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Transition in Poland, Poland in transition: tracing the history of gender transition discourses in Polish social media

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Introduction

It may seem ironic that the English noun *transition* can refer both to the process of 'gender transition' undergone by some transgender people, and the process of 'democratic transformation' undertaken by many Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including Poland, after the collapse of their planned economies. This irony has not escaped the attention of scholars working in the field of gender and sexuality within Central and Eastern European perspectives, giving rise to several – some very witty – academic paper titles (consider, for example, "Poland's Transition: From Communism to Fundamentalist Hetero-Sex" (Kitliński, Leszkowicz, Lockard 2005) or "Gendering post-socialist transition: studies of changing gender perspectives" (Daskalova et al. 2012)).

This connection is indeed ironic because medical and legal gender transition procedures in Poland are particularly challenging due to the lack of binding, nation-wide protocols of trans-specific healthcare (coupled with long waiting lists and the fact that many transgender patients are forced to pay for the procedures they need via private, i.e. non-state healthcare (Kuhar, Monro, Takács 2017) and a convoluted legal procedure that necessarily involves suing one's own parents. The transitioning person is also required to sue for divorce if they are married, since same-sex marriage does not exist in Poland (Śmiszek, Dynarski (eds.) 2014, European Commission 2020). It seems thus that the Polish state, itself often portrayed and perceived in terms of being perpetually "prefixed" (i.e., *post*-socialist),

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always in-between, lagging behind and never quite yet "there" (i.e. not belonging to the Western community of "modern", progressive states (Szulc 2012)), has no empathy for its citizens who are equally (apparently) trapped in their own personal transitions. The irony extends also to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, the so-called "gender ideology" is by no means a recent import from the mythicized "West" (in itself a problematic and paradoxical – simultaneously revered and despised – construct): people were successfully transitioning, medically and legally, already in the 1960s (Dębińska 2021, Kłonkowska 2015).

Scholars have also described the recent history of struggle over women's and LGBTQ+ rights in Poland in terms of a "paradox": the unprecedented, rapid democratic shift of 1989 quickly giving way to demobilisation and political apathy (Kinowska–Mazaraki 2021: 3, 4), or "apolitical privatism" (Mishler and Pollack 2003). Kitliński, Leszkowicz, and Lockard (2005) note how Poland is "full of paradoxes", accommodating the omni-triumphant Catholic Church and rampant pornography on the shelves of every corner shop at the same time (with Polish media all the while lamenting expressions of same-sex affection as "flaunting"). On the level of politics, the country was able to accommodate both the extremely xenophobic right-wing youth movement *Młodzież Wszechpolska* (Sidorenko 2008) and voters who elected a gay person (Robert Biedroń) and a transgender person (Anna Grodzka) to be members of Parliament in 2011 (Grodzka being the second transgender MP in Europe).

The present contribution, inspired by these and other paradoxes and ironies of transitioning in Poland *in transition*, is an attempt at answering the call of two Polish gender scholars, Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska, to "de-center Western sexualities" (and, we may add, genders) through CEE perspectives (Kulpa, Mizielińska 2011). My research explores the history of Polish online gender transition discourses that I have conceptualized in terms of two main stages: "Transnet 1.0" of anonymous, text-based blogs documenting individual experiences, and "Transnet 2.0" of YouTube videos, podcasts and Tik-Toks created by openly trans activists. I investigate translanguaging, translation and other multilingual practices in these narratives and the way they have been changing to discover traces of local and global, conservative and liberal, medical and activist discourses co-existing: sometimes competing, other times collaborating, but always in flux.

Poland in transition

The nominally socialist *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* (PRL, the Polish People's Republic) existed from 1952 to 1989. The time frame of the

democratic transition/transformation, although defined differently by individual scholars, is generally placed starting with the first liberal reforms in late 1980s; its end took place sometime between, or around, 1999 (accession to NATO) and 2004 (accession to the EU). While these two accessions might suggest that Poland *has* entered the community of modern democratic states (and accordingly, that the benchmark to measure the success of its transformation is set by these West-led/centric institutions), the "constant reference to CEE as 'post-communist' [or 'post-socialist']" (Kulpa, Mizielińska 2011: 17) indicates that this process is not construed as complete. LGBTQ+ rights – or lack thereof – is among the criteria used to draw the line between the mythicized West, a civilized place where much progress has been achieved, and its "others" – i.e., post-communist/socialist and postcolonial spaces (*ibid*, see also Godovannaya et al. (eds.) 2020).

Poland is currently predominantly placed among the worst places in Europe for the LGBTQ+ community to live: the country has recently scored 13% in the annual Rainbow Europe ranking[2], obtaining the lowest result in the European Union, followed by Romania and Bulgaria with 18% each. More relevantly for this study, Poland was given 7 out of 30 points in terms of legal protection for trans people (within the EU, only Latvia and Lithuania scored lower)[3]. Granted, rankings like these only consider the legal situation of the communities in question, and the rights officially recognized in some of the higher scoring countries may not have been implemented or might be difficult to enforce in practice. As a matter of fact, the levels of visibility and activism in Poland are increasing[4], and pride events are now organized in more than 30 cities and towns across the country. Social attitudes, acceptance, and tolerance may prove more important than legal provisions – and levels thereof were consistently rising in Poland until quite recently. The editors of the most recent Campaign Against Homophobia report attribute the currently observed level of social acceptance – decreasing for the first time in decades – directly to

[2] https://www.rainbow-europe.org/.

[3] https://transrightsmap.tgeu.org/home/.

[4] NGOs working for trans rights include Trans-Fuzja and Akceptacja; LGBTQ+ organizations more generally include Kampania Przeciw Homofobii (Campaign Against Homophobia), Miłość nie Wyklucza ("Love does not exclude"), Lambda Warszawa, Stonewall Poznań, Tolerado Gdańsk, and others. Several universities hold LGBTQ+ groups (e.g. Queer UW, Stowarzyszenie Społeczności LGBT+ UAM, TęczUJ) and there are numerous independent collectives, e.g. Ursa Queer or Stop Bzdurom (Stop Bullshit), whose members face prison sentences for vandalizing a van belonging to a homophobic Stop Paedophilia Campaign (https://stopbzdurom.pl/help-us/).

the hostile political and media discourse on the rise since 2019 (Świder, Winiewski 2021: 9). Such discourse may be viewed as a lingering effect of the LGBTQ+ community being instrumentalized in the 2020 election campaign of the incumbent president Andrzej Duda and his infamous dehumanizing statement: "these are not people, this is ideology" (Pakuła, Chojnicka 2020). It could also be part of a wider trend of anti-LGBTQ+ backlash in CEE (cf. Hungary) but also in the "progressive" West, with anti-trans movements in the UK and USA.

The current situation bears some resemblance to the state of affairs noted in 2004–2005[5], when gays and lesbians were targeted in parliamentary elections by certain populist parties, leading to the emergence of the most homophobic – though short-lived – parliament in Polish history, which collapsed in 2007. Agnieszka Graff talks about gay and lesbian issues "erupting" from "complete silence at the turn of the twenty-first century to almost daily headlines in the news by late 2005 and early 2006" (2006: 434). What we see currently is different, however, predominantly due to the presence of a strong activist movement mentioned above (and in footnote 3).

These two waves of homophobia and transphobia in the public discourse (2004–2006 and 2019-present) can also be attributed to, and seen as symptomatic of, Poland's troubled relationship with the European Union. While the first "wave", which targeted gays and lesbians in spite of there being practically no *visible* gay and lesbian activist movement, coincided with the period of EU negotiations and the following accession – the current one may be connected to Brexit, a phenomenon which has provided a precedent for leaving the Union and is seen by many Eurosceptics as paving the way for a "Polexit".

It is important to bear in mind that the only legal provision for the LGBTQ+ community in the Polish law (protection against discrimination in employment, introduced in 2003) was among the conditions required by the EU in accession negotiations. This provides a foundation for the already-mentioned argument, popular in right-wing circles, that tolerance towards gays and lesbians is "anti-Polish" and that it was "imposed" by the

[5] The history of scapegoating minority communities in Poland is well documented. Czarnecki (2007) draws a parallel between anti-Semitism in the pre-war Poland and its present-day homophobia. Both Jews and gays have been constructed as a threat to health (carriers of disease), to the institution of family, and to the nation. "A heavy importance is placed on the family as the cornerstone of Polish society, and as a symbol of the nation. Any behaviour that is seen as anti-family can also be paramount to treason, or a deliberate attempt to destroy the nation" (Czarnecki 2007: 334).

West (e.g. Gruszczyńska mentions the "numerous claims about the existence of a powerful 'homosexual' lobby, apparently supported by the West", 2007: 108). After more than a hundred years of occupation by Prussia, the Habsburg monarchy, and the Russian Empire (1795–1918), followed by half a century of Soviet Union's political influence after World War II, many Polish people tend to perceive those who govern them as their enemies (Kinowska–Mazaraki 2021); Sidorenko emphasizes that "in the context both of the partitions and of communist domination, the [Polish] nation's identity developed apart from and against the state" (2008: 118). "Eurosceptics" often compare the European Union to the Soviet Union (see analysis of Internet discourse in Chojnicka 2015).

It can thus be seen as another typically Polish paradox that the "West", which epitomized the freedom, liberty, and democracy craved for by some (and the jeans and Coca-Cola dreamt of by some other) Polish people under state socialism, is simultaneously reminiscent of the very system from which they wished to escape to the "West".

No analysis of Poland's democratic transition can be complete without mentioning the role of the Catholic Church. Under partitions and later socialism, where the ruling class were seen by the elites as foreign and alien powers, the Church was claimed to be perhaps the one institution, one authority harboring "Polishness". Following the fall of socialism, across Central and Eastern Europe, most states turned (back) to conservative and traditional values in order to re-invent their identities; the Church played an important role in this process, although to a varying degree across the region. In Poland, due to the clear anti-gay and anti-feminist stance of the Church, being gay automatically means to be anti-Church and so, by extension, anti-Polish (on the discursive construct of Pole = Catholic, see Kulska 2023). Polish LGBTQ+ people and feminists are thus excluded from "nationhood" and cannot be "patriots", not to mention "nationalists" – hence it can be argued that homonationalism is in fact impossible in Poland (Kulpa 2011)[6].

[6] With the LGBTQ+ community seen as alien both in terms of time (a *recent* "import") and space (an "import" *from outside*, from the West), the strategy to present itself as patriotic and already belonging to the nation has failed. But because the European identity project launched by the EU seems unsuccessful in Poland as well, the move to identify with the global LGBTQ+ movement – the only remaining opportunity for Polish gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans people to feel part of a community – only reinforces their "foreignness".

The importance of religion in the construction of national identity was salient during the EU accession process, and the conservative right perceives Poland's membership in the EU as

> [A]n opportunity to reintroduce Catholic-Christian values to the mostly secular societies of Western Europe, where Poland profiles itself as the new religious-conservative power in the Union (...) [T]he prominence of homophobic attitudes in Poland can be seen as a reflection of national pride and the notion of Poland as an island of "normalcy" in the sea of Western European degeneracy (Gruszczyńska 2007: 106).

Currently, representatives of the Catholic Church do participate in the political process in Poland, and have played a vital role in vilifying the LGBTQ+ community during the "second" wave (2019-present); e.g., a Catholic bishop has infamously called the community a "rainbow-colored plague" (Kinowska–Mazaraki 2021: 10). Fischer illustrates the influence of the Catholic Church in Poland with a counter-example of post-unification Germany, where, with the Church playing no significant role in political life, homophobia is not an element of the far-right movement's ideology (2007).

It must be emphasized, however, that the position of the Catholic Church in Poland is, to a certain extent, paradoxical as well. While it certainly has a degree of political authority, the amount of societal legitimacy on which this authority rests is unclear, with accelerating secularization especially among younger age groups: "political sacralization is thus accompanied by bottom-up secularization" (Kulska 2023: 525).

Transition in Poland

In the state socialism era, sexuality in general was largely considered taboo, and homosexuality, although not criminalized, was heavily stigmatized. Dębińska describes homosexuality as being "radically pathologized", which, paired with "low social knowledge of sexuality in general and lack of social movements for sexual emancipation", in the context of the power struggle between the socialist government and the Catholic Church, led to sexuality censorship (2014: 53) and the spectacularization of homosexuality in the tabloid press.

The period following the collapse of state socialism in the 1990s might resemble the already-mentioned EU accession period as it was "an exceptional situation that enabled rapid changes, which would otherwise have been unthinkable" (Mishler, Pollack 2003: 249). In both these periods,

liberal values, matters of individual freedom etc. grew to play an influential role. Importantly for this study, both were also the times when the Polish LGBTQ+ community have perhaps felt most secure. Krzysztof Zabłocki writes that in Poland after 1989, "the general climate (…) was that of freedom, tolerance and mutual kindness" (2007: 139), even though it must be noted that sexual minorities (with the exception of the transgender community[7]) were not at all visible and did not figure in public discourse (resulting, among others, in the tabooization of the HIV/AIDS crisis). The first Gay Pride parade in Poland was organized during the final stages of EU accession, as activists felt that "the EU was watching" (O'Dwyer and Schwartz 2010: 221).

But the euphoria of regaining independence was soon followed by economic and material concerns, and the EU accession – by a financial crisis which yet again increased the importance of material values. The public discussion in Poland focused on economic and related issues, such as unemployment. Especially following the global financial crisis which started in 2008, LGBTQ+ rights issues have not been taken as seriously in public discourse as economic/financial matters; for example, when raised in parliamentary debates, they are often referred to as "pseudo-" or "substitute" problems that conceal the lack of ideas or solutions to "real" problems – those of economic nature. LGBTQ+ issues have only been discussed in the Polish parliament sporadically in connection to civil partnership draft laws (in 2003 and 2011; in both cases the proposals were rejected) and gender recognition draft law prepared by the transgender MP Anna Grodzka (which was first passed, then vetoed by the president Andrzej Duda, and ultimately returned to the Parliament to fail due to a formality in 2015 (Jacoń 2021)).

It is interesting to note that the history of public discourse on transsexuality in Poland was nearly completely different from, and developed independently of, the discourse on homosexuality. The global acceptance of the LGBT acronym, admittedly a Western (Anglo-American) invention, carries with it a risk of losing sight of this particularity associated with the letter T therein. In fact, many people in Poland have little knowledge as to what the acronym means in the first place (Kinowska–Mazaraki 2021: 11);

[7] Janion writes about the "media consensus" around "transsexuality" in the early 1990s, when mainstream discourse on this issue was controlled by the leading Polish sexologists rather than by the trans community. This discourse emphasized the medical nature of the "problem" and called for tolerance, which seemed more progressive than Western discourses on the topic at that time (Janion 2017: 127).

Mizielińska emphasizes that the abbreviation was adopted "nominally" at a time when it was only possible to speak of gay and lesbian, but not so much of bisexual and transgender activism (2011: 92). While traces of transgender activism can be found already around 1998–2001, its forming era is to be placed around 2007–2008 (Mizielińska, Kulpa 2011: 14)[8].

Medical discourses of transsexuality as a medical condition

The category of transsexuality (or, earlier, transsexualism) was popularized in mid-20th century by American sexologists within the general context of medicalization of sex and sexuality. The term was probably introduced by David Caudwell in 1949 (Dębińska 2014: 51), but is generally attributed to Harry Benjamin, author of the well-known text *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966). At about the same time across the Iron Curtain, the field of sexology was being developed in Poland around one man – Kazimierz Imieliński, the founder of the first sexual health clinic in the country. Within the context of a social taboo imposed on sex and sexual activities, sexology was conceived as a field of science and as such enjoyed relative freedom and respectability. Transnational contacts within the field of science were also easier than in other domains, and so Imieliński and his students had the opportunity to collaborate with American colleagues; Stanisław Dulko, for example, studied with John Money at one of the most renowned American gender clinics at Johns Hopkins University (Dębińska 2014: 58). As a consequence, the understanding of transsexuality in Poland did in fact emerge under Western influence around the middle of the twentieth century – and definitely to a greater extent than the local understandings of homosexuality, which can be traced back in Polish literature as early as to the eleventh century (Biedroń 2010: 57–58). This is why Dębińska considers transsexuality "a specifically Western creation", associated with the development of endocrinology as a field of science (2014: 51).

Notably, this relatively supportive, humanist approach to transsexuality during socialism came at the expense of homosexuality; while transsexuals (as they were then referred to) were pitied as suffering from a *medical* condition, gays and lesbians were disdained for their perceived *moral* depravity (and, ironically again, largely associated with the individualistic, bourgeois Western culture). Because transgender people were

[8] As "transsexuality" had some institutional/medical support during state socialism, the need for transgender activism arose when this support (in particular, the (partial) availability of SRS through the national healthcare system) had been withdrawn in 1999. Gays and lesbians never had this sort of support. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this comment.

automatically labelled as heterosexual, allowing them to "change sex" so as to fix the mental issues that kept them off work was seen as a means of producing proper heterosexual workers for the benefit of the socialist state.

Under these conditions, the first instances of changing the gender marker on official documents for persons identified as "transvestites" took place in the mid-1960s and the first attempts at medical transition – in the 1980s (Dębińska 2014: 58). Kazimierz Imieliński and Stanisław Dulko continued to shape the discourse on transsexuality in the 1980s and 1990s with their publications under much-telling titles *Przekleństwo Androgyne* ("Androgyne's Curse") and *Apokalipsa Płci* ("Gender Apocalypse"). It is clear that while they were genuinely devoted to helping to improve the situation of transsexual people, their approach was highly pathologizing, essentialist, and medicalized. Transsexuality only began to be seen in terms of a possible issue for social studies in the late 1990s (Bieńkowska 2012), challenging the medical approach and paving the way for discourses of gender identity.

This, however, applies to the discourses within the trans communities themselves; the official medical discourse still limits its understanding of the transgender identity and experience to "transsexuality" exclusively; those who want to transition must obtain a diagnosis of transsexuality. In order to obtain this diagnosis, one must first convince the diagnostician that they fit an image of a "true transsexual," often based on the early editions of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and ICD (International Classification of Diseases) systems (compare Bieńkowska's "transsexual mask", 2012: 50–51; Kłonkowska 2018: 136–51; Kłonkowska, Bonvissuto 2021: 96). Kłonkowska concludes that "although many scholars in social science fields and activists in trans organizations do not subscribe to [this] essentialist approach, it continues to govern most legal and medical discourses on gender identity in Poland" (2015: 124).

Social-constructivist discourses of trans identity

The process of breaking away from essentialist understandings of "transsexuality" as a medical condition and towards postmodern/poststructuralist narratives of trans identities began in the West in the 1990s. According to this approach, being trans simply means not (fully) identifying with the sex assigned at birth; it no longer presumes the need or necessity of undergoing any medical transition procedures. This approach has also made non-binary identities legible and recognized under the trans umbrella. "Although it followed a similar swing (…), the aforementioned shift in defining a transgender condition (…) had a different timeframe in Eastern

Europe (…). It would not be until the late 2000s and early 2010s when Polish social scientists started investigating the transgender identity and adopted the constructionist and queer theory approach" (Kłonkowska and Bonvissuto 2021: 95).

The Western "queer time" is a "time of sequence", with stages that clearly "grow" out of one another (Mizielińska, Kulpa 2011: 15). This means that the social-constructivist trans discourse has grown out of the "essentialist" one and is seen as more advanced, rather than an equally valid, alternative. Eastern (European) "queer time", in turn, is a "time of coincidence", with various discourses "knotting and looping" rather than consequentially developing out of each other (Mizielińska, Kulpa 2011: 15). This theory, though not devoid of drawbacks, lends itself to explain e.g. the phenomenon of both the feminist language reform movement and the non-binary language movement co-existing in Poland, where the use of generic masculine forms is still widespread and barely challenged.

The theory also supports Kłonkowska and Bonvissuto's claim that both essentialist and social-constructivist discourses exist alongside, and in competition with, each other:

> The first faction is primarily composed of individuals whose transgender narratives reside unproblematically within the binary framework suggested by Benjamin's definition of transsexuality—for example, identifying as exhibiting the dysphoric-based criteria requiring medical and surgical intervention (…). The other faction, who do not recognize their transgressive genders as being accurately described by the medical model, seek non-medical or alternative medical or surgical expressions of their identities (…). For the latter, a transgender experience need not hinge on any medical or psychological condition beyond an affinity toward a gender other than the one assigned at birth (Kłonkowska, Bonvissuto 2021: 94).

Interestingly enough, the influence of Western/Anglo-American discourses is often discussed in negative terms with regard to discourses seen as harmful or disruptive. For example, Borba and Milani's work shows how the medicalized Western trans discourses have spread to Brazil due to the neo-colonial power of American medical epistemologies, shaping the local narratives of gender identity and transition (Borba, Milani 2017, Borba 2019). They do not, however, mention the influence of the more inclusive social constructivist discourses, which have also originated in American culture and are spreading globally, challenging the more essentialist understandings of transsexuality. This omission is important in that it can

affect how we understand the legacy of American transgender activism globally.

On the other hand, it also needs to be considered that the simple narrative of LGBTQ+ and trans discourses originating in the West and spreading globally may suggest that the "West" is a place of progress and civilization where some progress has already been achieved, and in whose footsteps other cultures must follow in order to progress as well. Such a narrative construes other countries, such as Brazil or Poland, as "backward", "homophobic" or "nationalistic" (Kulpa, Mizielińska (eds.) 2011). In my research, I try to show that although both trans discourses – the essentialist/medicalized and the social constructivist one – have originated in the Anglo-American culture, they are not simply accepted at face value by other cultures, but rather, transformed to better reflect and adapt to local socio-cultural contexts and understandings of gender and sexuality.

Polish online gender transition discourses

Methods and materials

Careful readers will notice that the section devoted to Poland in transition quoted numerous sources dealing with sexuality/sexualities rather than genders/gender identities. It is quite common for "LGBT studies" to deal mostly with gay and, to a lesser extent, lesbian issues. As the field known as "gender studies" deals mainly with (cis-)femininities (it could be argued that it is just another name for "women's studies"), "transgender studies" has come to be excluded from both LGBT studies and gender studies, forming a research niche of its own, which does not help to ascertain its visibility in the academic arena.

Sexuality and (to a lesser extent) gender in (post-)socialist contexts specifically have been addressed by several edited volumes, some of them already mentioned here (e.g. Štulhofer, Sandfort 2005, Kuhar, Takács 2007, Kulpa, Mizielińska 2011, Vērdiņš, Ozoliņš 2016, Godovannaya et al. 2020, and Basiuk, Burszta 2021).

Within Polish academia, transgender issues have been dealt with predominantly from sociological/anthropological perspectives since the late 1990s (after a period of strong medicalization of "transsexuality" as explained above). These publications are usually based on either interviews with transgender people or their pieces of life writing/story-telling elicited by researchers (e.g. Kłonkowska 2015, 2018, Kłonkowska, Bonvissuto 2021; Bieńkowska 2012, partly Dębińska 2020). They are also addressed in literary and cultural studies (e.g. Janion 2018, 2022). My research takes a different, i.e., linguistic/discursive approach, and is based on transgender

creators' social media contributions, which means that the narratives I look at are not elicited and thus not influenced by the "observer's paradox".

My research is based on two types of online narrative sources: blogs and videos posted to a YouTube channel run by a collective of Polish transmen (for security purposes, I am not disclosing the name of the channel).

My corpus of blogs consists of 27 titles, out of which 16 belong to transmen, 10 – to transwomen, and one to a person we would call non-binary today (and who calls themselves *transgender*, more below). The corpus was compiled in the years 2015–2019 for the purposes of a project on the constructing of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality in Central and Eastern European social media. I uploaded all the post contents (excluding the blogs' fixed elements, such as lists of posts, calendar, links, the "about me" page, etc.) to be analyzed using the qualitative data analysis program MaxQDA.

At the time of compilation, the corpus contained all blogs written by self-described transsexual or transgender creators in Polish, discoverable and freely available to Internet users. Today, only one of these blogs remains active – in fact, this has been the case ever since material collection was completed (in April 2018). Five blogs are still available online, but no longer updated (with last posts in 2010, 2014, 2014, 2017, 2019). Two blogs are available to invited readers only. This means that 18 blogs have been deleted.

The first five blogs appeared in 2003 and belonged to transmen; the earliest transwoman's blog appeared in 2005. Out of these six initial blogs, four had ceased to be updated before the material was collected. With just some exceptions, the blogs were maintained and updated for at least one year. Most of them were kept for around five years or less. Three blogs were updated for more than ten years (Chojnicka 2020).

In contrast, the YouTube channel under study was founded in 2017 by a group of transmen. Each of the contributors posts a video on a specific day of the week, and each week is devoted to a particular topic that they all address in their videos. The present study makes use of the first 330 videos, published between June 2017 and November 2021 (when the channel's activity was suspended for several months). The channel recommenced in February 2022 with a new crew of contributors, and in March 2022 a "sister" channel run by a collective of transwomen was launched. At present, the transmen's channel has 12.9 thousand subscribers and almost 1.6 million views, and the much "younger" transwomen's channel – 1.29 thousand subscribers and over 100 thousand views.

It is clear that in terms of a timeline, blogs precede the YouTube channel – when it was being launched, most blogs were no longer updated. After a careful examination of both media outlets, it also becomes clear that they constitute two distinct phases in the history of trans narratives on the Internet.

Anonymity vs. openness

Blogs tend to be anonymous – written under a pseudonym and without revealing the author's face. Only one blog among these examined here featured a photograph of the blogger's face; most images were memes found on other sites or drawings by the author (representing e.g. their desired effects of hormone therapy). A few blogs also feature photographs exhibiting the results of chest surgery (for transmen), but with faces out of the frame or distorted for anonymity.

Due to the fact that YouTube is an audio-visual medium, all contributors to the two trans channels do show their faces. Most videos are shot in the "talking-head" format, showing the contributors' head and shoulders against the background of their private space (usually a bedroom). All contributors disclose their names (if they are pseudonyms, viewers are never informed of that) and some even surnames.

While this shift from anonymous text-based blogs to open audio-visual media is characteristic of global social media in general, there is another fascinating difference between blogs and YouTube that refers specifically to trans content. Many blogs start being written when their creators are still trying to resolve matters pertaining to the issue of their gender. In Chojnicka (2020), I distinguished three types of Polish trans blogs:

1) *diary-like blogs* which focus on the emotional difficulties associated with ascertaining one's gender identity,
2) *transition timeline blogs* that document the transition process (usually focusing on medical transition), and
3) *educational or advice blogs*, meant to help other trans people and/or educate the mainstream audience.

While blogs listed under 1) are often abandoned when transition *begins* (and the period of uncertainty and emotional turmoil is over), many blogs under 2) are abandoned when (medical) transition *ends*; in turn, blogs under 3) are usually written like memoirs, after a considerable amount of time has passed since transition was completed.

In contrast to blogs, especially those of type 1) and 2), the YouTube channels are maintained by creators who have completed the process of figuring out their gender identity, have been *out* as trans for some time, and have already started their social and medical (as well as, in some cases, legal) transition. It must be kept in mind, however, that the fact that all YouTube contributors are out could be attributed to the audio-visual character of the medium, where anonymity is not really possible. YouTube is not necessarily an appropriate medium to record the process of figuring out one's gender identity or share one's doubts and concerns about coming out. A trans channel is not a place for people who wish to be "stealth" (i.e. pass universally as a cisgender person) either, since their videos can be discovered by their friends, colleagues, acquaintances etc. YouTube creators do share their identity forming experiences, but only via narratives about the past, rather than "in real time" as they happen.

Transsexualism/transsexuality/transgender

Another difference between blogs and YouTube videos concerns the terms used with regard to the gender transition process and what those terms are to mean. The blog terminology appears to be illustrative of a transition period: a shift from heavily medicalized, essentialist discourse of "transsexuality" towards an approach that focuses on freedom of self-identification and a plurality of options for being trans (a social-constructivist approach).

First of all, it is quite striking that all blogs use the term *transseksualizm* and its derivatives: *transseksualny*, *transseksualna* 'transsexual [masc.], transsexual [fem.] and *transseksualista*, *transseksualistka* 'a [male] transsexual, a [female] transsexual'.

Transseksualizm is the first – and considered the weakest – translation of the term 'transsexuality' from English that has taken root in Polish. There are two reasons why this translation is now considered to be flawed. First, the ending in *-izm* in Polish tends to be used in words denoting diseases or addictions, carry negative connotations, and have a stigmatizing effect (e.g. *alkoholizm*, which incidentally is also a term currently going out of use). For the same reason, the term *homoseksualizm* is now considered politically incorrect and the term *homoseksualność* is preferred. Since the *-izm* suffix was never applied to the Polish terms for 'sexuality' (*seksualność*) or 'heterosexuality' (*heteroseksualność*), its use for 'homosexuality' arguably marked the signified notion as an unnatural aberration rather than a normal variation of human sexuality. The shift from *homoseksualizm*

to *homoseksualność* represents a move away from this pathologizing interpretation.

A parallel shift from *transseksualizm* to *transseksualność* has taken place for similar reasons, but this has not resulted in a correction of the faulty translation. The reason for this is that while the word *sex* in English refers to both the domain of sexual activity (sexuality) and a person's assignment at birth as female or male, in Polish it has the former meaning only. Since *homosexuality* denotes the domain of sexual activity, the Polish translation *homoseksualność* is correct in that sense; however, *transsexuality* applies to the latter meaning – a person's assignment to male or female sex – which does not exist in Polish (the Polish term for this meaning being *płeć* rather than *sex*). This means that the only correct translation is *transpłciowość*, which, however, has come to the fore relatively recently. It is important to keep in mind that this shift represents not only a correction of a faulty translation, but also – and possibly, above all else – a shift from "victimhood to positive identity" (in the words of Szulc, 2012).

In the blogs discussed here, *transseksualizm* is used over two hundred times, *transpłciowość* – twenty-eight times (note, however, that out of these nineteen mentions appear on the same blog) and *transseksualność* – only nine times (Chojnicka 2020: 211). This might support the argument that the blogs represent an earlier phase in the development of gender transition discourse in Poland. In contrast to the YouTube channel, the majority of blogs focus on the medical aspects of transition and apply the medicalized, essentialist discourse discussed earlier. In most blogs, the diagnosis (*transseksualizm k/m* or *transseksualizm m/k*) is explicitly stated, and vocabulary associated with disease (symptoms, treatment, cure etc.) is used.

It must be emphasized, however, that this use of medicalized discourse does not necessarily reflect an internalization of the essentialist approach. It may also be used to claim expertness, as a kind of scripted narrative expected by doctors for others to use (cf. "transsexual mask"), or applied in an ironic or jocular way. It should also be mentioned that with the exception of one blog, almost all explicitly reject the "true transsexual" stereotype (Chojnicka 2020: 220).

This terminological fluidity seems resolved with the advent of the YouTube channel. Its creators take great care to avoid the term *transseksualizm*, clearly favoring *transpłciowość* and, to a lesser extent, *transseksualność*. What both blogs and the YouTube videos have in common, however, is a clear preference for the bare prefix *trans* as an umbrella term. The latter is more inclusive and allows the user to avoid all the issues inherent to faulty translations described above. This form is also preferred by mainstream

media and public discourses – consider, for example, the title of the book written by a popular Polish journalist Piotr Jacoń (2021) – *My, trans* ('We, trans'). This nominal use is rare in English – at least on YouTube (but note the use of the form *transes* in Torrey Peters' novel *Detransition, Baby* from 2021). Unlike English, Polish offers a wide range of adjectival and verbal suffixes that can be attached to the *trans-* prefix to create new innovative words, e.g. *transowaty* 'trans-like', *transować* 'to trans'. While only a few examples of such word formation are to be found on blogs, the YouTube channel is an exceptionally rich source of such innovation, a topic to be discussed in another article (Chojnicka, submitted).

The English term *transgender* does not seem to have gained ground within the Polish context. It is interesting, however, to trace its history as the word was being negotiated in the blogosphere; confusion around this term can be illustrated by several occurrences of the misspelled *transganderyzm*. It appears that the word itself was initially adopted to mean what we would call 'non-binary' today:

(1) *osoby transgender, które nie są ani tym ani tamtym* 'transgender people who are neither this nor that'

According to this interpretation, being *transgender* and being *transsexual* are two separate phenomena. Another blogger describes *transgenderyzm* (note the *-y/izm* suffix) and *transseksualizm* as both falling under the umbrella term of *transpłciowość*. Today, however, we recognize that *transseksualizm* and *transpłciowość* indeed have the same signified (the former being a mistranslation of *transsexuality*), itself part of the *trans(gender)* spectrum alongside non-binary and other non-cis identities.

The lack of popularity of the term *transgender* may be partly attributed to the troubles that the term *gender* is encountering in Polish. The collocation *ideologia gender* 'gender ideology' has become a fixed element within Polish right-wing discourse (Pakuła, Chojnicka 2020). The YouTube channel does make frequent use of the word *gender*, but only with regard to the concept of *misgendering*, i.e. referring to someone using grammatical markers of the gender with which they do not identify. This term does not seem to be known by the bloggers at all.

Other transition-related terms

There is a number of other terms associated with gender transition that appear more fluid, less fixed on blogs than the YouTube videos, and tracing them across the blogosphere reveals some tensions and negotiations between global gender transition discourses and local narratives that seem

to have been resolved by the time the YouTube channel enters the picture. A good illustration of this is the phrase *coming out*, which appears in many different versions across blogs, e.g. *coming out*, *"coming out"* (with quotation marks), *comming out* (sic) (all three can be used with or without a hyphen), *commingout*, and even with the perfective prefix *wy-* and the verbal suffix *-ować*:

(2) *Muszę się wy-comming-outować* 'I must come out'

In the YouTube videos, *coming out* is fixed as a noun, and the verbal function is taken over by the form *outować* (preposition *out* + verbal suffix *-ować*). It is interesting to note that the calque verbatim translation of the English phrase 'to come out of the closet' – *wyjść z szafy* – is avoided on both media, even though it is widely used in mainstream media discourses.

Another example is the term *dysphoria*. On the YouTube channel, the Polish form *dysforia* is consistently used, but it does not appear in any of the blogs. Instead, an older form – *dezaprobata płci* (lit. 'gender disapproval') – popularized by Polish sexologists, as mentioned earlier in this article, is frequently used. It is clear, however, that this term is not favored by the trans bloggers, who find it too "mild". For this reason, some of them use the original English term:

(3) *DYSPHORIA – Informacja. Jest to nazwa angielska bez polskiego odpowiednika* 'DYSPHORIA – Information. It is an English term without a Polish equivalent'

Today, there are two terms for 'gender transition' widely accepted by the Polish trans community and used on the YouTube channel: *tranzycja* and *korekta płci*. At the time when the blogs examined here were being maintained, however, these terms were still being negotiated. Some bloggers do use an expression that is considered unacceptable today – *zmiana płci* ('sex change'); others challenge the latter formula:

(4) *Jestem transseksualistką. Nie zmieniłam płci. Zmieniłam swoje ciało i dokumenty prawne* 'I am a transsexual. I haven't changed my sex. I have changed my body and legal documents'

Alternatives include *przemiana* ('conversion', 'transformation'), *sprostowanie płci* ('gender correction', 'gender rectification' – still used in the legal context) or even, *transformacja* ('transformation'):

(5) *Mój proces transformacji wciąż trwa, na różnych płaszczyznach życia codziennego* 'My transformation process still continues, in different spheres of everyday life'

One blog is clearly distinguishable among the others since its owner is the only blogger who also ran a YouTube channel (defunct now). The frequency of multilingual practices on this blog is clearly higher than on others (examples of expressions include *zombie, not fair, superhero, binder, e-book, audiobook, seriously, fanpage, cosplayer*), with a certain level of playfulness and creativity (e.g. *oh staph it, dafuq, gender-blender*). The following quote illustrates the use of an English phrase and offers an explanation:

(6) *Grow up your mental dick. Cóż, po angielsku lepiej niż po polsku.* 'It [sounds] better in English than in Polish'

This blogger seems to be using the term *transgender* as an umbrella which encompasses *transsexuality*. He also appears to take a lot of inspiration from English-speaking (mostly American) bloggers and YouTubers, sometimes translating full texts/paragraphs (e.g. on how to "rock an open chest" or on the "power of DHEA"), sometimes paraphrasing them. He is also the only one to adapt specific genres common on Anglo-American blogs and vlogs, such as reviews (e.g. of binders, stand-to-pee devices, and other items).

Another blogger mentions his plan to put together a photo collage to trace the progress of his transition, but never does publish such a collage. The following quote illustrates how Polish bloggers take inspiration from American creators, and refers specifically to this common genre in the repertoire of gender transition narratives – a timeline collage/video:

(7) *Moimi zdjęciami pochwale się dopiero po 4 grudnia. Cały rok, co równy miesiąc leci fota, posklejam w całość i być może zamieszcze to w jakimś filmie na YT. Zauważyłem że amerykańscy transi tak robią.* 'I will show off my photos only after December 4th. For a whole year, I take a photo once a month, will put them together and maybe make some video for YT. I have noticed that American trans [people] do that.'

The quote above additionally exemplifies the use of the *trans-* prefix as a noun to denote trans people (*trans-i* – a masculine plural form[9]).

The fact that gender transition terminology seems to be stable on the YouTube channel does not mean that there is no fluidity and variability

[9] Full declension paradigm is as follows:
- masculine singular: N. *trans*, G. *transa*, D. *transowi*, A. *transa*, I. *transem*, L. *transie*;
- masculine plural: N. *transy*, G. *transów*, D. *transom*, A. *transy/transów*, I. *transami*, L. *transach*.

Feminine forms are also possible with an additional suffix *-ka*:
- singular: N. *transka*, G. *transki*, D. *transce*, A. *transkę*, I. *transką*, L. *transce*;
- plural: N. *transki*, G. *transek*, D. *transkom*, A. *transki*, I. *transkami*, L. *transkach*.

in the use of multilingual terms. General terms associated with popular culture and new technologies from English, German, French, and even Russian are frequent, often used when there are no adequate equivalents in Polish, to signal belonging to a global youth culture, or mark individual style (e.g. the use of Russian words for days of the week by a particular contributor to the channel). While there seems to exist a list of fixed trans-specific terms, these can still be employed in a variety of creative and innovative ways. For example, it was mentioned here that the phrase *coming out* is always used as a noun and that its spelling (in textual modalities) is consistent, but one can pair it with different introductory verbs: *zrobić/mieć coming out* 'to do/to have coming out', or prepositions: *coming out do kogoś/przed kimś* 'coming out to someone/in front of someone'. The above-mentioned 'misgendering' can be realized as *misgendering*, *misgenderowanie* (noun forms), *misgenderować* (verb). And the list of combinations with the trans- prefix appears nearly endless: *transfacet, transfriendly, transfeminine, transmasculine, transiątka, transik, transiki, transludzie, transmęskie, transować sobie, transowanie, transowniki, transujący*… This diversity does not exist in the blogosphere; more importantly, nor does it exist in English – at least not to a comparable extent. In a previous paper (Chojnicka, submitted), I suggested that it is the plasticity of the Polish grammatical system (highly productive suffixes) coupled with the YouTube creators' fluency in the global LGBTQ+ sociolect that facilitate this freedom and creativity in their multilingual practices. The YouTubers might also represent a generation more confident in English – enough to experiment with *translanguaging* – and perhaps more confident in their own trans identity as well.

Conclusions

In this article, I have attempted to trace the history of Polish discourse of gender transition starting from the essentialist approach popularized by Polish sexologists in the 1960s and 1970s through an advent of a social-constructivist understanding of gender identity that forms the basis of the global gender transition narratives today. It may be claimed that both the medicalized and pathologizing understandings of "transsexuality" and the identity-based "trans(gender)" discourses have their origins in American/English-speaking cultures. But it must be kept in mind that the early discourses of transsexuality travelled into Poland via medical textualities and were then transplanted into a socio-political context of extreme tabooization of sexuality and pathologization of homosexuality. Transsexuality was considered to be a medical issue and not a moral vice

(unlike homosexuality) or a valid identity option. It thus remained within the authority of medical experts to diagnose and handle it.

When the Iron Curtain fell, discourses of Western LGBT movements simultaneously flooded Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland. The acronym LGBT was adopted, even though the letters B and T were hardly represented in local activist organizing or academic discussions. Gay and lesbian activists quickly recognized that the argument which they needed to convince the Polish society of their right to a safe and fulfilling life was the "patriotic argument": since homosexuality was seen as incompatible with Polish national identity, most campaigns focused on representing gays and lesbians as good citizens and patriots who are "just like everyone else" (cf. homonationalism), although it is fair to say that this strategy has failed.

Trans people have recently become visible in mainstream media and are currently having "their five minutes in the spotlight" (Jacoń 2021). The damage done by transphobic politicians makes the move away from medicalized discourses of "transsexuality" even more risky, since, while clearly pathologizing and stigmatizing, these discourses still offered vestiges of safety by claiming "a medical disorder". The failed attempt to introduce *gender* as a socially constructed rather than biological/genetic/essentialist understanding of sex may also have hurt the trans cause, leading many people to believe that "gender ideology" claims that gender (or sex? *płeć*, anyway) can be changed at whim, and that Polish feminists and drag queens want to teach that even to school children. In a way, then, the social-constructivist understanding of transsexuality may be more difficult to stomach by the general public in Poland than the medicalized one. Both trans bloggers and YouTube creators seem to understand that, avoiding the terms *gender* or *transgender* while spending considerable time challenging gender norms and stereotypes.

Focusing on multilingual practices, I have traced the history of Polish trans online discourse. Contrary to interviews, social media offer researchers unelicited narratives. The first stage, which we may call Transnet 1.0, is represented by the medium of blogs. Blogs are anonymous and focus more on the emotional struggles and difficulties associated with ascertaining one's gender identity or deciding to come out than on the actual gender transition experiences. All blogs make use of the medicalized transition discourse, popularized in mainstream media and the authority figures of leading sexologists, and their most distinctive feature is the consistent use of the now-dispreferred term *transseksualizm*. The relatively low amount of multilingual practices and the lack of consistency in their using the

terms now widely accepted in the community, such as *dysforia* or *coming out*, may suggest that these early blogs were not as influenced by global LGBTQ+ discourses as the YouTube channel.

The channel, in turn, represents the second stage in Polish online trans discourse, Transnet 2.0. It is maintained by a collective of contributors who show their faces and disclose their names to their viewers. They are all out as trans, having undergone their social transitions and either having completed or being in process of their medical and legal components. Their gender transition terminology is stable and consistent, and their use of multilingual practices profuse. This might suggest that they are familiar with global LGBTQ+ discourses and influenced by Western social-constructivist understandings of gender identity popularized in social media by English-speaking trans activists.

While gender transition terminology appears fixed, there is still a lot of creativity, innovativeness, and playfulness in the use of multilingual practices. It is the discourse, the "cultural narrative" of trans identity that has been "fixed", while the YouTubers' enhanced multilingual awareness allows them to express their individuality in a multitude of creative ways. This suggests that Polish trans social media users do not merely copy American/English-speaking discourses, but apply them consciously and strategically in weaving the narratives that are meaningful to them in their socio-cultural contexts.

As a final note, the tension between the essentialist and social-constructivist approaches described by Kłonkowska and Bonvissuto (2021) is not to be found on the blogs and the YouTube channel. While all bloggers and YouTubers identify themselves as binary, they do challenge gender norms and reject the "true transsexual" stereotype. Most bloggers appear unaware of non-binary identities, but the YouTube channel has run a series on the topic and all contributors have expressed the view that non-binary identities are valid and included under the trans umbrella. They accept a diverse trans community that includes people who wish to fully transition, people who want only particular components of transition (e.g. chest surgery without hormone therapy or a neutral name without a gender marker correction), or people identifying as agender or genderfluid. Thus the narratives examined do not support the claim that the social-constructivist approach may be replacing one dogma for another by calling for a complete gender liberation (Kłonkowska, Bonvissuto 2021: 100–101). Future research might look at narratives of creators identifying as non-binary to see if this is also the case from their perspective.

This article started with a discussion of Polish democratic transition which to many people appears incomplete; the lack of LGBTQ+ rights in Poland seems to disqualify it from taking a place in the community of democratic (Western) nations. An analysis of Polish gender transition narratives suggests that while the local transgender community is well informed of global gender and sexuality discourses, they are not accepted at face value as setting the benchmark of progress. Future debates, rather than asking whether Poland is "there yet", might thus combine queer and postcolonial approaches to challenge the discursive construction of the "West" as the model of struggle for LGBTQ+ rights.

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Summary

The present article explores the history of Polish online gender transition discourses, conceptualized in terms of two main stages – "Transnet 1.0" of anonymous, text-based blogs documenting individual experiences and "Transnet 2.0" of YouTube videos, podcasts and tik-toks created by openly trans activists. It offers an analysis of various kinds of multilingual practices in these narratives and attempts to track the way they have been changing to reveal threads of local and global, conservative and liberal, medical and activist discourses. This is done against the background of Poland's own transition from a (nominally) socialist state to a modern democracy, which has not followed a simple, straight-forward path to progress allegedly exemplified by the "West". The history of attitudes towards the transgender community throughout Poland's democratic transition and its traces in contemporary online discourses paint a more complex picture.

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