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## **An Inconvenient Minority: LGBTQ+ Experience in the (Former) Socialist Europe**

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This special issue of *Zeszyty Łużyckie/Minority Issues*, academic journal dedicated to the study of minorities in the broad sense, addresses histories, experiences, and representations of LGBTQ+ communities and individuals in those European countries which shared the experience of state socialism in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Placing this discussion in the context of cultural and social minorities, i.e. in line with the approach proper to *Zeszyty Łużyckie/Minority Issues*, we wished to reflect upon both opportunities and constraints of such framing, and highlight its specificity in the regional context shaped by distinct historical experience.

The (former) socialist Europe as a geographic area often evokes associations, perpetuated after 1945 and still alive in public discourse and in political practice, with the division of Europe into two zones. Europe's

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West is thus associated with democracy, progress, and individual freedoms, whereas the East is frequently connected to nationalism, authoritarianism, and restrictions imposed on freedom. This stereotypical dichotomy which still features prominently even in academic discourses, generally biased and unfit to be used as an explanatory framework, proves to be particularly perspective-narrowing when it comes to LGBTQ+ experiences. The texts collected in this special issue also critically address this unambiguous hegemonic image, revealing a complex picture rendering such dichotomous understanding unproductive and even inapplicable. In this introduction, we add some illustrations to further stress the necessity of deconstructing notions of Western moral and legal superiority regarding LGBTQ+ related issues. As Matthew Todd reminds us, Western Europe has relatively recently opened up spaces of freedom and public expression for non-heteronormative people (Todd 2021: 12–35): it was as late as in 2000 when England and Wales considered that “sex between two consenting men over the age of 21, in private, was no longer illegal” (ibid.) and the age of consent was lowered. Franko Dota, on the other hand, emphasizes that over the period between 1951 and 1977, around 520 men were convicted of homosexuality in socialist Yugoslavia, while in less-populated Austria, 12,000 persons were convicted during the same period (Dota 2016). It is not, however, our intention to reverse the dichotomy by creating a resentment-motivated narrative that would seek out examples of non-heteronormative freedom in the states of Central and Southern Europe, thereby creating an equally false picture. It is important to keep in mind that the Eastern bloc and Yugoslavia did not constitute a homogeneous space with the same legal regulations and practices, and as Lukasz Szulc argues, should not be considered as isolated from the exchange with Western countries (Szulc 2018: 5–13). However, it cannot be denied that for forty years this part of Europe remained under the power of a particular political, ideological, and social project that has marked the sphere of action, experience, and communication for several generations.

The “transition period” of the 1990s set certain models and patterns of action, creating solutions but also problems that today’s LGBTQ+ communities in these countries have to face, while the accompanying process of accession of the former socialist states to the European Union has brought “multiple forms and implications of the increasingly potent

symbolic nexus that has developed between non-heterosexual sexualities, LGBT activism(s), and Europeanisation(s)” (Bilić 2016). The “Europeanization” process additionally lays bare the hegemonic gaze on post-socialist Europe that silences and marginalizes its own genealogies of activism and agency of LGBTQ+ communities, and poses challenges to the efforts of historization of LGBTQ+ activism and queer histories in this part of the world. As Aleksandar Ranković argues in the present issue, LGBTQ+ communities in (post)socialist Europe “seem to have become historical agents only in the light of system change,” which makes queer histories subjected to “more serious” histories of statehood and nation-building (see also Kajinić 2016).

To navigate these multiple temporal frames and complex power relations while avoiding the dangers of stereotyping and generalization, we put forward the category of *experience*; central for humanities and cultural studies in particular (see Lugarić 2020), this concept brings together subjective and collective dimensions and helps follow discrete histories and phenomena across spatial and temporal divisions. We believe that the category of experience should work towards resolving the tension between, on the one hand, individualism and the belief in the full agency of the subject, and, on the other hand, social determinism and the entrapment in the ready-made social schemes imposed by the sociopolitical context. In other words, the perspective focused on experience respects the emotions and strategies undertaken by individuals to cope with the social environment. The essay authored by Slavcho Dimitrov and Ana Blaževa focuses precisely on the immediate human experience of LGBTQ+ community members in contemporary Macedonia. Addressing the experiential and the affective, in their analysis the researchers direct our attention towards the essential interconnectedness between the individual and the collective through the concept of social affects, “visible through historically accumulated institutional obstacles in one’s wellbeing, the development and exercise of one’s capacities, the expression of one’s own experiences and needs, as well as institutional obstacles to self-determination and determination of one’s own actions.”

The LGBTQ+ history in Poland provides a telling example of the ambiguity of power relations and the complexity of experiences inseparable from these. Numerous studies provide the reader with information on how

in Poland — in contrast to Western European countries — homosexual relations were decriminalized as early as in 1932. After 1948, the power was fully taken by the Party which declaratively claimed to bring equality of different social groups. However, the actual situation of homosexual persons, particularly men, was extremely difficult. As Remigiusz Rzyziński shows, this group was under the watchful eye of both the police (MO) and secret service (SB), which had been conducting censuses and interrogations every few years since the 1950s, culminating in the infamous Hiacynt action of 1985–1987 (Rzyziński 2021). In this special issue, Adriana Kovacheva points to yet another aspect of the LGBTQ+ community's experience, discussing the work of Wilhelm Mach (1916–1965), a Polish writer popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Kovacheva finds Mach's writing to be an example of the repression, or perhaps silencing, of an experience felt as otherness, as difference whose confession exposes one to risks. Importantly, this otherness is a burden for the subject himself as he struggles to accept being part of a group subject to strong social tabooization.

In East Germany, the infamous Section 1975 which was in force until 1968 declared homosexual relations to be fornication and criminalized sexual behaviors between men (Zakrzewicz 2013). Despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1968, non-heteronormative people did not gain social visibility or acceptance. The experience of public alienation and the loneliness of gay people in the GDR is discussed by Marta Brzezińska-Pająk who refers to the first film presenting this topic made in East Germany, *Coming out* (1989, directed by H. Carow). It is significant that the first motion picture with this theme was released before the very end of the German socialist state. As the author claims, “it was a late voice”; this accounts for the lack of tools for conceptualization and narration of the LGBTQ+ experience in the public sphere in East Germany. The official policy of the ruling party supported a heterosexual model of relationships, and any activity aiming to expose the question of homosexuality was controlled by the secret service and blocked. Both articles, i.e. those proposed by Kovacheva and Brzezińska-Pająk, expose the liminality of experience of LGBTQ+ people in societies where the official narrative in the public sphere was strongly derived from ideologies of socialism or communism, and the uneasy cohabitation between homosexuality and the socialist values and morals.

Joanna Chojnicka's research is concerned with the period of "the transition" from state socialism to a market-driven economy and multi-party democracy — seen from the perspective of transsexuality. The author discusses the gender recognition procedure, addressing the broader issue of transgender people's experiences. Transgender/transsexual discourses are examined through an analysis of blogs and Youtube channels belonging to the first and the second wave of online media activism led by those associated with the transgender community (Transnet 1.0 for blogs and Transnet 2.0 for video channels). It is fascinating to trace how language has transformed from medicalization discourse in the 1980s, one which paradoxically offered a space of freedom to act, the absorption of "Western" discourse in the 1990s, through the recent efforts to adapt the available lexicon to the specifics of public debate in Poland. Another interesting aspect is the transition from the anonymity of broadcasters in the Transnet 1.0 period to the presence and full visibility of Youtube channel creators of today. Chojnicka makes us rethink the interrelation between the local and Western European models of public debate and the shaping of the language used to define the position of LGBTQ+ persons. In this discussion, the question is raised as to the extent to which the Polish case is peculiar due to the dominance of institutional Catholicism in the public sphere, or whether it can be linked to the post-socialist phenomena more broadly. Irena Šentevska, on the other hand, uses the case of the post-socialist Serbia and its Eurovision Song Contest winner Marija Šerifović to expose a generally ambiguous relationship between the discourses of nation-building and those of sexual minority rights and identities. Šentevska highlights the concepts of "sexual democracy" and "homonationalism" which "refer to normalization of queer politics and identities into a nationalist discourse used in delineating the boundaries between the progressive West and the oppressive 'other'" — pointing to yet another cultural realm in which LGBTQ+-related issues serve as a tool for denying or challenging the "Europeanness" of (post)socialist Europe.

An important issue addressed in the texts collected in this special issue is the tension between the *desire for normality* and the experience of otherness and liminality, as well as the desire for acceptance within the public sphere. In the Polish public space during the period of "transition", notable efforts were made to present the LGBTQ+ community as "normal" and

therefore compatible with the norms of behavior and social roles. These efforts most often included references to cultivation of family life, building lasting partnerships, but also even dressing in a standard way. This motif of desire for normality is present on the margins of Chojnicka's discussion; the film analyzed by Brzezińska-Pająk also creates a narrative about such longing for normality and the wish to be able to undertake activities otherwise inaccessible to, or socially difficult for non-heteronormative people, including, above all, seeking love and partnership.

The issue is distinctly present in the article coauthored by Zuzanna Kierwiak and Eliza Markiewicz. Using Bulgaria as an example, the researchers tackle a theme that is not only present in the public discourses of post-socialist Europe, but indeed probably universal with regard to the presence of LGBTQ+ in public space. The nationalist anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns, not only those led in Bulgaria, often use the image of "gays" as a group inherently inept at fitting into society, a group which violates social norms and is generally harmful for public morality. This is frequently accompanied by metaphors of plague or pestilence, evoked here in the form of "monkey pox" which the nationalists allegedly believed gay people to be spreading. Depravity and pestilence: these perceptions are what LGBTQ+ activists still have to confront. Such metaphors are an integral component of the broader discourse opposing the so-called "gender ideology" in the context of a surge of "anti-gender" and populist sentiments and policies, particularly in the East and Central European societies. "Gender + Convention about the so called 'violence against women and family violence' is Ebola for Poland from Brussels," was written on one of the banners "displayed during a large anti-sex education rally held on August 30, 2015, in Warsaw", as yet another example of a metaphor of deadly disease used in gender-related debates, reported by Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff (2018: 211).

In this context, however, it is important to recognize the normative expectations for "normality" imposed on the former socialist Europe in the process of "Europeanization." Several researchers have pointed to ambiguous nature of the EU-related transformations in post-socialist European societies, often framed as "catching up with the West" (Grabowska 2012) and adhering to an "ideology of normality" which was "particularly useful in advancing the decade-long process of EU accession, during

which many a post-communist polity busied itself with passing laws over which it had scarcely paused to deliberate” (Krastev 2010: 117; see also Rawłuszko 2019). Eszter Kováts (2021), on the other hand, highlighted the connection between “anti-gender” politics and sentiments in Eastern Europe and the long-standing East-West inequalities. These inequalities, Kováts argues, “played and continue to play out within the EU in gender issues,” manifesting themselves in areas such as gender studies and LGBTQ+ activism in post-socialist Europe. Basing the argument on existing empirical studies and critical theoretical literature, and focusing on the four Višegrád countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary), Kováts demonstrates how “anti-gender discourse is a right-wing language of resistance against existing material and symbolic East–West inequalities in Europe” (Kováts 2021).

The closing text provides an accurate reflection of the transformations taking place in the sphere of discourse in the countries of (post) socialist Europe. The authors, Milena Hebal–Jeziarska and Iliana Genew–Puhalewa, analyze lexical material from Czech and Bulgarian. An analysis of dictionary and encyclopedic definitions reveals profound practices of discrimination embedded within official discourse, showing that the available categories have created a negative image of non-heteronormative people, primarily gay men; a fact which accounts for an atmosphere of exclusion and social ostracism faced by the LGBTQ+ community. A gradual change in attitudes towards this group can be seen only in the late 1990s (Czech Republic) or even since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bulgaria).

The texts presented in this issue place significant emphasis on different aspects of the experience of LGBTQ+ people in the region of former socialist Europe; we see this collection primarily as a starting point for possible research and discussion. Categories of experience and cultural intimacy seem of considerable research potential as they go beyond discursive and ideological presentations of the subject matter (cf. Herzfeld 2007). The respective cases of Wilhelm Mach, German cinema, or contemporary Polish youtubers testify to how important non/adherence is to strategies of being culturally relevant in a community. Another noticeable problem is the search for a language to express such experience. We present texts analyzing various kinds of cultural production such as cinema, literature, television, as well as those referring to practices within the public sphere.

The value of this juxtaposition lies precisely in the diversity and exploration of the language of expression specific to each of these areas, which further helps to develop ways of capturing the experience of otherness as fully as possible. An additional, potentially productive avenue of research would be addressing the shift brought by the turn of the early 1990s in the region, a change that cannot be described as “catching up with Europe” in the light of typically employed stereotypes, as the case of (former) Yugoslavia illustrates particularly strongly; a more interesting question would be that of whether the desire for normality articulated in various fashions reveals a more important aspiration — to no longer be a minority.

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## Summary

This special issue brings articles discussing experience of LGBTQ+ people in the region of former socialist Europe as situated in a framework formed by institutional, legislative, and ideological regimes, covering several East- and Southeast European societies (Poland, the GDR, Socialist Yugoslavia, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria), and spanning the socialist period, the transformations of the 1990s, the post-socialism era, and the present-day reality. The authors dwell on different modes of cultural production (television, cinema, literature), expose multiple hegemonic gazes on the history of LGBTQ+ activism and the hegemonic nature of discourses related thereto, as well as point to the ways LGBTQ+ experiences are dependent on social affects shaped by the historically accumulated and institutionalized hegemonic regimes. In its entirety, this issue poses an important question regarding the nature and possibilities of agency and autonomy of LGBTQ+ people as individuals and communities, but also as historical subjects. The editors of this special issue highlight the experience of LGBTQ+ people in the region of former socialist Europe as a productive category, enabling navigation through different temporal frames and complex power relations, while simultaneously avoiding the dangers of stereotyping and generalization. The experience brings together subjective and collective dimensions and helps follow the discrete histories and phenomena across spatial and temporal divisions.

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