also suggests that the term ‘resilience’ is problematic in this context, failing to adequately account for—and often actively obscuring—organisational activism of communities and their interaction with the political context. This offers an understanding of community-led responses against counterterrorism and counter-extremism as a tool of repression as well as examining the credibility of terms such as ‘resilience’ within CVE in Crimea and elsewhere.

Keywords: Counter-extremism, counterterrorism, resilience, repression, Crimea, Islamic activism, Russia

1 Introduction

This article examines the interaction between Russian authorities and Crimean Tatar communities since the annexation of the peninsula by the Russian Federation. It focuses on how counterterrorism and counter-extremism has been utilised by an illiberal regime, how activists have sought to respond, and the implications this has for understanding changes in the on-going ‘War on Terror’. As Coynash and Charron explain, Russia has engaged in acts which mimic those of the United States, ‘evok[ing] threats of terrorism and extremism to justify the annexation and its exceptional use of violence in occupied Crimea’ (Coynash & Charron, 2019, p. 33).

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 gave way to repression of perceived political opponents and religious minorities in the peninsula, with counterterrorism and counter-extremism used as 'a convenient tool of repression' (HRW, 2019a). This has largely been achieved by charging suspects with membership of or affiliation to *Hizb ut-Tahrir* ('the Party of Liberation,' or HT), an international Islamic activist party (cf. Taji-Farouki, 1996; Sinclair, 2010; Hanif, 2014, for excellent overviews of the party). With the annexation of Crimea, Hizb ut-Tahrir—which had maintained a small but active presence in the peninsula—was reclassified from a legally-operating group under Ukrainian law to an organisation not only illegal but within the scope of punitive counterterrorism measures.

Since January 2015, scores of arrests have been carried out in Crimea under the guise of countering 'religious extremism,' with arrests growing in number and frequency (Coynash, 2020c). In 2015, four individuals were imprisoned on the charge of alleged HT membership, rising to 15 in 2016 and to 35 in 2019 (CrimeaSOS, 2021). The two days of 27 and 28 March 2019 saw the largest mass arrest of Crimean activists on counterterror charges, with 23 people charged as alleged HT members in one operation (HRW, 2019b). As of March 2021, there were at least 103 persons imprisoned on political grounds in Crimea, including 74 over supposed involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir (CrimeaSOS, 2021). All detainees deny HT membership or affiliation, and official HT sources refuse to confirm or deny detainees' membership, stating that all official party activity has ceased in Crimea since annexation (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative).

This article uses empirical research from 12 anonymised interviews conducted with leading Crimean activists, human rights groups, legal practitioners and official spokespersons of Hizb ut-Tahrir Ukraine. Interviewees were chosen due to their work in Crimea as defence lawyers of those charged with HT membership, as high-profile community activists, as representatives of leading international human rights bodies or as Hizb ut-Tahrir Ukraine members authorised to speak on behalf of their work. Interviews took place in 2021 in English, Russian, and Ukrainian, and interviewee names were anonymised to guarantee research subject safety.¹ The article explores how the language of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) has been appropriated by an illiberal regime against political opponents, how activists use practices broadly contingent with 'resilience-building' against state repression and the problems of applying concepts such as resilience beyond a liberal-democratic context.

2 Resilience

This work enhances existing discussions on resilience-building as part of this special issue on resilience and resistance in illiberal regimes. In recent years, the concept of resilience has emerged within policy and research to respond to concerns over violent extremism and polarisation in Western Europe (Pospisil & Gruber, 2016; Cavelty, Kaufmann & Kristensen, 2015; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

¹ An anonymised breakdown of the 12 interviews can be found in the article's Annex.

Resilience-based approaches attempt to reframe counter-extremism through a focus on what is keeping people resistant to violence, rather than what is making them engage in it (Grossman et al., 2020). Traditionally associated with individual psychological responses, some scholars have reframed resilience as a socio-ecological phenomenon (Mukherjee & Kumar, 2017; Ungar, 2013), enhanced or diminished by the allocation and negotiation of factors and resources (Hunter & Warren, 2013; Sippel et al., 2015). This conception of resilience assesses communities' adaptability and transformative capacity to respond to changes, challenges, and adversities (Grossman et al., 2020; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

A variety of resilience approaches have sprung up across Europe in recent years, developed as a means of responding to new patterns of societal polarisation and address criticism of more 'securitised' counter-extremism measures (Stephens & Sieckelink, 2019; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Research in this area lags behind practice, but several significant projects have been conducted in Melbourne (Grossman, Tahiri & Stephenson, 2014), Minnesota (Weine & Ahmed, 2012), and Canada (Joose, Bucerius & Thompson, 2015), to identify protective resources that can help mitigate the risk factors for involvement in violent extremism, resulting in—amongst others—the BRAVE-14 measures (Grossman et al., 2020). The BRAVE-14 measures identify five main factors that are required by communities to be resilient: (1) cultural identity and connectedness, (2) bridging capital, (3) linking capital, (4) violence related behaviours, and (5) violence related beliefs.

Concepts of resilience have, however, been challenged as carrying certain problematic assumptions, including the axiom that violence is inherently negative, irrespective of its cause or justification. Its application seems to assume a neo-liberal, individualising approach that stresses the importance of localised or individual responses to potentially wide, structural problems (Joseph, 2013). Ultimately, ways in which resilience concepts are used in a liberal-democratic context tend to replicate problems that have dogged the long 'War on Terror': an unwillingness or inability to conceptualise the state as a potential perpetrator of violence, or adequately to account for the political context of polarisation and extremism. It furthermore tends to generalise political contention as only a negative marker of 'extremism,' ignoring its potential as a positive marker of democratic engagement or structural revolution.

Using the case study of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea, this article explores the application of resilience within the context of an illiberal regime. It details how the evolving language of the War on Terror has been integrated into policies by an illiberal power, and the implications this has for utilising concepts of 'resilience.' The article finds that resilience-building is problematic in this context because it depoliticises authorities as benign or neutral actors, struggling to conceptually account for polarisation and violence perpetrated *through* counterterrorism. This obscures the interplay between political movements and authorities by imagining resilience as always in support of counter-extremism, rather than as a tactic against it. This case study draws attention to problems caused by counterterrorism and counter-extremism in illiberal regimes and wider implications for liberal applications of resilience.

3 Case Study: Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea

Within the annexed peninsula of Crimea, much repression against activists involves accusations of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, banned in Russia since 2003 as a terrorist organisation. Hizb ut-Tahrir was founded in 1952 by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani in East Jerusalem with

the aim of replacing the ‘colonialist regime’ in Jordan with a Caliphate (al-Khilafah, 2013; Taji-Farouki, 1994). Rejecting European and Arab nationalisms, al-Nabhani’s ideology envisaged the unification of the *ummah* [global Muslim communities] in traditionally Islamic lands as a means of tackling injustices of capitalist and socialist regimes (an-Nabhani, 1999; Sinclair, 2010, p. 23; Yilmaz, 2010). Initially comprised of the Levantine-Palestinian diaspora, HT has since expanded throughout the world, with operative branches in at least 45 countries (Orofino, 2021). Whilst it maintains work throughout the Middle East, its operational capacity has become increasingly constrained and it is banned in most Muslim-majority countries (Karagiannis, 2005, p. 318).

The party has also established significant bases throughout the post-Soviet space, exploiting the ideological and political vacuum following the fall of the USSR, along with widespread socioeconomic poverty and disparity (Yilmaz, 2010, p. 502). HT activism in Ukraine began in the early 1990s, with official party statements suggesting established activity by 1994 (Hizb-ut-Tahrir, 2014). HT branches are semi-clandestine organisations, Janus-like in their operations, with both a relatively visible presence—public activism, media presence, and press releases to spread their core ideological tenets—and a closed, cell-based membership (McNeil-Willson, 2019). Whilst their ideological texts state a firm non-integrationist, anti-democratic stance, they are avowedly non-violent—a view confirmed by even their most ardent of critics—and tentative engagement with state democracy, policy-makers, and lobbying has been recorded (Frances, 2015; McNeil-Willson, 2019). Activism by HT in Ukraine and Crimea has included conferences, rallies, and protests, as well as the publication of a newspaper, ‘Revival’ [*Vozrojdenie*] (Muratova, 2019).

Estimates on the size of HT in Crimea vary. In 2015, a year after Crimea annexation, Vladimir Makarov, deputy director of the Russian Interior Ministry’s central department for counter-extremism, stated, ‘thanks to the preventive measures taken by us, the number of supporters of the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami outlawed terrorist organisation [...] has seen a significant decrease—from 10,000 to 2,500 people [in Crimea]’ (Khalifah, 2015). Such an estimation seems wildly inflated. HT membership requires years of commitment and learning, generally between three to five years of training and engagement with the organisation, which has tended to keep membership limited even in more favourable contexts (McNeil-Willson, 2019). Understanding the size and prevalence of Hizb ut-Tahrir is made particularly difficult by the party’s aversion to keeping membership lists and its tendency to publicly overstate its own influence.

Prior to annexation, HT was able to operate legally, with Ukrainian authorities taking a generally tolerant stance towards the party. Attitudes towards HT within Crimea before 2014 were mixed, with *Mejlis* (the representative body of Crimean Tatars) attempting to combat the influence of such ‘non-traditional’ Islamic groups (Muratova, 2019, p. 51). However, since annexation, the repression of HT has enabled a coalition between formerly critical bodies such as the *Mejlis*, HT, and Crimean and international human rights groups.

Russian authorities have used the language of counterterrorism and counter-extremism against Crimean Tatar activists, framing them as HT members. Local communities have responded through measures which suggest a resilience-building approach. This raises issues about the deployment of the language of resilience in the context of an illiberal regime, as well as having several implications for use of the term elsewhere.

4 Russian authorities' counter-terrorism language

Since annexation in 2014, Russian authorities have sought to clamp down on activism challenging its legitimacy in Crimea (Gorbunova, 2020), which has increasingly taken the guise of counterterrorism and counter-extremism (Savchuk, 2019; Kyzy, 2019; Coynash & Charron, 2019). This has been criticised by human rights groups as discriminatory and opaque, prosecuting individuals on statements made prior to annexation or evidence overwhelmingly challenged as falsified or planted. As a representative from a human rights organisation stated:

Russia is using counterterror legislation to prosecute individuals who are simply expressing their dissent with authorities. They are clearly targeting groups like Crimean Solidarity and Crimean Tatars in general, by attempting to present them as dangerous 'terrorists' and 'extremists'. (Interview F, Human rights organisation representative)

Four charges have recurred against Crimean Muslim activists: (1) membership of a terrorist group, (2) establishment of a terrorist group, (3) justification of terrorism, and (4) engaging in acts seeking the overthrow of the Russian state—carried out under Article 205.5 of the Russian Federation's Criminal Code of 13 June 1996. Russian law currently legislates for a term of imprisonment between 15 and 20 years for those engaging in acts of terrorism; participation in organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir is punishable by 10 to 20 years (Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации, 1996). Russian arrests of Crimean activists have been accompanied by large-scale operations of the 'Russian Centre for Combating Extremism,' sometimes referred to as 'Centre E' (Muratova, 2019, p. 57), whilst a rehabilitation centre for 'those who fell under the influence of extremists' has also recently opened in Crimea to reform accused HT members (В Крыму откроют центр реабилитации попавших под влияние экстремистов, 2019).

Crimean Tatars have faced further counterterror-linked repression through 'Administrative Prosecution' and a series of enforced disappearances. Individuals are detained on Administrative Prosecution for minor charges—such as attending illegal gatherings or 'solo demonstrations'—without formally being charged. Detentions generally last between one and two weeks, often in dilapidated prison complexes, as a means of dissuading activists from further, more committed activism. In some instances, interviewees cited the use of torture, such as the case of Renat Paralamov (Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 2017). Crimean Muslims have also been victims of several enforced disappearances linked to Russian authorities (Amnesty, 2016, p. 5). As of March 2021, 44 people have been victims of these disappearances, 15 of whom are still missing. Those who have disappeared disproportionately come from Crimean Tatar communities, with 10 of the 15 still missing being Crimean Tatar; six of those still missing have been linked by Russian authorities to terrorism, dubiously claiming they left for Syria to join Islamic State (Coynash, 2015; Interview B, 2021).

As Crimean activists face crackdowns from counterterrorism laws, concern has been raised about the spurious nature of evidence used in prosecution which openly links Islam to terrorism (HRW, 2019a). Evidence has been strongly disputed as suspect, and charges of HT membership 'either appear manifestly unfounded or there are serious doubts regarding the probity of the respective charges' (Amnesty, 2016, p. 6). Such prosecutions conflict with

Convention IV Article 64 of the 1949 Geneva Convention, determining that ‘penal laws of the occupied territory shall remain in force,’ preventing occupying state laws from superseding pre-existing ones (ICRC).²

Lawyers highlight three forms evidence used against Crimean Muslim activists in counterterror trials: (1) planted literature, (2) secret witnesses, and (3) testimonies by religious and linguistic experts. Consistent concerns were brought up in interviews that evidence was fabricated—planted by security personnel during house searches (HRW, 2019a). As one human rights lawyer stated:

The literature that they find is really ridiculous, they don’t even try to make it look used. It’s books that are completely new and unbroken. They find it in places like behind closets with shoes, in attics—places where strong believers would never keep religious literature. (Interview C, human rights lawyer)

Such planted evidence has included HT literature—often freely available online or within local communities—or Islamic texts and commentary, determined by officials as promoting ‘extremism’ (Федеральной службы безопасности Российской Федерации, 2019; Edem, 2020). House searches often involve Russian Security Service (FSB), counterterrorism and military personnel and are carried out in a means which prevents residents from observing the searches (Savchuk, 2019).

There is this dark joke amongst lawyers who protect these people that usually the FSB officers arrive with the same things they leave with. They bring the evidence with them, then they ‘find’ it, and then they arrest people and go away. (Interview B, Crimean activist)

The second form of evidence used to convict individuals of HT membership is secret witnesses, persons who provide unverifiable testimony for the prosecution and whose identities are often unknown to the court. Cases are built on witnesses recalling run-of-the-mill conversations engaged in by the defendants, on issues such as the current political situation, the place of Islam in society, or religious norms (Savchuk, 2018). Secret witnesses are admissible in Russian law, with interviewees suggesting that different criminal cases would sometimes recycle the same witnesses several times over (Interview J, Crimean activist).

Crimean Tatars may gather at mosques and discuss some political and religious topics. They may discuss developments in Turkey or Syria. But based on this, so-called experts claim that they are talking about extremism, seizure of power or attempts to seize power and that they are members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. (Interview I, human rights organisation representative)

Thirdly, Russian authorities use religious and linguistic experts to analyse language by defendants in wiretapped recordings, social media posts, or literature cited found at the defendant’s property (Coynash, 2018). Counterterror charges of attempting to overthrow

² [H]earings into cases concerning “terrorism” charges are reserved only for military courts in Russia. The nearest such court is the North Caucasus Military District Court in Rostov-on-Don in Russia. Putting defendants from Crimea on trial in a military court outside Crimea is a direct violation of the international humanitarian law governing occupation’ (Amnesty, 2016, p. 6).

Russian authorities are largely based on evidence by these linguistic experts, who offer a de-contextualised and essentialist analysis of HT texts to conclude that their goal of establishing a caliphate in Muslim-majority countries is incompatible with Russian governance (Coynash, 2020a; 2020b). Again, the quality of this evidence and expertise was challenged by interviewees:

Most of it is being carried out by the same experts; you see them over and over in the [HT] cases. They copy-paste parts of their expertise from different cases. One time, there was a typo and instead of HT it mentioned Islamic State, and they didn't bother to redo it. These experts don't have a religious education and have no idea what they are talking about. (Interview A, Crimean activist)

Such practices are seen regularly in prosecution of supposed HT activists. For example, Emir-Usein Kuku faced a house raid based on supposed extremist activities, along with threats to 'put [him] in gaol for Hizb ut-Tahrir' (Amnesty, 2016). His later arrest and pre-trial detention were based on evidence from a wiretapped conversation on the political situation in Crimea. Server Mustafayev, a founder of activist group 'Crimean Solidarity,' was arrested following a public lecture at a mosque attended by about 60 people:

There was a lecture about interpretation of love and hate in the Quran, and the question that Mustafayev asked during this lecture was an innocent question about how you should treat different people based on an interpretation of the Quran. This public lecture is treated by Russian authorities as a terrorist cell. But for some reason only eight people have been charged and sentenced. Why would a terrorist cell conduct an open meeting that was advertised publicly in advance for anyone to attend? These are the sorts of things we are seeing with the convictions (Interview G, human rights lawyer)

Lawyers also report being unable to access defendants or vital case information (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b; Coynash, 2021). Some detainees have been denied family visits and removed from the peninsula without due process (Savchuk, 2019). Notably, those linked to HT have been placed in worse detention conditions because they were labelled 'terrorists,' and some placed in solitary confinement due to being 'susceptible to terrorism and extremism' (CrimeaSOS, 2019).

One possible reason why HT is framed as a 'terrorist' threat is its international links (Hanif, 2014). Whilst HT branches—*waliyat* in party parlance—largely operate independently from one another (Sinclair 2010), the party maintains loose transnational links (McNeil-Willson, 2019; Hanif, 2014). HT is the most prominent Islamic activist organisation repressed in the peninsula by Russia, but other groups have been proscribed and subject to arrest, such as 'Tablighi Jamaat' and the 'Jehovah's Witnesses,' as well as followers of Said Nursi (Reuters, 2021). Ultimately, groups like HT are not being targeted because of their religious beliefs but because authorities are 'afraid of groups becoming united against Russia through an independent ideology that the state can't control' (Interview J, Crimean activist). This results in the state attempting to 'repress any sites of opposition—religious, human rights, national, even Christian religious opposition' (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative).

Whilst Russian authorities have prosecuted supposed HT members, one lawyer suggested that Ukrainian authorities had been instrumental in their arrest, finding evidence that the Ukrainian government had monitored the party's activities closely, filmed meetings and created personal files on individuals connected to or attending HT events. Upon annexa-

tion, these files at the Crimean offices of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) were lost to Russian authorities. As one human rights lawyer active in several cases detailed:

These folders were piled up in a building—the SBU had these folders in their offices in Crimea. When Russia annexed Crimea and took hold of this building, they didn't even have to do anything—they just opened these profiles of each individual HT member and started prosecuting and gaoling those people whose profiles the Ukrainian authorities had already collected. (Interview H, human rights lawyer)

These files included details on 'those who just participated once in a public meeting, went to a rally, picked up some HT materials'—and with existing files on HT members running thin, authorities are increasingly pursuing members of their families (Interview H, human rights lawyer).

Russian authorities' use of counterterrorism to target religious minorities and repress political dissent is not unique to the peninsula, with the language of counterterrorism and the proscription of Hizb ut-Tahrir present throughout the Russian Federation. However, in Crimea it offers a particularly convenient language for Russian authorities to carry out political repression, which deflects from international criticism. Interviewees from human rights groups emphasised that European bureaucrats or ambassadors often avoided engagement with the repression of Crimean activism because of this counterterror aspect: 'they are happy to hear about the crushing of protest, but they don't want to hear about actions against Muslims as security measures' (Interview E, human rights organisation representative). Linking Muslims with terrorism 'makes it very difficult for human rights groups and lawyers to defend those against charges of extremism, and even harder for those accused of terrorism' (Ibid.). This was reported as particularly effective against countries such as Germany, due to its ban on HT activism (though not membership) since 2003 (McNeil-Willson, 2019).

I have dealt with representatives of embassies, and they always asked about the prosecution of Crimean Tatars and whether they are members of Hizb ut-Tahrir or not. One country that is particularly susceptible to this sort of rhetoric is Germany, where Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned. Because Germany and other countries already have this cautious attitude towards Hizb ut-Tahrir, hearing that an activist was accused of being a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir already makes them believe less that these people are innocent. And because Germany is a leading member of the EU, it is a heavy blow for our work. (Interview D, human rights lawyer)

Russian authorities have integrated and centralised the language of counterterrorism and counter-extremism within practices of repression against Crimean political activism. In response, local communities have developed patterns of resistance that could fall under definitions of resilience-building.

5 Community resilience

In response to counterterror arrests, Crimean activists have engaged in acts that could be understood through a 'resilience' lens. Grossman and co-authors (2020) identify five key traits as part of the BRAVE-14 measures for communities to build resilience: (1) cultural identity and connectedness, (2) bridging capital, (3) linking capital, (4) violence related behav-

iours, and (5) violence related beliefs. The European Commission's *Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation* (BRaVE) Project builds on this framework to identify 20 resilience-building resources that span socio-economic, cultural, political and network-related spheres (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Several of the factors identified by scholars as a means of building resilience against political violence or violent extremism seem to describe activities carried out by Crimean Solidarity activists. Exploring this process is useful for breaking down different activisms in response to Russian repression in Crimea, as well as examining resilience in illiberal contexts.

The first BRAVE-14 resilience indicator is 'cultural identity and connectedness,' which relates to familiarity with one's own cultural heritage, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms (Grossman, et al. 2020). In this instance, we see Crimean Tatar communities using common concepts of cultural heritage to enhance community strength, responding to counterterrorism and counter-extremism through the cultivation of an oppositional, non-violent identity.

Cultural identity is expanded by stressing common cultural heritage, focussing on shared historical repressions, and by groups like HT expanding their ideological tenets. One such identity formation has been to create comparisons between current repression and the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944 (Goble, 2020). Around 200,000 Crimean Tatars were forcibly moved, many dying en route or shortly after their arrival in the Urals, Siberia, and Central Asia (Conant, 2014). The decline of the Soviet Union allowed for the return of Tatars but this has since become a 'chosen trauma' as part of ethnic group identity and maintenance, surfacing in discussions with activists around Crimean identity and solidarity (Ozcelik, 2015). As public defender Sever Cholakchik stated in a monthly meeting of Crimean Solidarity:

Our people have suffered many trials and difficulties. But the worst was the deportation... In 1944, having labelled our people the traitors, they loaded them into wagons and deported them. Our grandfathers hoped that this would not happen to our people again. But today, having hung a new label of terrorists, having replaced animal wagons with auto-servants, our people continue to be deported, only now to Russian prisons. (Muratova, 2019)

Crimean activists have successfully encouraged the narrative that Crimean Muslim communities are facing similar repression now as in the 1940s—this time enacted through counterterror legislation. One interviewee joked: 'my father was repressed by the Tsarist security services, I was repressed by the Communist KGB, and my son is repressed by the FSB' (Interview K, Crimean activist). This framing is made particularly powerful by highlighting similarities between USSR tactics and contemporary events, such as the public trials of Crimean detainees in courts outside of the Crimean Peninsula and the division of prosecutions to complicate their defence (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b). Current events have been termed by activists a 'slow' or 'hybrid deportation' (Goble, 2020) and despite representing a very specific reading of the arrests, it is a narrative that is effective in reframing resistance as a fight for cultural identity.

This has created an impression within Crimean communities that Russian prosecutions targeting HT are ultimately an attack on Crimean Tatar identity (Sadovskaya & Pfeilschifter, 2020). Prominent imprisoned activists, such as Emil Usein Kuku, have been championed as leaders of Crimean Muslim culture, with Crimean Solidarity linking Tatar

cultural decline with Russian repression (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b). Whilst this has strengthened unity and lessened polarisation in Crimean Muslim communities, it has taken place in response to increasing Russian repression, as a tactic against counterterrorism and counter-extremism in an illiberal context.

Further evidence of cultural identity and connectedness has come from HT itself, with suggestions that their ideological framing has been modified to support Crimean activism. Interviews with representatives of HT Ukraine reveal that the party has aligned itself openly with Ukrainian and Crimean nationalist movements. Despite analysis that suggests there is 'no room for racism, nationalism, or patriotism' in HT's desired Caliphate (Olsson, 2021, p. 8) and that the party believes Muslims must 'reject previously held ideologies [such as] nationalism' to become a member (Baran, 2006, p. 23), HT Ukraine explicitly disputes this, stating that—at least in the Crimean context—'there is no inherent contradiction between national and religious identity' and 'no difference between Crimean or Tatar national identity and Crimean or Tatar religious identity' (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative).

The concept of 'bridging capital', another factor of the BRAVE-14 resilience indicators, relates to the building of trust and confidence between groups, and the creation of structures of support across community boundaries (Grossman et al., 2020). Within Crimea, we see community coalition-building taking place in response to Russian repression, strengthening communities by cultivating unitary action across groups. Interviewees suggested that HT had struggled to gain traction within Tatar communities prior to Russian annexation, but repression of supposed HT activists was powerful in generating wider support for party, replacing longstanding community rifts with inter-community engagement.

Much community bridging and resilience-building has been conducted through the creation of the group 'Crimean Solidarity.' In response to Russian prosecution of HT members, activists began a process of horizontal coalition building, resulting in the establishment of Crimean Solidarity in 2016. Representing over 100 community activists, human rights groups, and lawyers, Crimean Solidarity runs its outward-facing activities largely through its Facebook page (Crimean Solidarity [Крымская солидарность]), as well as holding regular monthly meetings tackling legal cases and developing activism (Crimean Solidarity, 2021a).³

Crimean Solidarity conduct actions and allocate resources that both challenge arrests and support communities impacted by them. The group follows a similar logic and mode of action to that used by HT: organising private meetings, community networks, and public political activism to build close ties based on Islamic brotherhood, mutual aid, and reciprocity (Muratova, 2019, p. 61). Such organisational structures are particularly well-designed for working in repressive contexts—HT members state, '[t]he natural state of Hizb ut-Tahrir is to be banned' (McNeil-Willson, 2019, p. 226)—and it is probable that the experience of HT has informed Crimean Solidarity, even though representatives from HT Ukraine stressed in interviews that they have no direct contact with the group (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative). Using online platforms, Crimean Solidarity disseminates the latest information

³ These monthly meetings were held in person prior to the international health crisis of COVID-19, and have been via ZOOM meeting software since.

on house searches, arrests, and prosecutions throughout Crimea, offers competing narratives to Russian-controlled broadcasters, and plans public demonstrations and pickets (Kent, p. 2021), drawing on an Islamic activist model:

We see how Muslims, both the adult generation and the youth, respond to pain and repression in Crimea. They are trying to pin labels on us as terrorism and extremism. Therefore, as far as possible, everybody participates in flash mobs, conduct du'a. We, in turn, also responded to this event. We express our protest by all the peoples. (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b)

In response to arrests, Crimean Solidarity mobilise lawyers to provide legal advice for those facing charges, monitor cases and provide community updates (Crimean Solidarity, 2021). The group conducts crowd-funding to pay politically-motivated fines, runs public activism in support of those arrested, and puts together food parcels for those in prison. Children and families directly impacted by arrests are supported by Crimean Solidarity, a specially designated branch office organising educational camps and activities, whilst women whose fathers or husbands have been arrested are provided with financial support and transportation to visit their loved ones in gaol (Smutko, 2020).

The work of Crimean Solidarity ultimately reinforces 'cultural connectedness' through the unification of 'mainly young and middle-aged from HT and older people from the National Movement,' creating a 'feeling of unity, erasing age and organisational boundaries' (Muratova, 2019, p. 61). This bridging capital takes place in interaction with Russian repression, enhanced following arrests or detentions:

When someone is being arrested, it's a way for the community to expand and bring in new members. When someone is arrested, it is a means of bringing in new members because we are representing them, supporting them in prison. (Interview K, Crimean activist)

As such, bridging capital does seem to be present, channelled through the Crimean Solidarity movement, which builds trust and support between and within communities. However, such solidarity is a direct response to interaction with Russian repression. Accounting for bridging capital therefore requires acknowledgement of the political context against which it is positioned.

The third factor of community resilience is that of 'linking capital', which represents trust and confidence in authority and community organisations (Grossman et al., 2020). In this context, we see both horizontal bridge-building between communities and the development of new vertical structures. The Russian annexation of Crimea led to greater trust and engagement between local communities, HT, and Crimean Tatar authorities (particularly the *Mejlis*, who had represented Crimean Tatar interests in Ukrainian prior to annexation), in turn creating engagement with international organisations.

Following 2014, the *Mejlis*⁴ and Islamic activist organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir – which previously held an antagonistic relationship – were brought together in opposition to Russian annexation; a move further cemented by the designation of the *Mejlis* in April 2016

⁴ The *Mejlis*, the Crimean Tatar's representative body, is an executive commission made up of 33 members chosen by the Crimean Tatar Kurultai, an elected representative council (Coalson, 2014). Whilst not an official government body, it served as the representative of the Crimean Tatars to the Crimean government, the Government of Ukraine and international organisations.

as an 'extremist organisation' by Russia (Knott, 2016), Such a union, exemplified in Crimean Solidarity, has allowed for the resultant movement to be more flexible than its constituent parts, in both ideology and action (Muratova, 2019, pp. 61, 57). On a local level, the community links of Hizb ut-Tahrir have provided an important means of conducting activism following sudden arrests or trials, creating a highly responsive community network. At an international level, Mejlis have built awareness and support amongst transnational legal and human rights bodies, working with lawyers using the Geneva Convention, European-wide advocacy campaigns and engagement with international platforms on human rights regarding counterterrorism. Thus, this horizontal 'linking capital' and coalition-building has allowed Crimean activism to have greater impact both on the ground in Crimea and internationally:

It's amazing to see the growth of this group internationally, how they keep in touch with international organisations like Amnesty, attending international events in Brussels. And they're also trying to be in touch with human rights defenders in Russia, as well. (Interview D, human rights lawyer)

This approach does seem to be having impact: a UN General Assembly resolution on Crimea on 7 December 2020 recognised the political status of prisoners detained by Russian authorities in the peninsula (UN, 2020); on 18 July 2019, a European Parliament resolution called for Russia to release all Ukrainian political prisoners, including those involved in HT-related criminal cases (Crimean Solidarity, 2021). It has spurred new movements in Russia itself, including the establishment of 'Parents' Solidarity,' which builds on the successes of Crimean Solidarity to support Russian families who face political and religious repression. It has also led to renewed debate in Russia over the 2003 banning of HT, with human rights defenders calling for HT to be reclassified from a terrorist organisation to an extremist organisation, which 'doesn't sound like a big difference, but in terms of prison sentences is huge and will probably save lives' (Interview F, human rights organisation representative). In Crimea, instances of linking capital have materialised, including vertical coalition-building and development of new organisational structures to shield communities from repression.

The fourth and fifth factors of resilience are related to the acceptance of violence, determined as the willingness to speak out against violence and the degree to which violence is normalised or tolerated (Grossman et al., 2020). Both these concepts are evident within Crimean Tatar activism, with groups such as HT and Crimean Solidarity countering accusations of supposed links with violence.

HT in Ukraine and internationally have distanced themselves from violence by challenging the charge of terrorism. They emphasise the religious focus of HT, denouncing accusations of violence and highlighting human rights violations carried out against Muslims in Crimea. Whilst traditional HT literature has tended to eschew human rights discussions as bound up within the liberal framework they are trying to challenge (McNeil-Willson, 2019; Sinclair, 2010), HT responses have centralised arguments in Crimea around the lack of democratic accountability, instances of human rights violations, and demands for free and impartial press (Hizb-ut-Tahrir, 2013). In response to greater Crimean activism, traditional statements on 'the perniciousness of Western influence, failure of democracy, or rejection of nationalism [...] disappeared from the rhetoric of HT members' as representatives begin to speak at different Western human rights platforms (Muratova, 2019, p. 58), demonstrating flexibility and engagement with languages of democracy, the rule of law, and equality.

Whilst Russian authorities have attempted to paint Crimean Tatars as terrorists and extremists, Crimean activists have focussed on non-violent ways to resist, such as demonstrations, support for families of those imprisoned, and distribution of information on human rights violations. There has also been emphasis on women as activists, forming a sizeable contingent of Crimean Solidarity (Sadovskaya & Pfeilschifter, 2020).

The use of non-violent responses has become central to Crimean Solidarity. Drawing on traditions of Crimean non-violent resistance, such approaches have blunted the threat of Russian authorities whilst also legitimising Crimean resistance. As Russian lawyer Nikolai Polozov noted:

[Crimean Tatars] do not enter into active contact with the Russian security forces, do not take up arms. Naturally, this makes the Kremlin very nervous. It is difficult for them to do something with these people, because in fact, if they had taken up arms, everything would have been solved much easier. But it is precisely such a peaceful, non-violent protest, such a dulled defence that makes the Kremlin look for new ways to intimidate these people, to forcibly instil in them some kind of loyalty to the authorities. (Galperovich, 2017; see Coynash, 2017)

The rejection of violence-related beliefs and behaviours similarly suggest that the application of 'resilience' may be relevant in this context. However, it is important to understand this rejection of violence is grounded in localised political traditions and used as an effective tactic against the threat and actualisation of Russian repression.

6 Assessing the resilience paradigm

This article has attempted to apply the concept of resilience to the study of Russian repression of Crimean activism. In this instance, it has highlighted certain responses by Crimean activists, including development of discourse patterns, and horizontal and vertical community structures. Whilst this suggests scope for using resilience within an illiberal context, it also raises questions. In this instance, the integral role of repression in necessitating resilience, as a means of mitigating *against* counterterrorism, is in stark contrast to the language of resilience used elsewhere.

The focus of resilience on strengthening communities against 'violent extremism' is particularly problematic in this context because communities conducting the resilience activities are those accused by authorities of violent extremism. It raises questions as to what extent we can consider resilience a response against polarisation or violent extremism within a context where violence is deployed by authorities. Here, we are either forced to align concepts of 'resilience-building' consistently with counter-extremism—an exercise made nonsensical by Russian authorities' use of counter-extremism to repress activism—or we accept that, to use articulations of resilience in illiberal contexts, it can and must be applied to a variety of groups that sit on either side of the extremism/counter-extremism divide.

This hints at a wider problem with the concept of resilience. Actions that can be broadly described as 'resilience-building'—cultivating community identity, developing horizontal and intercommunity links, building support structures or even rejecting violence—can be utilised by groups labelled 'extremist,' as a means of enhancing their activism (McNeil-Willson, 2020). Social movement scholars researching terrorist groups in illiberal contexts have long accounted for such practices in cases where state power has reached limitations

(Gunning, 2007; Davis & Robinson, 2012). Furthermore, several groups labelled as ‘extremist’—including many Hizb ut-Tahrir groups in Western Europe—have actively engaged in, for instance, anti-knife crime initiatives in Copenhagen or community support groups in London (McNeil-Willson, 2019). Ultimately, to respond to this theoretical dilemma, the language of resilience-building has occasionally slipped into discussion of ‘prosocial resilience,’ implying an ‘anti-social resilience’ when deployed by groups labelled as malign. However, this distinction requires a slight of hand, a political act of determining who or what is malign or benign; such terminological slippage leaves us at an impasse within the context of illiberal regimes, where who or what is prosocial or anti-social is perhaps more difficult to determine, requiring advanced knowledge of the political context.

Ultimately, the problem of the language of resilience is, I suggest, reflective of much wider problems that exist with the language of counterterrorism and counter-extremism: it often fails adequately to account for state violence or to overstate the benign nature of the state, even in a liberal-democratic setting. The example of HT in Crimea represents a highly visible example of the problems of using ‘resilience’ in illiberal settings, made nonsensical by the framing of community activists as ‘extremists’ by a repressive state. Yet the use of counterterrorism and counter-extremism measures to repress political activism is certainly not confined to Crimea or Russia, and such accusations have been levied against several European governments (D’Amato, 2019).

This article offers an attempted application of the template of resilience in just one illiberal setting. Further research should explore the specifics of resilience in several non-democratic political regimes—instances where community resilience is built against repressive measures—using alternative theoretical paradigms. This would allow for greater exploration of the structural features required for regimes to affect community conditions and space. It may also be beneficial to conduct a comparative analysis of HT and Crimean activism under Ukrainian control prior to 2014, to better detail the impacts of Russian annexation. This could reveal the likelihood of the current coalitions remaining in place, should there be any changes in Russia’s repressive measures or the political regime within which they operate, or whether this union is situational and reactionary.

To conclude, the language of resilience offers an interesting template for considering community responses by Hizb ut-Tahrir and Crimean Solidarity in Crimea. However, its application has meant that important political interactions involving repression and response have been lost. Without discussing the state’s influential role in creating violence or exacerbating community polarisation, current resilience language risks obscuring why ‘resilience-building’ is perhaps needed in the first place. The further we move from a liberal-democratic context, the more blindingly obvious (though no more important) the need to investigate critically the role of the State in polarisation and community violence becomes. This article highlights these problems, in its own limited way, suggesting that existing conceptualisations of resilience are highly problematic in illiberal settings—and perhaps require much further critical investigation elsewhere.

Annex

Chart 1. *Details of interviews*

Interview	Designation	Interviewee Position	Date
1	Interview A	Crimean activist	March 2021
2	Interview B	Crimean Activist	February 2021
3	Interview C	Human Rights Lawyer	January 2021
4	Interview D	Human Rights Lawyer	February 2021
5	Interview E	Human Rights Organisation Representative	January 2021
6	Interview F	Human Rights Organisation Representative	March 2021
7	Interview G	Human Rights Lawyer	April 2021
8	Interview H	Human Rights Lawyer	March 2021
9	Interview I	Human Rights Organisation Representative	April 2021
10	Interview J	Crimean activist	March 2021
11	Interview K	Crimean activist	February 2021
12	Interview L	Hizb ut-Tahrir Ukraine Representative	August 2021

Bibliography

- al-Khilafah (2013). The Departure of the Caravan of Hizb ut Tahrir: ‘The Blessed Light that originated from Masjid al Aqsa’. *Al Khilafah*, <http://www.khilafah.com/the-departure-of-the-caravan-of-hizb-ut-tahrir-qthe-blessed-light-that-originated-from-masjid-al-aqsaq/> Accessed 23-04-2020.
- Amnesty (2016). *Crimea in the Dark: The Silencing of Dissent*. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR5053302016ENGLISH.pdf>
- an-Nabhani, T. (1999). *Political Thoughts*. Al-Khilafah Publications.
- Baran, Z. (2006). Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism in Europe: Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir – Allies or Enemies. *Connections*, 5(3), 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.05.3.03>
- Cavelty, M. D., Kaufmann, M. & Kristensen, K. S. (2015). Resilience and (in)security: practices, subjects, temporalities. *Security Dialogue*, 46(1), 3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0967010614559637>
- Coalson, R. (2014, May 5). Explainer: What is the Crimean Tatar Mejlis? *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, section Ukraine. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-crimea-tatars-explainer/25373796.html>

- Conant, E. (2014, March 15). Behind the Headlines: Who are the Crimean Tatars? *National Geographic*, section History. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/140314-crimea-tatars-referendum-russia-muslim-ethnic-history-culture>
- Coynash, H. (2015, October 12). Russia accuses Crimean Tatar leaders of recruiting for Islamic State. *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <https://khpg.org/en/1444434154>
- Coynash, H. (2017, September 13). Chiygoz Lawyer: Crimean Tatar non-violent resistance makes Russia nervous. *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <https://khpg.org/en/1505249500>
- Coynash, H. (2018, September 14). Russia calls comment that Crimea is Ukraine a public call to violate RUSSIAN territorial integrity. *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <https://khpg.org/en/1536608721>
- Coynash, H. (2020a, March 27). 25 Crimean Tatar activists charged with trying to violently overthrow Russia through their words. *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <https://khpg.org/en/1584300311>
- Coynash, H. (2020b, April 17). Crimean Tatar jailed for 17 years for “planning to overthrow Russia” by practising his faith. *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <https://khpg.org/en/1587055131>
- Coynash, H. (2020c, April 27). Mounting Religious Persecution as Russia imposes monopoly on faith in Crimea. *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <https://khpg.org/en/1587906872>
- Coynash, H. (2021, February 1). FSB use fake ‘secret witness’ in revenge trial of Crimean Tatar who exposed their methods of getting false testimony. *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <https://khpg.org/en/1608808787>
- Coynash, H. & Charron, A. (2019). Russian-occupied Crimea and the state of exception: repression, persecution and human rights violations. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 60(1), 28–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1625279>
- Crimean Solidarity (2021a). Коротко о мартовской встрече «Крымской солидарности» (Briefly about the March meeting of Crimean Solidarity). *Crimean Solidarity*, <https://crimean-solidarity.org/news/2021/03/31/korotko-o-martovskoj-vstreche-krymskoj-solidarnosti-1102?fbclid=IwAR0opm2UuibO8rR4sVwUEicLEm6CQwbRZ3LAHSUTz46UAuSFnQJjuMrPoN0> Accessed 31-03-2021.
- Crimean Solidarity (2021b). We Express Protest with all the People. *Crimean Solidarity (Facebook)*, <https://www.facebook.com/1653084724995340/posts/2422040668099738/>.
- Crimean Solidarity [Крымская солидарность]. Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/crimeansolidarity/?ref=br_rs Accessed 31-03-2021.
- CrimeaSOS (2019). Fighting terrorism or terrorising activism? Persecution of civic activists in Crimea. *International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)*, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Crimea-report-new-full-lr.pdf>
- D’Amato, S. (2019). Islamisation of criminal behaviour: The path to terrorism? Terrorist threat and crime in French counterterrorism policy-formation. *European Journal of Criminology*, 16(3), 332–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1477370819828955>
- Davis, N. J. & Robinson, R. V. 2012. *Claiming Society for God: Religious Movements and Social Welfare: Egypt, Israel, Italy and the United States*. Indiana University Press.

- Edem, S. (2020, July 18). «Спящие террористические ячейки» с бумажными книгами вместо тротила или обожествление абсурда от ФСБ ('Sleeping terrorist cells' with paper books instead of TNT or the deification of the absurd from the FSB). *Crimean Solidarity*, <https://crimean-solidarity.org/opinions/2020/07/18/spyashhie-terroristicheskie-yachejki-s-bumazhnyimi-knigami-vmesto-trotila-ili-obozhestvlenie-absurda-ot-fsb-22>
- Frances, W. S. (2015, February 12). Why ban Hizb ut-Tahrir? They're not ISIS - they're ISIS's whipping boys. *Guardian*, section Opinion – Australia News, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/13/why-ban-hizb-ut-tahrir-theyre-not-isis-theyre-isis-whipping-boys>
- Galperovich, D. (2017, September 12). Nikolai Polozov: The Kremlin is nervous that the Crimean Tatars do not take up arms. *Voice of America*.
- Goble, P. (2020). Crimean Tatars Suffering From 'Hybrid Deportation' Since New Russian Occupation. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17(36). <https://jamestown.org/program/crimean-tatars-suffering-from-hybrid-deportation-since-new-russian-occupation/>
- Gorbunova, Y. (2020, September 22). Russian Repression a Persistent Reality in Crimea. *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/22/russian-repression-persistent-reality-crimea>
- Grossman, M., Hadfield, K., Jefferies, P., Gerrand, V. & Ungar, M. (2020). Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism: Development and Validation of the BRaVE Measure. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, online first. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1705283>
- Grossman, M., Tahiri, H. & Stephenson, P. (2014). *Harnessing resilience capital: an investigation of resilience and cultural diversity in countering violent extremism*. Australia-New Zealand Counter-terrorism Committee.
- Gunning, J. (2007). A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies? *Government and Opposition*, 42(3), 363–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2007.00228.x>
- Hanif, N. (2014). *The Securitisation of Hizb ut-Tahrir: A Comparative Case Study*. PhD Thesis, University of London. <https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/23330978/NHPHdThesis2014.pdf>
- Hizb-ut-Tahrir (2013). Хватит лгать открыто, о, Россия! Хизб ут-Тахрир не предпринимает насильственные меры, а подражает великому Пророку (с.а.с.) ! (Stop openly lying, Russia! Hizb ut-Tahrir does not take violent measures, but imitates the great Prophet (s.a.s)!). *Hizb ut-Tahrir Ukraine*, <https://hizb.org.ua/ru/directing/4807-cmo/106257-khvatit-lgat-otkryto-o-rossiya-khizb-ut-takhrir-ne-predprinimaet-nasilstvennye-mery-a-podrazhaet-velikommu-proroku-s-a-s.html>.
- Hizb-ut-Tahrir (2014). Statement of Hizb ut Tahrir / Ukraine Regarding the Recent Developments in Crimea. *Hizb-ut-Tahrir:info*, <http://hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/leaflet/ukraine/4075.html>
- HRW (2019a, July 12). Crimean Tatars Face Unfounded Terrorism Charges: Raids, Arbitrary Arrests, Torture of Activists. *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/12/crimean-tatars-face-unfounded-terrorism-charges>
- HRW (2019b, April 2). Ukraine: Escalating Pressure on Crimean Tatars; 23 Activists Arrested on 'Terrorism' Charges. *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/02/ukraine-escalating-pressure-crimean-tatars>

- Hunter, B. & Warren, L. (2013). *Final Report: Investigating Resilience in Midwifery*. Cardiff University. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/61594/1/Investigating%20resilience%20Final%20report%20oct%202013.pdf>
- ICRC (1949). Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=6DB876FD94A28530C12563CD0051BEF8>
- Joosse, P., Bucerius, S. M. & Thompson, S. K. (2015). Narratives and Counternarratives: Somali-Canadians on recruitment as foreign fighters to al-Shabaab. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 55(4), 811-832. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu103>
- Joseph, J. (2013). Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: a governmentality approach. *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*, 1(1), 38-52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2013.765741>
- Karagiannis, E. (2005). Political Islam and Social Movement Theory: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan. *Religion, State and Society*, 33(2), 137-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637490500118638>
- Kent, E-A. (2021, March 17). New documentary chronicles the plight of Crimean Tatars under Russian occupation. *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/new-documentary-chronicles-the-plight-of-crimean-tatars-under-russian-occupation/>
- Khalifah (2015). Number of Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters drastically down in Crimea – Russian Interior Ministry. <http://www.khilafah.com/number-of-hizb-ut-tahrir-supporters-drastically-down-in-crimea-russian-interior-ministry/>
- Knott, E. (2016, May 2). What the Banning of Crimean Tatars' Mejlis Means. *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-the-banning-of-crimean-tatars-mejlis-means/>.
- Kyzy, A. U. (2019, April 19). Crimean Tatars: 'Religious persecution made us more strong and united', *TRT World*, section Magazine, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/crimean-tatars-religious-persecution-made-us-more-strong-and-united-26007>
- McNeil-Willson, R. (2019). *Islamic Activism and the Counterterror state: The Impact of the Securitised Lens on Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain and Denmark*. PhD Thesis, University of Exeter.
- McNeil-Willson, R. (2020). Framing in times of crisis: Responses to COVID-19 amongst Far Right movements and organisations. *ICCT Research Paper*. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/06/Framing-in-times-of-crisis-Responses-to-COVID-19-amongst-Far-Right-movements-and-organisations.pdf>
- McNeil-Willson, R., Gerrand, V., Scrinzi, F. & Triandafyllidou, A. (2019). Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe today: An analytical framework for the BRaVE project (Concept Paper). European University Institute. http://brave-h2020.eu/repository/D2.1_BRaVE_concept_paper_final_10Dec2019.pdf
- Mukherjee, S. & Kumar, U. (2017). Psychological resilience: a conceptual review of theory and research. In U. Kumar (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychosocial Resilience*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315666716-11>

- Muratova, E. (2019). The Transformation of the Crimean Tatars' Institutions and Discourses After 2014. *Journal of Nationalism, Memory and Language Politics*, 13(1), 44–66. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jnmlp-2019-0006>
- Olsson, S. (2021). Hizb ut-Tahrir's Caliphal Counter-Narrative. *Religions*, 12(7), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070486>
- Orofino, E. (2021). Framing, new social identity and long-term loyalty: Hizb ut-Tahrir's impact on its members. *Social Movement Studies*, 20(1), 75–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2020.1722629>
- Ozcelik, S. (2015). Analysis of the Crimean Tatars situation during the occupation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 with the conflict and peace studies approach. *E-Journal of Law*, 1, 11–19.
- Pospisil, J. & Gruber, B. (2016). Resilience and the transformation of sovereign security: a look at policy challenges and interests. *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*, 4(3), 202–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2016.1210256>
- Reuters (2021, March 30). Russia jails Jehovah's Witness in Crimea for over six years for extremism. *Reuters*, section World News. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-jails-jehovahs-witness-crimea-over-six-years-extremism-2021-03-30/>
- Sadovskaya, P. & Pfeilschifter, V. (2020, May 17). From Stalin to Putin: The Crimean Tatars face a new era of Kremlin persecution. *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/from-stalin-to-putin-the-crimean-tatars-face-a-new-era-of-kremlin-persecution/>
- Savchuk, A. (2018, June 19). How Russia's security services target Crimean Tatars as "Islamic terrorists". *openDemocracy*, section ODR, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-russias-security-services-target-crimean-tatars-as-islamic-terrorists/>
- Savchuk, A. (2019, April 1). "My only crime is that I am a Muslim": mass terrorism arrests hit Crimean Tatar solidarity campaign. *openDemocracy*, section ODR, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/my-only-crime-is-that-i-am-a-muslim-mass-terrorism-arrests-hit-crimean-tatar-solidarity-campaign/>
- Sinclair, K. (2010). *The Caliphate as Homeland: Hizb ut-Tahrir in Denmark and Britain*. PhD Thesis, University of Southern Denmark.
- Sippel, L., Pietrzak, R., Charney, D., Mayes, L. & Southwick, S. (2015). How does social support enhance resilience in the trauma-exposed individual? *Ecology and Society*, 20(4), 10. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-07832-200410>
- Smutko, A. (2020, January 10). Look, she is a terrorist's wife! *New Eastern Europe*, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/01/10/look-she-is-a-terrorists-wife/>
- Stephens, W. & Sieckelinck, S. (2019). Being resilient to radicalisation in PVE policy: a critical examination. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 13(1), 142–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1658415>
- Taji-Farouki, S. (1994). Islamic Discourse and Modern Political Methods: an Analysis of Nabhani's Reading of Canonical Textual Sources of Islam. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 11(3), 365–393. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v11i3.2416>

- Taji-Farouki, S. (1996). *A Fundamental Quest: Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Search for the Islamic Caliphate*. Gery Seal.
- Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (2017, September 15). Crimean Tatar missing after his house was searched found in Simferopol with signs of torture. *Ukraine Crisis Media Centre*, section News - Society. <https://uacrisis.org/en/60411-crimean-tatar-torture>
- UN, United Nations (2020, December 7). Resolutions Calling on Withdrawal of Forces from Crimea, Establishing Epidemic Preparedness International Day among Texts Adopted by General Assembly. United Nations General Assembly. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/ga12295.doc.htm>
- Ungar, M. (2013). Resilience, Trauma, Context and Culture. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 14(3), 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1524838013487805>
- Weine, S. & Ahmed, O. (2012). Building Resilience to Violent Extremism Amongst Somali-Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Centre of Excellence. https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/publications/Weine_BuildingResilienceToViolentExtremism_SomaliAmericans.pdf
- Yilmaz, I. (2010). The Varied Performance of Hizb ut-Tahrir: Success in Britain and Uzbekistan and Stalemate in Egypt and Turkey. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 30(4), 501–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2010.533448>
- В Крыму откроют центр реабилитации попавших под влияние экстремистов (2019). Conflict Analysis & Prevention Center, <http://cap-center.org/v-krymu-otkroyut-czentr-reabilitaczii-po/> Accessed 31-03-2021.
- Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации (1996). *N 63-ФЗ* edited by Russian Federation.
- Федеральной службы безопасности Российской Федерации, ФСБ. (2019). ФСБ России пресечена деятельность структуры международной террористической организации (The FSB of Russia Suppressed the Activities of the Structure of an International Terrorist Organisation). <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/press/message/single.htm%21id%3D10439250%40fsbMessage.html>

BOOK REVIEW

Ashe, S. D., Busher, J., Macklin, G. & Winter, A. (Eds.) (2020) *Researching the far right: Theory, method and practice*. Routledge

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.916>

The volume at hand, on the theory, methods and practice of researching the far right comes amid a wave of political visibility of far-right actors which, in turn, has triggered a boom in demand for research meant to help understand and address extremism. As research strives to catch up to the ever-shifting reality of far-right electoral politics, not to mention the litany of incidents of political violence attributed to far-right actors over the past decade, the editors of this volume contend that there is a conspicuous gap between research practices and researcher reflexivity (3). By exploring the experiences of both established and novice researchers in a variety of disciplines, including scholarly and practitioner accounts, as well as taking stock of methodological, ethical, and personal implications of conducting research on the far right, the volume manages to give a wealth of answers to a fundamental question: how can researchers avoid unwittingly bringing contributions to the visibility of the far right? This is what differentiates and recommends this volume as foundational reading for researchers of the far right looking to consider the implications of their work.

There are six parts to the volume containing specialist contributions varied across fields, methods, theories, debates, assumptions, definitions, terminology, ethical stances, and intentions. Most contributions focus on far-right groups, movements, or parties from Europe or North America. Nevertheless, the volume reflects a richness of experience resulting in a diversity of tips, advice, methods, and questions for self-reflection that can inform research on extremism around the world.

The first part may be the most valuable for those seeking to gain a coherent understanding of the theoretical and methodological evolution of social science and humanities approaches to far-right phenomena. This section is an excellent starting point for students finding their way around their fields or those searching for gaps in their respective disciplines. In the short space of a chapter, Mayer systematically covers all important shifts in political science research of the far right, from terminological debates, to supply and demand approaches, to qualitative and quantitative methods. The section continues with similar panoramas from leading scholars of the far right in sociology (Blee & Latif), psychology (Merino, Capelos & Kinnvall), anthropology (Hervik) and criminology (Perry & Scrivens). A particularly welcome contribution presents the historical perspective, too often neglected.

In his chapter, Copsey doubles down on criticism towards both historians' and political scientists' tendency to cut conceptual ties between contemporary far-right phenomena and interwar fascism, and speaks to what can be gained by attending to continuities between far-right manifestations of different eras.

The volume's second section contains a wealth of resources and examples of quantitative and mixed integrative methods for investigating the far right with large survey (Georgiadou, Rori & Roumanias), crowdsourced (Ravndal & Jupskås), social media and other forms of digital trace or digital content data (Muis, Klein & Dijkstra; Önnersfors; Richards). As the editors point out, scholars engaging in quantitative research on the far right have no choice but to approach their topics from multidisciplinary perspectives; they must often-times integrate a plethora of different methods. The chapters included here demonstrate the agility needed to navigate a landscape of statistical, computational, and theory intensive studies. Moreover, they indirectly make a case for the need to integrate teams of different specialists, or for social scientists to hire specialized assistance to properly deal with the challenges of research designs based on large, non-traditional datasets.

The focus on methods of researching the far right concludes with section three on using interviews and section four, on dealing with ethnographic observational studies. The two sections are permeated by ethical issues, considerations about empathy towards unsympathetic study subjects, suspension of political judgement, the need to build rapport in order to safeguard data quality, and the personal cost to conducting this type of research. Notably, several authors point out that the personal costs are not only limited to the psychological effects of being directly exposed to extremist ideas, but also that scholars may share the social stigma of their subjects, being perceived as part of an extremist group or even becoming suspect in the eyes of academic peers who question the choice of directly engaging with extremist groups.

The volume is commendable for including a section on the contingencies of far-right parties, movements, groups, and allegiances, comprising aspects that usually elude study, yet may be fundamental to the propagation of far-right ideologies. Thus, section five deals with locality-dependent variation in participatory motivations of far-right adherents (Veugelers) and the importance of far-right aesthetics, including fashion, iconography (Miller-Idriss & Graefe-Geusch) and rhetoric (Wodak).

The last section may be the volume's most important part, as it has the potential to make visible the assumptions and preconceptions that researchers could be making to bias and skew studies of extremist groups. First, through a good amount of gifted storytelling drawn from a lifetime's experience engaging with far-right groups as a scholar, journalist, and activist, Chip Berlet (2020) confronts the reader with ways in which clear pre-determined ethical boundaries may become relative depending on specific situations as well as the purpose of the research. Berlet's account is particularly valuable to those who conduct activist scholarship.

The last chapter, however, is the ace up the sleeve of this volume. It takes on questions around the importance of researcher reflexivity and it details the risks of failing to do so. Rather than simply reformulating the points and counterpoints about the risk that research on the far right can unwittingly or negligently contribute to the visibility of extremist actors and ideologies, Mondon and Winter propose a practical process to safeguard against such a risk. They argue there should be four main subjects on which purposeful questions should be asked by anyone writing on the far right: 'amplification, hype and legitimization; distraction

and deflection; access, risk and representation; and bandwaggoning' (374). The risks of ignoring these processes may be serious. For example, amplification and hype can lead to misleading interpretations of available data and legitimisation of far-right parties through rushed and mistaken conclusions, such as the idea that they represent an imagined white-racialised working class. Buying into far-right rhetorical strategies of distraction and deflection helps conceal a certain racist ideological loading from the mainstream understanding of their ideologies. Being oblivious to who has access to actors on the far right and therefore who can represent their motivations and practices for scholarly purposes, can lead to the amplification of personalities and individual psychologies on the far right while the effects of their politics on targeted minorities remains unexamined. Lastly, the authors point out that the subject of the far right is understandably fashionable at this time, and scholars should avoid jumping on the bandwagon without first becoming familiar with previous research. These observations are supported with ample clarifying examples and they should benefit not only scholars but responsible journalists as well.

One of the limitations of the book comes down to its exclusive focus on Europe and North America. The editors rightly acknowledge that advancement of far-right electoral success is not a Western phenomenon, pointing towards the consolidation of Hindu Nationalism in India and the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. A motivation for why the volume is not concerned with far-right extremism in the rest of the world has not been given. Short of winking at the irony of presenting a volume focused on the Global North while acknowledging the need for the field to take seriously the perspectives of scholars of more diverse backgrounds, the volume does not contribute at all towards encouraging that objective.

There is another direction in which the volume seems to have ambitions that are only partially fulfilled, namely that of bringing clarity specifically to explanations of the electoral rise of far-right parties. This volume has many strong contributions, but it simply does not offer sufficient space to electoral politics in order to illuminate this aspect. Mayer's political science disciplinary overview and chapter seven, on estimating far-right vote with aggregate data are the only sections approaching this topic head on. They are initiations into the topic but they reflect only a slim slice of debates and regional applications of far-right vote determinants.

Nevertheless, the volume delivers at least two major contributions to scholarship on the far right. Firstly, it shines a spotlight on a host of practical challenges posed by the research subject and ways to overcome them, from surmounting methodological entry barriers, to dealing with the psychological toll of processing extremist discourse. Secondly, it manages to drive home the point that, when it comes to scholarship on the far right, researchers cannot afford to treat questions of ethics as an afterthought or to merely delegate them to ethics boards without first submitting one's own intentions and practices to reflective interrogation. Moreover, it provides examples of pathways to researcher reflexivity. This is an important and timely contribution to a field that continues to expand voraciously as far-right governments and parties seemingly continue to gain prominence and popular support.

HENRI POZSAR

(Central European University)

[mhenri.pozsar@gmail.com]

BOOK REVIEW

Krizsán, A. & Roggeband, C. (2021). *Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of the Istanbul Convention*. Palgrave Pivot

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.925>

The Council of Europe Convention on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly referred to as 'the Istanbul Convention,' came into force in 2014, and is one of the most extensive legal and policy instruments on tackling violence against women (p. 2). However, opposition to the Istanbul Convention has become a focal point of broader opposition to gender equality in the European Union. This book explores the emergence and dynamics of this opposition. It investigates its implications for policies combating violence against women and contributes to scholarship of social movements, particularly their transnational qualities and their interaction with opponents and the state.

An extensive account of the actors and strategies in anti-gender movements in four country cases comprise the book's empirics. This includes a comparative analysis of anti-gender movements, consisting of complex networks populated by civil society organisations, religious groups, think tanks, and state actors, and with contextualisation of each national movement which enhances the authors' analysis. The four country cases, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Croatia, all of which have experienced staunch anti-gender mobilisation, offer illuminating variation in the contextual conditions underlying contention about the Istanbul Convention.

The book is divided into six sections. The first offers an introduction to the contestations around the Istanbul Convention, explains how these relate to the broader opposition to gender equality, and outlines the research design. The study applied qualitative methods; the authors describe their use of traditional narrative process tracing and critical frame analysis in order to examine the opposition to the Istanbul Convention. Narrative process tracing enabled the authors to identify and trace the relevant actors, their strategies, the frames used, and policy outcomes in the four countries studied. This method also allowed for the analysis of the resistance launched by women's rights groups by tracing their strategies in the face of anti-Istanbul Convention mobilization and how this impacts feminist mobilization in practice. Critical frame analysis further allowed the authors to explore in depth the way in which frames were manipulated to draw the emphasis away from the issue of violence against women and instead paint the Istanbul Convention as a danger to national sovereignty, democracy and traditional family values.

The second section provides the study's theoretical framework, bridging often disconnected research areas. It unpacks violence against women as a core concept, drawing from feminist theory, and connects this conceptual discussion to combatting violence against women as a policy issue. The authors then describe the politicisation of gender and the Istanbul Convention; the interactions between actors supporting and opposing the Istanbul Convention, and how this interplay impacted the violence against women policy agenda. This is the core of the analysis: triadic contention between feminist, anti-gender, and state actors. After furnishing readers with background knowledge on the politics of violence against women policy, the third section catalogues the actors involved in the four countries and identifies the strategies and frames they used to challenge the Istanbul Convention.

Yet the analysis of contention would be incomplete without accounting for the efforts of women's movements. Section four therefore covers how women's rights activists adapted to the mounting resistance to the Istanbul Convention across the four countries. Detailed accounts are provided of the challenges they faced in the midst of well-planned and coordinated attacks against the Istanbul Convention. Feminist organisations suffered resource deprivation and closing opportunity structures, and either innovated and adapted or demobilised.

Section five delivers detailed examples of how illiberal actors can appropriate democratic terminology in their attempt to give legitimacy to their rhetoric, in this case, by adopting framing that suggests the Istanbul Convention instead infringes upon the rights of women and families. This appropriates the violence against women policy field for the heteronormative, so-called 'pro-family' agenda, which excludes gender equality. Exposing this tactic provides vital information on the manipulation of democratic process to advance anti-equal rights agendas. Crucially, the final section of this book uncovers how this is not only an issue of the four countries analysed, but is part of a transnational movement which is broader than the opposition to gender equality, comprised also of nationalism and xenophobia.

The book makes an important contribution to research on political mobilisation against gender equality, as well as on the efforts of feminist movements to elevate combatting violence against women on the political agenda. While the book provides a valuable in-depth analysis across four countries, it remains unclear how generalizable are the contentious dynamics; whether they are similar in, for example, Turkey, which withdrew from the Istanbul Convention earlier this year, merits further research. Likewise, it would be interesting to examine how anti-gender mobilisation is impacting EU institutions. The effect of incongruous EU member state positions on gender equality has created challenges during EU-level discussions on gender equality, frustrating attempts to forge cohesive internal and external EU stances. Though beyond the scope of the authors' analysis, an analysis of EU-level dynamics would be a useful complement to the substantial ground covered in this text.

Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of the Istanbul Convention is a tool which is not only useful for researchers of political movements or policy making because it goes further than analysing policy changes to assess whether opposition strategies have led to policy backsliding. By exploring the campaigns and networks of aligned actors, the anti-convention mobilisation cases exemplify how a variety of actors can harness democratic processes to support illiberal agendas. Furthermore, by identifying strategies, frames, and tactics of these mobilisations, the authors provide useful information for researchers, advocates, and policymakers on how to repel opposition to gender equality and to consider the

challenges they face in future discussions related to gender equality. Ongoing national and transnational movements are working to stall, prevent, and water down policies which advance health and human rights; this book is therefore essential reading for scholars and activists in the fields of political science, gender studies, and public and global health.

LYNDA GILBY

Tampere University
[lynda.gilby@tuni.fi]