Vol. 10 No. 3 (2024)

intersections

East European Journal of Society and Politics

Unsettling Gender, Sexuality, and the European East/West Divisions

PUBLISHED BY:

Centre for Social Sciences
Zsolt Boda
Director General

https://intersections.tk.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.

The publication of *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics (IEEJSP)* is supported by HUN-REN Hungarian Research Network

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Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 1–6.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1444
https://intersections.tk.hu

Unsettling gender, sexuality, and the European East/West divisions

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The East/West division paradigm has a long history in Europe and was particularly influential during and after the Cold War. While acknowledging its relevance and analytic productivity in some cases, it is also crucial to account for its deficiency in contemporary times. At the very least, this approach is ineffective in explaining the power relations within Eastern Europe and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Conceived as an attempt to critically re-examine the limitations of the East/West divide paradigm, this special issue seeks to explore new analytical possibilities in theorizing European East and West, as well as scrutinize what has been obscured by the very perspective of the East/West division. Working with gender and sexuality as our primary area of investigation, we prioritized two major directions of the debates.

The first one concerns the ongoing discussions on gender and sexuality underlying the discourse of East/West divisions. This includes the debates regarding which part of Europe – western or eastern – has been more advanced regarding gender and sexuality politics. Where did the sexual revolution first take place – in the 1920s Soviet Union or the 1960s Western countries? Where were the legislative regulations for abortions and access to contraception more favorable? Who had more progressive family planning and reproductive rights? In which part of the world did feminism first occur, or did gender equality start being discussed? Where did women first get access to education, the labour market, and political participation? How was homosexuality regulated, and what were the transsexual politics?

These kinds of debates, however profound, have rarely addressed that both Eastern and Western Europe often shared similar – modern – notions of gender, sexuality and emancipation, which can be seen as problematic and have been questioned in both West and East. Drawing on the scholarship that scrutinized the connection of the modern regime of gender and sexuality with nationalism (Mosse, 1985; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Kuntsman, 2009; Janion, 2006), colonialism (Lugones, 2007) and the emergence of the modern forms of homophobia and transphobia (Rao, 2020; Rasa Navickaitė in this volume), we aimed to unsettle the modus of competition for the status of the more progressive political system between European East and West. We believe that focusing on the debates of division,

pioneering, and progressing, the very issue of gender and sexuality as 'body-geo-politics' (Mignolo, 2016) remains obscure, and, even more importantly, interconnectedness as well as strategies of solidarity are often neglected or omitted.

The second direction of investigation focuses on the very concept of 'Eastern Europe'. Even though the paradigm of 'Eastern Europe as a project of the West' got extensive academic attention over the last decades (Adamovsky, 2005; Confino, 1994; Krastev & Holmes, 2018), it has also been pointed out that lately 'Eastern Europe' has become a rather loose concept without concrete meaning (Grob, 2015; Lucas, 2023). We can see how the notions of what constitutes Eastern Europe and where the border between East and West is to be drawn shift and change over time, depending also on the actors and the context in which the division is made. Nowadays, for example, Eastern Europe is perceived by some as consisting of the eastern members of the EU, including Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Baltic countries, while Ukraine and Belarus quite often remain outside the scope of investigation of Eastern Europe at large.

By stating that Eastern Europe today is a rather vague concept and, again, either terra incognita or overloaded with projected meanings, we want to stress that while there is a lack of a clear definition of what constitutes Eastern Europe, there is also a scarcity of alternative categories capable of grasping the peculiarities of these localities. Our readers can still come across expressions such as Eastern Block, post-Communist, or post-Soviet countries in this special issue. The authors reflect on these descriptive statements and the analytical work these statements can or cannot do.

While critically focusing on the European East/West divisions and the notion or the very phenomenon of Eastern Europe, this special issue also seeks to address the problem that the production of legitimate knowledge on the region is typically being done through the lens of the Anglo-American scholarship. This is also true for the most cited literature on gender and sexuality, as well as feminist and LGBTQ+ movements and politics. Hence, already from the late 1990s, a critique was raised about the role of academics and activists in the East of Europe and Central Asia being reduced to an 'empirical' base for Western scholars to build theory on (see, e.g., Havelková, 1997; Kassymbekova, 2022). Although more scholarship from these regions is being recognized today internationally, it is still striking that many of the scholars cited have gained recognition through their training in and links with Western academia and by publishing in English. It seems that the knowledge production on Eastern Europe continues to rely on paying homage to Western academia to be considered worthy not only internationally but even locally.

Against this background, we would like to raise awareness of what Annabel L. Kim (2020) calls the 'politics of citation': how particular modes of intellectual legitimacy are reproduced by the same citation sets and reference models over and over again. One way forward to problematize the reinforcement of hierarchies is a citation practice that recognizes innovative and critical authors (possibly writing in languages other than English) from the regions with which the research is concerned. This approach would also include knowledge production beyond academia, as activist and artistic communities are often at the forefront of theoretical reflections on the problems of intra- and extra-Eastern European power dynamics. By practicing such politics of citation, the authors of this special issue made an additional valuable contribution to the critical dismantling of European East/West divisions.

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All the articles of this special issue contribute to the ongoing critical debates on how gender and sexuality underly the discursive construction of East/West divides (Barát & Annus, 2012; Blagojević, 2009; Edenborg, 2018; Frunză & Văcărescu, 2004; Kampichler, 2012; Kulawik & Kravchenko, 2019; Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2016; Pitoňák, 2019; Plakhotnik & Mayerchyk, 2023; Wiedlack et al., 2022; and many others) question this division and its common tropes in one way or another.

The article by Olena S. Dmytryk explores the interrelation between the lives and politics of trans* people in former Soviet countries and the development of the Internet. Working at the intersection of digital humanities, trans* studies and cultural studies, and building on media archeology as a methodology, Dmytryk starts a conversation on how the lives and politics of trans* people in ex-Soviet countries responded to, informed and shaped the development of the Internet. Based on an analysis of early digital trans* cultures, the author argues that while the Internet was 'spreading' from the West to the East, and the ex-Soviet states were integrating into the global information network, trans* people in the region were not just 'integrating' into globalized trans* identity discourses. Focusing on a case study from Ukraine, the article highlights how trans* Internet users were (and continue to be) active contributors to global knowledge production and medical/technological innovations, fostering a collective ethos vital for trans* communities.

Analysing the late Soviet expert and pedagogical texts in the Lithuanian SSR from a feminist and queer historical perspective, the study by Rasa Navickaitė challenges the popular perception of the USSR as a paragon of women's emancipation and gender equality, where the 'return to traditional gender roles' allegedly happened only within the post-1991 conservative turn. On the contrary, Navickaitė shows how the 'gender complementarity' paradigm in the expert and pedagogical texts published in Soviet Lithuania echoed similar ideas in Western contexts, such as those in the United States. The article shows how the adoption of complimentary yet strongly differentiated gender roles by men and women was seen as key to marital happiness and a healthy Communist society; how the emphasis on the need to foster traditional gender roles with homophobia, as homosexuality was seen to pose a threat to the proper functioning of masculinity and femininity, and a reason for the fading attraction between the 'opposite' sexes.

Anna Shadrina's paper critically questions the East/West divide while working with the intersection of gender and age in the contemporary Belarusian political narratives: how the persistent logic of Cold War geopolitics animates social hierarchies in territories positioned between Western and Russian influences. Analysing narratives of the official national project and the oppositional ethnocentric concept of Belarusianness regarding the place of older citizens, particularly women, in society, Shadrina shows their paradoxical similarity: both share a discursive construction of 'pensioners' as an inferior Other. Importantly, exploring the alternative discourse of 'in-between-ness', which champions a democratic Belarus that belongs neither to the Soviet past/Russia nor to the West but is connected to both, the article shows how rejecting binary logic in national self-determination can open the avenue for intergroup solidarity.

Two articles in this special issue explore the lived experiences of non-heterosexual people in Eastern Europe during the socialist time. In doing so, they seek to grasp the peculiarities of the social reality, typically marginalized in the West-centred discourse as homo- and transphobic peripheries of the 'progressive' centres of the 'sexual revolution'.

The paper by Kristina Millona looks at the cruising past of men seeking same-sex desire under the communist regime in Albania with the aim to challenge the totalizing historical discourses of non-normative sexualities under state socialism, limited to the narratives of oppression, criminalization, and persecution of homosexuality. Millona shows that in contrast to such essentialist representations, which in turn are juxtaposed with representations of the West as a homoerotic paradise, there was also sexual political resistance in the state-socialist countries that differed from the West-centered conventional forms of political organizing. Conceptualizing urban spaces not only as areas of sexual encounter but as grounds for political resistance, the article seeks to 'queer' the forms of grassroots politics within the geo-temporality of state-socialism in Albania.

Antonina Tosiek, Błażej Warkocki and Lucyna Marzec analyse the first comprehensive volume of memoirs of LGBTQ+ people in Poland All the Power I Draw for Life (2022). Looking at first glance as a continuation of the long Polish tradition of diaries written for a competition announced by state institutions, the collection is, in fact, exceptionally important. It was published at a politically sensitive moment, when homophobia became an element of global politics, including the construction of the East/West European divide. Thus, the collection of diaries becomes a unique, autonomous and empowered voice of the LGBTQ+ community from Central and Eastern Europe in a contemporary geopolitical context.

The articles of the special issue are published in alphabetical order by the authors' names, aiming to avoid building hierarchies of topics, regions, or author statuses.

Acknowledgements

We, the guest editors, are thankful to all the authors and reviewers for their input and inspiring work together on this special issue. Jennifer Ramme acknowledges that this project has received funding from the European Union's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon Europe (2021-2027) under the Marie Sklodowska Curie Grant Agreement No. 101152829. She would also like to thank the Faculty of Cultural and Social Sciences at the European University Viadrina for hosting and funding the lecture series 'Gender and Sexuality in (Post) Socialist Europe and the Validity of East/West Divides' (2022/2023), which inspired the idea for this special issue. Olga Plakhotnik acknowledges funding from the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) under the funding line for Ukrainian Studies as a 'small discipline' (UNDIPUS project, 2022–2026).

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Communicating community: Early Internet and trans* digital cultures in Ukraine and beyond

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 7–23.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1325
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

This article explores the interrelation between the lives and politics of trans* people in former Soviet countries and the development of the Internet. I argue that while there were possibilities for communication and connection for trans* people during Soviet times, the arrival of the Internet expanded these possibilities. Turning to media archaeology as a methodology, I investigate how early versions of the Internet shaped (digital) trans* communities and how these communities influenced knowledge production. I show that early Internet trans* users were involved in collaborative mutual aid practices that were fostered by the digital cultures of the time, Internet architecture, and earlier offline cultures. Focusing on a case study from Ukraine, the article highlights how trans* Internet users were (and continue to be) active contributors to global knowledge production and medical and technological innovation, fostering a collective ethos vital for trans* communities. I also point to the impact of the Internet's evolution and geopolitical changes on contemporary trans* communities.

Keywords: digital cultures; transsexuality; transgender epistemologies; net histories; Ukraine; USSR

1 Introduction

This article aims to start a conversation on how the lives and politics of trans*[1] people in ex-Soviet countries responded to, informed and shaped the development of the Internet. How did the early versions of the Internet shape trans* communities? How did trans* people, in turn, shape knowledge production and organising on the Internet? Finally, how do the

[1] My use of 'trans*' is in line with Blas Radi's (2019, p. 45) suggestion to use it not as a homogenising term but 'as a way of evoking a multiplicity that is not limited to trans* women and men, but rather includes all those identities whereby a person does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth'. At the same time, I use 'transgender', 'transsexual', 'transvestite' etc. to reflect historical practices of self-identification. The citations are left unchanged and may contain 'trans' without an asterisk.

changes in the Internet as a media and the (geo)political shifts influencing Internet regulation affect online trans* cultures today? Based on an analysis of early digital trans* cultures, I argue that while the Internet was 'spreading' from the West to the East, and the ex-Soviet states were integrating into the global information network, trans* people in the region were actively involved in shaping the Internet. Via the Internet, they were not just 'integrating' into globalised trans* identity discourses. They were also creating virtual and real-life strategies for making liveable lives and developing various fields of knowledge in a collective process of experimentation.

This article builds upon academic knowledge created within trans* studies and media archaeology. It is important to remember that the studies *of* trans* people greatly outnumber studies written *by* trans* people within both of these disciplines (see Ratkowska-Pasikowska & Okólska, 2022). This complex history of academic knowledge production is reflected and discussed in trans* studies. Andrea Long Chu and Emmet Harsin Drager (2019, p. 113) describe trans* studies as 'medical, cultural, aesthetic, and political theory that has come about since the creation of transsexual and transgender as identity categories in the mid-twentieth century'. While recognising Susan Stryker and Sandy Stone as important theorists in trans* studies, they also (2019, p. 113) point out that the most cited texts within trans* studies were written by people who were not trans*: sexologists and clinicians such as Harold Garfinkel, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Harry Benjamin; feminist theorists like Janice Raymond and Donna Haraway; queer scholars such as Gayle Salamon, Heather Love, and Marcia Ochoa. As noted by Cassius Adair, Cameron Awkward-Rich and Amy Marvin (2020, p. 313), 'we cannot know what trans studies might have been (and might yet be) had trans academics laboured under less hostile conditions'.

Trans* studies have also been criticised for focusing only on privileged and 'Western'-centric experiences (see, for example, Laidlaw & Stirrett, 2023). When we turn to more local discussions, we may find that the ideas on gender variance in Central and Eastern Europe produced in academia have been influenced by the 'Western'-centric epistemic system. This system associates countries in the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) region with a process of eternal 'development' and 'transition' (see an analysis of these processes in Gressgård & Husakouskaya, 2020). Yet there has been an increase in studies that have turned to local histories and theories of gender variance, providing a more nuanced perspective and often written from a queer/trans* standpoint. Among the most recent works are studies by Jūratė Juškaitė (2017), Nadzeya Husakouskaya (2018), Maria Dębińska (2020), Yana Kirey-Sitnikova (2020; 2024), Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord and Aleksa Milanović (2022), Zhanar Sekerbayeva (2023), and Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa (2023). These studies engage not just in the study of transsexual/transgender/trans* phenomena but also of the complex East/West dynamics surrounding these phenomena.

Many of the studies listed above mention in passing the importance of the Internet for trans* people. The development of the Internet is connected to the historical development of contemporary trans* communities, as the Internet enabled people to connect with each other, provide support and exchange information. While ten years ago, scholars noted 'the relative absence of studies of transgender phenomena in relation to [...] new media' (Aizura & Stryker, 2013, p. 10), this situation has somewhat changed. The role that the Internet plays in trans* lives and politics is now not just mentioned but studied in depth. In articles with titles like 'I Did It All Online' (Cavalcante, 2016) and books with titles like *Digital Me* (Nicolazzo et al., 2022), online communities are studied as 'counterpublics' and

'care structures' (Cavalcante, 2016) for trans* people. And yet, while the study of trans* digital cultures is growing, conceptualisations of the Internet often lack a focus on technological materiality.

What does it mean to take the technological materiality of the Internet seriously? For some, it means turning to media archaeology as a methodology and intellectual orientation to bring the Internet from the 'background' to the 'forefront' of analysis. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (2011, p. 253) emphasise the value of media archaeology in exposing 'the technicality of media not to reduce culture to technology but to reveal the techno-epistemological momentum in culture itself'. Media archaeology is committed to an interdisciplinary 'spirit of curiosity and intellectual radicality' (Parikka, 2013, p. 161).

Given the transdisciplinary orientation of media archaeology, it is not surprising that it proves to be useful for researchers working on gender heterogeneity. An important recent study in this regard is 'The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet' (2023) by Avery Dame-Griff. The study delves into alternative net histories and the interrelated histories of trans* communities, focusing on the US context. Such in-depth study is still lacking when we turn to research on other regions.

Turning to media archaeology as methodology, this article bridges the studies of the Internet with trans* studies, focusing on a specific period (the 1990s and early 2000s), specific media (early Internet versions and the World Wide Web that came later), specific communities (transsexual communities, as well as trans* networks more broadly), and specific region (the ex-Soviet countries, and Ukraine in particular). But this article is meant to prompt further thinking and call for more academic and activist conversations that would take technology and trans* solidarity seriously.

In this article, I will sometimes engage with experiences and studies from the broader CEE region when pointing to the transnational character of the Internet. I will also use 'ex-Soviet' when referring to the countries that once were part of the Soviet Union. My implicit focus in this article is on Ukraine, and the Ukrainian context will be my anchoring point throughout the article. I believe that focusing on Ukraine helps uncover valuable net histories and is important in the current political moment. At the same time, the limited focus of the article excludes many other digital experiences and histories carved in other languages and connected to other countries.

The first section of the article will delve into the technologies of communication and knowledge production used by trans* people in the USSR before the development of the Internet. I will then present a brief history of the Internet development and trans* participation in it, with a focus on communities and mutual aid. The third section will present a case study of community work and a personal website by Lena from Kyiv. I will locate this within the broader discussion of the early trans* websites and networks, in particular, *Usenet* and *GeoCities* platforms. Finally, in conclusion, I will turn to the current moment and discuss how (geo)politics and technology affect trans* communities.

For this study, I used community archives as a source of information: newsgroups, mailing lists, and websites that have ceased to exist yet were archived by the Internet Archive, Google Groups and Oocities.org project. While these sources were public, the personal information included in them raises questions about digital research ethics (Adair, 2019; Dame-Griff, 2023, pp. 21–22). Therefore, in the article, I use only first names when referring to or citing the trans* users and do not include citations to individual archived home pages or mail threads to limit the overall visibility of these sources.

2 Transsexuality in the Soviet Union

From the time of the Russian empire and through the Soviet Union modernisation campaigns, one can trace the history of gender regulation as a history of colonial and Orientalist practices. These practices were the shadow of the modern idea of the Soviet subject. While Soviet gender regulation is often thought about in terms of women's emancipation, gender crossing did not fit with the model of the new Soviet man or woman. It was often criminalised – in particular, in the Soviet republics that were considered backwards and peripheral by the 'central' Russian regime, such as the republics of Central Asia (see Aripova, 2022). At the same time, gender transgression and gender variance have been discussed in Soviet medical circles since the 1920s, and the concepts of 'hermaphroditism', 'transvestism' and 'transsexualism' appeared and developed in the Soviet Union as modern, medicalised phenomena (see Husakouskaya, 2018; Kirey-Sitnikova, 2020).

The interest in sex and gender identity was most prevalent in the fields of Soviet psychiatry, sexology and endocrinology. Dan Healey (2021, p. 34) notes the 'unruly appropriation' of European sexological ideas in early Soviet sexology, as well as the 'sifting' of European and local knowledge 'for what it could offer to the project of communist modernisation with its notes of internal colonisation'. The field of sexopathology appeared in the 1960s, and in the 1970s–80s included research on sex changes for transsexuals. Aron Belkin from Moscow's Institute of Psychiatry and Irina Golubeva from the Institute of Experimental Endocrinology and Hormone Chemistry were some of the few Soviet researchers working on transsexuality. In Soviet Russia, they diagnosed trans* people and helped them in their 'adaptation' (meaning the adaptation of the person to life in society in their desired gender role). Belkin followed the theories of Harry Benjamin, the German-American endocrinologist and sexologist and the author of the influential *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966). While the opinions of Soviet and foreign researchers differed about the causes of 'transsexualism' (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2020), they agreed on it being a pathology, a condition that could be cured through hormonal and surgical medical interventions, as well as through legal (documental change) and social 'adaptation'.

The Soviet attempts at sex change surgeries in the 1920s were not successful (see Healey, 2001, pp. 165–170); yet in the 1960–70s, Irina Golubeva, in collaboration with Belkin, performed successful sex change surgeries for intersex and transsexual patients (Healey, 2017, p. 104). In Latvia, Viktors Kalnbērzs performed similar operations in the early 1970s, and there are also records of the surgeries being carried out for transsexual men in 1980s Estonia (Põldsam & Arumetsa, 2023, p. 6). However, the official diagnosis of 'transsexualism' appeared in the Soviet Union only in 1983, and the guidelines for doctors developed by Aron Belkin were published in 1991.

Within the Soviet Union, there were not many sources from which those who did not feel aligned with their assigned gender could get information. Trans* people had to become activist scholars by doing their own research and reading medical volumes that could be borrowed from a library or accessed otherwise. The transsexual activist Lena from Kyiv compiled a list of several hundred titles while carrying out personal research in the late 1980s (Juškaitė, 2017, p. 11). Likewise, Kristel from Estonia searched for information in the library and even requested materials on transsexuality from the library of Johns Hopkins University in the USA (Põldsam & Arumetsa, 2023, p. 9). Foreign materials

were an important source of knowledge, although access to them was very limited. In the late 1980s, local newspaper articles and TV shows (sometimes of a sensationalist nature) would occasionally present information on transsexuality or transvestism, and it is through these materials that people would find out about the possibility of presenting or living otherwise (see Juškaitė, 2017, pp. 30–33).

The possibilities for trans* communication during late Soviet times existed through informal underground trans* circles or friendships, although finding other trans* people was often a matter of luck, especially in smaller towns or villages. Broader underground communities (such as gay or lesbian circles), and self-published print media could also facilitate connections – both locally and internationally. For instance, the print journal *Forumo in Esperanto* was published by the Ligo de Samseksamaj Geesperantistoj (League of Homosexual Gay Esperantists).[2] Among other topics, the journal published materials on gay life in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It also provided ads for pen pals, the majority of which came from Eastern Europeans.

One can find evidence of international communication and connections in grassroots trans*-produced publications in the US, UK and Western Europe. The grassroots *DRAG Queens* magazine (News, 1971, p. 9) included information about a document obtained from the Soviet embassy describing nine 'sex conversion operations' performed in 1967–68; the Institute of Experimental Endocrinology is also mentioned. In a letter published in the *Everywoman* UK feminist grassroots magazine, American transgender activist Angela Douglas (1971, p. 12) described her joy at obtaining a document about the surgeries performed in the USSR. The Soviet account of the surgeries was proof of actual transsexual people existing in the USSR, and the fact that these surgeries were free of charge in the USSR was leveraged by the US trans* activists like Douglas. Douglas shared the document with US doctors and organisations involved in transsexual research and claimed that this step fostered international communication between researchers (1971, pp. 12–13). In the 1980s, US-printed pamphlets featured lists of doctors in foreign countries who treated transsexuals (List of Doctors in Foreign Countries Who Treat Transsexuals, 1980). These lists included contact details of doctors in the USSR, which points to the exchange of knowledge that happened 'through' the Iron Curtain.

However, it was only with the start of the *glasnost* period of the late 1980s that trans* people in the USSR could easily find each other and create local and international connections. The first interview with a Russian transsexual woman, Svetlana, carried out by a Latvian transsexual activist, Elga, in 1990, and published in the grassroots *International TranScript* magazine in 1992, was tellingly entitled 'Glasnost' (Remes, 1992). In it, Svetlana talked about the support she received from Irina Golubeva but also about the discrimination she endured from family members and doctors, including forced psychiatric treatment.

With borders slowly opening, local community organising and face-to-face international visits also became a reality. Põldsam and Arumetsa (2023, p. 6) mention the effect of the interview with the surgeon Viktors Kalnbērzs published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* in 1989 and reprinted in the Estonian newspaper in 1990. After reading the interview and contacting the article's author, Kristel was able to reach other transsexual people in

[2] See the journal's website, https://www.fieraj.org/forumo (accessed June 14, 2024).

Estonia. The US *FtM*[3] Newsletter (FTM International, 1990) even mentions 'a special visitor from Leningrad' at the 1990 monthly FtM get-together who 'had come to the Bay Area to interview surgeons and meet other FTMs'.

To sum up, some possibilities for communication and information exchange between trans* existed during Soviet times. While these possibilities were quite limited at first, they greatly expanded with the decline of the Soviet Union and increased exponentially with the development of the Internet. Studying the development of the Anglophone trans* community, Avery Dame-Griff (2023, p. 2) argues: 'For those who came into their trans identity in the 1970s and 1980s […] the rise of the desktop computer and the Internet revolutionised not only how they communicated but also the very makeup of what was then known as the "gender community"'. The next section will discuss early online networks that trans* people in some ex-Soviet countries were and are connected to, as well as the features of early digital cultures.

3 Trans* communication and the dawn of the Internet

In 1998, the Ukrainian government approved the 'National informatisation program'. This program defined Ukraine's 'integration into the global information space in accordance with the contemporary information geopolitics tendencies' (Zakon Ukraïny N74/98. Pro natsional'nu prohramu informatyzatsiï, 1998) as a state priority. Integration into the global information space proceeded very slowly: in 2002, only one in every 50 people in an urban area had Internet access. Tetiana Popova, head of the newly formed Internet Association of Ukraine, complained in 2003 (see Popova, 2003) that Ukrainian people were completely disinterested in connecting to the global web: they would rather buy a TV or a mobile phone[4] than a computer of the same price with Internet access. Yet there was a category of people in Ukraine who were very interested in connecting to the Internet who had been 'going' online since the Internet's appearance in the ex-Soviet states, and actively contributed to the Internet's development. For trans* people, Internet access was literally life-saving.

In this section, I will address the multiple histories of the Internet. These histories are related to the communication and communities trans* people from ex-Soviet countries shaped when connecting to the Internet. The earlier versions of online platforms that existed before the privatised World Wide Web's rise in the 1990s differed from the latter technologically and socially. An important network in this regard was Usenet – a distributed newsgroup service (now archived by Google Groups and Internet Archive) that proliferated in the 1990s.

Usenet relied on users' direct input and innovations for its development. The 'do-it-together' community was fostered by the decentralised character of the network. Dame-Griff (2023, p. 85) states: '[…] as a decentralized network, newsgroups did not have

[3] Here and later, FtM stands for 'female-to-male', and MtF for 'male-to-female' – terminology often used by transsexual people.

[4] At that time, mobile phones did not have features enabling access to the Internet.

membership or sign-up requirements. Instead, one's Usenet "identity" was tied to one's email address, which could easily be anonymised or spoofed. Usenet's reliance on email addresses also made it platform agnostic: any single platform [...] could (and did) allow users to send and receive Usenet messages. Usenet was one of the first unregulated cross-platform discussion platforms available to a variety of audiences'. As a network, Usenet also did not have one centralised server that the users would dial into. This made it much cheaper for users, who did not have to pay long-distance telephone bills and democratised access to the network for trans* users. The use of an email address for logging in provided additional safety for those who were worried about being 'outed'.

Technological decentralisation went hand-in-hand with the 'decentralised' community-building. A Usenet group did not have a single moderator who would control, set rules or censor anyone; new groups could not be deleted; and the process of content moderation and 'netiquette' was developed collectively. The lack of moderation could be and was abused: Usenet is believed to be the first online space where spam messages were 'invented'. Yet the Usenet community relied on self-organisation: it did not call for government regulation and looked for internal technological solutions to resist spamming and scamming (Campbell, 1994).

The Alt.transgendered newsgroup that appeared in 1992 quickly became the main Usenet space for trans* people from all over the world, including people from ex-Soviet countries (the first messages from users from Ukraine appeared on Usenet from 1996 onwards, only several years after the creation of the alt.transgendered group). The newsgroup was a space for debates and discussions of identities and experiences, as well as the creation of new terms and practices. Knowledge and solidarity practices developed in offline activist circles extended to online activity. For instance, Leslie Feinberg, an American activist and writer, was cited a lot in the newsgroup (especially after Feinberg's book *Transgender Warriors* came out in 1996). While discussing Feinberg's new book in 1996, users also informed each other of Feinberg's health and made fundraising donations to help offset Feinberg's medical bills.[5]

FidoNet, a network similar to Usenet, was more popular in ex-USSR countries. Kyiv and Kharkiv FidoNet nodes appeared in 1990 and were among the first Fidonet nodes in the USSR (Dan'shina, 2021). FidoNet featured possibilities for one-to-one communication, as well as forum-style communication called 'echo conferences'. While echo conferences in English like *Gender* existed on FidoNet, the *RuSexualDifference* conference in Russian that appeared in 1998 was more popular among Russian-speaking users and included discussions on gender and transsexuality. One of the most important features of FidoNet was that it became the first platform for digital file sharing. Continuing the tradition of Soviet *samizdat* (self-published materials), FidoNet saw the rise of 'shadow librarians' – community librarians who typed in thousands of books and shared them online (Bodó, 2018, pp. 34–35). The maker communities[6] that formed around book digitisation promoted the culture of free information access and knowledge exchange.

[5] Post by Michelle, 22 March 1996, alt.transgendered, archived by the Internet Archive.

[6] See the study of the maker communities and the historical roots of the D.I.Y. maker cultures in Kohtala et al. (2020).

Like Usenet and Fidonet, Geocities was key for trans* people in building communities and knowledge exchange. GeoCities appeared in late 1994 as a web hosting service. In 1995, it allowed users to create their own websites for free and to read the websites created by others. While Usenet and Fidonet were breakthroughs in online communication, GeoCities was a breakthrough in democratising web design and hosting. In the words of Ian Milligan (2019, p. 172), 'For the first time, users could create their own webpages without needing programming skills or knowledge of FTP, Telnet, HTML, Usenet, and so forth. It was in places like GeoCities where users became part of virtual communities held together by volunteers, neighbourhood watches, webrings, and guest books. These methods, grounded in rhetoric of both place and community, made the web accessible to millions of people.'

GeoCities became one of the most popular services, reaching its first million users in 1997 and growing even more afterward. GeoCities websites were clustered into different 'neighbourhoods' – communities shaped by different interests or themes. As a platform, GeoCities was also open to nonnormative users, to the extent that a special neighbourhood, *WestHollywood*, was started.

Trans* websites were a prominent part of the WestHollywood neighbourhood. Dame-Griff (2023, p. 126) argues that trans* websites can be considered the early ancestors of social media profiles. These websites existed within the broader 'offline' ecosystem of community organising that involved publishing collectives and community archives created by trans* people for trans* people (see Dame-Griff, 2023). The Internet made it easy to share community archives, and thus, the generation of trans* 'community librarians' appeared, curating collections of useful links, advice on gender transition and personal stories on their web pages.

Such curation and archiving involved technological innovation. GeoCities existed at a time when search engines were just developing. Contrary to our current experience, information was not 'sieved' by a search engine and was not limited to specific search keywords. It was difficult for new users to find information on specific topics of interest. To address this problem, GeoCities users invented decentralised 'webrings' that connected a multitude of websites through hyperlinking relationships. By adding a website to the thematic ring (like Global TransgendeRing), one would make it easier to find. Webrings were created and looked after by active users, who often formed small collectives. In addition to this, users also created directories categorised by themes or countries. One of the examples is Susana Marques's TV/CD/TS/TG World Directory (a world directory of transvestite, cross-dresser, transsexual and transgender websites). Sarah McTavish (2020, p. 212) identifies Susana Marques's directory as significant and influential within the global trans* community: it was 'extraordinarily highly connected' and had the highest PageRank on WestHollywood. These 'hacks', as well as invisible long-term labour of digital 'community librarians' like Susana Marques, ensured that trans* users could find information and build new connections, especially locally.

GeoCities soon became known among trans* people globally. One of Maria Debinska's interlocutors from Poland (see Dębińska, 2020, p. 213) recalled that discovering GeoCities trans* websites in 1995 allowed her to self-diagnose, self-define and find the proof that she was not alone. My browsing of the WestHollywood neighbourhood showed that it was the first hosting service for LGBT organisations' webpages, such as the Ukrainian Nash Mir

and Gay Ukraine International. Likewise, I found a multitude of websites of grassroots initiatives, such as Action Romania association in Romania; Roz Mov, the first Greek LGBT website; the first gay website of Uzbekistan; Croatian LesBiGays on the Internet (and a separate Croatian Transsexual Page); a Gay Latvia page; and personal webpages from Ukraine, Poland, Estonia and other countries. The ease of use, helpful instructions and direct support provided by international community members made GeoCities and WestHollywood, in particular, popular with sexually and gender nonnormative users from Eastern Europe. The free hosting service offered by GeoCities was particularly important for trans* people from ex-Soviet countries who often did not have money to pay for the Internet, let alone for web hosting.[7]

This section has covered early digital trans* communication, focusing on newsgroups and websites. I have shown that the architecture of the early Internet platforms supported decentralised, community-oriented and 'do-it-together' maker cultures. These cultures, in turn, often had their roots in earlier offline activist and underground practices, such as trans* activism or Soviet *samizdat* underground cultures. I also noted that trans* users, including users from ex-USSR countries, took an active part in the shaping of early Internet platforms. In the next section, I will turn to online trans* communication in the 1990s to early 2000s, with a focus on Ukraine. I will discuss further the 'do-it-together' ethos of digital trans* communities and why it was important for trans* people from ex-Soviet countries.

4 Connecting to the network: Ukraine and digital trans* cultures

After the collapse of the Soviet state, transsexuality became more known – but also more regulated. The newly formed nation-states adopted conservative legislation with regard to gender transition. In Ukraine, legal recognition of gender was linked to medical sex reassignment. Husakouskaya (2018, pp. 28–29) points out: 'From 1996 till 2016, there were two primary governmental mechanisms: the Decree and the Commission. Through discursive practices, these regulatory mechanisms shaped transgender subjects as problematic and offered specific solutions to this/their "problem". The Decree stipulated how the procedures should be carried out. It specified steps for transgender persons to undergo "transition" (medically and legally), determined the "medico-biological" and "socio-psychological" indications and counter indications for this process, and established a commission of doctors (often referred to as "the Commission") with the authority to mandate and control access to medical and legal procedures related to gender markers and change of name'.

Within this regulatory system, someone's documents could be legally changed only after the sex reassignment procedure that involved mandatory psychiatric hospitalisation and sterilisation. Sex reassignment surgery was prohibited for people under 25 years and those with a child. The Commission met infrequently and considered only a handful of

[7] The poverty among transsexual people in Ukraine was mentioned in the interview that a Ukrainian transsexual woman, Alisa, gave to Vasilii Kalita in 1998 in the *Meditsinskaia Gazeta* newspaper (published on the gay.ru website, archived by the Internet Archive).

cases each time. There was no possibility to appeal the verdict. The whole process was financially costly, difficult bureaucratically (Husakouskaya, 2018, pp. 28–29). There were risks of unemployment, harassment and violence connected to the fact that sex reassignment surgery, a prerequisite for document change, could take place only after a full year of a person's full psychological and social 'adaptation' to the desired gender. In addition to the bureaucratic and medical 'gatekeeping' (external control of the access to desired changes and services), trans* people had to combat transphobia and the lack of knowledge and experience in trans* medicine from medical professionals. These barriers made the lives of trans* people barely liveable.

Trans* people who desired body modifications or document change often had to rely on D.I.Y. (from 'do-it-yourself') strategies to speed up and ensure a favourable decision from the Commission. These strategies included community-driven practices of knowledge production and autonomous healthcare practices. Autonomous health care practices (such as D.I.Y. HRT – 'do-it-yourself' hormonal replacement therapy) supported by community scholarship and expertise are not unique to ex-Soviet countries; they are an international phenomenon. Some of the positive aspects of autonomous trans* health care practices are an assertion of trans* agency, the greater accessibility and affordability of hormones, a high level of information support from the community, and liberation from normative biomedical assumptions (see August-Rae et al., 2024). As the description of one of the popular Anglophone mailing lists, *MtF HRT*, states in English, 'We are not afraid to research endocrinology ourselves and take our treatment in our own hands'.[8] And while in the Anglophone context, both print and online guidelines on D.I.Y. HRT were developed by trans* activist communities, these guidelines were not useful for people from ex-Soviet countries due to the unavailability of specific medications. Therefore, the need for local knowledge production was pressing, and the Internet became the tool for fulfilling this need. In 1996, user Lena from Kyiv wrote to the alt.transgendered newsgroup, asking whether there was anyone from the ex-USSR there. She mentioned that there were no mailing lists for trans* people in the ex-USSR region.[9] In 1998, Lena created *TGRus* – the first mailing list in Russian for transsexual and transvestite people, their loved ones, 'and such'. The year before that, she created a personal website, which was one of the first trans* websites with information in both Russian and English.

Lena volunteered with the Ganimed LGBT Association based in Kyiv, one of the first Ukrainian LGBT organisations. Since 1995, she has co-organised the meetings of the informal transsexuals and transvestites club in Ganimed. However, her web activism was on a much greater scale. With a professional background in IT, Lena was very experienced in using both Usenet, Fidonet and the Internet in general. On her website, Lena described her transsexual journey in English and Russian. The website also presented information in English on the political, medical and social concerns of transsexual people in Ukraine. Lena gathered links to legislation and standards of care from other countries and asked the (Anglophone) website visitors to send her more documents. These documents were

[8] See the MtF HRT mailing list, available at groups.io (accessed June 14, 2024).
[9] Post by Lena, alt.transgendered, 26 October 1996, archived by the Internet Archive.

used to demand better legislation and standards of conduct from the Ukrainian Ministry of Health. Lena also archived on her website articles featuring her comments to journalists. Using her vast knowledge of international practices and legislation, she critiqued both Ukrainian legislation and the gatekeeping practices of doctors in the media.

Finally, Lena included links to useful trans* resources both in English and in Russian. Users were encouraged to engage with Lena by contacting her via email or guestbook; Russian-speaking trans* people were encouraged to contact her to sign up for the TGRus mailing list, and doctors could sign up for a separate mailing list for medical professionals. Thus, Lena's website was both a personal 'social profile', an archive, and a social document aimed at building international solidarity to change the situation in Ukraine and educating and connecting local trans* people.

Lena is an example of a scholar and community expert who fostered knowledge production on hormonal, social and surgical transition, as well as created technological possibilities for safe communication and community-building. The Internet's development, which took place alongside offline grassroots initiatives, helped somewhat to 'level' the epistemological inequality that existed between the Global North and the ex-Soviet space. On the one hand, multiple online 'shadow libraries' were created in the 1990s, continuing the *samizdat* tradition of D.I.Y. book digitisation and translation mentioned in the previous section. On the other hand, major scientific journals gained an online presence, which brought them 'closer' to countries like Ukraine. In the 1990s, Lena was able to access articles from open-access endocrinology scientific journals and was thus aware of the latest discussions and findings. The Internet also enabled direct contact with other scholars. Since 1996, Lena has been active on the Anglophone *Crone* mailing list on hormone replacement therapy for MtF and created and co-moderated the Anglophone MtF HRT mailing list.[10] She also took part in the 'trans-academic' UK mailing list on Jisc, thus being involved in and influencing international knowledge production on trans* medicine. This knowledge was then shared with trans* people and doctors via closed TGRus mailing lists.

On Lena's website, one can find different 'archaeological' layers of trans* and media histories. As discussed earlier, one of the main functions of the website was also to promote the new TGRus mailing list. However, making a website popular at a time when search engines were just developing required effort and determination. At the same time, some trans* creators led their digital lives only within one online 'ecosystem' (such as GeoCities), yet Lena's embrace of the cross-platform approach and both global and local digital partnerships guaranteed that her website could be easily found by users from any platform. Lena linked the website to the GeoCities Global TransgendeRing and to the Angelfire platform through the virtual 'award' banner. Following 2000, it was also listed under 'Ukraine' in Susana Marques's TV/CD/TS/TG World Directory.

Lena's website was also 'linked' to the emerging regional trans* Internet ecosystem. A curated section listed links to the webpages created by other trans* people from ex-Soviet countries – and they listed Lena's website on their pages in return. Such mutual collective

[10] Here and later, the information is sourced from Lena's website, her postings in different mailing lists, or my email correspondence with Lena (June 2024).

action boosted the popularity of all websites involved and brought more people into TGRus. Communicating via the TGRus mailing list, trans* people could inform each other about trusted doctors, hormone use, and legislative changes in their countries, as well as form long-lasting online and offline connections.

While TGRus became a popular trans* mailing list, Lena's website was visited almost 70,000 times from 1997 to 2000, and Lena created and ran both without Internet access. While Lena was lucky to have a personal computer, due to high Internet costs in Ukraine, she had access only to the email address service but not the online Internet. All local and international communication was carried out with the help of coding skills and filters that helped to source information from different networks. She used the 'accmail' service to access webpages via email, and developed a free 'mail2ftp' service that enabled her and other users to create their own websites with just email access. This brings us back to the 'do-it-together' culture that started the Internet: a community of (trans*) computer scientists, software engineers and civic hackers (those who deploy information technology tools 'to enrich civic life or to solve particular problems of a civic nature', Hogge, 2010, p. 10).

Lena used her programming skills not just to create online spaces of communication for trans* people but to help them stay safe in those spaces. While TGRus was not designed as a secret group, Lena moderated access to it to protect participants' safety. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many trans* people did not own a personal computer with Internet access and used to work on computers or in public spaces such as Internet cafes. Information leaks would have created safety risks not just for the individual user but for the whole community of TGRus. Therefore, Lena designed a software package that encrypted emails and data stored on the computer and shared it freely on her website, specifying that it could also be used by 'any representatives of sexual minorities'. She also gave consultations to those trans* users who were not tech-savvy about the use of encryption. Lena's encryption software was probably helpful for many people beyond trans* users at the dawn of the Internet. And it has been invaluable for sustaining trans* communication and communities in the ex-Soviet space.

While the previous section pointed to trans* Internet users as knowledge producers, community librarians, archivists, and makers, this section explored the embeddings of Internet and trans* autonomous D.I.Y. health care practices. 'Zooming in' on Lena's website and her role as a scholar and community expert in early digital trans* communities foregrounds the contributions trans* people like Lena made to the fields of endocrinology, medicine, computer science and Internet development. While the focus of the section was on mutual aid in health care, one can understand the cross-platform 'outreach' that Lena embedded into her website design, as well as the encryption software and information literacy she provided to the community, as practices of care. Such practices of digital care not only enabled trans* people to find their community in the vast sea of the early Internet and to make their lives more liveable but also changed the fabric of the Internet and ensured that the community itself would be well equipped to protect itself in the future. In conclusion, I will address the significance of these practices in the current moment.

5 From dawn to dusk and back again

In the article, I explored trans* communication and communities in ex-Soviet space, with a focus on the early Internet, do-it-yourself and do-it-together practices and mutual aid. I have shown how trans* users from Ukraine were not just passive recipients of 'Western' knowledge, using the Internet solely for communication purposes. They actively influenced global knowledge production, provided technological solutions, and sustained a collective do-it-together ethos crucial for trans* communities.

Decades later, the commercial web has completely replaced the early forms of the Internet discussed in the article. Just like its media predecessors, the Internet is now at the heart of communication and communities around the world – including trans* communities. A plethora of social networking websites and apps have appeared and made forums and mailing lists seem outdated. Contemporary AI-powered search engines allow us to search the web effortlessly in seconds. This creates the illusion of the infinite possibilities of the Internet as the invisible wireless communication system that flows across borders and 'lives in the cloud'. However, this idea is far from reality. In the 21st century, submarine and terrestrial Internet cables (see Starosielski, 2015), satellites and cell phone towers, the data they carry, access to this data, and Internet architecture depend on transnational companies, national regulation, and geopolitical factors that directly affect trans* lives and communities.

Russian internal and external politics, including its invasion of Ukraine, is a significant threat to trans* communities. Trans* people in Ukraine are under direct attack. The threat of physical destruction is combined with economic vulnerability (Iryskina, 2023). While Ukrainian legislation regarding gender recognition has somewhat improved, hormone replacement therapy is still the necessary condition for document change. Yet the war has worsened the shortage of endocrinologists and limited access to medical services for those in need of body modifications (Iryskina, 2023). Abroad, Ukrainian trans* refugees may struggle to get medical help and gender recognition. This means that trans* people in and from Ukraine, like years ago, often rely on D.I.Y. hormone replacement therapy and mutual aid networks made possible by the Internet.

At the same time, access to these networks can be limited or risky for trans* people. Electricity cuts caused by Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure affect the amount of time one can spend online. Following China and Iran, Russia is pursuing the project of creating a sovereign Internet, which means rerouting cyberspace on the occupied territories and integrating them into the Russian network (see Limonier et al., 2021). Surveillance, website blocking and limiting or distorting search results (Makhortykh et al., 2022) in Russia and on the territories it has occupied, combined with openly transphobic legislation, endangers trans* users and suppresses ways of building transnational solidarity.

The Russian information war and cyberattacks spur investment into cybersecurity and national legislation on cybersecurity, both in Ukraine and globally. The securitisation of the Internet that is taking place globally is happening alongside the digitisation of identity. Identity, tax, migration, medical and other documents are migrated to online systems that are sometimes merged, which makes trans* people even more vulnerable. Likewise,

profit-driven corporations that control and manipulate social media algorithms limit users' exposure to specific 'bubbles' and apply policies of validating one's identity online have been shown to discriminate against trans* people (Dame-Griff, 2023, pp. 180–181). Finally, the conservative turn and global anti-gender mobilisation (see Hemmings, 2020) are targeting trans* people specifically, and the Internet is weaponised as a tool for misinformation campaigns. The tendencies we can observe urge us to think not just about preserving and re-inventing our community librarianship, information and media literacy, cross-platform outreach, digital security and other practices mentioned or unmentioned in this article. While Lena's website, TGRus, and other trans* mutual aid networks continue to exist, shape-shifting since the dawn of the Internet and to its dusk, it is the network of imperialisms, capitalism and the normative gender system that many of us need help uprooting.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the editors and anonymous peer reviewers for their comments, to Airi Triisberg and Viktorija Kolbešnikova for pointing to important sources, and to Lena for her time, correspondence and commenting on the draft of this article.

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The cruising past of men seeking same-sex encounters under Albanian communism

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 24–39.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1234
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

Despite the growing sexuality-related scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the history of non-normative sexualities under state socialism remains theorized mainly through totalizing narratives. These problematic discourses have contributed to the theorization of LGBT+ experience in the CEE region solely through narratives of oppression, criminalization, and persecution of homosexuality, therefore emptying the history of CEE from any development of LGBT+ activism and by rendering the existence of non-normative sexualities even more invisible. I argue that in contrast to such essentialist representations, which in turn are juxtaposed with representations of the West as a homoerotic paradise, there were also different forms of political resistance that contributed to sexual emancipation in state-socialist countries. For this reason, I depart from Western-centric understandings of conventional forms of political organizing and take as a vantage point the cruising areas where men sought to fulfill same-sex desires under the oppressive regime in communist Albania. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, I conceptualize these urban spaces not only as areas of sexual encounter but as grounds of political resistance, therefore 'queering' the forms of grassroots politics within the geo-temporality of state-socialism in Albania.

Keywords: state socialism; Albania; homoeroticism; grassroots politics; sexual citizenship

1 Introduction

Under the rule of communist leader Enver Hoxha, Albania constituted one of the most authoritarian regimes in the Eastern Bloc (De Waal, 2005, p. 5). Hoxha sealed Albania off from the rest of the socialist republics and the world. The communist party followed this isolationist policy for half a century and established *Sigurimi*[1] (a secret police system emu-

[1] *Sigurimi* (Security) was the former State Security Police in Albania. It constituted an intricate network of around thirteen thousand uniformed employees, undercover agents, and informers. An estimated one in four Albanians were working for this agency, usually as informants, with recorded instances of husbands who spied on their wives, pupils on teachers, etc. (Abrahams, 2016, p. 19).

lating the Soviet KGB) and other technologies of social control. The women's emancipation model was part of the state rhetoric during communist Albania, which involved policies that supported women's participation in the labor market and military (Këlliçi & Danaj, 2016). This model, developed throughout different stages under the communist rule, failed to promote gender equality by placing a double burden of productive and reproductive labor on women (ibid., p. 144).

As stated by several researchers, there was no form of sexual education in socialist Albania, and speaking about intimacy and sex was considered taboo (Shkreli & Çunga, 2023). Even though women and girls could get an education and go to work, they were still forced to marry and give birth to children (Woodcock, 2016, p. 82). The criminalization of abortion and male homosexual acts was furthered from the establishment of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania in 1944 until the end of the regime. As Lišková (2018, p. 2) argues, the state's socialist morals sanctioned the nuclear family and marriage. They glorified a specifically asexual socialist reproduction in alignment with the regime's requirements for the labor force.

Despite the growing body of scholarship in sexuality studies and (post)-communism, the history of non-normative sexualities in socialist Albania remains little explored. In its attempt to deconstruct the myth of queer invisibility, this article focuses on subaltern queer lives and the forms of resistance that emerged against compulsory heterosexuality in communist Albania. Held common beliefs about the history of social movement for sexual rights follow a linear Western narrative of emancipation. These discourses need to be challenged. For this reason, I depart from Western-centric understandings of conventional forms of grassroots politics and take as a vantage point the cruising strips, where men sought to fulfill same-sex desires under oppressive communist rule. This article focuses on disciplinary mechanisms in the legal realm which sought to control and regulate male 'homosexual acts' under the communist regime and how marginalized sexualities subverted these regulatory schemes through the appropriation of urban territories. I argue that despite the social and legal repression, some gay men exercised their sexual agency by navigating the heteronormative discourses through the transformation of urban spaces into contact zones for sexual encounters.

I begin this paper by introducing Albania's broader political and social context under the communist regime. I unpack the anxieties generated by queer sexualities for state power in the Socialist Republic of Albania and critically explore why the latter was fixated on regulating certain sexual acts. Following a Foucauldian-informed analysis I critically examine how the Albanian state exercised bio-political power by governing reproductive rights through a pro-natalist policy and imposing some of the most draconian laws in the Eastern bloc against consensual homosexual acts (Blinken OSA, 2021). I proceed in the next section by outlining the conceptual background and the methodology based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted for one year between 2022 and 2023 with homosexual men who lived in Tirana during state socialism and heterosexual men willing to share stories relevant to the research. Drawing on my ethnographic study, I argue that despite the official ideology of a 'de-sexualized' totalitarian regime, there was resistance toward institutionalized heteronormativity. This article contributes to the body of literature in sexuality studies in communist Eastern Europe by developing a deeper understanding of queer subjectivities in the context of Albania.

2 Notes on terminology

Like any history of sexuality, finding the suitable vernacular remains a difficult task. The shifting terminologies constitute a challenge for this article in building bridges between the past and present and linguistically navigating between Albanian and English. As Věra Sokolová (2021, p. 15) illustrates in the ethnographic work with the queer community in socialist Czechoslovakia, queer people did not use terms like 'lesbian,' 'gay,' or even 'homosexual' to describe themselves because these terms became popular only after the fall of communism. During the oral interviews conducted in my ethnographic study, informants identified with words such as *gej* (gay), which are commonly used nowadays, even though narrators admitted that these labels were introduced and became known after 1991 when Albania opened its borders to the world. A common offensive term attached to gay men during communism was *pederast,* which was also part of the legal vocabulary used by the Party-State in defining and punishing gay men.

During state socialism, the word *dylber* (which can be literally translated as 'rainbow') was used to refer to men who engaged in homoerotic sexual practices, and it is also a label that some of the research participants used to refer to themselves in addition to phrases such as *burra që shkojnë me burra* ('men who go and sleep with other men'). As Piro Rexhepi observes in their book *White Enclosures: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality Along the Balkan Route* (2023), *dylber* had entered the discourses about queerness during Ottoman rule in Albania. As a coinage, *dylber* referred to male admirers of *bejtexhi,* who were Ottoman-era poets performing Albanian poetry through Arabic script and addressing homoerotic tropes. The *bejtexhi's* relation to his *dylbers* was poetic and erotic while frequently equating their love for *dylbers* with piety for Islam. The term was later on co-opted by Albanian nationalists in discursively pathologizing same-sex desires, framing them as 'remnants' of the old ways of life and as sexualities incompatible with the hetero-normative regime emerging in the late socialist period (Rexhepi, 2023, pp. 71–79).

Like other researchers in sexuality scholarship, I use the word *queer* as a fitting term that captures the best the diversity of narrators' sexual experiences. The term *queer* has emerged as a dominant conceptual framework in the Global North and can be associated with different definitions (Brown & Browne, 2016, p. 2). I share an understanding of the term which perceive *queer* as a mode of thinking that allows us to question the ways how desires, identities, and practices are produced and help us conceptualize sexuality as dynamic, fluid and historically contingent.

As for the use of the label 'Central and Eastern Europe', there are many terms in use denoting what the CEE might stand for, ranging from geographical meaning (Eastern Europe; East; Balkans, etc.) and historical (post-/former communist; post-/former Soviet; Soviet/communist satellite countries; former communist bloc, etc). These terms stem from the entanglements of history and geography and should not be perceived as stable and fixed categories. Undoubtedly, the former 'East bloc' did not constitute a bloc at all, as it is problematic to lump together all former communist countries under some broad claims or to enclose CEE within fixed geographical/historical boundaries. Hence, the label CEE is a relational concept used to insinuate hierarchies of power and resistance. The geographical/historical position is used in this paper to critically examine the construction of CEE as an object of 'Western pedagogy' (Kulpa, 2011, p. 49) and to problematize the imposition

of Western hegemonic frameworks in the conceptualization of non-Western realities and the ways how the Western time and space are perceived as universal. I use terms like 'communist,' 'Party-State,' 'state-socialism,' and the label 'Eastern Bloc' for naming political and economic systems in the former socialist republics during the Cold War.

3 Queering the People's Socialist Republic of Albania

The hegemonic Western time of progress places the history of LGBTIQ+ movements, which took place in Global North countries, as the only legitimate path to progress that others should follow. As many scholars argue, history is not a linear movement from oppression to liberation, but it has its local nuances and looks different in every country (Kulpa & Mizielinska, 2012, p. 89). Recent developments in the field of sexuality studies in (and about) CEE have recognized the need for *localization* of sexual politics based on their respective geo-temporalities (ibid., p. 5). This localization of sexual politics interrogates universalist discourses that have emerged from hyper-normalized Euro-American queer theory and help us to understand how queer politics play out in the local context. Hence, several scholars have argued in favor of a reconceptualization of sexual politics by contextualizing sexualities within local geographical and linguistic contexts and rejecting the 'Stonewall era' and other Western frameworks as signifiers and references in conceptualizing non-Western cultures (Szulc, 2019, p. 33).

Following queer and Soviet perspectives, Kondakov (2017) argues that grassroots politics in Soviet time were differently arranged in comparison to conventional forms of political participation in the West. Kondakov's analysis enhances the theoretical framework of sexual citizenship (Bell & Binnie, 2000, p. 4) by critically examining the relationship between one's sexuality and political participation in the USSR context. In any of its readings, citizenship constitutes a disciplinary discourse that makes individual political subjects susceptible to a pre-arranged set of norms and ideologies. In the outlined framework by Kondakov, the acts of resistance toward the disciplinary regime of citizenship derive from the mutually constitutive relation between queer sexualities and material urban spaces that the former claimed for the construction of subaltern urban experiences. Despite the heterosexualized urban space, queer men in USSR joined struggles for the reconfiguration of their restricted citizenship by occupying and designating alternative urban material spaces (Kondakov, 2017). Therefore, resistance did not necessarily manifest as formal political organizing but constituted an alternative form of protesting, resulting in the re-organization of Soviet city space.

This conceptualization departs from the Western liberal tradition of claiming rights and inclusion into 'full' citizenship, which would constitute an empty signifier in the USSR context, where the right to assembly and street-protesting were curtailed. As argued by Muñoz (2020, p. 8) a reconceptualization of queerness in non-Western realities should depart from identity politics in order to focus on dis-identificatory performances enacted by the minoritarian subjects in disrupting hegemonic discourses of state power. Even though the government guaranteed freedom of assembly and association in its second adopted constitution in 1976 (Andersen, 2005), the political environment was hostile and repressive in communist Albania. Homosexuality remained outlawed until the fall of

communism and men would go to jail for having sex with other men. Under such circumstances, it was unimaginable for Albanians to self-organize around sexual freedom and follow street protests. Nonetheless, men who desired queerly were not plain victims of heteronomative state power and discourses but silently subverted these discourses by searching and appropriating urban spaces to live and embrace their sexuality.

This collection of cruising spaces provides an alternative image of the oppressive Hoxha regime by depicting these sites as places of queer sexualities, which were deemed to be suppressed under state socialism. Following Kondakov's analytical framework, I argue that such erotic topographies in socialist Tirana, where the intimate life became public, constitute a 'silent' form of resistance. Following the Foucauldian informed analysis, in order to deconstruct the 'totalizing' view of power (Kelly, 2022, p. 50), I show that despite the 'de-sexualized' totalitarianism of the communist regime in Albania, no subjectivities were completely powerless and without any agency. As argued by Foucault, power contradicts itself and manifests incongruence by getting involved in the process which tries to annihilate or marginalize some individual(s), and simultaneously participates in the process of establishing and identifying these subjectivities (Foucault, 1977, p. 197).

As highlighted by academics in geographies of sexuality scholarship, human sexualities differ geographically, with space playing a central role in shaping and conditioning sexual desires and identities (Brown & Browne, 2016, p. 1). Scholars argue that spatial relationships produce sexed bodies, and sex itself is policed and relegated to the private sphere through a public/private divide. Under socialism, public spaces were defined by heteronormative images and designed to foster the spirit of collectivism and other socialist ideals. The heterosexualization of the public space was informed by subtle regulative mechanisms (gazing, staring, etc.), which spread discomfort among queer men by conveying to the latter that they do not belong to society at large (Kulpa & Mizielinska, 2012, p. 154).

These disciplinary mechanisms established self-control among queer men and contributed to the heteronormative geography of the public space. Despite this, some queer men transformed public sites into contact zones driven by same-sex pursuit, using some of the city's areas as grounds for 'unconventional' behavior that defied socialist values. Numerous studies (Browne & Brown, 2016) have focused on documenting subaltern urban experiences of gay men pursuing their sexual desires in (semi-) public spaces, where they searched for and engaged with their sexual partners. According to Aldrich (2004), there is a correlation between urban centers and homosexual expression. Despite the official 'sexless' ideology of state socialism, men utilized urban landscapes, which were conducive to homosexual expression.

4 The regulation and policing of male same-sex eros in communist Albania

To shed light on the possibilities for sexual freedom in the socialist period, one has to explore how the Communist regime shaped the lived experiences of queer individuals in Albania. Existing research on sexuality has directed scarce attention to the effects of legal regulations and stigma attached to queerness on individuals. The archival documents available in Albania impose significant limitations in developing the history of sexuality.

Former State Security files remain under-analyzed and therefore we have little knowledge on police surveillance on queers. The Communist Party[2] formed the government in 1948 and ruled the country until 1991 when the communist regime collapsed (Rejmer, 2018, p. 181). Enver Hoxha was the First Secretary of the party, who ruled the country until his death in 1985. Hoxha's rule sought to establish a totalitarian regime since the early years of socialism (O'Donnell, 1995), and authoritative discourses informed the official ideology. It became increasingly difficult to speak against the official ideology, including for those who governed.

The communist goal of reconstructing everyday life did not only manifest in economic terms through the proletarian revolution, but also sought to transform how citizens thought, acted, worked, and talked about sex. The Party-State deployed purges and police surveillance as a form of social control against those deemed as opponents of ideological conformity (Mëhilli, 2017, p.6). The omnipresent 'watchful' eye of *Sigurimi* and the purge with its review of family biographies would contribute to a mentality of suspicion and ideological orthodoxy. Denouncing someone suspected of disobeying the regime's rule became a way to show loyalty to the party (Woodcock, 2016, p. 80).

The criminalization of 'pederastia' predates communist rule. The first attempts from the Albanian state to regulate 'pederastia' were recorded in 1925 (Pinderi, 2017) resulting from various reports drafted by officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs directed to the Council of Ministers. These reports emphasized the need to propose a bill legislating against sexual activity between two men (ibid.). The 'anti-sodomy legislation' was subjected to minor changes during communism (Hazizaj, 2019), but at no point in its development was the question of lesbian relations explicitly raised. Just as the Soviet legislation that exempted female homoerotic desires from its regulatory schemes (Healey, 2004, p. 13), communist leadership in Albania criminalized same-sex conduct only between men. Leaders did not perceive a need to prohibit lesbian relations legally. The policing and regulation of male same-sex desires was done through Article 137 on 'pederastia' pertaining to the Penal Code of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (Figure 1). According to the statistical records from National Archives in Albania, there were around 270 men sentenced under Article 137 throughout the decades of socialism (Dervishi, 2010). This Article included the following (in the original terminology):

- sexual acts falling under consensual sodomy (punishable with up to 10 years of imprisonment);
- sexual acts between men committed violently and non-consensually, and depraved acts with children or minors (the consenting age was 14 years) (punishable with five to 15 years of imprisonment);

The so called 'consensual sodomy' was punishable with up to 10 years of imprisonment, whereas pedophilia and rape were punished from 5 up to 15 years of imprisonment (Hazizaj, 2019). Even though the last two categories constituted forms of child abuse and

[2] The Communist Party of Albania (in Albanian: Partia Komuniste e Shqipërisë) was established in 1941. In 1948 it changed its name to Party of Labor of Albania (DBpedia, 2007).

sexuality-related felonies, these sexual offenses were merged with 'anti-sodomy' legislation. Overall, these legal acts pertained to the 'Crimes against the Social Morality' cluster. As illustrated in this section, some of these illegal acts coalesced into those punished by the law against pedophilia. Hence, the legal framework perpetuated the pathologization of male 'sodomy.'

In 1977 the political leadership introduced harsher legal punishment against 'sodomy' by re-classifying acts of 'pederasty' as illegal conduct against the administrative order of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (Blinken OSA & Háttér Archive and Library, 2021). Specifically, the Penal Code stipulated that 'pederastic acts' were punishable with up to 10 years of imprisonment. Hence, Albania became one of the countries with the harshest legal sanctions against homosexuality among the former socialist republics. The further policing of sexuality in 1977 can be attributed to a combination of historical developments. If we contextualize these draconian measures within the domestic environment of the late 1970s in Albania and within the larger geopolitics, we come across an entanglement of historical events that might have instigated a further crackdown on non-procreative sex as explained further.

Following the Sino-Albanian split,[3] these years find communist Albania as a growing insecure state after it had broken diplomatic ties with communist China, its last ally, before withdrawing further into isolation and with economic aid from allies coming to a halt (Mëhilli, 2019). After the break with China, Hoxha's military paranoia reached incredible levels with the construction of thousands of bunkers (Woodcock, 2016, p. 82). Public anxieties instigated by Hoxha routinely fed the collective fear and paranoia of a possible threat and attack from neighboring countries leading to the further militarization of society. Despite a pro-natalist policy, that the Party-State had embraced since the establishment of communism, the fertility rate in Albania started to drop from 1960 onwards (Falkingham & Gjonça, 2001). These circumstances prompted the political leadership to worry about the falling birthrates midst a growing need for further militarization of the society.

The regime's paranoia culminated with the Constitution of the People's Republic of Albania declaring Marxism-Leninism as the country's official ideology with heavy militarization as its underpinning principle and maternity imposed as a socialist duty (Andersen, 2005). Article 33 of the Constitution stipulated that education was based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology and combined formal education with military training (ibid.). Military service and constant training for the defense of the socialist homeland were compulsory under Article 63 for all the citizens of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. In accordance with the Constitution (ibid.), marriage and the family were under the protection of the state and society, hence reproduction and compulsory heterosexuality were prioritized and institutionalized under Hoxha's rule.

[3] Initially a satellite of Yugoslavia (which helped in the establishment of the communist party in Albania), the Party-State in Albania broke the ties with Tito in 1948. Then Hoxha became an ally with the Soviet Union (1960–1961) and lastly aligned diplomatically with China (1976–1978) until the Sino-Albanian relations ended in 1978 (Mëhilli, 2019).

As argued by Foucault, this embodiment of power over population by the governments is institutionalized through restrictive sanctions and techniques that aim to control human sexuality and reproduction (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). According to Foucault such an understanding of power constitutes biopower and biopolitics that find expression in the form of regulatory controls foregrounded by compulsory heterosexuality that aim to subjugate non-procreative sexual desires. The decline in fertility, coupled with the national need to establish militaristic self-reliance, might have increased the state's interest in clamping down on non-procreative sex activity in communist Albania. Reading these developments through the Foucauldian framework of bio-politics, one can unpack the investment of the Party-State in assigning itself as the controller of population growth by regulating reproduction and punishing sexualities not conforming to the heteronormative order.

At the same time, the newly imposed housing policies under communism had transformative effects on Albanians by making communal apartments popular and by placing family members in proximity to each other. These new material conditions, marked by the impossibility of privacy, affected the sexual experiences of its citizens. In addition, the confiscation policy followed by the Party-State is another factor that might have impacted the lives of queer men in the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. According to Mëhilli (2017, p. 32), who provides a historical overview of the governmental policy on urban planning, a widening inequality in housing unfolded during socialism. Since the communist leadership came to power, local council officials had confiscated housing units under the pretense that 'residents had too much of a living space' (ibid., p. 31). These officials displaced families from their property to other houses, even though the authorities did not have the right to confiscate private belongings. In some other cases, these officials confiscated the property of arrested individuals without receiving approval from the central government, making expropriation a de-facto reality (ibid.). Internal exile was another common method applied to the relatives of those convicted for 'political crimes.' Hence one can understand how living arrangements were shaped by these policies and restricted one's access to housing depending on the socio-economic status of the person.

In her ethnography on communism in Albania, Woodcock chronicles different aspects of life during socialist times. Some of the narrators testified to the difficulty of getting a residence permit in Tirana during the socialist times Woodcock (2016, p. 70). Based on oral histories she found out that many people constantly tried to find the opportunity to live in the capital city since it was the center of political and cultural life. In addition to this, the author notes that in cities such as Kukës (and in other places too) the lack of access to private apartments forced many couples to walk through the fields or find empty barns where they could sit alone and enjoy the intimacy. This urge to find privacy is a sentiment that I noticed in my research as well. Participants argued that the lack of private space exacerbated by the stringent housing policy might have pushed some of them to seek public spaces such as parks and public toilets to live and perform their sexualities, thus bringing a proliferation of cruising strips in Tirana.

5 Shaping the ethnographic research among queer men from communist Albania

The past decade has witnessed a shift in the construction of collective memory of subaltern queer lives (Arondekar, 2005), by collecting oral histories, who have been rendered illegitimate subjects of archivization. The research material I analyze in this paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork consisting of in-depth semi-structured interviews focused on personal experiences of men pursuing same-sex desires in the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. These personal narratives have enabled me as an ethnographer to reconstruct a network of cruising sites in Tirana during communist Albania. During my fieldwork in Tirana, I conducted eight interviews with narrators aged between 36 to 81 years old. Most of the interviews took place in person between June 2022 and July 2023, except for one interview scheduled online due to the interlocutor living abroad. Several interlocutors preferred to meet in an informal setting such as a café. I ensured fully informed consent of my participants and secure data management and storage of the empirical data. Before I analyze these interviews in the following section, it is essential to describe the characteristics of the group of narrators whom I interviewed.

Three interview narrators self-identified as gay men (born between 1940 and 1970) who spent their youth years in Tirana during communism. Two of the interview participants still live in the capital city, and the third narrator resides in Greece, where he migrated together with his family after the fall of communism. I reached out to them through my personal contacts with LGBT+ communities and activists in Tirana. The interviewees' names have been altered in order to retain their anonymity. Only one of the informants, Tore (81 y/o), was 'out' (in the contemporary understanding of 'coming out') as a gay man during communism. In contrast, the other two, Sotiraq (63 y/o) and Ari (65 y/o), said they had to disguise their real identities due to social stigma. Therefore, they were forced to lead double lives as heterosexuals, with only a few family relatives and acquaintances knowing about their sexual orientations.

The perceived experience of 'otherness' is a common denominator in their accounts, alongside the use of public areas in Tirana where the narrators engaged in (sometimes anonymous) male same-sex acts. While there was a unitary legal framework, narrators experienced structural discrimination differently. The participants' narratives differed in their encounters with the state structures. Because of being openly a gay man during communism, Tore was arrested at the age of twenty by the communist authorities. He was convicted of 'pederasty' and was sentenced to three years of imprisonment. Tore gave a detailed account of the circumstances of his arrest:

> Apparently, somebody had spied on me at the Party branch. I learned years later that the ticket officer at one cinema in Tirana was an undercover agent for *Sigurimi*, who overheard two young men speaking about me. They were talking about a night in Pezë (a village twenty kilometers away from the city center) where I had joined a sex party with five other men. Later, a letter was issued and sent to my house, and I was legally prosecuted. The authorities accused me of corrupting the youth and forcing young men to have sex with me, which was a false claim.

It must be underscored that these personal narratives cannot paint a complete picture of queer life in state socialism, as these accounts are confined to the capital city and do not represent voices from other cities and areas. In another interview conducted with Xheni Karaj, a contemporary lesbian activist and executive director of 'The Alliance against Discrimination of LGBT' in Albania, closely in touch with community members, Karaj argued that 'due to the stigma and internalized trauma, gay men from the communist period hesitate to talk about their experiences, and only a few of them have decided to open up and reach out to local organizations'. One of the reasons is homophobia, which according to recent surveys (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024), remains rampant in Albania and forces many members of the LGBTI+ community to lead a double life due to fear of discrimination, harassment, and social stigma.

In order to gather insights into the topic, the other narrators included in the ethnographic study are acquaintances and family relatives who accepted the invitation to share stories of men who were outed as 'gay' in the communities where they lived in Tirana and Elbasan. During the family visits, I conducted specific interviews to raise issues that I wanted to discuss later in the recording. Sometimes family relatives would share stories in informal conversations without me starting the recording. These interviews focused on their perceptions and personal memories of queer men and stories concerning the cruising sites. All the narrators lived (mostly) in Tirana during the communist regime and were aged between 50–70 years old. They all held university degrees, and six of them self-identified as heterosexual men, with one narrator identifying as a lesbian (Xheni, 37 y/o). According to the informants, there were cases of heterosexual men who were interrogated by the *Sigurimi* just because they were spotted near individuals who were deemed as non-heterosexual.

My research is limited in several ways: I included a small sample of participants. Interviews were carried out in Tirana and Elbasan and excluded participants from other rural areas. Whereas one of the limitations of the empirical data gathering is the low number of the participants of the queer community it remains a challenge for scholars to reach out to queer men willing to share their personal narratives; hence this methodological obstacle deserves more attention in future academic work undertaken on 'sexual dissidents'. The scope of my ethnographic fieldwork is therefore narrow and excludes personal narratives on lesbian eros. Previous research (Healey, 2004, p. 73) on lesbian love in other countries during state socialism demonstrates that women, unlike men, did not use urban public spaces to express homoeroticism. Concealed from the public eye, lesbian networks were mainly confined to the private domain, while the queer urban communities were exclusively male. The prevalence of male subcultures in the cruising sites contributes to methodological obstacles in researching how lesbians self-organized and pursued their sexual desires. Undoubtedly, new avenues of research should focus on female same sex-desires in order to disrupt lesbian invisibility and to initiate an understanding of why the Party-State did not perceive a need to include female same-sex relations in its regulatory schemes.

In order to interpret the personal narratives of the qualitative research, I use a Foucauldian-informed interpretative practice developed by Maria Tamboukou (2008). This framework of narrative epistemology enables researchers to understand narratives as: effects of power and knowledge; modalities of power; and as productive and constitutive

of subject (ibid.). Narrative epistemology suggests that narratives or stories are not just a way of conveying information but are integral to the construction and interpretation of knowledge. It enables us to understand the process of narrative formation as crucial for unpacking how knowledge is produced and reconfigured, how storytelling shapes our understanding of reality and untangling the complex relationship between knowledge, identity, and social context. In this light, I am interested to see how my participants' narratives reflect, and are limited by, existing power structures and larger social discourses about sexuality or how they resist these discourses. On the other hand, the narratives of my informants are not only spaces where discourses circulate, but also the tools that potentiate the negotiation of those discourses.

6 'How we survived communism and even had sex' – cruising strips in Tirana

Contrary to the common belief, the circumstances in former communist countries provided more political grounds for resistance than what is commonly believed (Sokolová, 2021, p. 19). This also applies to Albania. Despite the conviction of hundreds of men on 'sodomy' charges during communism in Albania, there appeared to be an urban homosexual subculture taking shape in Tirana. This subculture was known for its sexualized territories and use of urban space. Many informants claimed that under such circumstances, where freedom of assembly was not allowed, the only forms of resistance in subverting the norms of the sex-gender system were confined to the urban spaces (and even there were marginal). Queer men established clandestine networks by constructing alternative spaces to exercise sexual agency. As Sotiraq – one of the people I interviewed – claimed, queer men had little sense of a community due to the lack of terminological and political means for mobilizing and that finding a sexual partner was a challenge due to the fear of legal punishment:

> I have been lucky to have a family who knew of my sexuality but did not kick me out of the house. Let's say that they were somehow silently supporting me. I remember them talking and referring to me with the following expressions 'Well, he is that type of bloke.' You should be aware that we didn't know about terms like *gay* or *homosexual* in that period. These terms came to us very late, almost when communism was overthrown. Just imagine that until 1991 we did not even have a sense of community or collective identity as gay men. You should get the gist of that system: *pederasts* were persecuted by the law. Therefore, we were forced to experience our sexuality 'underground'‼

According to most of the interview participants, Tirana offered more opportunities for sexual pleasure as a city in comparison with smaller towns and areas in the countryside:

> Tirana was a liberal town compared to other cities and villages in Albania. The cruising sites were mainly the green parks, especially the zones around the artificial lake. Or the cinema. I was very fond of cultural events, and I was flirting with men on these occasions. Generally, 'we' were cruising in areas that were not well-lit to avoid any by-passer gazing. The parents of some of us knew where their kids were going when the twilight approached but approved of it silently… (Sotiraq, 63 y/o)

As illustrated in Sotiraq's testimonial, Tirana had several public spaces where men with same-sex attractions could look for sexual partners, ranging from public bathrooms, theaters, recreational parks, etc. The area around the artificial lake, away from the city center, was one of the most well-known cruising strips due to the surrounding bushes and trees, which were conducive for men to engage in sexual intercourse and avoid the by-passers gazing. In these locations men would create spaces of communication which were not allowed to be publicly performed. In Tore's account, theaters would be a contact zone where men would socialize with other men and flirt:

> We used coded language to show interest and attraction… some gestures included winking, shaking the head… I have slept with a lot of dancers and actors. I would usually wait for them at the theater entrance after the play, and then we would go to an apartment. When neighbors saw men entering my flat, they usually whispered, '*ja i erdhën…*' (here they come again). A peculiar place that I would use to have sex was the school. My partner and I would go inside the schools after twilight by the time all pupils had gone home. I would drive those men crazy. 'There is no one like Tore,' they would say. Let me tell you that those schools' walls have been shaken many times…

While reminiscing, Ari recalls how cruising grounds were the place of his first sexual experience with another man. He was frequently visiting and strolling around these cruising strips observing other men engaging in erotic acts and admits that such experience helped him to recognize his attraction toward men. Interestingly, the informants do not recall any memory of police patrolling the cruising sites, even though it was generally known that these were sexualized territories for queer men. Nonetheless, Sotiraq and Ari shared their perceived fear of being followed whenever they would go and cruise for lovers in parks.

In a Foucauldian framework, panoptic technology instills the awareness that you are being surveilled all the time, even in cases where one might think that is exempted from surveillance (Chaput, 2009). Due to the 'watchful eye' of *Sigurimi* – the focal point where the supervision originates from – no citizen can ever know if they are being supervised or not (Caluya, 2010), especially in a context like communist Albania, where the secret police bugged thousands of citizen's homes and recruited around two hundred thousand informers (Rejmer, 2022, p. 27). As Foucault illustrates through the 'carceral continuum' (Foucault, 1978, p. 201), the power is ubiquitous and disperses in a capillary form. Hence supervision is exercised on every level. With citizens fearing permanent surveillance, a need to prove to the party that they are loyal citizens to the socialist ideology emerges. The interviews from the qualitative research show that a sense of being 'permanently surveilled' from the Party-State was present among heterosexual men whom I interviewed. As Piro points out, there were ways the state used different techniques of surveillance on men who pursued sex with other men:

> I lived in Elbasan between 1975 until the late 2000s. I remember one guy who worked in a grocery store. Everybody in the neighborhood knew about his sexuality, that he wanted to have sex with men. People called him 'Beni the butthole.' I think he was supervised all the time. Personally, I never went to the shop where Beni worked because I was afraid of surveillance and being seen around him.

According to testimonials, even youth organizations such as the Democratic Front,[4] which were in charge of the political education of the masses during socialism, internalized the regulatory role of external authorities and ensured that the social norms of the communist society were respected. This punishment of citizens as sexual dissidents shows what Foucault frames as the automatic functioning of power (Foucault, 1977, p. 198). Nonetheless, there was resistance against the legal domain regulating male same-sex eros. There were myriad ways how queer men negotiated their sexual citizenship during the communist period, as exemplified by the narrator below:

> I get so annoyed when I listen to the youngsters nowadays who believe that the youth only suffered during the socialist regime. You know… we also had our glorious days during those years, and we resisted [referring to engaging in same-sex sexual acts – annotation by the author] in creative ways, despite the repression that the system produced. (Sotiraq)

As we can see from the participants' narratives, gatherings in private apartments were a privilege for only a few men seeking same-sex contacts. Given these circumstances, men resorted to public spaces and spatially organized to have sex together. The criminalization of sex between men by the Albanian law and 'ubiquitous' surveillance apparatus did not prevent men from gathering in certain locations used as sex contact spaces.

7 Conclusion

Drawing on my ethnographic study, I argue that despite the official ideology of a 'desexualized' totalitarian regime, there was resistance toward institutionalized heteronormativity. Contrary to the Western-centric understating of progress and sexual liberation, resistance to hostile laws goes beyond formal political organizing. It also includes the strategies of everyday resistance that queer men in former socialist republics showed by claiming urban spaces for themselves and subverting state power. Queer people had the opportunity to transgress norms of socialist prudishness that would allow them to exercise personal agency to some extent. The repressive sexual policies imposed by the Albanian Party-State in the socialist era did not prevent men from pursuing same-sex encounters in urban landscapes in Tirana. These public urban areas were transformed into transitory sites for sexual freedom. Queer men constructed private networks by gathering in public spaces and adopting various communication strategies, such as coded language.

This collection of cruising urban spaces shines a light on the oppressive Hoxha regime by contributing to the shaping of the history of communism. Following Kondakov's analytical framework, I argue that the urban spaces in socialist Tirana, where some men found ways to resist hostile laws, such as the criminalization of homosexuality, and claim spaces for themselves, are a 'silent' form of resistance.

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[4] Initially called 'The National Liberation Front,' this was regarded as the largest youth organization responsible for the social organization and the political education of the masses. In August 1945, it was renamed 'The Democratic Front' (Omari & Pollo, 1988, pp. 16–18).

The scholarship on queer lives during the socialist era remains under-theorized because the study of queer sexuality is in its infancy. Mapping and locating personal memories of queer men enables us as scholars to tap into the clandestine network of 'sexual dissidents' whose existence was forced underground by state power structures. For this reason, the cruising spaces should be perceived not merely as sexualized territories but as sites of collective memory, resistance, and subversion to the legal gaze of the Albanian communist state. This paper centers on sexuality as a legitimate analytical category in historical inquiry, which can enrich and transform the study of communism. Oral history as a methodological approach is crucial not only for its potential to fulfill blank spots of the communist past but it serves to give voice to marginalized identities. This work contributes to the body of literature on communist studies in Central and Eastern Europe with a substantive focus on Albania's history of sexuality. Building on oral history, this article offers new perspectives on the history of sexuality and state socialism in general in communist Albania.

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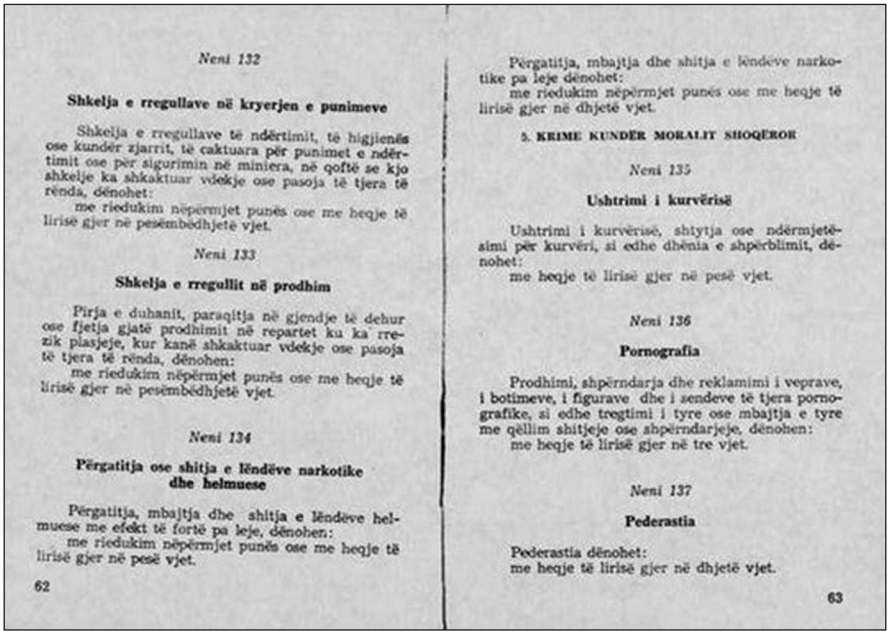
Appendix



Neni 132

Shkelja e rregullave në kryerjen e punimeve

Shkelja e rregullave të ndërtimit, të higjienës ose kundër zjarrit, të caktuara për punimet e ndërtimit ose për sigurimin në miniera, në qoftë se kjo shkelje ka shkaktuar vdekje ose pasoja të tjera të rënda, dënohet:
me riedukim nëpërmjet punës ose me heqje të lirisë gjer në pesëmbëdhjetë vjet.

Neni 133

Shkelja e rregullit në prodhim

Pirja e duhanit, paraqitja në gjendje të dehur ose fjetja gjatë prodhimit në repartet ku ka rrezik plasjeje, kur kanë shkaktuar vdekje ose pasoja të tjera të rënda, dënohen:
me riedukim nëpërmjet punës ose me heqje të lirisë gjer në pesëmbëdhjetë vjet.

Neni 134

Përgatitja ose shitja e lëndëve narkotike dhe helmuese

Përgatitja, mbajtja dhe shitja e lëndëve helmuese me efekt të fortë pa leje, dënohen:
me riedukim nëpërmjet punës ose me heqje të lirisë gjer në pesë vjet.

62

Përgatitja, mbajtja dhe shitja e lëndëve narkotike pa leje dënohet:
me riedukim nëpërmjet punës ose me heqje të lirisë gjer në dhjetë vjet.

5. KRIME KUNDËR MORALIT SHOQËROR

Neni 135

Ushtrimi i kurvërisë

Ushtrimi i kurvërisë, shtytja ose ndërmjetësimi për kurvëri, si edhe dhënia e shpërblimit, dënohet:
me heqje të lirisë gjer në pesë vjet.

Neni 136

Pornografia

Prodhimi, shpërndarja dhe reklamimi i veprave, i botimeve, i figurave dhe i sendeve të tjera pornografike, si edhe tregtimi i tyre ose mbajtja e tyre me qëllim shitjeje ose shpërndarjeje, dënohen:
me heqje të lirisë gjer në tre vjet.

Neni 137

Pederastia

Pederastia dënohet:
me heqje të lirisë gjer në dhjetë vjet.

63

Figure 1 Excerpt from the Albanian Penal Code (1977)

Source: exhibition print, Blinken OSA

Rasa Navickaitė

Gender complementarity paradigm and sexual deviance in late Soviet expert and pedagogical texts: The case of the Lithuanian SSR

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 40–54.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1244
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

Despite the official Communist proclamations of women's emancipation and equality of the sexes, the gender complementarity paradigm took hold in popular and expert discourses in state-socialist Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union starting at least with the 1970s. This article presents an analysis of the late Soviet expert and pedagogical texts in the context of the Lithuanian SSR from a feminist and queer historical perspective. It shows how the adoption of complimentary, yet strongly differentiated gender roles by men and women was seen as key to marital happiness and a healthy Communist society. It further demonstrates how the emphasis on the need to foster traditional gender roles was interrelated to homophobia, as homosexuality was seen to pose a threat to the proper functioning of masculinity and femininity, and a reason for the fading attraction between the 'opposite' sexes. The article shows how Soviet expert and pedagogical texts borrowed from and at times paralleled similar ideas on gender and sexuality as they appeared in scholarship produced in other countries of the Eastern bloc, but also in 'Western' contexts, such as the United States. It deconstructs the perception that the 'return to traditional gender roles' discourse is only a result of post-socialist conservatism, and instead shows it as intrinsic to the moralistic dogmas of Soviet sexual science and pedagogy.

Keywords: homosexuality; Soviet Union; sexual science; Lithuania; gender complementarity; homophobia

1 Introduction

Despite the official Communist proclamations of women's emancipation and equality of the sexes, the gender complementarity paradigm took hold in popular and expert discourses in state-socialist Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union starting at least with the 1970s. It is by now well-researched that sexology books on family life, published in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia during this period stressed the importance of 'natural' gender roles in ensuring both marital and societal harmony. The Soviet Union, including its Westernmost republics, like the Lithuanian SSR, was not an exception in this

regard. Decades before the rise of the post-socialist nationalist political rhetoric, which saw the rebirth of the nation as inseparable from the 'rebirth of the traditional family' (Žvinklienė, 2008), Soviet Lithuanian psychologists, psychiatrists, and sexologists have been claiming that the happiness of families and the prosperity of Communist society relies on men and women dutifully enacting their stereotypical gender roles. The notion of the crisis of masculinity and the unwelcome virility of Soviet women was promoted by experts in combination with the vilification of homosexuality. While the nationalist populists in the 1990s blamed Eastern European women for allegedly having forgotten their responsibility as mothers due to the Communist propaganda (Novikova, 2006), in fact official Soviet sexual education and expert texts have been injecting the exact same idea into society for a few decades already. This, however, remains an understudied phenomenon, contributing to the skewed perception of gender politics under the Soviet regime and the extent of the changes that the fall of the Soviet Union brought to Eastern European societies. There is also a lack of understanding of how the ideas on gender and sexuality in the 'Eastern Bloc' were rather interconnected with various discourses produced in the 'the West', and in the United States in particular.

This article analyses how the anxiety, related to the perceived 'masculinization' of women and 'feminization' of men penetrated various specialist, educational and popular-scholarly texts in Lithuanian SSR since the 1970s. In particular it pays attention to how the fear of trespassing gender norms related to the general strife of the state to control and regulate sexuality of Soviet citizens and, in particular, to the strict policing of homosexuality. The article therefore contributes, first, to the field of Soviet and Eastern Europe studies, by analysing the formation of the discourses of gender and sexuality in the under-researched area of the Baltic states, Lithuania in particular. Second, it contributes to the scholarly debates on homophobia (Bosia & Weiss, 2013; Healey, 2018; Huneke, 2022), further historicizing this phenomenon and analysing it as a part of specific expert knowledge production in a transnational context. The insights presented here are based on the findings of my archival and desk research into the Lithuanian-language sources from the period between 1968 to 1990, with a focus on sexual education, expert scientific, and popular psychology texts. I argue that the moralistic re-traditionalization of gender in late Soviet Lithuania cannot be understood separately from homophobia and, in turn, that homophobia was inextricably connected to the fear of the mutability of gender. In my analysis I employ insights from feminist and queer history of sexual science, which has recently blossomed in the context of state-socialist Eastern Europe (Renkin & Kościańska, 2016; Lišková, 2018; Kościańska, 2021) and the Soviet Union (Healey, 2001; 2018; Alexander, 2021). This research has been influenced in turn by the theoretical contributions of feminist and lesbian & gay studies, as they developed primarily in the United States, and in particular the notion that gender and sexuality are historically changing, socially and discursively constructed phenomena, central to the social organization of societies (Scott, 1986; Duggan, 1990).

In what comes next, I first present an overview of the secondary historical literature on the changing discourse on gender and sexuality in state-socialist countries and the Soviet Union, which shows a tendency in the 1970s and the 1980s expert texts to emphasize the importance of 'traditional' gender roles. I then analyse selected examples from the Soviet Lithuanian sources during this period (1968–1986), examining how the 'gender

complementarity' paradigm appeared in pedagogical (sexual education) and expert (forensic and psychology) texts. Throughout my analysis, I show how the discourse of 'traditional' gender roles is intertwined with the conceptualization of gendered and sexual deviance, homosexuality in particular. By analysing gender and sexuality discourse in a Soviet context from a transnational perspective, with a focus on international knowledge flows within the Eastern bloc as well as across the 'Iron Curtain', this article helps to break with the persistent imagination of the exceptionality of the Soviet propaganda and policy in the sphere of sexuality. Also, by analysing the predominance of strict gender roles and the heterosexual monogamous relationship model (McLellan, 2011, p. 51) it problematizes the tendency in some recent scholarship to idealize state-socialist and Soviet contexts as more progressive in terms of gender and sexuality (see e.g. Ghodsee, 2018) than certain Western contexts of the same period.

2 The historical context: The conservative turn of the 1970s–1980s

As the historian Deborah Field writes, since the 1960s, the Soviet Union and the state-socialist countries of Eastern Europe experienced a relative modernization of sexuality, with increasingly relaxed societal attitudes to premarital sex and extramarital affairs, and the weakening of the double sexual standard for men and women (Field, 2007, p. 64). However, since the 1970s, in these countries the official concern with declining birth rates prompted an attempt at a tighter control over sexuality, with the hope to redirect it to exclusively procreative goals. As Kateřina Lišková has shown in the context of Czechoslovakia, the Normalization period after the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring led to the cult of the nuclear family and domesticity. Since the 1970s, expert sexologists started putting increasing importance onto the hierarchically organized gender roles in the family, with women seen as the primary caregivers and housewives (Lišková, 2018, p. 180). The expert consensus in this period was that only 'traditional' gender roles could ensure sexual satisfaction and individual happiness. Gender equality in society and in the economy, allegedly achieved by the Communist revolution in the Soviet Union, was, according to socialist sexologists writing in that period, detrimental to the natural gender order. They warned that too much equality could even be dangerous on a personal level, in terms of leading to dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and to the abandonment of the important social roles – that of the mother-caregiver in women, and the father-provider in men (Lišková, 2018, p. 185).

Similar processes were also taking place in neighbouring Poland and Hungary, framed either as a backlash against the excesses of the earlier socialist policies, or as a reaction to the detrimental influences from the sexual revolution of the West. As Agnieszka Kościańska has shown, in the 1970s and the 1980s the most widely read and influential Polish sexologists of that period started seeing 'proper' gender roles as contributing to marital harmony, sexual satisfaction and mental health. Women's emancipation, their achievement of positions of independence, power, and influence started to be seen as threatening the social order and harming individual happiness (Kościańska, 2016, pp. 244–247). The belief in the essential difference and complementarity of gender roles was not limited to expert discourses – it also permeated the media, constituting somewhat of a conservative backlash against the post-war Communist ideological agenda, when

women's emancipation was promoted by the state (Kościańska, 2016, p. 247). Likewise, in Hungary, in 1973, two Communist intellectuals, Ágnes Heller and Mihály Vajda were expelled from the party due to their positive commentary on the sexual revolution in the West. The Communist party saw that as a threat to 'the Hungarian family' and the spread of Western leftist ideas, which were incompatible with 'actually existing socialism' (Takács, 2015, p. 162). State-socialist governments embraced the traditionalist line and aimed to 'protect' the national family ideal, the 'natural' gender order, and sexual morality, which was likely a useful strategy in facilitating the social support of the previously deeply religious populations.

In 1970s and 1980s Soviet Russia, the discourse of the 'crisis of masculinity' became prominent, which blamed women's emancipation for creating a generation of weakened, infantilized, feminized men (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013). As Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina argue, the discourse of 'the crisis of masculinity' should not be seen as a reaction to changing gender roles under Communism. Rather, it should be read as a hidden critique of the Soviet system itself, which, by restricting liberal rights, prohibited men from 'performing traditional male roles' and thus allegedly emasculated them (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013, p. 43) Following Zdravomyslova and Temkina it can be said that the dissatisfaction with the social and economic structure of the Soviet system was rhetorically transferred to private life, where women's emancipation came to be seen as depriving men from their 'long-standing role of conqueror' in the sphere of sexuality (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013, p. 46). In the late Soviet period, propagandists therefore started navigating between two somewhat contradictory claims: the first one emphasized the importance of gender equality as achieved by the Communist Party and celebrated marriage as a partnership, while the second one communicated the persisting importance of the underlying 'natural' sexual differences between men and women. These allegedly innate differences meant that women had to stay prude and tamed, and their task essentially was to become mothers, while men had much stronger, uncontrollable sexual desires, which they had to master and redirect to productive work for the good of the state (Field, 2007, p. 41).

The history of gender and sexuality in Soviet Lithuania is still rather underresearched, although the topics of family and private life have already drawn some attention from researchers. According to the sociologist Aušra Maslauskaitė, the Soviet Lithuanian society throughout the whole socialist period remained continuously attached to the pre-Soviet ideal of a nuclear family model, seen as connected to the national, ethnic identity, but also easily transformed into the ideal 'Soviet family' model (Maslauskaitė, 2010). The historian Dalia Leinarte (-Marcinkevičienė) has analysed Soviet Lithuanian society as a puritan society, opposed to the romantic notion of love, and exalting the kind of marriage, which creates the best conditions for the productive labour of both spouses and the upbringing of Soviet youth. Relationships, she argued, were seen not as a private matter under the Soviet regime, but ideally a building block of the Communist society (Marcinkeviciene, 2009). She identifies the 1970s and the 1980s as the decades when expert interest in sexual and romantic aspects of love started growing, with the institutes of sexology opening in Vilnius and Riga (Marcinkeviciene, 2009, p. 112). The historians Valdemaras Klumbys and Tomas Vaiseta point out that the 1960s in Lithuania was a relatively liberal decade – not of sexual revolution, but of moderate sexualization of the

public sphere, which allowed publication of erotic images of women in popular magazines. However, this 'liberalization' was halted very suddenly in 1968, when the Soviet censorship curbed all erotic content from appearing in public – something that lasted for the next two decades (Klumbys & Vaiseta, 2022, pp. 98–100) Simultaneously, in the 1970s, the worsening demographic situation prompted a further conservative turn towards family, which aimed at procreation-oriented sexual education of families and youths (Klumbys & Vaiseta, 2022, p. 135).

In late Soviet era Lithuania, sexual education was countering perceived threats to the nuclear family and traditional gender roles. Just like in the Soviet Union at large, as the historian Rustam Alexander has shown, homosexuality was constructed as a moral threat to Communist society (Alexander, 2018; 2021). As Alexander argues, since the 1970s the Soviet Union increasingly relied on the conception of 'Communist morality' in their policy making. Vaguely defined as meaning that sexuality should be confined to marital heterosexual procreative sex, the concept of 'Communist morality' allowed conceptualizing homosexuality as a moral crime (Alexander, 2021). In the sexual education manuals, youths were treated as easily susceptible to homosexuality, and warned against many triggers – from spicy foods to exposure to inappropriate behaviour of adults. The sexual education itself was seen as potentially dangerous, in terms of triggering sexual curiosity in youths. For that reason, the mentioning of homosexuality was mostly very careful and implicit, hoping not to instil any indecent ideas into the young minds (Alexander, 2021, p. 54). As Aušrinė Skirmantė, one of the first researchers of LGBTQ history in Lithuania has argued, sexual education can be seen as the main tool by means of which the Soviet heteronormative ideal was ingrained in society, with accompanying 'gender roles, forms of cohabitation and sexual practices' (Skirmantė, 2013, p. 22, translated from Lithuanian by me).

3 Strict gender roles as the basis of socialist upbringing

Since the 1960s the Lithuanian SSR state publishers 'Šviesa' and 'Mintis' started releasing book-sized manuals that aimed to instil proper gender roles and sexual morals into young people; they targeted boys and girls separately (Bagdonaitė, 1967; Chripkova & Kolesovas, 1983; 1985; Griciuvienė, 1971). The books were edited volumes, with texts mostly translated from Russian and some partially authored by scholars from other countries of the 'Eastern bloc'.[1] Since the publishing process was controlled by the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP CC), these texts demonstrate quite well what kind of gender roles were encouraged by the state-approved expert pedagogical discourse, and how gendered behaviour and appearance was policed by the state. The books were normally written in a moralistic tone and had an explicit intent at ideological indoctrination through

[1] The lack of references in these books make it hard to trace the exact provenance of texts, but parts of the book for boys *Be a Man* (1971) were for example borrowed from the Russian translation of the 1956 book by the prominent Czech sexologist Josef Hynie, called *Growing into a man* (Hynie, 1956). The original text was however tampered with by the translators, often abridged and 'adapted' to the Soviet context (see Alexander, 2021, p. 63).

praising the Communist society and criticizing the allegedly immoral capitalist 'West' and the vestiges of the 'bourgeois past' (Alexander, 2018, p. 352). These sexual education manuals took it as self-evident that clear gender roles were at the basis of a proper upbringing of the Soviet youths and key to successful marriage and procreation, as well as a well-functioning society (Skirmantė, 2013, p. 21).

Despite the rhetorical emphasis on the emancipation of women and the overarching importance of 'common-for-all-humans' (Lit. *bendražmogiškos*) features, the books normally included long and detailed lists of characteristics and behaviours that are allegedly typical for either boys or girls. Boys naturally possessed 'deeper thinking and a broader worldview', but lacked 'adaptability to the household chores' (Chripkova & Kolesovas, 1985, p. 45). Girls, on the other hand, were prone to caring for other people, they were able to effortlessly create a positive and warm atmosphere at home and in the workplace (Bagdonaitė, 1967, p. 6), but they lacked attention to technical detail, creativity and inventiveness (Chripkova & Kolesovas, 1983, p. 110). In the sexual sphere, men were depicted as active and persistent, but they were taught to control themselves and their urges and respect a woman – their sexual object (Chripkova & Kolesovas, 1985, p. 63). Women, on the other hand, were not understood as sexually proactive – their role was primarily to resist the advances of a man by their own modest behaviour (Bagdonaitė, 1967, p. 247). These differences in character were seen as innate, universal and unchangeable. The ability of individuals to understand the strengths and weaknesses dictated by their gender were key to harmonious married life and social adaptation – femininity and masculinity were supposed to 'complement one another' (Chripkova & Kolesovas, 1983, p. 104).

Since gender differences were seen as natural and complementary, one of the most crucial aspects of a proper socialist upbringing was the development of behaviours which would fit the traditional roles of masculinity and femininity. For girls, it was important to never forget that their main mission and calling in life was to become mothers, which also implied the necessity to preserve their virginity before marriage (Bagdonaitė, 1967, p. 251; Chripkova & Kolesovas, 1983, p. 135). A young boy, on the other hand, was encouraged to build himself as a fully independent, strong individual, able to control his passions and instincts, ready to work for the homeland, and, of course, defend it, if needed. While boys were encouraged to help their future wives in the household, and 'not to distinguish between masculine and feminine jobs' (Griciuvienė, 1971, p. 109), the traditional division of labour was taken for granted in these books. Unquestionable was also the presumption that there are fundamental differences between the expected social roles of men and women, which stem from innate psychological and physiological differences, as described above.

While gender roles were taken for granted as natural, they were also an object of cultivation, scrutiny and policing – it was the task of parents, but also very much of pedagogues to correct the inappropriate behaviours. For example, in the following excerpt from the book *Be a Man!* boys were shamed into adopting 'masculine' haircuts and warned against wearing long hair or any clothes reminiscent of femininity:

> Long haired, untidy young men lose the appearance characteristic of men, they lose their masculine pride, they turn into something in between a man and a woman. (Griciuvienė, 1971, p. 137)

In the book this excerpt was accompanied by an illustration of an untidy long-haired boy with a cigarette in his mouth and a shall around his neck. The passage was likely intended as a critique of the hippie fashion, which was seen as blurring strict gender roles in appearance and behaviour and framed as a bad influence from 'the West' (Fürst, 2021, p. 325). Such fashion was presented as threatening the normal gender roles of young men and women, turning them into something 'in between' proper gender roles and had to be shamed. Similarly, girls were warned that in 'the Western world' some young women find it appropriate to walk around 'disheveled, purposefully untidy, pretending to be drunk, rude like savages' (Bagdonaitė, 1967, p. 5), something, that was unsuitable for a Soviet girl. All in all, the appearance, behaviour, character and sexuality of young men and women was expected to follow quite strict guidelines. Trespassing of gender norms was not expected and, if it occurred, it had to be shamed and eradicated, because it was seen as un-Soviet and a bad influence from 'the West'.

The sexual education manuals, described above, promoted a rather contradictory message, especially for the girls: while they reiterated Communist slogans regarding the emancipation of women and the realization of 'common-for-all-humans' needs, the books also stressed repeatedly the importance of accepting the gendered social norms, including the woman's role of a mother and caretaker. The books acknowledged this contradiction but stated that the burden of reproductive labour will eventually be eradicated by the inevitable progress and perfection of Communist society (Chripkova & Kolesovas, 1983, p. 108). However, in late Soviet society the opinion became more and more prominent that in the light of Soviet societal progress one needs to cultivate the seemingly disappearing traditional gender roles for the sake of morality and social wellbeing. The scholarly publication *Equal, but Different. On the Social Roles or a Man and a Woman* (1987) by the psychologist Gediminas Navaitis is a good example of this discourse. Based on a survey of 700 parents, 426 pupils and 210 students, it aimed to analyse, in the context of the Lithuanian SSR, 'the issues that arise in the acknowledgement and enactment of the social roles of man and woman in a family' (Navaitis, 1987, p. 4). Characteristically for such publications, the introductory section of the book was dedicated to the achievements of the Soviet system in ensuring gender equality and women's ability to achieve their fullest potential. It also contained an acknowledgement that science has not convincingly shown any fundamental psychological differences between men and women. The book, however, emphasized, that socialist gender equality should not be misunderstood as meaning that all the differences between men and women should disappear.

Navaitis stated:

> The social equality of men and women characteristic to our society has brought their activities closer. However, the change of the social circumstances has not and cannot eradicate the complementarity and some kind of difference of the social roles of men and women in the society, family in particular. As it was earlier, so it is now, that we appreciate man's courage, restraint, the ability to be the defender of a woman, while in a woman we value gentleness, care for the children, the ability to create coziness and spiritual comfort at home. (Navaitis, 1987, pp. 28–29)

On the one hand, the book emphasized, in a declarative way, the already achieved gender equality as one of the great accomplishments of Communism. On the other hand, it proposed that women and men are in fact fundamentally different.

Navaitis's conceptualization of gender was informed by post-war U.S. American sexology. He referenced, for example, the 1963 article by John L. Hampson, the colleague of the infamous sexologist John Money, in which Hampson argued that gender is fully learned and proposed a theory of 'psychosexual neutrality' (Hampson, 1963, p. 34) in humans at birth. Navaitis adopted the view of gender as mainly formed socially and stressed the importance of parents and pedagogues in forming the gender of children 'correctly'. The book proclaimed that men and women are not so different 'biologically' (that is, that science cannot show any immovable differences in the brain of men and women) and that Communism could eradicate any inequalities. Nevertheless, Navaitis also argued that people should cultivate the age-old social differences between genders for the sake of familiar harmony and the moral upbringing of children. Navaitis wrote:

> We have to stress the fact, which is understandable and known to everyone, but still not sufficiently referred to in the familial and even social upbringing: without a clear gender belonging there cannot be a full-fledged personality. […] Therefore, it is important that when taking over the socially accepted models of masculinity and femininity, the inner position of the personality – a man's or a woman's position – would form without a contradiction (*neprieštaringai*). […] In helping children to understand their gender belonging it is also important to educate them – parents should often repeat to their children: 'you are a girl', or 'you are a boy.' (Navaitis, 1987, p. 50)

Navaitis saw gender in line with the Soviet Marxist view of human nature – as pliant and changeable (Oushakine, 2004), which also aligned with the view prevalent in post-war American sexology, as described above. The belief in the social malleability of human nature, including gender, did not preclude Navaitis from promoting a conservative view towards gender roles. In fact, the belief in the mutability of gender, which clearly permeated the *Equal, but Different* book, led to a certain anxiety about the possibility that girls and boys might fail to attain their respective gender roles and fall somewhere in between masculinity and femininity. The goal of sexual education in a Communist society was to therefore ensure that gender was achieved 'without an inner contradiction', and that men and women took up gender roles which were different, but complementary in the service to society.

4 Gender inversion as the basis of sexual deviance

When examining a variety of sources from the late Soviet Lithuania one can notice that the social fears surrounding young people's ability to achieve their appropriate gender role was connected to homophobic social views. One of the most explicit examples of this was the manual for forensic experts, published in 1977, entitled *Sexual perversions. Reasons, juridical interpretation, prophylaxis* by the psychiatrist Zenonas Buslius and the forensic doctor Antanas Cėpla (Buslius & Cėpla, 1977). The authors assumed homosexuality and other 'sexual deviances' to be caused mainly by social factors and bad upbringing, a part of which was gender socialization gone awry. Most of the attention in terms of the 'prophylaxis of sexual perversions', was given to proper parenting, 'tidy' (*tvarkingi*) behaviour at home, prevention of early exposure to sexuality, and the good example set by the parents (Buslius & Cėpla, 1977, p. 27). However, the authors also mentioned that any deviation from proper gender roles, meaning from the gender appropriate dress, behaviour, manner of speech, even games, can be seen as a sign of impeding homosexuality or 'transvestism' (or might cause it) and should therefore be prevented by parents and educators:

> We have some doubts over the recent custom for the young men to grow long hair, wear various shiny things, while for the young women to wear masculine pants on any occasion, smoke demonstratively, and so on. From a sexological point of view, such fashion is unacceptable, as it eradicates the external gender difference to some extent [...] If a boy likes to wear girls' clothing, wear jewelry, imitate their manners and games, while girl is demonstratively rough, copies masculine behavior, style of talking, avoids feminine clothing, etc., this shows that the psychosexual orientation is on the wrong path. From such seemingly innocent aspect of childhood behavior might arise homosexual or transvestite tendencies. (Buslius & Cėpla, 1977, p. 26)

The authors argued that children and teenagers should stick to narrowly defined gender roles and saw this as an indicator of normality in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity. Parents and educators had the responsibility to fix any deviances from the norm. For adults Buslius and Cėpla recommended regular marital (heterosexual) intercourse as a healing and preventive tool from homosexuality for adults (Buslius & Cėpla, 1977, p. 27). As the researcher Skirmantė aptly put it, 'successful marriage, as a cornerstone of society, had to prevent deviances, which had the potential to disrupt the Soviet gender order' (Skirmantė, 2013, p. 21) and was therefore promoted by the state and its experts/educators. Buslius and Cėpla treated any deviation from heteronormative behaviour as a serious 'perversion,' detrimental to society and also criminal. They therefore warned that in the cases of hardened deviances, including homosexuality, marriage might not be a possibility anymore and psychiatric treatment might be necessary. Among the suggested treatments in cases of homosexuality they mentioned, as the last resort, also 'medical, laser, or chirurgical castration' (Buslius & Cėpla, 1977, p. 28). Homosexuality was clearly cast as a grave danger for socialist society, which needed to be policed from early childhood up until adulthood, making sure that children stick to their gender roles and that adults stick to the heteronormative script.

One can see the relation between unsuccessful attainment of the gender roles and homosexuality also theorized in other texts of this period, but with slightly different implications. The psychiatrist Aleksandras Alekseičikas, one of the pioneers of psychotherapy in Lithuania, argued, in his 1980s science popularization book *The Psychology of Human Weaknesses* (Alekseičikas, 1980), that men and women are different in their psychological make-up. Typically for Soviet texts on this issue, he claimed that while individual differences matter, the gender differences were more significant, and that people should aim to take advantage of their gendered differences, rather than trying to become more alike. Alekseičikas, however, also created a fascinating theory of sexual attraction, unique in Lithuanian language sources, where he defined gender as a spectrum, and explained homosexuality as a 'discrepancy between the physical and psychological gender markers' (Alekseičikas, 1980, p. 102). Alekseičikas, who is still (at the time of writing) professionally active as the department head at the Vilnius City Mental Health Center is currently the only psychiatrist in Lithuania who has publicly testified to having treated 'hundreds' of homosexual patients during the Soviet period by helping them 'develop' their gender identity (A. Alekseičikas, personal communication, August 21, 2023).

Alekseičikas, similarly to Navaitis, discussed above, claimed that the equality between the sexes does not mean their sameness and, in the same vein as the Soviet educational manuals, commented ironically on the current trends in unisex fashion. He however, differently from Navaitis, did not believe gender to be a social role, essentially shaped

by society and upbringing, but a much more fundamental phenomenon – he believed that gender 'penetrates the whole organism' of the human being, that 'every cell of the human body has its gender' (Alekseičikas, 1980, p. 98). In *The Psychology of Human Weaknesses* Alekseičikas' presented a table of stereotypically feminine and masculine features, such as men having more abstract thinking, while women having more detail-oriented thinking, men having stronger will-power, women having more subtle and deep emotions, men having broad interests, women being more adaptive to the environment, etc. (Alekseičikas, 1980, pp. 92–93). Alekseičikas assumed these character features to be deep-seated in men and women and believed that the key to a successful marriage and, essentially, to the flourishing of an individual, was cherishing and managing these gendered differences in an intimate relationship with a partner.

In the same book Alekseičikas, however, also developed a theory of gender spectrum, as he believed that men and women can be more or less masculine or feminine. His spectrum also equated gender expression with sexuality. For Alekseičikas the most feminine woman would also be the most sexual, and the most masculine man – the most sexual man too, while people with less pronounced gender would have less 'sexuality'. In the scale that he developed, the most masculine presenting man would get +5 points, while the most feminine presenting woman would get -5 points, while many people would fall somewhere in between. In developing such a scale for measuring gender Alekseičikas was not completely original, but echoed a similar development in the 1930s U.S., where the American psychologist Lewis Terman created a test to determine psychological gender, the so-called M-F test (Terman & Miles, 1936). It is not possible to check if Alekseičikas relied on Terman in developing his own theory, since his *The Psychology of Human Weaknesses* includes no reference list. Coincidentally or not, in both Alekseičikas' and Terman's theories, the positive scores indicated masculinity, while negative ones – femininity, and homosexuality were depicted as related to gender deviance.

As the historian Wendy Kline argued, Terman's test was inspired by the eugenicist ideas, highly influential in the U.S. at the time, which saw homosexuality as 'severe form of sexual "maladjustment,"' which threatened marriage, family and the ideal of a healthy society, and had to be eradicated by specialists (Kline, 2001, p. 134). For Terman, the 'failure to acquire gender-appropriate identity, as revealed by M-F score, indicated homosexuality' (Kline, 2001, p. 136). Alekseičikas also used his gender scale to discuss homosexuality:

> Some cases of homosexuality show the discrepancy between the physical and the psychological gender characteristics. For example, a personality with clear physical signs of a man (bodily condition, sexual organs) can have a feminine psyche, while a female "form" might hide a masculine psyche [...] Such a psyche is of course attracted to the externally "opposite" (but actually the same) gender body [...] For the individuals with homosexual tendencies this mismatch might be the reason for many difficulties, sometimes very torturous. (Alekseičikas, 1980, p. 102)

According to Alekseičikas' understanding of desire, according to which 'opposites attract', homosexuality could be explained by the attraction of a less masculine person by a more masculine person, even if both people were men. Analogously, he explained that a very feminine woman would seek a less feminine woman as a partner (so a –5 or –4 would look for a -1 or -2). Homosexuality, as he explained, did not always manifest in people with

the external appearance reminiscing of the opposite sex. However, homosexuality still indicated a sort of a gender inversion on one or another level, or a discrepancy between the physical and psychological genders, which would inevitably cause 'disharmony'. While Alekseičikas argued against criminalization of homosexuality, he was in favour of psychiatric treatment of such individuals. Similarly to the American eugenicist Terman, he believed that homosexuality was detrimental and had to be eradicated for the sake of harmonious families and healthy society (A. Alekseičikas, personal communication, August 21, 2023).

The last example of the promotion of 'gender complementarity' paradigm in connection to the perceived threat of homosexuality analysed here is the book *Mīlestības vārdā*[2] ('In the Name of Love'). Written by the Latvian doctor oncologist Jānis Zālītis and published in original Latvian in 1981, it was translated to Lithuanian and published in the neighbouring Lithuanian SSR in 1984. The first publication had a print-run of 100.000 copies and was reprinted the following year (70.000 copies), making the total print run of the book among the largest of any publications in Soviet Lithuania (Klumbys & Vaiseta, 2022, p. 136). Interviews with LGBT respondents collected in both post-socialist Latvia and Lithuania have shown that for this group of people the book was often the very first source of knowledge about the existence of homosexuality, albeit a very stigmatizing one (Ruduša, 2014; Skirmantė, 2013). Despite its emphasis on the importance of sexual satisfaction, which might be seen as progressive, the book however also reproduced many of the predominant Soviet ideological clichés regarding sexuality, including the ones already analysed above.

In line with other Soviet and socialist authors of his time, Zālītis believed that psychological and behavioural differences between women and men are key to sexual attraction and satisfaction, stable marital life, and psychologically healthy children. The conceptualization of the difference and complementarity between femininity and masculinity therefore permeated the whole book. He argued that an essential part of sexual education is teaching children how to stick to the rules of behaviour appropriate to their sex – how to be proper boys and girls.[3] While he could not completely avoid the programmatic and brief praise of the gender equality and women's emancipation achieved by the Soviet Union, Zālītis spent much more time elaborating on the dangers of the 'vulgarization of women's emancipation,' (Zalytis, 1984, p. 65) which, according to him, resulted in 'masculinization' of women and 'feminization' of men (Zalytis, 1984, pp. 69–73). Zālītis warned that:

> Without denying the good aspects of emancipation, it seems worrying that a woman, whose true call is to bring the new generation to this world, should sit at the steering wheel of a tractor. (Zalytis, 1984, p. 69)

Zālītis worried, that the 'masculinization' of women, that is, the loss of what he understood as specifically feminine traits – modesty, pride, elegance – will result in a weakening

[2] The book that was used for analysis here is the Lithuanian translation of the original Latvian book: Janis Zalytis, *Meilės Vardu*, trans. Renata Zajančkauskaitė and Visvaldas Bronušas (Kaunas: Šviesa, 1984).

[3] The book is filled with different versions of this argument, but for the most concise example see Zalytis, *Meilės Vardu*, p. 72.

sexual desire between the sexes, because desire is 'the attraction between the opposite poles' (Zalytis, 1984, p. 72). Woman's 'masculinization' would further lead to the 'feminization' of men, and obstruct the development of a sexual relationship based on true love. Furthermore, it could lead to sexual perversions, argued Zālītis, because 'as research shows, a rude and hostile woman always also has sexual deviances, and one influences the other' (Zalytis, 1984, p. 70). Women's alleged loss of femininity under Communism therefore came to stand in *Mīlestības vārdā* as one of the core problems of contemporary marriages.

In line with his Pavlovian behaviourist reasoning, Zālītis argued that since homosexuality 'does not exist among animals' it must be a purely human problem, related to upbringing and education, and therefore, must certainly be mutable – it could be 'healed', for example, with hypnosis (Zalytis, 1984, p. 82). Among the reasons for the development of homosexual attraction he listed, predictably, seduction by an older homosexual, growing up in an incomplete family and therefore lacking a proper same-sex role-model, and finally, masturbation, which might lead to situations of same-sex intimacy (Zalytis, 1984, pp. 82–84). Next to the reasons connected to bad socialization, Zālītis added that sometimes homosexuality might be inborn, or 'constitutive' (Zalytis, 1984, p. 82), in which case it appears with symptoms of gender inversion:

> Sometimes such people quite openly hold themselves to be of the opposite sex, they wear the clothes and do the jobs of the opposite sex. Such men like to bake and cook, take care of children, they choose feminine professions. Usually they grow long hair, even their clothing is feminine. Lesbians, on the other hand, like to dress in an overtly masculine way, cut their hair short, pick masculine professions, etc. […] We would not have to mention any of this, if these phenomena did not hide the weakening feelings of love: a feminized man (which is similar to latent homosexuality) could never feel such a passionate attraction to a woman as a normal man. The same can be said about women. Therefore, let us not insist that a man should take care of the household. Of course, a woman might need some masculine help at home, but it is crucial to avoid such activities, which might instigate homosexual tendencies. A man can cook a dinner once in a while, but he should also be able to fix a broken sink… (Zalytis, 1984, p. 82)

While Zālītis described the subversion of gender roles as a sign of inborn homosexuality, he also believed, as it is clear from the excerpt above, that it is crucial to avoid the socio-cultural 'feminization' of men and 'masculinization' of women, which might lead to homosexuality. His discussion of the dangers of homosexuality shows how deeply entwined was the notion of sexual 'normality' with the notion of gendered 'normality' in late Soviet expert and pedagogical discourse. Moreover, it demonstrates how directly was the threat of the disappearance of traditional gender roles connected to homophobia – weakening masculinity and femininity were seen as inevitably leading to the erosion of sexual attraction, which would lead to homosexuality, and vice versa.

5 Conclusion

While it is often assumed that the 'return to proper gender roles' rhetoric is characteristic of post-Soviet and anti-Communist traditionalist discourse, in this article I have shown how in fact this discourse flourished in the late Soviet period already, next to the declarative ideological support for gender equality and women's emancipation. Soviet expert and pedagogical texts promoted the view that men and women have to preserve and foster traditional gender roles, despite the egalitarianism of the sexes, achieved, allegedly, by the progress of Communist society. A part of this discursive promotion of the traditional 'gender complementarity' paradigm was the fear of the masculinization of women and feminization of men, which, in turn, could apparently lead to the decline of the 'traditional' family and the weakening of heterosexual desire. Even though the reasons for homosexuality were understood as complex (both biological and social), the belief in the possibility to prevent and treat homosexuality remained. The main tool for such management of the homosexual 'threat' was proper socialization of children. Since homosexuality was continuously understood as related to gender inversion and/or trespassing of gender norms, the strict policing of gendered expressions was seen as a way to ensure the stability of heterosexual desire and generally good adaptation to social norms and expectations of Soviet society.

The heteronormative ideals of Soviet sexual education and the strict gender order that it promoted were not unique – they reflected similar theories that have been developed in capitalist countries throughout the twentieth century. The Communist ideological belief in the malleability of human nature, embodied in the project of the New Man resonated with the theories of gender as socially mutable, as developed in post-war American sexology, for example. However, the idea of pliancy of femininity and masculinity did not lead to more openness to the idea of transgressing the gender norms. Instead, in the late Soviet Union it resulted in anxious attachment to traditional gender roles and conservative morality, which were seen as threatened by social progress and 'wrongfully interpreted' emancipation of women under Communism. The gender complementarity paradigm and the related condemnation of sexual deviance became increasingly pronounced in late Soviet expert and pedagogical texts, appearing as an implicit critique of the earlier 'excesses' of women's emancipation. This rise of gendered and sexual conservatism in the 1970s and the 1980s allowed a smooth transition into the traditionalist nationalist discourses characteristic of post-Soviet societies.

Acknowledgements

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101025145.

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Anna Shadrina

National identity and ageing: 'Pensioners' in post-2020 Belarusian political narratives

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Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 55–73.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1253
https://intersections.tk.hu

Abstract

This article explores how Belarusian political actors, speaking from diverse civilisational perspectives, discuss the place of older citizens, particularly less privileged women, in society. It demonstrates how the persistent logic of Cold War geopolitics animates social hierarchies in territories positioned between Western and Russian influences. Through an analysis of state-controlled and opposition media, I find that the official national project and the ethnocentric concept of Belarusianness share a discursive construction of 'pensioners' as an inferior Other. Invested in confrontation with the West, the autocratic regime claims moral superiority by representing 'pensioners' as objects of state care. Drawing on the narrative of suffering under communism/Russian colonialism, advocates of a 'European' Belarus discuss older people as obstacles to democracy. By exploring the narrative of 'in-between-ness', which champions a democratic Belarus that belongs neither to the Soviet past/Russia nor to the West but is connected to both, I argue that rejecting binary logic in national self-determination opens up opportunities for intergroup solidarity.

Keywords: Belarus; borderland; in-between-ness; nationalism; older people; Othering

1 Introduction

This article contributes to research that explores the ideological tensions produced by the geopolitical location of territories situated between two imperial formations – the global West and Russia (Mayerchyk & Plakhotnik, 2021, p. 126; Plakhotnik & Mayerchyk, 2023, p. 25). It discusses how, speaking from diverse civilisational perspectives, Belarusian political actors use the categories of gender and old age as markers of the European East/West divide. It examines how this practice reproduces social and moral hierarchies.

Politics is rarely considered in conjunction with gender and ageing, yet these phenomena are closely related. While women outlive men everywhere in the world, power largely lies in the hands of older men (Carney & Gray, 2024, p. 517). The fear of death and

the emphasis that modern societies place on productivity and autonomy produce an image of older people, especially those who require social assistance, as an unhealthy, costly burden (Higgs & Gilleard, 2015, pp. vii, 84). This stigmatising perspective primarily targets older women because they are more often structurally disadvantaged. Globally, governments have implemented 'active ageing' policies to tackle social exclusion in later life. Yet, politicians often promote populist narratives blaming societal problems on older people (Segal, 2014, p. 45).

Since taking power in 1994, the regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has considered retirees to form its support base. Simultaneously, the Belarusian ethnocentric opposition portrayed those who supported Lukashenka based on his promise to control unemployment, wages, and prices as 'sovki' (a derogatory term for 'Soviet people') and 'crazy babushkas'. Led in the 1990s by the Belarusian People's Front, this opposition movement promoted Belarus' 'European' identity through a non-Soviet version of history and by favouring the Belarusian language over Russian (Gapova, 2008, pp. 5, 10).

In 2020, a group of Belarusian retirees, mainly comprising women, held 'The Pensioners' Marches' to demand the resignation of Lukashenka. The older activists broadened the scope of the months-long anti-authoritarian resistance that unfolded that year, following the rigged presidential election. To make their voices heard and to protect themselves from state violence, they placed the idea of old-age vulnerability at the centre of their identity activism. Despite the survival of the autocracy in 2020, state-controlled media have worked diligently to discredit the influence of 'The Pensioners' Marches' (Shadrina, 2023, pp. 3, 14).

This article considers whether the participation of retirees in the 2020 protests has influenced the way in which the autocratic system and pro-democratic civil society discuss the role of older citizens in their national projects. To address this question, I analysed pro-government and anti-authoritarian media narratives about national identity in the aftermath of the 2020 uprising.

My findings suggest that the visibility of retirees as a distinct political subject during the 2020 mass mobilisation has had a partial effect on the imaginaries of the Belarusian nation. In this article I shall demonstrate that the ruling regime and the ethnocentric segment of civil society both claim moral superiority by establishing themselves as the normative political subjects against 'pensioners,' who are constructed as the inferior Other. In both instances, older women are the primary targets of the politics of Othering.

Articulated in confrontation with the West and invested in recycling the Soviet legacy, the official national project portrays 'pensioners' as a unified group, deprived of agency and in need of state protection. Building on the narrative of suffering from communism/Russian colonialism, the ethnocentric project of Belarusianness discusses 'pensioners' as an obstacle to the democratisation of the country. In both these narratives, the intersection of gender and ageing that constitutes the image of the inferior Other serves as an implicit reference to the less privileged social position of those whose subsistence depends on the state.

However, the proponents of Belarusian civilisational 'in-between-ness' offer a national project that deviates from the logic of Othering. This segment of civil society interprets the 2020 protests as a transformative anti-authoritarian alliance that brought together

citizens across their social differences. Within this imaginary, Belarus belongs neither to the Soviet past/Russia nor to the West, but is connected to both. By refusing to self-identify in opposition to one of the two imperial formations, the advocates of this perspective seek to transcend the East/West divide, and to unite Belarusians around confronting the problem of social inequality.

I present my findings in the following order: first, I discuss the socio-economic position the Lukashenka regime offers to older citizens. After identifying the theoretical groundings and the methodological approach of my study, I explore the representations of older people in the official narrative and the alternative visions of Belarusianness. I conclude by discussing the significance of my findings for research on nationalism and political participation in later life.

2 Ageing in authoritarian Belarus

In Belarus, neither of the two official languages – Belarusian or Russian – have a word for 'retirees.' After reaching pensionable age, individuals are commonly referred to as 'pensioners,' irrespective of their employment status. This practice implicitly de-emphasises the contributions to society that older citizens have made throughout their lives and foregrounds their status as recipients of social benefits.

In the state ideology, the term 'pensioners' serves as a symbolic resource to create a fixed imaginary in which a quarter of the population are constructed as objects of state care. According to the National Statical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat), from the total Belarusian population of 9.2 million (Belstat, 2023a, p. 28), 2.3 million receive an old-age pension (Pavluchenko, 2024). To create a critical distance from this imaginary, in my study I refer to those who have disengaged from paid employment as 'retirees' and to those entitled to an old-age pension as 'people of pensionable age' or 'older people'.

The production of the binary opposition of 'the vulnerable – the protector' is a feature of Lukashenka's ideology. To gain electoral support at the beginning of his political career in the 1990s, he capitalised on the sense of uncertainty about the future caused by the dissolution of the USSR. By exaggerating the uncertainty, he portrayed himself as a strong leader capable of establishing stability (Bekus, 2010, p. 85). To maintain his image as the protector of the nation, state-controlled media promote the idea that, unlike in other countries, Lukashenka has been paying old-age pensions without fail. Within this imaginary, the autocrat is equated with the state.

The stability ideologeme resonates with many Belarusians who lived through the early post-Soviet years, when wages and pensions were paid irregularly in many organisations affected by the collapse of the centralised economy. With Russian subsidies, living standards in Belarus increased between 1996 and 2010. However, between 2014 and 2016, economic growth declined, which resulted in the gradual shrinking of the social welfare system. The regime demonstrates both paternalistic and bureaucratic capitalist features: it allocates substantial budget resources to maintaining industry and the public sector, while oppressing Belarusians politically and appropriating the surplus created (Buzgalin & Kolganov, 2020, pp. 442–444).

Life expectancy at birth in Belarus is 78.1 years for women and 68.1 years for men (World Health Organisation, 2024). Due to the ten-year gap in longevity, there are two and a half times as many women of pensionable age as men (Belstat, 2021, pp. 72–73). 18.8 per cent of Belarusians entitled to an old-age pension remain employed (Kozlovskaya, 2020). Nine per cent of men work past pensionable age, compared to 28.7 per cent of women (Belstat, 2023b, p. 58). Between 2016 and 2022, the pensionable age in Belarus was increased from 55 to 58 for women and from 60 to 63 for men. The minimum contribution period required for registration for an old-age pension was also increased from 15 to 20 years.

The Belarusian state pension system depends on contributions from working people, whose payments go to the Fund of Social Protection. Any surplus in the Fund can be used by the state budget, and any deficit can be covered by the state budget (Lisenkova & Bornukova, 2017, p. 104). The number of working-age people has been declining due to low birth rates and outmigration. This dynamic has caused a deficit in the Pension Fund, which was estimated to be about 0.9 per cent of quarterly GDP in 2022 (Lvovsky & Bornukova, 2022, p. 6). In 2022, voluntary pension savings options were also introduced.

The ratio of the average pension to the average salary in Belarus is about 40 per cent. In 2022, the average pension amounted to 630.8 rubles (Belstat, 2023a, p. 83), equivalent to USD 250 (National Bank, 2022). The 17.8 per cent of Belarusians who rely on the average pension as their only source of income (Belstat, 2023a, p. 56) can afford to meet their basic needs but must save for months to purchase durable consumer goods such as refrigerators and washing machines. In addition, 23.8 per cent of people of pensionable age have incomes lower than the average pension (Belstat, 2023a, p. 56). The minimum subsistence level in 2022 was calculated at 377.1 rubles for the working-age population and 256.7 rubles for retirees (Belstat, 2023a, p. 58), equivalent to USD 150.80 and USD 102.60, respectively (National Bank, 2022).

Only fully retired Belarusians receive the full old-age pension. Citizens of working age who are registered as unemployed are eligible for free retraining, but Belarusians of pensionable age do not receive this benefit. A presidential decree in 2000 prescribes that a worker cannot be fired in the two years before reaching pensionable age. However, a 2002 presidential decree, which ended the Soviet system of permanent employment, places older employees in a vulnerable position. It allows employers to favour younger workers by not renewing the contracts of older ones. In the early 2000s, a nationwide programme was adopted to provide social services to the oldest citizens living alone in remote areas. However, there was still a gap between the need for these services and the ability to provide them (Padvalkava 2019, pp. 100, 97).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Belarusian state retained control over key industries. Trained for the Soviet planned economy, most of those who are currently aged over 60 were not motivated or did not have the resources to compete for better-paid jobs in private companies or to become entrepreneurs (Shadrina, 2023, p. 2).

In parallel, 'new class' formations have been developing in Belarus, particularly among those involved in the IT sector and the global media market. This process divides society into those whose livelihoods come from the global post-industrial service and creative economies, and those who depend on the state for their income (Gapova, 2021, p. 4). While the socio-economic backgrounds of those aged 60+ varies, most citizens of pensionable age belong to the latter group.

3 The study

My media analysis is inspired by gender studies, postcolonial theory, and critical gerontology. Within these fields, the concept of Othering elucidates the politically charged practice of identity formation through the production of symbolic boundaries between self and Other, establishing relations of power (Brons, 2015, p. 70). De Beauvoir (2009 [1949], pp. 21, 506) argued that in patriarchal societies, women are positioned as the Other in relation to men, who are afforded the status of normative subjects. Following this claim, Said (2003 [1978], pp. 1, 39) and Spivak (1985, p. 256) showed that the same oppressive logic maintains class inequality and colonial domination. The fixed notions of 'sameness' and 'otherness' also underpin the ageist hierarchy between middle-aged and older people (van Dyk, 2016, p. 109).

To explore how the category of 'pensioners' is constructed in the official rhetoric concerning the national distinctiveness of Belarus, I analysed news reports published between 2020 and 2024 on the largest state-owned media portal *SB. Belarus Segodnya*. By applying the keywords 'pensioner(s)' and 'national idea' to the portal's search string, I found 3,000 articles in the first category and 62 in the second. In addition, I searched for the same keywords in the transcripts of 152 radio interviews with members of civil society who oppose the Lukashenka regime, published in two books – *The Belarusian National Idea* (Lukashuk & Harunou, 2020) and *The Belarusian National Idea in Exile and at War* (Lukashuk, 2023).

Drawing on an inductive approach of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), I coded the reports and the interviews using the following categories: 'Belarus' civilisational position promoted' and 'the identity offered to older citizens'. I then examined the data sets to find patterns and to explore the underlying assumptions that inform the most common statements. The quotes used in this article were translated into English by me.

4 Old-age Othering in state media

Offering the vision of Belarus as an upgraded version of the Soviet developmental project, at the beginning of his political career Lukashenka secured the support of those who prioritised resource distribution through policy rather than the market – including most retirees, and factory and agricultural workers (Gapova, 2008, p. 5). Relying on Russian subsidies, over the last 30 years, he has built a centralised, repression-based system, which promotes its legitimacy by portraying liberal Western-style democracy as evil (Bekus, 2010, p. 215).

Seeing the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014 as a potential threat to its sovereignty, the regime invested in emphasising Belarus' distinctiveness from Russia (Bekus, 2023, p. 108). The government endorsed apolitical civil society initiatives promoting Belarusian culture and history (Astapova et al., 2022, p. 14). However, to suppress the 2020 protests, Lukashenka turned to the Kremlin for help. Putin's support resulted in a change of narrative. Presenting Russia as Belarus' closest ally since 2020, the Lukashenka regime allowed Russia to pursue its full-scale invasion of Ukraine from the territory of Belarus in 2022.

Between 2020 and 2024, the concepts of 'national idea' and 'national identity' were cited interchangeably in state media in four main contexts. In the first thematic bloc, the publications aimed to discredit the 2020 protests and to legitimise Lukashenka's sixth term in office. To illustrate, in this quote, a high-ranking academic discusses the anti-authoritarian resistance as a Western plot to destroy the union of the Belarusian people and the authorities:

> It is obviously a coup attempt initiated by the intelligence services of Western countries. […] there were no obvious reasons for the socio-political crisis. […] Belarus is the quintessence of the Eurasian balance and a shining example of stability and prosperity, sovereignty, and independence. […] Many people don't like this. (Shchokin, 2020)

In the official media, the narrative of suffering due to the hostility of the West is aimed at presenting the state and the Belarusian population as united against the external threat. The related aim is to deflect attention away from the unprecedented levels of state violence and mass repression which have unfolded since 2020.

In the second thematic bloc, 'the national idea' was cited alongside discussions concerning the economic sanctions imposed by Western countries on major Belarusian enterprises following the Lukashenka regime's crackdown on civil society in 2020. For instance, in her address to members of the National Assembly, the chairwoman of the Council of the Republic interprets the sanctions as a measure aimed at tormenting Lukashenka's supporters:

> The odious pseudo-democrats are sinking deeper into psychosis. […] After failed attempts at 'blitzkrieg' and strangulating us by the sanctions, they continue to poison our citizens with tons of dirty lies and fakes, resort to the vilest provocations and literally terrorising Belarusians, who have a firm pro-state position. (Kochanova, 2022)

The chairwoman builds her narrative on the 'victim–perpetrator' dichotomy to claim moral superiority for the regime, to justify state violence, and to shift the blame for the violence to its opponents.

In the third thematic bloc, the term 'national idea' was mentioned as part of a discussion of Belarus' role as Russia's main geopolitical ally. This perspective, for instance, is featured in a transcript of a public lecture given by the chairman of the pro-government party *Belaya Rus*:

> The historical experience of both Belarus and Russia shows the world the miracle of preserving many ethnic groups that were not suppressed or forced out by the hegemonic ethnic group. The paradox of the West is that it applies the principle of pluralism it had formed exclusively for domestic use. (Romanov, 2022)

To legitimise the alliance of the Lukashenka regime with that of Putin in the context of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the speaker diverts attention away from Russia's history of imperial violence before, during and after the Soviet era, and portrays the West as the site of aggression. This strategy corresponds with the official memory politics which focuses on the role of Belarus in the victory of the Soviet army in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) but ignores the mass repressions that took place during Stalin's rule (Marples & Laputska, 2021, p. 32).

The fourth theme – the outcome of the 2022 Constitutional Referendum – manifested in all the publications cited above. The latest change to the constitution gives Lukashenka more power and allows Russian troops and nuclear weapons to be stationed permanently in Belarus. While the referendum was held without adhering to democratic standards, the speakers represented its results as indicative of the unanimous choice of a nation united against external threats.

When it comes to the representations of older people in the official rhetoric, the term 'pensioners' operates as a figure of speech rather than a marker of the age group entitled to the old-age pension. This is evident from the fact that while Lukashenka himself reached pensionable age a decade ago, state media avoid associating him with 'pensioners' and represent him as the provider of social security:

> The great merit of the Head of State is that he always protects the interests of ordinary people: he supports young professionals and pensioners, large families, and children. (Khomiakova, 2024)

On other occasions, Lukashenka portrays himself as a patron of the elderly:

> We will all be old people. Therefore, old people should not be forgotten. I would like this [charitable initiative] to continue, so that we come to our old people and give them gifts, wishing them a Happy New Year and Merry Christmas. (Lukashenka, 2022)

Since the regime does not allow critical debates over its actions, the narrative strategies used by the press to discuss the relationship between the state and older citizens are limited to repetitive stories in which 'vulnerable pensioners' either fall victim to accidents and scammers or express gratitude to the system for its tireless care. The former rhetoric, for instance, is demonstrated in the following report in which the police are portrayed as caring representatives of the state who visit 'pensioners' to instruct them on how to protect themselves from scammer schemes:

> Pensioners are the most vulnerable victims of scammers. The elderly are very trusting and even naive, which is what scammers take advantage of, and shamelessly rob defenceless old people. (Yankovich, 2024)

The photo illustrations included in this report depict young male police officers instructing older women who represent 'the vulnerable pensioners'. The reports in this thematic bloc do not consider the responsibility of the state for policies that implicitly prioritise the interests of younger citizens over those of retirees (Shadrina, 2023, p. 9), and for cultivating the image of older people as vulnerable that the scammers exploit.

The narrative of older people expressing their gratitude to the system for its tireless care, for instance, is shown by the following report about activists from the state-approved youth organisation who are depicted as helping rural residents to prepare for winter: 'The guys, inspired by the President, chopped wood, and filled the woodpile to the brim […]. The grandpas and grandmas were very grateful, some even had tears in their eyes' (Shestakevich, 2022). The benevolently patronising tone of the report obscures the responsibility of the state for the fact that in rural areas, some older citizens live without central heating.

The images of 'vulnerable pensioners' are supplemented with stories about the 'young-old' presented as 'capable Others' (van Dyk, 2016, p. 111). For instance, Kucherova (2020) and Boyarchuk (2023) discuss a 71-year-old woman who works as a model and posts on social media, and a 64-year-old woman who demonstrates achievements in sports. These stories challenge the image of 'pensioners' as objects of state care. However, they simultaneously exoticise women of pensionable age who are capable of taking care of themselves. They celebrate the activities that would not be considered a reason for publication if the protagonists had not reached pensionable age.

In contrast to 'the capable young-old', 'pensioners' are often implicitly discussed as a burden on the state. To illustrate, during a meeting with sports officials, Lukashenka (2024) evaluated the achievements of Belarusian football and ice-hockey as 'worthless', even though Olympic sports, 'like pensioners, they sit on the shoulders of the state'. This utterance is a slightly mitigated version of the Russian colloquial expression 'to sit on someone's neck', which means taking advantage of someone by relying on their generosity without giving anything in return. In line with the official ideology, in this quotation Lukashenka claims moral superiority by presenting the autocratic system as a victim of unfair treatment and blaming problems in state-controlled spheres on someone else.

5 Old-age Othering in the 'European Belarus' narrative

To explore alternative perspectives on the national identity, I analysed 152 interviews with Belarusian public figures who oppose the ruling regime. The interviews were conducted for the radio programme *Idea X* on *The European Radio for Belarus (The Euroradio)*. The radio station was established by Belarusian journalists in Poland in 2005. Between 2009 and 2020, the station broadcast in Belarus. Following the 2020 protests, the staff were forced to flee the country. Currently, the station broadcasts from abroad.

Perceiving Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas as a potential threat to Belarus' independence, the radio hosts Zmicier Lukashuk and Maxim Harunou initiated debates about the country's national idea. Their programme *Idea X* aimed to preempt a potential Russian territorial claim over Belarus under the pretext that Belarus does not exist as a separate nation (Lukashuk & Harunou, 2020, p. 10). The transcripts of the radio interviews were published in three volumes. For this study, I analysed the first and the last collections. Since the authoritarian regime recognises *The Euroradio* as an extremist group, when citing the interviewees, I shall use pseudonyms.

The hosts asked members of civil society to reflect on their vision of Belarus' history and its civilisational orientation. Based on my analysis, the speakers' perspectives represented two popular narratives. The first one, discussed in this section, rejects the importance of the Soviet past. It is based on the claim that communist rule, a form of Russian colonisation, interrupted the development of the Belarusian national project. Formed by the end of the Soviet era, this rhetoric revives Belarus' historical associations with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Gapova, 2008, p. 5)

By making a connection between the modern nation and the medieval state, the proponents of this narrative present Belarus as originally belonging to the European civilisa-

tional space, and later occupied by the foreign Soviets (Gapova, 2002, p. 646). The adherents of this perspective interpret the investment of the Lukashenka regime in recycling the Soviet legacy and its current alliance with Russia as 'anti-national' (Bekus, 2023, p. 100).

The narrative of victimhood in relation to communist evils is not a Belarusian invention. Based on a mixture of historical facts and fiction, the rhetoric of suffering due to Soviet totalitarianism has been used by politicians in many Eastern European countries to claim the status of innocent victims (Barton Hronešová, 2022, p. 8).

The symbolic repertoire of the narrative that portrays the Belarusian nation as a victim of pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian expansionism includes several tropes. One is the representation of Belarusians as completely deprived of agency: 'We've got a neighbour who has been Russifying our people over several centuries' (Speaker B, 2020, p. 266).

In this way, the narrative of suffering as a result of Soviet colonisation renders generations of Belarusians, who witnessed the communist era, as non-present in history. It ignores the legacy of Soviet-time dissidents as well as cases of collaboration between the locals and the Nazis during German occupation of Soviet Belorussia in 1941–1944 (Oushakine, 2013, pp. 26, 297–298). However, a more nuanced representation of history would disrupt the 'victim-perpetrator' binary, depriving the speaker of the possibility of claiming moral superiority (Barton Hronešová, 2022, p. 8).

To distance Belarus from associations with anything Soviet – and subsequently Russian – some of the proponents of this perspective portray Russia as an Asian Other:

> […] a few centuries ago, our eastern neighbour saw this quality of Belarusians [docility] and used the Russian language against them. […] In the Middle Ages, we had the Magdeburg Law in our cities. […] These are the places where democracy, parliamentarism, elections and the like begin. […] Now look at the Horde cities. These cities have absolutely no understanding of democracy and its necessity. They only understand the need for a strong hand. And they brought that here. (Speaker C, 2020, p. 39)

Within the dominant Eurocentric perspective, Western Europe is understood as 'Europe' while Eastern Europe is imagined as being outside of political and cultural 'Europeanness'. The imaginary homogeneity of 'Europe', associated with progress, is constructed through its opposition to non-white non-European Others. This epistemology consequently conflates 'Europeanness' with whiteness; prompting Eastern European subjects to seek 'the capital of Europeanness' through racialising others (Krivonos, 2023, p. 1503).

Creating distance from the socialist understanding of social justice is another trope of the narrative of suffering due to communism, which is interpreted as being incompatible with democracy:

> The first generations of poets [who identified as Belarusian] mainly portrayed Belarusians according to the Marxist model as an 'oppressed class'. Until now, schoolchildren have been tormented by the poem *But who marches there?* by Yanka Kupala. […] Kupala and some of his predecessors endlessly aestheticised the lifestyle of peasants and workers and didn't understand how dangerous it was. […] As a result, in 1994, the people from Kupala's poem elected their president. (Speaker D, 2020, p. 311)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ethnocentric narrative in Belarus served to legitimise the substitution of the Soviet status-based system of stratification with the new property-based class system. The advocates of this perspective argued that by destroying the institution of private property, the communists had deprived individuals of autonomy, which is the constitutive feature of democracy (Gapova, 2008, pp. 5, 10).

The proponents of this narrative are often public figures with symbolic capital that is convertible outside the state economy. Initially, their position differed from that of postcolonial scholars of South Asia, who explained colonialism in Marxist terms as economic oppression resulting in other forms of subjugation. However, with time, the postcolonial intellectual project globally shifted to identity politics, replacing the discussion of structural inequality with ethnic dominance (Gapova, 2020a, p. 4). This shift enables those with more symbolic and economic resources to promote their own interests as 'national' interests.

Within the narrative of suffering as a result of communism, irrespective of whether the less privileged groups supported Lukashenka or not, the pro-welfare stance – as well as dependence on the state economy – became equated with advocacy for authoritarianism:

> [...] such different perspectives, not only ideological but also generational, largely divide Belarus into the Soviet and the new Belarus. And however hard you try; you see that they [older people] are not willing to engage in a dialogue. They are willing to fight immediately. [...] At times, I even think that it would be cosy to just make two separate Belaruses, like was done with Korea. (Speaker H, 2023, p. 225)

Those who do not possess the resources to generate income independently from the state economy, usually older citizens, are portrayed as backward and hostile towards the advocates of the 'European' Belarus. The interests of those in less privileged social positions are interpreted as an obstacle to Belarus' democratic future, which is allegedly only achievable through ethnocentric 'pro-European' nationalism:

> [...] they don't have their own national idea, mostly. Because they are alright that way – there is a home, work, money enough to get by. [...] It's not just different generations fighting over Belarus, it's cities fighting with villages. (Speaker K, 2023, p. 226)

Within this perspective, 'the national' is equated with a pro-democratic stance, and by extension with the free market. The interests of those dependent on the state economy are marginalised and marked as anti-national, philistine, and lacking a great cause. This position originates in early research into the nation-building process in Belarus after the end of Soviet socialism, which promoted the idea that 'the underdeveloped national consciousness' of Belarusians resulted in the democratic failure of the country (Marples, 2012, p. 189).

Challenging the assumption that nationalism can only manifest through the rejection of the Soviet past and in opposition to the authoritarian state, Bekus (2010, p. 6) argued that the ruling regime offered its Russian-speaking national project based on an appeal to the Soviet experience. She also demonstrated that irrespective of their attitudes to the autocratic system, most Belarusians support national independence (Bekus, 2010, p. 150).

From this perspective, the narrative of a Belarusian East/West divide reflects the post-Soviet reconfiguration of masculine privilege (Gapova, 2002, p. 641). While some proponents of the 'European' identity are female, they speak from the position of the masculine subject capable of surviving without relying on social welfare. They often portray the women who came of age during the Soviet era and who are economically dependent on the state as responsible for Belarus' democratic failure:

> They will physically go away sooner or later. [...] I wouldn't fire women with the 'nest' hair style [an old fashion 'big hair' style), I'd keep them as a rarity. (Speaker Y, 2023, p. 244)

This quote implies that the Belarusian East/West divide coincides with the generational divide. The categories of gender and age within this narrative broadly signify the class position of those Belarusians who are excluded from the global economy. The more privileged advocates of 'European' Belarus replace the debate about social inequality with one concerning taste and a moral choice. By ridiculing citizens dependent on the state economy, this part of civil society produces a moral hierarchy within which the interests of those who do not support this stance are interpreted as anti-Belarusian and immoral.

6 Intergroup solidarity in the 'borderland' narrative

While the narrative of suffering due to communism has proven unable to unite Belarusians, the 2020 protests – the largest in the country's history – brought together citizens from all social backgrounds, spanning multiple geopolitical perspectives and group interests. The anti-authoritarian resistance was driven by Russian-speaking opposition candidates and the new class of skilled professionals who derive income from outside the state economy (Gapova, 2021, p. 47). The slogans the protesters carried during the months-long rallies were written in three languages: Belarusian, Russian, and English.

As Gapova (2020b) points out, the political mobilisation preceding the protests often featured two national flags that had traditionally symbolised opposing viewpoints. For the ethnocentric opposition, the official red-green flag represented Lukashenka's authoritarianism, supported by Russian expansionism. For Lukashenka's supporters, the white-red-white flag adopted by the anti-Soviet and subsequently anti-Lukashenka opposition at the end of the twentieth century represented a threat to the status quo orchestrated by the West. She emphasises that during the 2020 election campaign, both flags took on different meanings – they symbolised the potential for a new Belarusian future that bridges the divide between those involved in the global economy and those dependent on the state.

This vision of the 2020 uprising is shared by a portion of public figures interviewed by *The Euroradio*. For instance, one interviewee describes their experience of the protests in the following way:

> [...] what happened in 2020 was a great meeting of the two Belarusian peoples. One of them wanted to build their homes, raise their children, they wanted peace and quiet, they wanted to live on their land. They looked down on the others a bit, to whom I belong, without much interest, as though we were freaks. We also looked down on them a bit. But in 2020, we met, looked each other in the eyes and realised that our distrust was meaningless. [...] we walked in the same column [...] – workers, entrepreneurs, baristas, writers. (Speaker S, 2023, p. 144)

By those who 'wanted peace and quiet,' the speaker refers to the less privileged social groups for whom the appeal of the ethnocentric opposition to move towards democracy through neoliberal capitalism signifies an existential threat. Those 'others' in this example represent a group who possess various forms of capital to successfully navigate the global economy. The willingness to acknowledge the difference in interests and to seek commonalities that the speaker demonstrates is linked to a distinct civilisational position. The proponents of this stance champion a democratic Belarus that belongs neither to Russia nor to the West but is connected to both. Here is how another interviewee discusses this version of Belarus' identity:

> I've always articulated that Belarus is not Russia, it's situated at the crossroads between Europe and Russia. It's quite easy for my interlocutors to identify Belarusians both as Europeans and as those who have a particle of Russianness. (Speaker R, 2020, p. 157)

The vision of Belarusian identity formed through disidentifying from the Eastern and Western imperial influences was first formulated in the early twentieth century. One of the most vivid examples of this position – the 1922 poem by Yanka Kupala *Tuteishiya* [The people from here] – promotes a territorial rather than a cultural attribution of Belarusianness (Bekus, 2010, p. 210). The poem is Kupala's satirical response to Russian and Polish claims to Belarus; Kupala's characters who identify as Belarusian react to these claims by retreating away from both (Ioffe, 2003, p. 1244).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a group of Belarusian intellectuals explored the potential of 'tuteishaść' or the state of 'from-here-ness' as a version of the national identity based on 'un-belonging' to either Russian civilisational space or to the West (Pershai, 2008, p. 86). Another vision of Belarus' self-sufficiency is based on acknowledging the influence of both. Building on Mignolo's (2000) concept of 'borderland' as a space in-between, some scholars imagine Belarus as present on both sides of the East/West European divide (Shparaha, 2005). The proponents of this perspective refuse to formulate the national idea in opposition to either external or internal subjects. Speaker Q (2023, p. 329) discusses the limits of national self-identifications that are based on confrontation:

> It's impossible to build something based on the thesis 'we are against something' – against Russians, the West, against internal enemies. […] If your national idea is to confront the enemies, at some point there won't be a nation – everyone will be eliminated.

This deviation from the logic of Othering opens up opportunities for solidarity across social groups:

> I believe that our way forward is to acknowledge our unique past, our shared heroes with other nations, and our complex history. […] We must support one another; we must strive for social justice to ensure that individuals and groups are not excluded from social participation. (Speaker M, 2020, pp. 175–176)

Another proponent of this perspective explains that at the beginning of his career, Lukashenka's promise to retain the Soviet-style welfare system resonated with the interests of those for whom Soviet modernisation was associated with access to education, an eight-hour working day, guaranteed housing with electricity and central heating, and guaranteed employment:

> It was a miracle for people. It's not surprising that they supported Lukashenka when he said that we'd return to the Soviet Union. (Speaker N, 2020, p. 195)

This speaker explains that championing resource distribution through policy rather than the market does not imply advocacy for authoritarianism. From this perspective, it is the autocratic system and the ethnocentric segment of civil society who pursue their interests by representing those dependent on social security as unquestioning supporters of the repressive regime.

Unlike the proponents of the narrative of suffering due to communism, the advocates of 'in-between-ness' do not seek a 'European' identity by Othering those who do not possess the capital to succeed outside the state economy:

> […] an average woman must think about how to ensure that her three sons would not have to bring their own families to live in the parents' one bedroom apartment on the outskirts […] When does she get to read books? That's the problem. […] Now look at those who participated in the protests. Those were, mostly, young people who have some level of education, and often not a Belarusian education. Those who can travel. (Speaker W, 2023, pp. 306–307)

The speaker emphasises that open political confrontation requires resources that are often unavailable to less privileged citizens, especially women, to whom society delegates the responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of their families. The fact that the participants of the 2020 'Pensioners' Marches' were mostly comprised of older women emphasises the political significance of that collective action. The attendees of the Marches simultaneously overcame their personal vulnerability by exposing themselves to state violence and used the notion of old-age vulnerability promoted by the state in the hope that the riot police would not use force against the group represented as objects of state care. Although they faced state brutality as the rest of society, their political subjectification came as a shock to the system (Shadrina, 2023, pp. 3, 18).

Social inequality and intergroup solidarity are the central themes featured in the 'borderland' narrative:

> Many people think about democracy […] while our parents think about how to survive on a pension of $100 […]. When it's a struggle for survival, there is no place for philosophical thoughts. […] It's impossible to build anything by saying that what was before isn't important, but here is our new history, we will start building it from now on. […] We don't need to look up to either Russia or the West. We must look inside ourselves, who we are, and how we can help one another. (Speaker O, 2023, pp. 39–40)

By reclaiming the socialist language of social justice, the proponents of the 'in-between' national project aspire to unite Belarusians across generations and social groups. The champions of the 'borderland' perspective acknowledge the Soviet legacy, including Stalin's repressions and forced migration, as well as the achievements of the Soviet developmental project. They advocate a democratic Belarus and condemn the Russian war against Ukraine.

7 Conclusion

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war in Donbas, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have mobilised debates about Belarusian sovereignty and national distinctiveness. My article explored how, speaking from diverse civilisational perspectives, Belarusian political actors use the categories of age, gender and class to reproduce or challenge the East/West European divide. It demonstrated that the imaginaries of the Belarusian nation that rely on the East/West dichotomy are productive of the practice of Othering. It further argued that the refusal to rely on binary logic in national self-determination promotes intergroup solidarity.

This article makes three contributions. First, it demonstrates how the tenacious logic of Cold War geopolitics animates social differentiation in territories positioned between Western and Russian influences. Second, it includes the interests of older citizens in the debates surrounding national projects. Third, by exploring the visibility of retirees in political narratives, following the 2020 anti-authoritarian 'Pensioners' Marches,' my article offers a more nuanced understanding of the impact generated by old-age identity activism.

Referring to the 2020 'Pensioners' Marches' held in Belarus during the largest anti-authoritarian protests in the country's history, I asked whether the participation of retirees in the mass mobilisation has influenced the ways in which the autocratic system and democratic forces discuss the role of older citizens in their national projects. To address this question, I analysed narratives about national identity promoted in Belarusian state-controlled and opposition media, following the 2020 uprising. I demonstrated that the autocratic system and the ethnocentric segment of civil society both establish themselves as the normative political subjects against 'pensioners', who are constructed as the inferior Other. Older women, who are often structurally disadvantaged, are the primary targets of the politics of Othering.

In contrast to the portrayal of the West as a space where citizens suffer a lack of social protection, the Lukashenka regime presents itself as a paternalist state effectively protecting 'vulnerable pensioners'. Within this imaginary, despite their generational and social differences, 'pensioners' are represented as objects of state care. The narrative of suffering due to Soviet totalitarianism/Russian colonialism, promoted by the ethnocentric opposition, discusses 'pensioners' as obstacles to the democratisation of Belarus.

In these narratives, the intersection of gender and ageing that constitutes the image of the inferior Other operates as an implicit reference to the less privileged social position of those who do not have the resources to successfully navigate the global economy. Speaking on behalf of the ruling elite and the middle-class civil society, both perspectives legitimise post-socialist privilege. In this sense, the visibility of retirees as a distinct political subject during the 2020 protests has not affected the exclusionary imaginaries of the Belarusian nation.

However, based on my findings, there is a segment of the democratic forces that refuses to identify with one of the two imperial formations. This part of civil society imagines Belarus as present on both sides of the East/West divide. This civilisational position allows its champions to seriously consider the concerns of citizens whose lives are far from the hegemonic notion of the masculinist subject capable of surviving without relying on social welfare. Rather than building on the colonial practice of Othering, this perspective promotes social solidarity.

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Speaker D. (2020). Мая націдэя: Беларусь мусіць быць бязмежнай ва ўсіх сэнсах [My national idea: Belarus must be limitless in all senses In Z. Lukashuk & M. Garunou (Eds.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя [The Belarusian national idea]* (pp. 310–315). Medysont.

Speaker H. (2023). "Жыве Беларусь!" – гэты выраз стаў кодавым, нашай агульнай ідэяй ['Long live Belarus!' – this expression became a code, our common idea]. In Z. Lukashuk (Ed.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя ў выгнанні і на выйне [The Belarusian national idea in exile and at war]* (pp. 224–229). Studio Magenta.

Speaker Y. (2023). Быць гаспадарамі на сваей зямлі – спрадвечная нацыянальная ідэя беларусаў [To be masters of one's own land is an ancient national idea of Belarusians]. In Z. Lukashuk (Ed.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя ў выгнанні і на выйне [The Belarusian national idea in exile and at war]* (pp. 241–246). Studio Magenta.

Speaker S. (2023). Мая нацыянальная ідэя застанецца нязменнай – мова і свабода [My national idea will remain unchanged – language and freedom]. In Z. Lukashuk (Ed.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя ў выгнанні і на выйне [The Belarusian national idea in exile and at war]* (pp. 144–149). Studio Magenta.

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Speaker Q. (2023). "Дабрабыт, самарэалізацыя, свабода" – тры словы нацыянальнай мары беларуса ['Prosperity, self-realisation, freedom' – three words of the Belarusian national dream]. In Z. Lukashuk (Ed.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя ў выгнанні і на выйне [The Belarusian national idea in exile and at war]* (pp. 325–331). Studio Magenta.

Speaker M. (2020). Беларусь для сябе і для ўсяго сусвету — мая нацыянальная ідэя [Belarus for myself and for the whole world is my national idea]. In Z. Lukashuk & M. Garunou (Eds.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя [The Belarusian national idea]* (pp. 174–179). Medysont.

Speaker N. (2020). Жыць па-людску і па справядлівасці — спрадвечная мара беларусаў [To live humanely and with justice is an ancient dream of Belarusians]. In Z. Lukashuk & M. Garunou (Eds.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя [The Belarusian national idea]* (pp. 192–202). Medysont.

Speaker W. (2023). Салідарнасць і барацьба – без гэтага нам не прыйсці да новый Беларусі [Solidarity and struggle – without this we cannot come to the new Belarus]. In Z. Lukashuk (Ed.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя ў выгнанні і на выйне [The Belarusian national idea in exile and at war]* (pp. 305–310). Studio Magenta.

Speaker O. (2023). Любоў – ўся Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя ў гэтым адным слове [Love is the entire Belarusian national idea in this one word]. In Z. Lukashuk (Ed.), *Беларуская нацыянальная ідэя ў выгнанні і на выйне [The Belarusian national idea in exile and at war]* (pp. 38–42). Studio Magenta.

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Politics of queer life writing in contemporary Poland

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 74–89.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1271
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the first comprehensive volume of memoirs *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie. Świadectwa, relacje, pamiętniki osób LGBTQ+* ('All the Power I Draw for Life: Testimonies, Accounts, Memoirs of LGBTQ+ People in Poland') (2022). It is a landmark volume in many respects. It is the first of its kind, a comprehensive (nearly 1,000-page) selection of memoirs sent to a competition announced in 2020 by the LGBT+ History and Identities Research Laboratory at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw. Therefore, they have become part of the long Polish tradition of diaries written for a competition announced by state institutions, a tradition dating back to the interwar period (diaries of peasants, Jewish youth, the unemployed, etc.). At the same time, the diaries were published at a very politically sensitive moment, when homophobia became an element of global politics, including the construction of East/West European distinctions. The published collection of diaries thus became a unique, autonomous, and empowered voice of the LGBTQ+ community from Central and Eastern Europe in a contemporary, hostile, geopolitical context.

Keywords: queer studies; life writing; Polish literature; memoirs; Central and Eastern Europe

1 Introduction

According to the ILGA Europe 2023 report, Poland ranked as the most homophobic country in Europe for the third consecutive year (ILGA Europe, pp. 114–116). Managing resentment and hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities has become a permanent part of the political game and the Catholic Church's interference in the structures of the Polish state. On July 20, 2019, the streets of Białystok, a city in one of the poorest regions in Poland – Podlasie – saw the first-ever Equality March in this part of the country. Nearly fifty counter-manifestations were registered along the route of the march, including road blockades and collective prayer stations organized by the All-Polish Convention of Football Fans (*Ogólnopolski Zjazd Kibiców*), which for the duration of the gathering decided to

conclude a pact of non-aggression against sports sympathizers and, as the participants themselves told reporters, to 'defend Białystok against perverts' in solidarity. Firecrackers, paving stones, and bottles were thrown in the direction of those marching with rainbow flags, and dozens of acts of physical violence occurred. Less than two weeks later, on August 1, 2019, the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski delivered a sermon at Wawel Cathedral in Krakow, during which he called the LGBTQ+ community the new enemy of Poland – the 'rainbow plague.' Both events were met with outrage from left-wing and center-left circles in Poland, but almost immediately, politicians of the right-wing party that has ruled Poland since 2015 – Law and Justice (*Prawo I Sprawiedliwość*) – got involved in defending both Jędraszewski and the Białystok hooligans – aggressive soccer fans, politically linked to nationalist radicals. The public media, dependent on the government's ideological agenda, launched a months-long propaganda campaign against the LGBTQ+ community. These attacks, part of systemic strategies to disseminate the growing homophobia and transphobia that has existed in Polish public discourse since 1989, were officially legitimized by the democratically elected government and the Church, which has real power in creating public sentiment.

In the face of a growing fear of persecution and political hostility towards minorities, researchers at the LGBT+ History and Identities Research Lab at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw (*Pracownia Badań nad Historią i Tożsamościami LGBT+, Instytut Stosowanych Nauk Społecznych Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego*) noticed the vital need to collect and memorialize the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in contemporary Poland. On June 1, 2020, the LGBT+ History Lab, together with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, announced the first-ever Polish competition for memoirs of queer people. One hundred and eighty-four submissions were received from all over Poland between June and October, including numerous villages and small towns.

Most of the contestants were born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the youngest participant being fifteen years old at the time of submission and the oldest being sixty. Classic memoirs were submitted, as well as artwork, texts of a poetic nature, and printouts of posts from social networks. In the introduction to the anthology of contest entries, published in 2022, *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie* ('All the Power I Draw for Life'), the organizers note that for most of the participants, the impetus to write a memoir came from widely reported political events and organized social hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities on a scale formerly unknown (Mikolajewski & Laskowski, 2022, p. 12). This is because the collection of texts coincided with the peak phase of the presidential campaign, during which the staff of Andrzej Duda (a former member of the then ruling party Law and Justice), who was seeking re-election, placed particular emphasis on managing resentment against non-heteronormative people. Duda, whose first presidential decree was to veto the Gender Reconciliation Act, began his campaign by signing the resolution called the 'Family Charter' (*Karta Rodziny*), consisting of, among other things, provisions on 'defending the institution of marriage' and 'protecting children from LGBT ideology' (Gluza, 2002). The Polish parliament also begun discussing a legal ban on the promotion of 'LGBT ideology' in public places, including sex education in schools. The political fuel of right-wing circles began to be the linking of psychosexual orientation with pedophilia. President Duda, in one of his speeches, said to those gathered at an election rally: 'They are trying to make us believe that they are people, and this is simply ideology,' adding further: 'We will not

allow our children to be led down the wrong path.' In turn, the official Twitter profile of a leading ruling party politician featured a post proclaiming, 'Poland without LGBT is the most beautiful.' Many memoirs recall the events of July 7, 2020, when police used violence against protesters during a demonstration in solidarity with a non-binary activist of the *Stop Bzdurom* ('Stop the Bullshit') collective arrested for a citizen stop of a van displaying homophobic slogans. Those who had gathered were beaten, their rainbow flags were yanked from them, and tear gas was sprayed among them. Forty-seven people were detained, and the way police conducted interrogations and personal searches (especially on transgender people) bore the hallmarks of inhumane treatment, according to representatives of *Krajowy Mechanizm Prewencji Tortur* ('National Torture Prevention Mechanism'). As we can read in the introduction to the selection of the competition diaries: 'The night of August 7 was the culmination of the political events of that summer and at the same time, apparently, a turning point in the history of the LGBTQ+ community in Poland' (Mikołajewski & Laskowski, 2022, p. 11).

The contest, the fruits of which were published in the collection *All the Strength I Draw for Life*, is part of a long tradition of Polish memoir writing. The organizers of the initiative in question were particularly inspired by the competitions of the interwar period (1918–1939): the three editions of competitions for peasants, emigrants, and the unemployed held at the initiative of *Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego* (The Institute of Social Economy) under the leadership of Ludwik Krzywicki, and the competition for diaries of young people of Jewish origin organized by *Żydowski Instytut Naukowy* (The Jewish Scientific Institute, JIWO) in Vilnius. Memoir competitions reached the peak of their popularity only during the communist era: it is estimated that by 1989, the archives of *Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Pamiętnikarstwa* (The Society of Friends of Memoirs Studies) had accumulated some nine hundred thousand manuscripts and typescripts (Gluza, 2002), but it is the pre-war projects that seem to have the most in common with the initiative dedicated to the diaries of LGBTQ+ people. First, they are united by their precursor character – they were the first such initiatives dedicated to minorities. Second, the pre-war initiatives also focused on texts by authors belonging to communities (of class or religion) that, due to the exclusionary policies of successive conservative governments, remained on the margins of public discourse. Both the participants in memoir contests for peasants, workers, or Jewish youth and the LGBTQ+ communities should be analyzed as individuals who were experiencing symbolic violence through their dependence on the disposers of the dominant culture; those who controlled and steered the social narrative. Writing down and submitting a memoir thus becomes an attempt by a marginalized individual to take control of their fate and create a sovereign narrative about the group on whose behalf the author speaks. For this reason, the participation of LGBTQ+ people in the contest in question can also be interpreted as an action in the name of collective solidarity – an activist gesture. Third, groundbreaking historical events were the impetus for the texts submitted to these competitions. Competition memoirs often exemplify *ad hoc* statements and texts-testimonies that react to current and significant socio-political events. In the case of the competitions for Jewish youth, this was the growing anti-Semitic propaganda; the backdrop for The Institute of Social Economy competitions was the economic and social effects of the Great Depression; the memoirs in the collection described here were written under the influence of the homophobic and transphobic political campaign.

2 Managing queer identity

One of the most important and conspicuous elements of the successive narratives is the self-identification or identity labels that always appear at the beginning of the diaries. They serve as identity signposts (for readers) and, at the same time, help manage one's own identity. They rarely come down to one word; they are usually elaborate and, importantly, individualized. They often pertain to both sexual and gender identity and sometimes even class (by indicating the place of birth and upbringing in childhood), as well as age (most often young people, 18+). Sometimes, they take the form of an extended biographical form that will later be developed in the main text of the memoir, indicating a considerable degree of self-reflection on the part of the authors. It seems especially important that these identity labels are individualized. It is as if the authors wanted to collectively say, as one of the diarists put it, that 'My only concern at the time was that my sexuality would overshadow my personality. I'll explain – I didn't want to be known in my circle of friends for being non-heteronormative because it was just one aspect of me' (Michał, memoir No. 3, p. 78).

It is worth mentioning some of the sexual and gender self-identifications mentioned in this volume. These are authorial formulations, not terms coming from the editors of the volume: 'homosexual person' (not 'homosexual man'), 'cis woman, lesbian, living in a small town,' 'I am a cis man and gay. I was raised and still live in a small, ten-thousand-person town,' 'cis woman, lesbian, living in a city in southern Poland,' 'cis man, homosexual/bisexual,' 'I am a cisgender man and gay,' 'I am a cis woman and a lesbian. I live in a provincial city in southern Poland,' 'cis man, homosexual,' 'I am a cisgender woman and a lesbian,' 'cis man, gay,' 'homosexual cisgender man [...] lives in a small village near Warsaw,' 'cis woman, lesbian, lives in Wrocław,' 'I am a trans woman, I identify as panromantic asexual,' 'trans man – born and raised in a small town,' 'cisgender woman, lesbian, grew up in Nowy Sącz,' 'cisgender homosexual man,' 'Homosexual cisgender man [...] lives in a small village near Warsaw,' 'cisgender woman, bisexual, born and lives in a provincial city, 'identifies as a non-heteronormative woman, lesbian,' 'Homoerotic and heteroromantic cis man,' 'cis woman, bisexual,' 'trans woman, lesbian,' 'cis man, gay,' 'demisexual and homoromantic woman, lives in a rural area in the Pomeranian Voivodeship,' 'non-binary person with an agender identity, demipansexual orientation,' 'non-binary person, bisexual, born in 1999 in Białystok,' 'transgender man', etc.

As mentioned above, most of the diarists are young people, probably very familiar with the way information about the memoir competition was circulated: it was done almost exclusively through social media. Nevertheless, this allows us to see that the self-identifications are not only very individualized but also clearly problematize both sexual and gender identity. This is a novelty compared to previous waves of emancipation (such as the one from the first decade of the 21st century, when the symbolic event was the 'Let Them See Us' campaign [*Niech Nas Zobaczą*] from 2003, which marked the beginning of the so-called politics of visibility). It is also evident that, especially in the biographical narratives of young authors, pivotal events are recurring. These are the events mentioned above: arrests on Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw after the detention of one of the activists (July 2020) and the earlier attack on the Equality March in Białystok. In the context of the entire volume, both events take on the character of 'generational' or formative events for young queer people in Poland.

The self-identifications used by the diarists in the biographical forms are now highly globalized. Their sources can be found in the cultural spaces and texts mentioned in the diaries of younger authors: primarily the Internet, but also TV series, movies, music, and, to a much lesser extent than for people from previous generations, books. Many of these cultural texts are English-language works with a global reach. The significant individualization and personalization of identity descriptions is also due to global changes in the channels and forms of communication of LGBTQ+ people. New forms of self-identification, such as xenogender, discussed on Tumblr channels, are expanding the range of gender, sexual and identity terms while making them contingent and disposable, and on the other hand, building new policies of non-binary identities, such as MOGWAI (Marginalised Orientations, Gender Alignments and Intersex) or LIOM (Labels & Identities, Orientations, Other Minorities) (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2023, p. 61). It is, therefore, worth looking back and examining what self-identifications were used in the past in Poland, how they related to identity politics, and whether something can be said about Polish or Central and East European dynamics of change.

The last issue is the subject of the book *De-Centring Western Sexualities. Central and East-European Perspectives* from 2011, and particularly the first chapter by two editors – Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa (Mizielińska & Kulpa, 2011). This is a very interesting and important article that explains the differences in the LGBT vs. queer approach in the Polish context, addressing the issue of exclusions within the former. The key thesis is related to differences in 'geo-temporal modalities' between West and Central-Eastern Europe. According to this thesis, a Western 'time of sequence' with successive stages of emancipation and corresponding theories took place (from the 1950s and the homophile movement), and an Eastern European 'time of coincidence' where everything has happened simultaneously since the 1990s, and specifically after 1989.

However, the period of the People's Republic of Poland, referred to as 'communist time' in the diagram (Mizelińska & Kulpa, 2011, p. 15) in *De-centring Western Sexualities*, essentially constituted a blank spot or a timeless space, which only moved towards modernity after 1989. Nevertheless, several important books have filled in this blank spot in the last decade. For example, Łukasz Szulc's book *Transnational Homosexual in Communist Poland* (Szulc, 2018) includes the beginnings of activism around zines in 1980s Poland and the collective work *Queers in State Socialism: Cruising 1970s Poland* (Basiuk & Burszta, 2021) tries to cover the previous decade. Very interesting research on the expert discourse on sexuality in the Polish People's Republic by Agnieszka Kościańska (among others, *Zobaczyć łosia,* 2017) and especially transgender issues (Dębińska, 2020) have shed light on the collection of biographical texts by non-cisgender people published legally and in large numbers at the end of the Polish People's Republic period – *Apokalipsa płci* [Gender apocalypse] (Dulko & Imieliński, 1989).

From these works, it is clear that while the 1970s can be characterized as a time when there were rather social circles of homosexual men (Burszta, 2021), the 1980s can be described as a period of native emancipatory discourse. However, in the public discourse of that time, the most emancipatory and non-stigmatizing terms centered around the words 'different' and 'other' (as in the manifesto of Krzysztof Darski *Jesteśmy inni* ['We are different'] (Darski, 1986) in the popular weekly *Polityka* in 1986 or the title of the pre-queer anthology by Maria Janion and Zbigniew Majchrowski *Odmieńcy*, ('The Odd Ones', originating from the German word *Außenseiter*, the title of Hans Mayer's influential book from

1982, see Warkocki, 2021). The word *gej* ('gay') only appeared in the 1990s, and then even in written form (rather than just oral) in the circulation of minority publications, and there you can even see the assimilation of this initially foreign word: in the first issues of these publications, words like *gaye, gay'owie,* and *gayowie* (now incorrect in Polish) were sometimes used, alongside *geje* (proper form in Polish). It remains very symptomatic, however, that none of the magazines for homosexuals, which began to appear after 1989, used the word 'gay' in the title or subtitle (e.g., *Filo. Miesięcznik kochających inaczej* ['Philo: Monthly magazine of those who love differently']; *Magazyn kochających Inaczej* ['The magazine of those who love Differently'], later *Inaczej* ['Differently']; *Okay. Miesięcznik dla panów* [Okay: Man's Magazine]). It is as if the word 'gay' was both too foreign and too informative.

This means that we can talk about the emancipatory discourse in the 1980s, but the politics of visibility began in the first decade of the 21st century. And the collection of memoirs under discussion is another symptomatic element of it.

3 The diary and memoir form

Every form of autobiographical writing includes conventional, typical, as well as individual and idiolectical elements. Regardless of the level of literacy and cultural competence of the individuals writing autobiographies, they creatively relate to or replicate the patterns and themes of autobiographical writing. The very form of autobiography enforces predictable writing techniques and basic themes. Additionally, in the case of commissioned autobiographies, each life story interprets the competition announcement, responding to the expectations and assumptions of its creators. All the texts that were submitted were prepared for the competition at the same time, even if they referred to different temporal orders (due to the age of the authors) or were based on previously written texts (blogs, diaries, social media) –, and narratives close with the deadline for submitting entries (the year 2020). Therefore, the collections of competition autobiographies maintain coherence. From the readers' and analytical perspective, this situation risks deindividualizing experiences and excessive and unfair comparison, as cautioned by autobiography researchers Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2020).

The texts submitted to the competition primarily relate to two fundamental and traditional genres: the personal journal (the diary) and the memoir. They are united by the central position of the writing subject ('I') and their different spatiotemporal context in relation to the subject's narration of events.

In the case of a personal journal (diary), recent events are recounted, and emotional states and reflections refer to moments recently experienced, viewed, and analyzed from within. Journal forms, written day by day, focus on temporary interpretations of processes, events, and themes captured in the flow of life. Strictly speaking, diaries appeared in a clear minority of the collections of competition (memoirs No. 76, 77), but several authors were inspired by their diaries (especially those written in the past). In several other cases, entries from internet blogs (memoirs no. 48, 74) and selections of social media posts were submitted for the competition. Probably, one of the texts is fictitious and only stylized as a personal journal (memoir No. 38).

In contrast to the personal journal, in the case of a memoir, the subject separates their past 'self,' which was the subject of action, and also the hero of the story, from their current, present 'self,' who recalls and analyzes their life. The time gap does not have to be significant (the youngest author was 16 years old); the key aspect is differentiating the 'self' as the object and subject of the narrative. The memoir perspective suggests that acquired experiences and participation in events led to the current life situation and existential condition. As a result, the memoir strengthens a teleological perspective and encourages summarization and ordering, such as dividing life into stages, typologizing experiences, identifying recurring themes, selecting the most important (influential) people, and determining exceptional and transformational events critical to one's life and self-understanding.

Life, organized into chronological and narrative sequences, transforms into a story about experiences concentrated on events occurring 'before' and 'after' key events for the subject. Therefore, in a memoir narrative, moments of change in a life, decisions that transform it (coming out, transitioning and initiating legal and medical procedures, divorce, leaving the religious order, moving out of the family home, emigration), and independent random events with individual and collective significance that affect the subject (family relocation during teenage years, completion of compulsory education, job loss, the death of a loved one/partner, the outbreak of a pandemic) are easily discernible.

An additional ordering factor is the anticipated queer perspective in the competition. Experiences related to gender and sexual identity were the central focus of the narratives, regardless of their declared character. These experiences became the central narrative category for all authors. Therefore, most memoirists describe the process of discovering their gender and sexual identity, and the period of coming of age and adolescence, along with new psychological and physical experiences, including consent and disagreement with them, was a crucial time in almost all texts.

Special emphasis is placed on family relationships and the description of the socialization process (especially the attitudes of caregivers and families toward the discovered identity, the level of acceptance and support, and the possibility of continuing relationships), as well as intimate/sexual relationships (the particular nature of the 'first time' and the first 'great love,' seeking partners, unsuccessful relationships and imposed unions, separations, singlehood, and starting a family).

Most memoirs repeat a sequence of three key events, not necessarily in this order: (1) discovering one's gender and/or sexual identity, incompatible with the dominant heteronomy and cisgender, (2) coming out (variably: to family, friends, potential partners, support groups), (3) searching for a loved one, falling in love, trying to enter a relationship.

Regardless of the experiences and age of the authors, other dimensions of identity and life aspects (work, hobbies) are treated less elaborately and mostly contextually in the diaries. However, school plays a particularly significant role as a state institution of education and socialization, and the Catholic Church, as the dominant institution in Poland, is also addressed by almost all memoir authors. The third point of reference is the deepening crisis of democracy in Poland and the country's radicalized policy toward minorities. Consequently, the recurring themes of emigration and migration to the city, attitudes toward religion, and political activism are not primarily the result of the conventions of autobiography or the competition announcement but of the social and political conditions of the authors' lives.

4 (E)migration

One of the key experiences for many individuals writing diaries is migration, taking various forms, such as moving from rural to urban areas, from smaller towns to larger cities (notably Warsaw, Gdańsk, Białystok, Lublin), and, of course, from Poland abroad, mainly to Western Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, England, Ireland, but also Canada and China). The pressing need for a change of residence is virtually a common experience for most memoir writers and is always more or less associated with a sense of discomfort in their current place of residence, often related to experiences of homophobia and transphobia or simply a lack of the opportunity to fully realize one's life. One could even argue that migration/emigration is a pivotal moment in biographical narratives, sometimes even causing a complete narrative shift. This change is often highly valorized to the extent that the narrative may already be presented from the perspective of being an expat, which somehow intensifies the retrospective viewpoint. For instance, memoir No. 60, signed 'Szymon Maurycy,' ends a sort of manifesto written after moving to Berlin:

> I experienced homophobia at all levels of life, from school to institutional and systemic. In the store, during breaks, in class, at home (sister, parents' friends), at the police station, on the street, in a club, or in a taxi. I was beaten in Krakow at Planty Park and on the Poniatowski Bridge in Warsaw. And that damn PiS, that stupid Pawłowicz. Nationalism and xenophobia. The wasted money on an ugly fountain and musical benches. And the omnipresent anger that Warsaw is not the Paris of the North.[1] (Memoir No. 60, p. 743)

This affective charge is not unique. It seems that many memoirs serve as accusations more than testimonials, and it is this kind of poetics that is employed. It involves a generalized accusation against Poland for not treating its non-heteronormative citizens as equals to heterosexual ones. For this reason, Western Europe is sometimes almost idealized – as a place where the limitations arising from homophobia and transphobia are less severe. In memoir no. 61, signed by Aleksandra Puciłowska, this difference between Poland and Western Europe appears quite literally or graphically as the Polish–German border between Słubice and Frankfurt. The memoirist describes her experience of participating in the Equality March and the fear, uncertainty, and threat on the Polish side. On the German side, such feelings disappear: 'Crossing the bridge to the German side, everyone proudly raised their colorful flags up, allowing them to flutter in the wind. It was beautiful, almost magical. [...] And, above all, the breeze of freedom – as if the gentle wind blowing from the western shore of the Oder heralded that we would soon be in a completely different world' (memoir No. 61, p. 745). Europeanness, or broadly defined Western Europeanness, often becomes an entirely different world, and the Polish border almost acts as a projection screen.

Of course, emigration's success depends on various factors, especially the type of work and earnings; nevertheless, biographical narratives thematically and structurally based on emigration typically have their happy endings. In other words, despite the hardships, the choice of emigration is presented as a proper, purposeful, and fulfilling one.

[1] The author refers here to pre-war saying: 'Warsaw is the Paris of the North.'

5 Class and Catholicism

A shared experience among many authors, often from small towns, is the desire to leave their family home and move to a large city, which is associated with anonymity and greater freedom of self-expression. In most cases, this desire is accompanied by a lack of understanding and acceptance in their immediate surroundings: from parents, siblings, friends, and school. A recurring theme is the authors' desire to move to a larger city to continue their education and establish new relationships, including, importantly, not just romantic ones but also support networks. As Krzysztof Kosiński pointed out, one significant benefit of sources from memoir competitions is the ability to discern the evolution of mechanisms of social advancement (Kosiński, 2003, p. 138). Many of the memoirs published in the collection can also be interpreted as non-traditional scenarios for breaking the class structure, where the stakes are not just material or symbolic status improvement resulting from education but the preservation of one's own identity. Often, this involves escaping violence and discrimination experienced during upbringing. Reading these memoirs according to Florian Znaniecki's traditional biographical method, a pioneer in life-writing studies among working-class people, who, along with William Thomas, compiled the groundbreaking collection of personal documents of Polish peasants in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920), allows an analysis of the changes in the relationships between 'identity (individual and collective) and organization (social/cultural)' (Kaźmierska, 2013, pp. 18–19), which undergo significant shifts over time and space. At various stages of their stories, the authors make different class and environmental identifications. Many narratives of the desire to leave their hometown (usually a small town or village) are linked to the challenging experiences of being raised in the Catholic faith and having a close relationship with the church, which amplified the difficulties of self-acceptance for the authors and support from their immediate environment. Sociological studies have long shown that LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland perceive the Catholic Church as the most discriminating institution, deliberately organizing collective animosity towards minorities (Jóźko, 2009, pp. 107–108). Researchers point to strategies employed by the Polish Episcopate against LGBTQ+ communities, which draw on anti-Semitic slogans (Kulpa, 2020) and depict non-heterosexual individuals as a 'threat to Polishness and the Catholic unity of Poles' (Hall, 2016, p. 81). Authors typically move to large urban and academic centers (Warsaw, Krakow, Gdańsk, Poznań), providing them with anonymity, greater freedom in expressing their identity (e.g., through clothing), and a sense of acceptance by finding friends within the LGBTQ+ community (in college or through the internet). Above all, they gain the freedom to decide the character of their religious practices or lack thereof. Authors for whom religion and faith were essential reference points for morality during their adolescence devote considerable attention to describing the traumatic collision between the conservative Catholicism instilled within their family communities and their emerging queer identity. *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie* contains numerous descriptions of internalized, fear-fueled homophobia, of which LGBTQ+ individuals raised in religious homes were both victims and perpetrators. One memoir entry provides a glimpse into this experience: 'I spent a lot of time in Church. Everything the priest did seemed fascinating to me. My religiosity was very fervent and sincere, even now, with the perspective of everything I've been through; it still seems very authentic to me. Whenever I felt sinful,

I would go to church… and regularly confessed my sin, believing every day that God would send me a good boy to marry and start a family with. Those were the worst five years of my life, self-hate, disgust with my own desires. For years, I was a homophobe, spreading hatred towards myself. The self-loathing speech' (memoir No. 4, pp. 89–98). In memoir no. 9, the author tells us the story of participating in a religious organization led by an exorcist priest who performed prayers for the 'liberation from homosexual spirits/demons,' as well as the 'March for Life and Family,' during which the diarist agreed to chant slogans like 'boy, girl, a normal family' to gain the favor and interest of the clergy. Memoir no. 10's author describes a secretly kept relationship with a member of a youth religious community who remained in a committed romantic and intimate relationship while posting homophobic content on social media and forbidding her partner from maintaining connections with the LGBTQ+ community. Many memoirs (e.g., 2, 4, 9, 10, 14, 24, 35, 78) present a similar repertoire of experiences: childhood spent in a small town, upbringing in a deeply religious family, participation in some form of youth religious community, and the recurring words in their texts: shame, guilt, and sin.

6 Shame

'Am I sick? Will I be a source of shame for my family? I had no doubts about one thing: that I am sinful… You bring shame to your home and your family, and for that, nothing good will ever come to you. Punishments, karma, sins, call it what you will, you'll live in hell' (memoir No. 4, pp. 95–98); 'I was afraid to go to confession; I felt ashamed that I was the evil sent by Satan to destroy the world. I felt guilty for who I am, even though I didn't harm anyone' (memoir No. 19, p. 173); '[S]in. You have a grave sin. You should confess it quickly, but I have no idea how you could admit this to the priest; it's pathetic, embarrassing, terrible' (memoir No. 78, p. 958).

The distinction intuitively made between the status of guilt and shame in trauma and violence experienced by victims is developed in Ruth Leys' book *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*. It assigns the sense of guilt to actual actions (including the commission of an act deemed sinful by a specific moral code), while the effect of shame is related to the feeling of who one is, revealing internalized beliefs about one's deficiencies and inadequacies under the judgmental gaze of another (Leys, 2007, p. 11). Experiences that lead to a sense of being ashamed, particularly the shame caused by something that should not be subject to someone else's judgment, reveal traces of sovereign consciousness, undermining the oppressive narrative of proper and improper identity. As Kaye Mitchell states, 'The question of shame is utterly imbricated with questions of identity and selfhood – particularly, but not only, flawed selfhood' (Mitchell, 2020, p. 2). In the memoirs, the evaluative adjective 'flawed' is integrated into the authors' processes of consciousness transformation. In their texts, often written from a distance in time, this no longer communicates non-normative, non-conforming to a socially acceptable identity repertoire but signifies being marked by oppressive feelings of guilt, a survivor of a false norm. Drawing inspiration from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's insights into the performative and creative potential of the effect of shame, Mitchell assigns the notes about experiences of shame the status of a 'redemptive act' (Mitchell, 2020, p. 1). It is precisely within the category of a certain redemption and the act of forming a new, subjective form of identity that fragments of

memoirs can be interpreted. In these fragments, authors write about 'euphoric elation' (memoir No. 2, p. 66), a sense of real freedom (memoir No. 10, p. 185), or a memory akin to the best birthday (memoir No. 35, p. 461), which resulted in processing memories of experienced guilt and succumbing to the processes of moral shame. This redemption is also achieved through radical, albeit often painful and bitter, actions such as cutting ties with an unsupportive environment or migrating to another part of the country or the world.

7 Collective and individual self-therapy

The necessary brevity and selectiveness of memoir narratives are accompanied by general reflections on one's life, family, loved ones, society, culture, and, as is typical in life writing, instructional and/or therapeutic elements.

The didactic nature of memoir forms arises from the ever-present, albeit often invisible or seemingly absent audience for every autobiographical text to whom one narrates one's life. Put simply, the narration serves as a cautionary tale ('do not repeat my mistakes') or a model to emulate ('this is how one should live'). However, most often, these elements are combined and are not treated as the primary value or purpose of autobiography. Didacticism is largely a byproduct of life writing.

Today, didactic functions are closely intertwined with self-care and therapeutic elements. Queer memoirs share many similarities with the genre of illness memoirs, especially those written by individuals who have gone through or are going through transitions or describe various illnesses, often of a psychological nature. The story of dealing with illnesses, physical discomfort, and/or healthcare, doctors, surgeries, and hospital stays, on the one hand, supports the author but also provides examples for potential comparisons, the use of warnings, setting an example, or, conversely, refraining from certain paths of treatment.

The specific conditions of the competition, detailed calls suggesting the thematic scope and character of confessions, heightened socio-political tensions, and immersion in dynamic, reaction-based social media have intensified the appeal, persuasiveness, and rhetoric of the entire collection of texts. Their didactic, therapeutic, and political dimensions are closely intertwined and mutually influence one another.

Since publication was the prize in the competition, authors immediately considered the existence of audiences beyond the competition committee, although texts were evidently accompanied by additional comments for the jury, such as: 'I am sending you the text. It's very important, written quite recently […]. It is part of something that will be compiled in the future,' (memoir No. 74, p. 931). Such explanations, on the one hand, place the memoirs in the context of the lives of individuals, often signed using their first and last names. On the other hand, they refer to the authors' creativity, activism, and social media beyond the competition. Most authors write about the internet as a public space (hence, they consider coming out/expressing support/activism on social media as a public activity). The competition is thus treated as an additional channel of communication and a space for popularizing their activities. For instance, Kinga Kosińska, the author of autobiographical novels, directly addresses her readers: 'And from this loneliness, I greet you' (memoir No. 55, p. 699), encouraging engagement and contact.

The youngest authors, belonging to the generation of digital natives, even if they do not introduce themselves, heavily employ the dynamic, replicable, and discussion-oriented formula of writing. They also use emojis, although less frequently than the abbreviations common in social media. For example, when describing homophobic comments from a teacher, Pati Maniura writes: 'And returning to our part-time school, we had Social Studies with an elderly lady who was trying to make a living. I greet the lady very warmly. I have never encountered such a mentally inflexible person in my life' (memoir No. 46, p. 550). The ironic tone of the greetings weakly suggests that the teacher might be a potential reader of the confession. However, it builds a community of readers who share the author's skepticism and distance themselves from the violent nature of education. The author's distance from the memoir form creates a community belonging to a post-Gutenberg world, even though memoirs have traditionally been printed in book form. With a wink of an eye, Ksawery Kondrat refers to classical but outdated forms of memoir writing: 'Dear Diary, you're just a notebook, a little booklet with which I will share my story. It won't be a sweet fairy tale, but I won't go with some heavy drama either. We'll just chat, like pals, straight from the heart,' (memoir No. 16, p. 255).

Anonymous authors, too, who are reserved or camouflage personal data, create strongly appellative texts. They often write in the plural, where 'we' encompasses a community of individuals affected by exclusion; people with similar identity concerns or desires. For example, Michał writes: 'I want to share my story with you, which may not take your breath away, but it offers a few morals, the most important of which: WE only want LOVE.' (memoir No. 41, p. 502)

In other memoirs, 'we' builds a community transcending gender, identity, or religious divisions. These texts have the character of an appeal for recognition and social respect. For example, Aleksandra Syrokomla writes: 'I have taken it upon myself to present my life as a non-heteronormative person, and I assumed that I would show that I am just like other people. I'm not different; I'm a normal human being' (memoir No. 73, p. 910). In the case of this memoir, the strategy of inclusion also involves parallel representation of political, social, and sports events in relation to their life story.

Similarly, Natalia directs her confession to a wide audience: 'I would like people to realize that there are no uniform groups, and in reality, both in the LGBT group at the Equality March and in the counter-demonstration, there are people with similar life stories, and the only thing that sets them apart is where they stand because they have a need to belong somewhere' (memoir No. 37, p. 481).

Most often, however, 'we' refers to the LGBTQ+ community. Memoir authors convey their creed and message to readers, stemming from their life experiences. They are aware when their stories are not uplifting and deviate from the narratives of pride, which they sometimes address with irony, detachment, or even sorrow. For example, Natalia writes: 'I would like this to be another nice story about how someone came out of the closet, and their parents hugged them and said they love them, and since this is a story with religion in the background, that God loves them too. Unfortunately, it wasn't that colorful' (memoir No. 37, p. 474). Individuals who have experienced mental breakdowns due to discrimination, have endured violence, or have suffered from depression, personality disorders, or eating disorders often share in their memoirs the ways to overcome trauma, fears, and discomfort. They often highlight the transformative role of psychotherapy and interpret

their lives in psychoanalytic terms, referring to the authority of their therapists. They usually provide encouragement and support and fit into the framework of empowerment and rescue in crisis situations. For example, Kamil Wajda warns against suicide and other forms of self-destruction: 'This is my last thought. I really want the person reading this to know that there is no such thing as a situation with no way out,' directing the message towards psychologists and support groups for queer individuals. Jolie, the author of memoir 30, concludes with the following words: 'I want to conclude my statement, adding courage to all those who are in a difficult situation and letting them know that they are wonderful people, regardless of what others say about them. Don't be afraid to discover your sexuality, and don't shy away from calling yourself a person who is not completely decided, because exploring your identity is a very tedious and demanding process, so not everything will come to you right away' (memoir No. 49, pp. 395–396). These kinds of demands, wishes, warnings, and good advice are explicitly didactic in nature.

8 Accusation

Confessions take on a political dimension primarily in those cases where the authors formulate demands related to social life. Even if not stated explicitly, almost every memoir resonates with wishes for change: social acceptance, equal education, and a wide range of human rights, including same-sex marriage and child adoption. Often, these demands boil down to calls for respect, empathy, and neutrality. Treating their case as a symptom of the necessary changes, Polie writes, 'It's about not panicking. It's about not fearing to leave the house every day because someone might push me under a tram just because of how I look. It's about not having to climb onto the windowsill every day and look down with hope. It's about not having to flee the country to finally live in harmony with myself and the person I love. It's simply about making the experiences of a non-binary person, born in Poland, equally important as anyone else's. And nothing more' (memoir No. 42, p. 519).

One of the key demands is to halt the radicalization of conservative social policies in Poland, which memoir authors observe closely. For example, Natalia writes, 'That's why I decided to share a piece of my story because I feel like an individual who is somewhere in all of this and mourns the decline of humanity in people, not as the politicians claim an ideology unworthy of human rights' (memoir No. 37, p. 470). Readers of the memoirs are encouraged to be politically active: 'How long will we continue to accept aggression into our already battered insides? We're all afraid, but let this damn fear drive us, not paralyze us. Together, we'll cut off the head of this far-right Hydra, because there are more good people, I believe. The end,' writes Madness, the author of memoir No. 20 (p. 281).

The collection of memoirs is a collective accusation against society and the ruling party. It is also a literary manifestation, a collection of political demands. The story of 'one's own life' takes on the characteristics of an exemplum and, without losing its individuality, acquires a political dimension by becoming evidence in a symbolic, collective process for equality policies. This is how the anthology has been interpreted since its publication. For example, Renata Lis, a lesbian literary critic, described it as a 'collective act of accusation' in which 'LGBTQ+ people bear witness in their own language and on their own terms against Poland' (Lis, 2022), referring to Emil Zola's famous article *J'accuse…!*

(1898) and the Dreyfus affair. This raises hope that the anthology will trigger an equally broad and engaged public discussion about the social injustices faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland. The book's title is a quote from one of the memoirs, the ending of which is significant: 'All the strength I draw for life must always come from within. I needed more and more of that coal and fire to get through all these socio-cultural obstacles' (memoir No. 26 by Paweł Bednarek, p. 344).

Another aspect that strengthens the presence of memoirs in the cultural and literary field is the book's form of publication. The anthology was published by Karakter, a prestigious publishing house known for its meticulous editorial and graphical work. It specializes in releasing politically engaged books alongside fine literature, both international and Polish (including translations of works by Rebecca Solnit, Mona Chollet, and Paul B. Preciado). The collection of memoirs, written by individuals with diverse cultural, educational, and economic backgrounds, thus entered a rather elitist yet recognizable public sphere. It is clearly associated with the progressive middle and younger generations' intellectual circles and is easily accessible (the book is also available in digital form).

Even more ambiguous is the decision of Karakter to publish separately one of the competition memoirs by Patryk Pufelski, titled *Pawilon małych ssaków* ('Pavilion for small mammals'). This book was published as a standalone work and thus excluded from the anthology and the context of the collection of texts. This separate publication, with a different title, enjoyed a seasonal literary career, received several nominations for prestigious awards, and the author was invited to author evenings and literary festivals. This publishing success has propelled Pufelski to continue his writing career. The differentiation of Pufelski's text from the rest of the memoirs is due primarily to its theme and writing style. His memoir is a collection of social media posts primarily related to his professional work of caring for animals in a zoo, his Polish–Jewish family history, and close friendships with his grandparents. Only towards the end, appearing the least frequently, do LGBTQ+ issues come into play. The hierarchy of narratives is significant for Pufelski's life and is arranged differently than most memoirs. At the same time, the author's witty, lively style and the undoubted appeal of stories about inter-species relationships and life as a Jewish gay person of the younger generation have made this memoir a subject of discussion in circles focused on animal rights and the Jewish diaspora. Excluded from the collection, Pufelski's memoir takes on a completely different context and no longer participates in the collective *J'accuse…!* Regardless of the publisher's decision to separate one memoir and publish it separately, the initiative itself of publishing an anthology of queer memoirs in a commercial rather than an academic publishing house has a groundbreaking and political dimension.

9 Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the key aspects of the politics of Queer Life Writing in contemporary Poland, based on the primary source material, which is the collection of memoirs of LGBTQ+ individuals gathered in the anthology. We presented the political and social context that significantly influenced the nature of the texts produced as part of a commissioned competition. We analyzed the most important themes in the memoirs, including issues related to identity, subjectivity, migration, class, attitudes toward Catholicism, key

existential experiences, the role of coming out, and the self-therapeutic, didactic, and emancipatory dimensions of the writing process. We connected the analysis of individual identity politics with the poetics of life narratives, and the tradition of memoir competitions and placed them in the context of the history of queer lives in Central Europe, highlighting the significance of collective writing work for collective emancipation.

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The legitimation of international organizations in the media in Eurasian post-socialist countries

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 90–116.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1296
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

The paper presents the first-ever big data analysis related to the legitimation of international organizations (IOs) in the media in Eurasian post-socialist countries. We use text mining and regression analysis to quantify intensity, tone, and narrative in the media as three critical dimensions of legitimation. The model is applied to a corpus of 1.3 million newspaper articles from six countries and twelve IOs. We show that contrary to earlier studies covering established democracies, the tone of articles about IOs is predominantly positive. Articles mentioning influential domestic politicians contribute to the delegitimation of the IOs featured, except in Poland.

Keywords: international organizations; legitimation; automated text mining; sentiment analysis; flexible LDA; post-socialist countries

1 Introduction

The liberal world order that prevailed in the 20th century under US global hegemony is being challenged around the globe (Ikenberry, 2018). Liberal democracy itself appears fragile, polarized, and vulnerable to far-right populism. Götz (2021) identifies four main features of the liberal world order and documents that all of them are being undermined by recent developments in world politics. One of these features is the network of international organizations (IOs) that helps socialize rising powers into the existing order and increasingly constrains the ability of domestic policies and states to protect the victims of the liberal world order (De Vries et al., 2021). This paper studies the crucial factor for IOs, which is their legitimacy. This influences whether IOs remain relevant in terms of states' efforts to solve problems (Sommerer & Agné, 2018), affects the latter's capacity to develop new rules and norms, and shapes their ability to secure compliance with international regulations (Dai, 2005). We define legitimacy as the belief of audiences that an IO's authority is appropriately exercised and legitimation as a process intended to shape such beliefs

(Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Delegitimation is understood as efforts to undermine the legitimacy of IOs by challenging whether the authority they exercise is appropriate, including by presenting critical views of them in the media.

The Eurasian post-socialist countries under analysis in this paper, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, provide fertile ground for IO legitimation studies. IOs played a crucial role in designing and implementing liberal policies after the collapse of socialism in the region. These policies were often backed by sizeable financial assistance aimed at fostering institutional and economic development or supporting financial stability. They delivered remarkable economic success in Central and Eastern Europe but failed in Ukraine and facilitated state capture and the creation of oligarchic autocracies in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. This dichotomy is a hotly debated issue. Hall and Ambrosio (2017) attribute these divergences to the different authoritarian learning and diffusion paths adopted in the early stage of transformation by the autocracies analyzed in this paper and implemented only in recent years by Hungary and Poland's political elites. Gel'man (2017) attributes these differences to bad governance and identifies three clusters of explanations: historical path dependency, agency-driven relations, and – most relevant for our research – international influence. He argues that international leverage, including well-designed institutions and democratization, depends on the will of domestic political elites to adopt such standards. If such will is absent, the financial assistance supporting such reforms can result in partial changes in some areas and can even preserve the status quo of bad governance (Abrams & Fish, 2015). Our research contributes to this discussion by showing how the legitimacy of international organizations is presented in local media.

Furthermore, many dimensions of the crisis of the liberal world order can be identified in the region. Liberal values, such as same-sex marriage, liberal gender education for children, and the right to abortion, are heavily contested or prohibited. Free elections are held in Hungary, Poland, and, to some extent, Ukraine, but they fail to meet democratic standards in the other countries under analysis. None of these countries, except Russia, is able to secure their military or energy safety without relying on the support of global powers or an IO. Belarus depends heavily on Russia for military and energy assistance. Poland's security is based on NATO membership, while Ukraine is a battlefield between Russia and NATO. None of the countries under analysis welcome large migration from culturally distinct regions, which contrasts with their very adverse domestic demographic trends, except for Kazakhstan. Even the climate change policies at the top of many IO agendas face significant hurdles in the countries under analysis.

For the IOs to be challenged by nationalist political forces, two key elements need to be present: public discontent about pre-existing forms of international cooperation and the mobilization of public opinion to the strategic advantage of national political actors (De Vries et al., 2021). Both elements are shaped by media, which exhibit very different levels of freedom in the Eurasian post-socialist countries. Freedom House ranks Poland as a free country, with some deterioration in recent years. Hungary and Ukraine are partly free, but Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus are not free. Considering all these factors, we expect that the media channel of IO legitimation will exhibit significant heterogeneity in the analyzed countries in the region.

We distinguish two types of IO legitimation in the media: general communication and elite communication. General communication refers to any article that discusses an IO. Elite communication is attributable to influential members in the public discourse. The role of politicians in the IO legitimation process has been found in the literature to be crucial. Dellmuth and Tallberg (2021) show that communication by national governments and civil society organizations has more substantial effects on perceptions of legitimacy than communication by IOs themselves. We expect elite communication to be even more important when politicians exert significant influence over the media.

Legitimation and delegitimation practices in the media can be measured according to three major dimensions: intensity, tone, and narrative (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019).

Intensity refers to the number of legitimation or delegitimation events like statements, press articles, reforms, or protests within a given time frame. Intensity is crucial with regard to the impact on beliefs about legitimacy since legitimation or delegitimation claims that are communicated more frequently will be more influential than those communicated less frequently. This is shown, for example, by Rauh and Zürn (2020), who document the positive relationship between the frequency of articles mentioning the WTO, the IMF, and NAFTA and the degree of politicization and protest activity in the period 1992–2012.

Tone or *sentiment* captures whether discursive and behavioral practices frame the IO in positive (legitimation) or negative terms (delegitimation). Many studies (Krzywdzińska, 2019; Schmidtke, 2019; Marcelino & Brandão, 2012) document that media discourse about IOs is predominantly negative. Schmidtke (2019) assessed the intensity, tone, and narratives of legitimation over time across IOs and countries, covering the EU, the UN, and the G8 in Germany, Switzerland, the UK, and the US from 1998 to 2013 by analyzing some 6,500 evaluative statements. The article demonstrates that IOs with more extensive authority are subject to more intense efforts at legitimation and delegitimation. The article further indicates that the media discourse on IOs is predominantly negative in tone. Similarly, the coverage of NATO on Russian public television presents a coherent negative image of the latter as an aggressive organization in Russia's near abroad, regardless of the genre of the broadcast (Krzywdzińska, 2019).

Narrative, in the context of automated text analysis, refers to the central theme or topic of media communication. Some topics, such as crime or the COVID-19 pandemic, have a much lower tone than others. So, to calculate an unbiased measure of legitimation based on sentiment, one should control for the media communication topic.

The automated text analysis tools applied here are often called natural language processing (NLP) methods. While they are frequently used in political and social sciences in general, only recently have they been applied in IO legitimation or similar studies. Further, we can now analyze such communication on the kind of vast scale that was previously impossible. For example, Parizek (2021) analyzed the media coverage of 70 IOs by more than 20,000 media outlets in 200 countries using a random sample of 20 million articles. Kaya and Reay (2019) used content analysis to explore almost 12,000 IMF documents to track changes in the Washington consensus policy paradigm within the IMF. Zaiotti (2020) analyzed the impact of the 2015-2016 refugee crisis on the reputation of the European Union by looking at nearly 4,000 tweets on the topic in two languages. Salience

and sentiment analysis show that the crisis raised the EU's profile on the world stage and helped the EU improve its reputation, contrary to broadly held beliefs. Rauh & Zürn (2020) analyzed almost 130,000 articles from quality newspapers that mentioned at least once one of the four IOs under study: the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, and NAFTA. They developed a specific legitimation dictionary to measure the discourse about the legitimation of the IOs in the collected corpus involving transnationally organized civil society organizations (CSOs) contributing to the debate about the IOs. Kentikelenis and Voeten (2021) applied sentiment analysis and a purpose-built dictionary analysis to a corpus of 8,093 speeches at the UN General Debate to identify legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order. Johnson and Lerner (2021) employed text mining to analyze 3,774 paragraphs of statements made by national governments associated with the WTO's Committee on Trade and Environment and showed that environmental discussions more frequent the higher the level of development of a country.

As shown above, the machine-learning framework can successfully address various research hypotheses related to IO legitimation, namely how intensity, tone, and narrative jointly influence IO coverage in the media. The current paper applies several machine learning tools, which are described in detail in the methodology section. These tools are salience or frequency analysis, sentiment analysis or, more broadly, dictionary-based models, and topic modeling. Salience measures intensity, sentiment captures the tone, and topics identify types of narrative.

The new methodology that is developed allows us to measure the media's attitudes towards IOs, controlling for the article's narrative and topic, and to compare the attitudes of different countries towards IOs. Additionally, it detects how influential domestic politicians contribute to IO legitimation or delegitimation.

This paper contributes to the literature in several new ways. The paper's focus is describing the development of a new model that identifies and measures all three dimensions of the legitimation or delegitimation of IOs. Analyzing large multi-language corpora is challenging, as internet newspapers and portals have many country-specific and language-specific idiosyncrasies. Namely, various newspapers have very different topic coverage, and their average tone also differs. Therefore, applying standard topic modeling or sentiment analysis could lead to biased results. We propose two new measures to address these challenges: flexible latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) and relative sentiment analysis.

We test this model on 1.3 million articles from 20 newspapers and news portals in six Eurasian post-socialist countries, using three languages. We show that the proposed model can capture significant differences in IO (de)legitimation practices between countries and their governments (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021). We compare these IO legitimation practices in the post-socialist world with those in developed countries (Schmidtke, 2019). Several versions of the model are estimated that generate similar results, confirming their robustness.

2 Data: Description of a corpus of 1,255,294 articles

The data were scraped for each day between January 2018 and December 2020 for five post-socialist countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland. They were scraped from web portal archives for Hungary in June and July 2021. The scraping script was written for Russian, Kazakh, Belarusian, Ukrainian and Polish in R using rvest library. The scraping was done in Python using BeautifulSoup for the Hungarian portals, except for index.hu, for which the Hungarian author has access to the archive (acquired from the index.hu editorial office).

The selection of media sources in post-socialist Eurasian countries is more complicated than in the case of established democracies, which are typically the subject of IO legitimation analysis. While media in Poland and Hungary enjoy relative freedom, with some deterioration in recent years, media in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia are controlled or monitored by the state, and various forms of censorship have been documented in these countries. Therefore, the typical Western approach of selecting the most popular or quality media would not be appropriate and could lead to biased results that rely too much on government-desired narratives. Our media sample selection took this factor into account. The corpus that was built covers a broad spectrum of newspapers across many dimensions, taking in liberal and conservative sources, outlets controlled by the state and those owned by oligarchs, and pro-government and anti-government papers. This means the newspaper corpus is suitable for identifying a broad range of the legitimation and delegitimation practices applied to IOs in the post-Soviet space.

The selection of countries for this study was guided by several criteria. Initially, the focus was on countries within the post-socialist Eurasian region. Additionally, the choice of countries was influenced by the linguistic capabilities of the research team, specifically Polish and Russian, which explains the inclusion of Poland in the study. Moreover, the research encompassed countries where Russian is a widely spoken and official language, including Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine, prior to the Russian invasion. The diversity in media regimes and levels of media freedom across these countries provides a robust testing ground for the newly proposed model of media freedom, facilitating an examination across varying political, social, and cultural contexts.

Table 1 presents the data sources, the number of articles, and the global and local Alexa ranking.[1] The owners of a majority of the websites that were selected also publish newspapers. The exceptions are in Kazakhstan, where we picked influential and popular websites, and Hungary, where online platforms are the only news segment in which pro-government content does not predominate (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Griffen, 2020). Most newspapers cover a wide selection of topics, with the exception of the Polish wpolityce.pl, which specializes in political news. A detailed description of the selected newspapers and

[1] The Alexa rank measures website traffic using information from internet browsers that have the Alexa plug-in installed. It is estimated that about one percent of browsers worldwide have such a plug-in. Alexa ranking is compiled by Alexa Internet Inc., a US-based company and subsidiary of Amazon. The authors classified and described local media using their deep knowledge of their political affiliation.

portals is provided in Appendix 1 in the online supplemental information. Due to the limited reliability of sentiment lexicons, only Russian-language newspapers were included in the corpus in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

Table 1 Newspapers and portals included in the analysis and their Alexa ranks

Country	Language	Newspaper site	Number of articles	Alexa global rank	Alexa local rank
Russia	Russian	iz.ru	43,782	1,378	45
Russia	Russian	kommersant.ru	46,070	1,335	44
Russia	Russian	novayagazeta.ru	29,357	9,215	459
Russia	Russian	vedomosti.ru	27,797	6,302	288
Kazakhstan	Russian	informburo.kz	29,375	38,916	119
Kazakhstan	Russian	nur.kz	67,350	951	6
Kazakhstan	Russian	tengrinews.kz	44,285	13,036	34
Kazakhstan	Russian	zakon.kz	109,442	9,477	30
Belarus	Russian	bdg.by	33,447	292,678	746
Belarus	Russian	belgazeta.by	21,995	1,392,332	11,041
Belarus	Russian	sb.by	83,685	41,015	79
Ukraine	Russian	kp.ua	194,792	64,062	860
Ukraine	Russian	segodnya.ua	45,835	18,658	256
Ukraine	Russian	vesti.ua	90,559	58,573	1,096
Poland	Polish	gazeta.pl	53,321	1,749	14
Poland	Polish	rp.pl	49,587	20,930	167
Poland	Polish	wpolityce.pl	76,625	13,833	105
Hungary	Hungarian	index.hu	55,891	7,174	13
Hungary	Hungarian	origo.hu	179,169	6,306	17
Hungary	Hungarian	alfahir.hu	31,860	362,256	N/A

Note: The Alexa ranking is provided for informational purposes only and has not been used as a criterion to select newspapers for the analyzed corpus.

The literature substantiates the rationale for selecting a diverse array of countries, as argued by Rosenberg (2016). Furthermore, the need for a focused analysis of post-socialist Eurasian states is particularly pressing, given their relative underrepresentation in political science discourse, a gap highlighted by Wilson and Knutsen (2020).

3 Methodology for a new legitimation model applying a machine-learning framework

The proposed model is based on the following findings of the sentiment analysis literature (Mäntylä et al., 2018). Suppose a given object, such as a product, service, or organization, is often mentioned in articles that feature many negative (positive) inclination words. In this case, a negative (positive) popular perception is formed about this object. In the context of IO legitimacy, negative perception or tone contributes to IO delegitimation, and positive perception or tone contributes to IO legitimation. The model derives the measure of IO legitimation from the interaction between the intensity, the tone, and the narrative of the media discourse about the IO. Contributions by influential politicians and public officials to this discourse carry great weight (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021), so the model also estimates the tone of articles that feature both the IO and influential domestic politicians. A high frequency or intensity of articles featuring a given IO yields statistically significant estimates for tone, while a low intensity of articles results in insignificant estimates. The tone of the article crucially depends on the topic of its narrative. Articles about specific issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, military conflicts, terrorism, or accidents are characterized by a topic-specific high frequency of negative inclination words. This means that the appearance of the name of the IO in such an article does not necessarily contribute to the delegitimation of the IO. The model takes topics into account to calculate unbiased measures of IO legitimation.

The proposed method should distinguish between the situations when an article discusses an IO and when the article discusses something else and the IO is mentioned only incidentally. Similarly, when we analyze elite communication, the model should be able to distinguish the incidental mention of influential politicians somewhere in the text from the articles that refer to them intensely. Our method is as follows. During text mining, we count the number of occurrences of the IO name (*io*) and the influential domestic politicians' names (*dip*). Let us denote either of the two values as *N*. Then, we calculate $1+\log(N)$ for $N>0$; see Table 2 for the definitions of the variables. These variables are then used in regression analysis. They measure the IO intensity of each article and the intensity of references to influential politicians for measures of elite communication. We use the log transformation to consider the declining marginal impact of additional mentions of IO or a politician when many mentions are already identified. For example, when both influential politicians and IOs are mentioned four times each, the variable measuring the interaction between them takes on a value of 5.7: $(1+\log(4))*(1+\log(4)) = 5.7$. For single mentions, the corresponding value is equal to one: $(1+0)*(1+0) = 1$.

All the steps of the model implementation are summarized in Figure 1 and described in detail below.

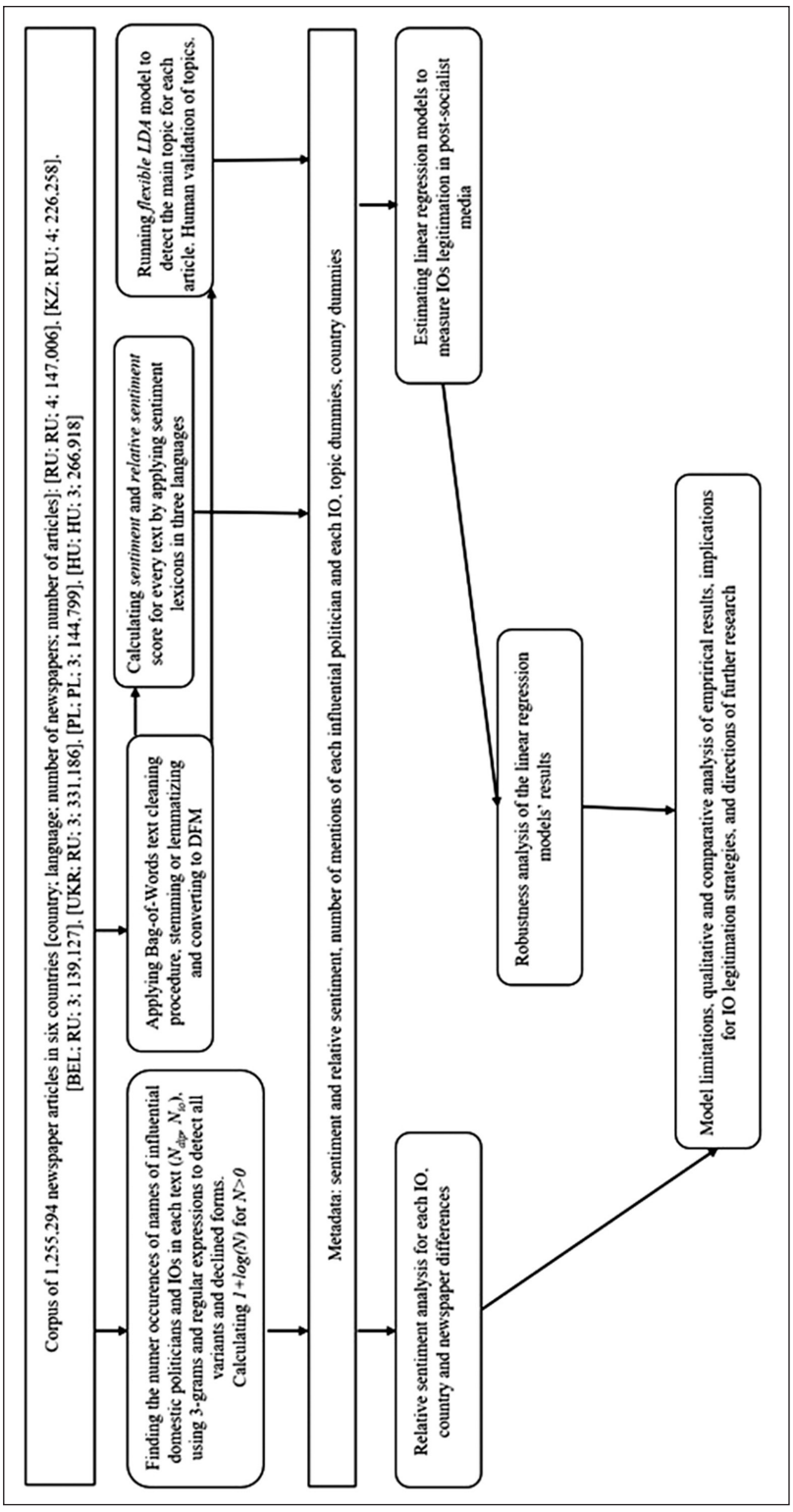

Fig 1 A machine learning model of legitimation and delegitimation of IOs in the meadia. An analysis of six countries, 20 newspapers in three languages and twelve IOs.

3.1 Text mining for names of politicians

This paper analyzes articles that feature both influential domestic politicians and the selected IOs. One issue that arises immediately is how to determine who is influential. We identified the latter individuals using the following criteria:

- Current President and Prime Minister.
- Former Presidents and former Prime Ministers if a large part of their terms in office overlapped with the period under analysis.
- The leaders of the party or parties in the ruling government.
- Heads or first deputy heads of a presidential administration ranked highly in popular local influence rankings.
- Family members of influential politicians in important political or business positions.
- Heads of the national security agency or committee and long-serving ministers of defense, security, or foreign affairs ranked highly in popular local influence rankings.
- Oligarchs with high positions in popular local influence rankings.

The names of the selected influential domestic politicians are provided in Appendix 2 in the online supplemental materials. The names of politicians and IOs in all declined forms were extracted from the text using n-gram regex expressions in R.

3.2 Text mining for the names of IOs

We selected the following twelve IOs for the analysis: the United Nations, the WTO, the WHO, the OECD, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), NATO, the IMF, the World Bank, the EBRD, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In the analysis, we included the IOs usually covered in the literature, which are the UN, the WTO, the UNSC, the IMF, and the World Bank. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to include the WHO as well.

The analysis is carried out for post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Therefore, we also sought to examine the regional international organizations that oversee numerous significant investment projects in the region, namely EBRD, ADB, and AIIB. It should be noted that the ADB and AIIB remain strongly influenced by the Chinese state and should be viewed as institutions promoting authoritarian policy transfer and diffusion (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017). This contrasts with the typical agendas of the other IOs under analysis, which are aligned with the liberal world order.

Because of the stand-off between the West and Russia, it seemed indispensable to include NATO. Finally, the climate change agenda is rapidly gaining momentum, and the countries under analysis are not at the forefront of implementing climate change policies, so the UNFCCC was included. However, because the number of articles mentioning the UNFCCC was minimal, we analyzed the more general phrase ‘climate change’ (CC) instead. As before, we applied regular expressions to detect the occurrences of these names in all their declined forms.

We know that the selected IOs are very different in terms of political authority (Hooghe et al., 2017; Zürn et al., 2021), a key variable in the IO legitimation literature. However, our goal was not to identify features of the IOs that need legitimation nor to examine the relationship between authority and legitimation (Schmidtke, 2019). We purposefully selected a very diverse set of IOs in terms of authority, policy areas, and influence over the member states, but ones very relevant for the analyzed countries. The goal was to verify whether the proposed model can measure media legitimation practices for very different IOs.

3.3 Data preparation and cleaning

This paper adopts the Bag-Of-Words (BOW) approach to NLP, which treats each text as a set of words and ignores their order. We applied the standard BOW cleaning approach (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Maerz & Schneider, 2020) to the newspaper articles by removing white spaces, punctuation, stop-words, and digits, putting the words in lowercase, and stemming them for Russian or lemmatizing them for Polish and Hungarian, as we did not have access to a lemmatizer in the Russian language. We then converted the cleaned text corpus into a Document Feature Matrix (DFM) for further processing. The DFM records how many times a stemmed word or lemma in the matrix column appears in each text in the matrix row. For the final analysis, we removed tokens or columns that occurred fewer than five times in the text corpus, as such rare tokens are not helpful in text mining, and they introduce noise into the analysis. The research in the paper used the quanteda library in R to create and manipulate the DFMs (Benoit et al., 2018).

3.4 Sentiment analysis and the concept of relative sentiment

We used three sentiment lexicons with sentiment polarity manually annotated by human researchers: Dziob et al. (2019) for Polish, Loukachevitch and Levchik (2016) for Russian, and the poltextLAB sentiment lexicon for Hungarian (Ring et al., 2024). The toolkits available are primarily for English texts and require contextual adaptation to produce valid results—especially concerning morphologically rich languages such as Hungarian. Each word in the Polish lexicon was assigned one of five levels of polarity: –2 (very negative), –1 (moderately negative), 0 (neutral), +1 (moderately positive) or +2 (very positive); the Russian lexicon has three levels of sentiment polarity: –1 (negative), 0 (neutral) or +1 (positive); and the Hungarian lexicon has two levels of sentiment polarity: –1 (negative) or +1 (positive). The Hungarian dictionary is a special one for measuring political sentiment.

We applied the appropriate lexicon to each article. We checked whether each word in an article appeared in the lexicon and then added its sentiment polarity to the sentiment score for the article. Words that were not in the lexicon were ignored. Finally, the sentiment score for the article was divided by the number of words in the article.[2]

[2] This normalization allows for the comparison of sentiment scores for articles of various lengths.

This algorithm is a standard way of applying sentiment analysis using human-generated lexicons.[3] However, it may not be appropriate for cross-country and multi-language research. Each country, language, or even newspaper may have its own idiosyncrasies that are not related to the politicians or IOs, resulting in higher or lower average sentiment scores or country-specific sentiment effects. We control for such factors by calculating the *relative sentiment* for each article *A* in each newspaper or portal *P* in the corpus. The relative sentiment is the difference between the sentiment score of article *A* and the average sentiment of all the articles in the newspaper or portal *P* (*rsenti* in Table 2). We also estimated models using absolute sentiment (*senti* in Table 2) for the robustness analysis, and we used country dummies to control for the country idiosyncrasies. The relative sentiment method was applied for the first time in Rybinski (2023) to a corpus of one million articles in five countries.

3.5 Topic modeling using flexible LDA

We identified the topic of each article by applying flexible LDA (Charemza et al., 2022; Rybinski, 2023). The standard LDA model (D. Blei, 2012; D. M. Blei et al., 2003) requires a fixed number of topics to be selected. The flexible LDA does not suffer from this limitation and is useful when one conducts a regression analysis for determining how various factors affect the sentiment of the texts in the corpus, when such a corpus includes articles on topics that may have radically different sentiments, or to filter out irrelevant topics. For example, some topics, such as accidents, crime, and the COVID-19 pandemic, usually have a very negative tone, while others are more positive. The flexible LDA identifies such topics that are later used as dummy variables in the regression models. A detailed description of the flexible LDA model has been included in Appendix 2.

3.6 Multivariate regression models

We applied the regression analysis to estimate how the tone of the article depended on the factors listed in Table 2. Each regression equation was estimated for the entire corpus of 1,255,294 articles.

[3] It is good practice to validate the sentiment scores that are obtained by drawing a random sample of articles and asking human readers to rate their sentiment. The correlation between the human and machine scores should be positive and significant. Such a validation analysis was conducted for all the sentiment lexicons and for the newspaper articles in Rybiński (2018) and Ring et al. (2024). There were 17 human readers in Russian, eight in Polish, and six in Hungarian, and the correlations were in the range of 0.44-0.93.

Table 2 Variables used in the regression models. Dependent variables in bold.

Name	Description	Method of calculation
$sent_i$	Sentiment score (tone) of the i^{th} article	Described in the section on sentiment analysis on page 7
$rsent_i$	Relative sentiment score (tone) of the i^{th} article	Described in the section on sentiment analysis on page 7
$io_{j,i}$	Intensity of *IO*-ness of the j^{th} *IO* in the i^{th} article, j ϵ {UN, WTO, WHO, OECD, UNSC, NATO, IMF, WB, EBRD, ADB, AIIB, CC}. Twelve variables.	If $\mathcal{J}$ is equal to the number of occurrences of the IO_j name in the i^{th} article, $io_{j,i} = 0$ if $\mathcal{J}=0$, $io_{j,i} = 1+log(\mathcal{J})$ if $\mathcal{J}>0$. The use of logarithms reduces the marginal impact of each IO name occurrence when there are many such occurrences.
$c_{k,i}$	Country dummy for the i^{th} article, k ϵ {RU, KZ, BEL, UKR, PL, HU}. Six variables.	$c_{k,i} = 1$ if the i^{th} article was published in country k, $c_{k,i} = 0$ otherwise.
$ioc_{j,k,i}$	Degree of *IO*-ness of the j^{th} *IO* times the k^{th} country dummy for the i^{th} article. 72 variables, twelve IOs times six countries.	$ioc_{j,k,,i} = io_{j,i} * c_{k,i}$. E.g. $ioc_{j,RU,i} = 1+log(\mathcal{J})$ if the i^{th} article was published in a Russian newspaper, 0 otherwise.
$top_{m,i}$	Main topic group of the i^{th} article, m ϵ {POL, ECO, MIL, INT, TECH, FAM, REG, HEA, MED, ACC, REL, USSR, MISC}. Thirteen dummy variables, only twelve used in the regression models as MISC was dropped.	We used the LDA algorithm with 30 topics. Described in the section on topic modelling on page 7. Additionally, after completing the human validation of the LDA30, we grouped the topics into thirteen topic groups based on their functional similarity. MISC is used when no meaningful topic can be determined.
$dip_{k,i}$	Intensity of the presence of influential domestic politicians from country k in the i^{th} article, k ϵ {RU, KZ, BEL, UKR, PL, HU}. Six variables.	If N is equal to the number of occurrences of the names of influential domestic politicians from country k in the i^{th} article, $dip_{k,i} = 0$ if N=0, $dip_{k,i} = 1+ log(N)$ if $N>0$.
$iodip_{k,j,i}$	A composite score measuring both the intensity of *IO*-ness and the presence of influential domestic politicians in the i^{th} article. 72 variables, twelve IOs times six countries.	$iodip_{k,j,i} = sqrt(ioc_{j,k,,i} * dip_{k,i})$.

We estimated several linear regression models, as presented in Appendix 3. We analyzed how the selected factors or explanatory variables impacted the tone of the articles. *Tone* was measured by both *sentiment* and *relative sentiment* to check the robustness of the results. In the first case, we included country dummies as factors because of the differences detected in the average sentiment in newspapers in the countries under analysis.[4]

[4] One country dummy is left out to avoid singularities during the estimation, so the estimation results reported for the country dummies are relative to the tone for that country, which is Poland.

Equations (1) and (2) identify the differences in the tone of the discourse about the IOs, controlling the topic of the articles and the appearance of the influential domestic politicians. Equations (3) and (4) allow for testing for differences in the media legitimation or delegitimation of the IOs in each country.

4 Results

Figure 2 presents the average relative sentiment (*rsent*) or tone scores for the twelve IOs for all the countries and media under analysis. Contrasting with earlier findings (Krzywdzińska, 2019; Marcelino & Brandão, 2012; Schmidtke, 2019), the tone in Eurasian post-socialist media is predominantly positive, except for articles mentioning the WHO, as shown by the positive average values of the articles' relative sentiment and positive estimates of IO variables in regressions. Later, we investigate whether this is related to the area of *activity* of the WHO, as articles about combating diseases often have a negative tone, or if they concern the IO itself more. For the majority of IOs, the tone is lowest in Russia and highest in Kazakhstan. The ADB and the AIIB, regional IOs that come under substantial Chinese influence, receive positive press coverage in Kazakhstan and Belarus and mixed coverage in Russia and are not mentioned in Hungary, Poland, or Ukraine. This probably reflects China's investment activity[5] in these countries and the Kazakh and Russian membership of both IOs.

For NATO, the highest tone is in Ukraine and Poland, especially in pro-government media, as both countries perceive NATO to be a crucial security asset in the policy of deterrence against any future Russian military threats. Interestingly, the tone for NATO is also positive but lower in Hungary, which may indicate that Hungary is striving to strike a more nuanced balance between the EU and Russia in its foreign policy (Buzogány, 2017; Deregözü, 2019; Végh, 2015). There are also striking differences in how the UN and the UN Security Council are covered in Hungary and Poland, with the Hungarian media presenting both IOs in a negative light.

The Russian media maintains the most neutral tone among all the countries under analysis towards all the IOs, with the exception noted earlier by the WHO. There are significant differences between the four Russian media outlets studied, indicating varying opinions across the internet media and a lack of dominant positive or negative narratives. Surprisingly, this also holds true of NATO, which the Kremlin perceives as a critical threat to Russian security (Ploom et al., 2020; Tsygankov, 2018; Ven Bruusgaard, 2016).

[5] In 2020, Chinese FDI stock in billion USD and as a percentage of the nominal GDP of the recipient country was as follows: Kazakhstan – 34.7bn/20.4 per cent; Belarus – 6.2bn/10.3 per cent; Russia – 58.1bn/3.9 per cent; Ukraine – 9.2bn/5.9 per cent; Poland – 2.8bn/0.5 per cent; Hungary – 5.9bn/3.8 per cent (AEI 2021; WB, 2021). Somewhat puzzling is the lack of the presence of the ADB and the AIIB in the Ukrainian media despite relatively large Chinese investments, but this should be attributed to Ukraine not being a member country of either IO.

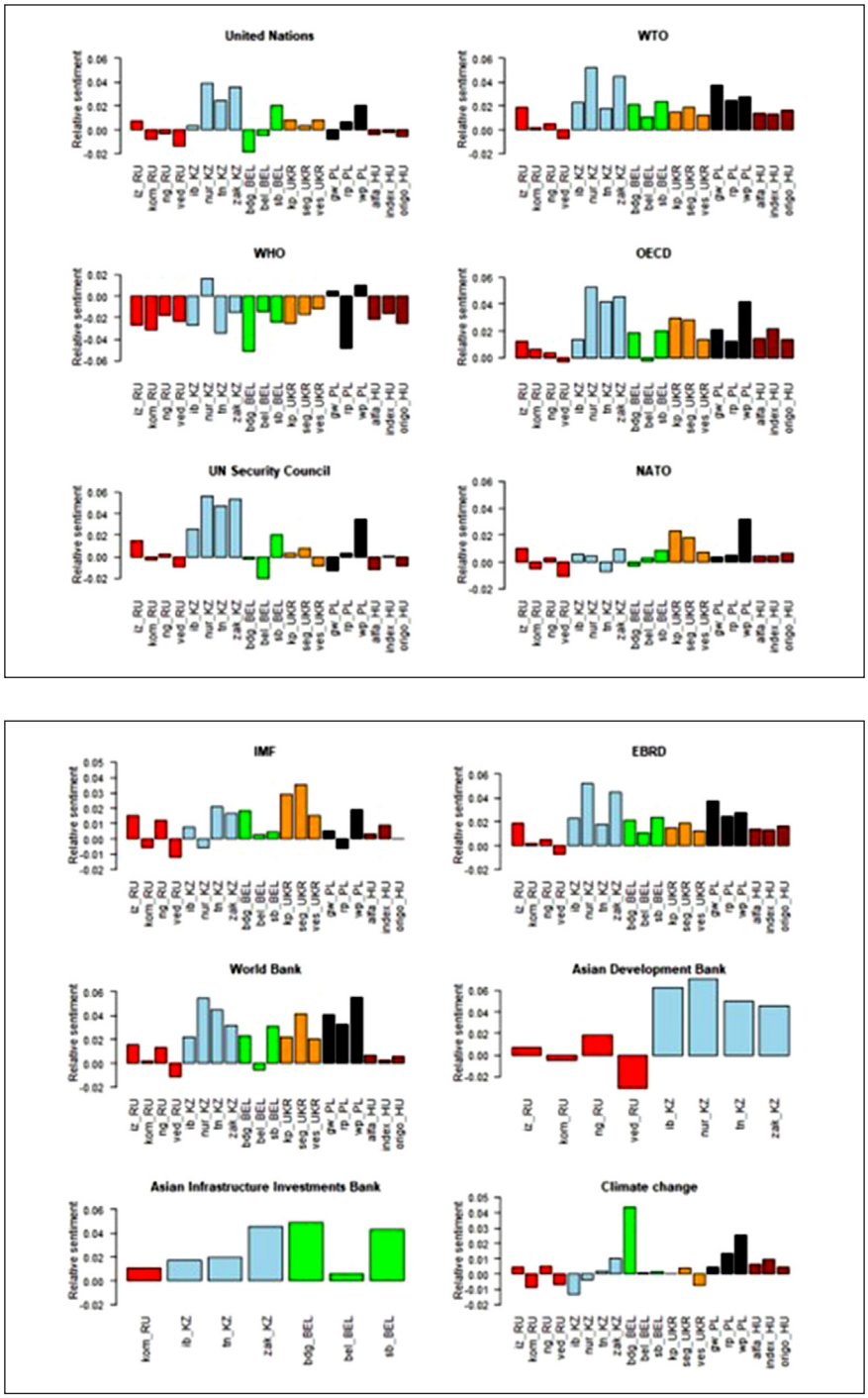

Fig 2 Relative sentiment or tone of the IOs. Country and newspaper comparison.

One-third of the period under analysis was during the global COVID-19 pandemic; consequently, the WHO was often mentioned in articles that contained many negative-inclination words. To account for this topic-related bias in the subsequent econometric analysis, we used dummy variables that indicate the most likely topic of each article in the corpus.

The linear regression results are presented in Table 3. We control for the topic of the article, its narrative, the presence of influential domestic politicians, and the idiosyncratic country tone effects as for Models 1 and 3. The tone of the articles discussing accidents, health issues, and military conflicts is markedly lower than that for the omitted dummy *MISC*, which denotes articles with topics that could not be determined. These expected results represent the successful validation of the LDA model. At the other end of the scale are the articles with the most positive inclination, which discuss religion, the economy, and technology. The tone of an article becomes higher than average whenever influential politicians are mentioned, especially in Kazakhstan. The absolute sentiment of the articles is most elevated in Poland, which is the omitted country dummy in Model 1, and the idiosyncratic country effects are large in magnitude. This clearly shows that the choice of relative sentiment for cross-country comparison was appropriate. Absolute sentiment should only be used for comparative cross-country analysis when country differences can be controlled for. The estimates of the controls and of the IOs are consistent across all four linear regression models, which confirms the robustness of the results.

Table 3 Estimation results of the linear regression model of legitimation of IOs

Model:	**1**		**2**		**3**		**4**	
Dependent variable:	***sent***		***rsent***		***sent***		***rsent***	
	Estimate	**Sig.**	**Estimate**	**Sig.**	**Estimate**	**Sig.**	**Estimate**	**Sig.**
(Intercept)	0.0197	***	0.0030	***	0.0198	***	0.0030	***
un	0.0023	***	0.0024	***				
wto	0.0011	*	0.0010	•				
who	−0.0123	***	−0.0126	***				
oecd	0.0029	***	0.0014	*				
unsc	0.0055	***	0.0055	***				
nato	0.0054	***	0.0060	***				
imf	−0.0003		0.0010	***				
ebrd	0.0067	***	0.0063	***				
adb	−0.0006		−0.0013					
aiib	0.0085	***	0.0079	***				
wb	0.0033	***	0.0030	***				
cc	0.0001		−0.0002					

Table 3 *(continued)*

Model:	**1**		**2**		**3**		**4**	
Dependent variable:	***sent***		***rsent***		***sent***		***rsent***	
	Estimate	**Sig.**	**Estimate**	**Sig.**	**Estimate**	**Sig.**	**Estimate**	**Sig.**
POL	0.0040	***	0.0029	***	0.0040	***	0.0029	***
ECO	0.0154	***	0.0144	***	0.0153	***	0.0143	***
MIL	−0.0353	***	−0.0343	***	−0.0354	***	−0.0345	***
INT	0.0035	***	0.0048	***	0.0033	***	0.0045	***
TECH	0.0157	***	0.0144	***	0.0156	***	0.0145	***
FAM	0.0090	***	0.0090	***	0.0090	***	0.0090	***
REG	0.0024	***	0.0018	***	0.0024	***	0.0017	***
HEA	−0.0442	***	−0.0432	***	−0.0442	***	−0.0433	***
MED	−0.0053	***	−0.0042	***	−0.0054	***	−0.0042	***
ACC	−0.0495	***	−0.0466	***	−0.0495	***	−0.0466	***
REL	0.0220	***	0.0237	***	0.0219	***	0.0236	***
USSR	−0.0047	***	−0.0055	***	−0.0048	***	−0.0054	***
dip_RU	0.0054	***	0.0043	***	0.0063	***	0.0056	***
dip_KZ	0.0280	***	0.0273	***	0.0285	***	0.0277	***
dip_BEL	0.0059	***	0.0052	***	0.0069	***	0.0061	***
dip_UKR	0.0092	***	0.0115	***	0.0096	***	0.0118	***
dip_PL	0.0072	***	0.0069	***	0.0065	***	0.0064	***
dip_HU	0.0064	***	0.0057	***	0.0067	***	0.0061	***
c_BEL	−0.0142	***			−0.0140	***		
c_HU	−0.0029	***			−0.0029	***		
c_KZ	−0.0317	***			−0.0322	***		
c_RU	−0.0273	***			−0.0271	***		
c_UKR	−0.0269	***			−0.0273	***		
$ioc_{j,k}$					see heatmaps in Figure 5			
$iodip_{j,k}$					see heatmaps in Figure 6			
Adjusted R^2	0.1749		0.1294		0.1540		0.1257	

Notes: p-value significance levels: *** <0.001, **<0.01, *<0.05, •<0.1, based on heteroscedasticity robust standard errors.

Models 1 and 2 estimate the average legitimation effects for the IOs in Eurasian post-socialist newspapers. Even after the health topic bias is controlled for, the tone of articles discussing the WHO is lower than the average. For the majority of the IOs, the estimates are positive but small in magnitude. This means that while the media seems to contribute to the legitimation of IOs, there may be significant differences between the countries under analysis. We verify this proposition in Models 3 and 4 with country-specific estimates, which are presented in the form of heatmaps in Figures 3 and 4. Articles in the Russian media are the most critical about the IOs under analysis (Figure 3). Although the Russian political elites moderate this negative tone in relation to the WHO and climate change (Figure 4), they actively engage in the delegitimation of NATO and the EBRD. These results are consistent with the view of the Kremlin that many IOs represent Western interests, either in the military domain for NATO (Ploom et al., 2020; Tsygankov, 2018; Ven Bruusgaard, 2016) or in the financial domain for the EBRD, where the bank's current operational approach, following guidance from a majority of directors, is not to undertake any new business in the country (EBRD, 2021).

Poland is at the other end of the IO legitimation spectrum, as the media there are critical of the WHO and the IMF and positive about six IOs, with strong legitimation of NATO. Moreover, articles featuring the UN or NATO and influential Polish politicians have an even more positive tone.

Among the IOs under analysis, the WHO faces the most pronounced delegitimation efforts in the Eurasian post-socialist media, especially in Poland. Articles featuring the IMF also have a negative tone in all countries, with the exception of Ukraine, where they are moderately positive overall and moderately negative when they also feature the names of influential politicians.

The World Bank and the EBRD, the IOs that finance development, are legitimized in the media in general but are criticized by domestic politicians in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. There is a mixed image of the Asian regional organizations that remain under heavy Chinese influence. The tone of the articles is positive in Belarus for the AIIB, negative in Russia for the ADB, and mixed in Kazakhstan. The appearance of domestic politicians in Belarus and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan lowers the tone of the articles that mention the Asian regional IOs. Influential politicians in Kazakhstan are also engaged in the delegitimation of policies aimed at combating climate change. In general, the tone of the climate-change-related articles is moderately negative in the post-Soviet countries and moderately positive in Poland and Hungary.

The evidence presented in this paper shows that the leaders in most post-socialist countries appear critical of IOs when addressing their national audiences, with the notable exception of Poland. Earlier research has shown that national leaders are less critical of the global liberal order in their official UNGA speeches (Kentikelenis & Voeten, 2021). A quantitative analysis of the quality of press in four established democracies also shows no clear shift from low intensity and a positive tone to high intensity and a negative tone in articles mentioning the EU, the G8, and the UN (Schmidtke, 2019). Further research is needed to understand the differences.

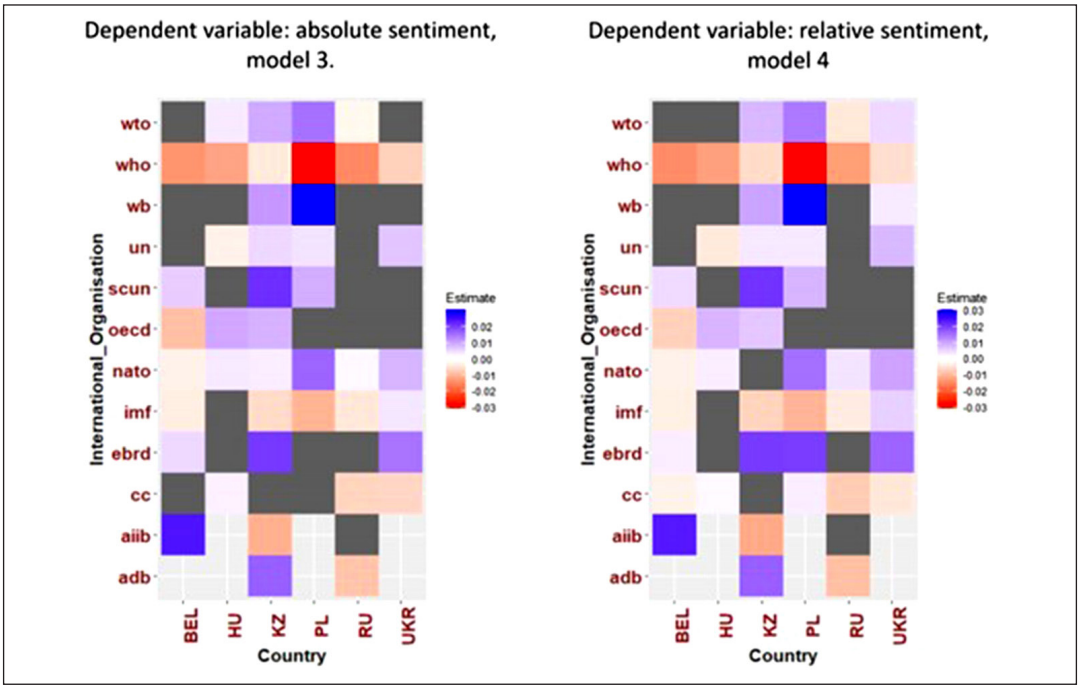

Fig 3 Heatmaps with estimates of the country level IO (de)legitimation effects: $\beta_{j,k}$.

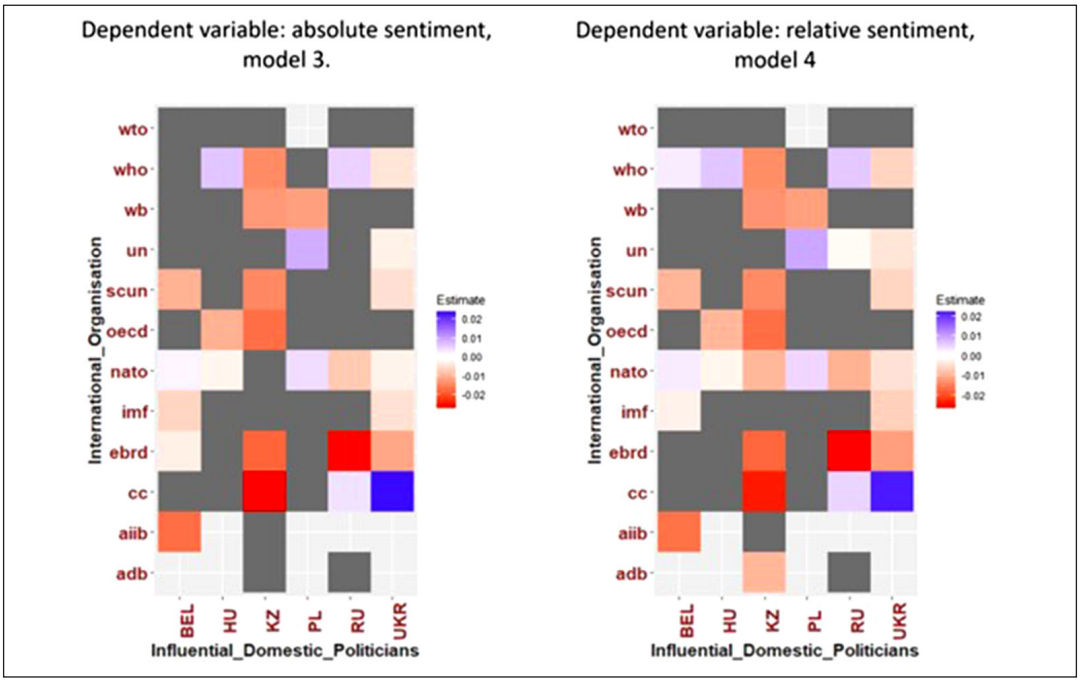

Fig 4 Heatmaps with estimates of the impact of influential domestic politicians on IO legitimation: $\theta_{j,k}$.

Note to heatmaps in figures 3-4: Only estimates with a p-value lower than 0.05 are shown. Empty cells indicate a lack of data, as at least ten articles were required to produce an estimate.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The media, including the internet, are among the most important channels for affecting people's perceptions and opinions about IOs. The model developed in this paper applies the Bag-of-Words framework to convert a corpus of articles published in six countries and three languages into metadata that can be used as input in econometric analysis. The availability of big data allows many hypotheses to be tested. Linear regression Model 5 has almost 150 estimated parameters, for example, but with nearly 1.3 million data points, we obtain a large number of statistically significant parameters and still avoid overfitting. When we analyze more than a million articles, we can easily find hundreds of them that mention both the IO of interest and influential politicians. As shown in the results section, the tone of such articles allows us to estimate whether politicians engage in the legitimation or delegitimation of a given IO. The proposed machine-learning framework provides estimates for all three of the major dimensions of legitimation practices, which are intensity, tone, and narrative (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). The tone is the dependent variable in multivariate linear regressions. Finally, we use the narratives that are identified as the LDA topics as control variables to eliminate biases from the legitimation estimates. Models 1–4 show, for example, that the tone of articles discussing health issues, which includes the COVID-19 pandemic, is 0.03–0.04 lower than average. This means that any assessment of the legitimation of the WHO in the media in general (*ioc*) or as a result of political narratives (*iodip*) has to take into account that the WHO is mentioned in articles with a negative tone in relation to discussions of the pandemic. Without controlling for the type of the narrative, we would obtain a deeply biased estimate of the delegitimation of the WHO, as found in every country, although it was much smaller in magnitude than the health or COVID-19 narrative effect.

The model provides estimates of the overall legitimation of IOs in the media (Figure 3) and measures how influential domestic politicians contribute to this process (Figure 4) in each country under analysis. These estimates reveal significant differences for countries and for IOs. While the tone of articles mentioning IOs is often positive, with the exceptions of those concerning the WHO and the IMF, politicians in the Eurasian post-socialist countries are critical of IOs, suggesting that the liberal world order faces significant hurdles in this part of the world. These results are in stark contrast with the outcomes of earlier IO legitimation studies that showed that media discourse about IOs is predominantly negative (Krzywdzińska, 2019; Marcelino & Brandão, 2012; Schmidtke, 2019) and that elite communication about IOs is more positive than general communication (Kentikelenis & Voeten, 2021; Schmidtke, 2019). Poland is an exception, with its political leaders more engaged in the legitimation of IOs.

The proposed model has several limitations that arise from the natural-language processing tools applied in the analysis. First, we did not conduct a framing analysis, so when we find, for example, that the average tone of articles discussing the IMF is below the corpus average, this does not necessarily mean that the media are criticizing the IMF. It may occur because IMF staff predict an economic downturn in a country or region or in the global economy or because the IMF is criticizing the government for running an excessive public finance deficit. In both these cases, the articles are liable to contain many words with negative inclinations and a negative tone. We argue that a negative tone in press articles in response to a recession or a crisis contributes to the delegitimation of the

perception of the IOs as global actors who are designing good policy practices that should prevent crises. Such IOs need to step up their communication efforts in crisis periods, release frequent statements that are positive in tone, and explain the capacity and role of the IO in restoring global economic prosperity.

Second, no humans validated the tone or sentiment, or narratives from the LDA topics. Given the large size of the corpus (nearly 1.3 million articles), the human validation of a small sample of one percent would require 13 thousand texts to be read. However, the results of sentiment analysis and LDA topic modeling presented here align with common-sense expectations. For example, the relative sentiment of articles discussing accidents, military conflicts, and the COVID-19 pandemic is much lower than average, while articles about family, education, and culture exhibit higher sentiment. So, the regression analysis represents a positive validation of the NLP methods that were used.

Third, we did not filter the corpus to take account of computational propaganda (Woolley & Howard, 2018), including junk or fake news or the formal and informal censorship that is present in some of the countries under analysis. While the NLP tools needed for this type of analysis exist, the goal of the paper is to introduce a new model for IO legitimation and not to fine-tune the findings for a given corpus of texts.

Finally, due to the limited reliability of sentiment lexicons and language skills of the authors, only Russian-language newspapers were included in the corpus in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. While this may potentially affect the results by introducing pro-Russian and other biases, consultations with local language experts and literature show that this is not the case. Society in all three countries is largely bilingual (Lin & Katada, 2020; Kurohtina, 2020). In Belarus, the same content is presented in both languages in both pro and anti-regime media, and the Lukashenka regime even aims to marginalize Belarusian-language media, striving to make the Russian language the dominant medium of mass communication. Etling (2014) used sentiment analysis to demonstrate that the coverage of the Maidan protests in Ukraine was more positive in social media that used the Russian language. Russian-language media in Kazakhstan are oriented toward individuals familiar with Kazakh culture and, to some extent, the Kazakh language, without which a full understanding of the texts remains impossible (Protasova et al., 2018). Simultaneously, Russian-language media is more popular among elites and has a greater impact.

The machine-learning model of the legitimation and delegitimation of IOs was applied here to a corpus of articles from six post-socialist countries in Eurasia. However, it could equally be applied to any number of countries providing the appropriate language resources are available, such as a sentiment lexicon. We would like to highlight two important choices that need to be made when applying this model. The first is the selection of an appropriate corpus of internet editions of newspapers. The selection should not be biased and, depending on the country, should cover a liberal-conservative spectrum of views about world politics and the economy, pro and anti-government media, and various formats such as quality, business, and broadsheet newspapers. The second decision is about the selection of influential politicians. In some countries, such as established post-socialist democracies in Eurasia, the former would mostly be key members of the government and parliament, but in others, such as autocracies, they could come from the close circles of influence that are based on family ties, special forces links, or religious structures. Once these choices are made, the analysis is almost entirely based on machine learning, while human intervention is needed to decide the names of the LDA topics and the number of topic groups.

In recent years, machine-learning models have been developing rapidly and are capable of analyzing text, speech, and pictures automatically. This is complemented by a sharp rise in the amount of unstructured digital data that can be processed with such tools, including internet media content and social networks. This paper shows that applying machine learning to big data in studies of IOs or other objects of interest creates many interesting insights. It can be done with very limited resources and is easily scalable to many countries and many IOs.

Appendix 1.

Description of the flexible LDA model

The LDA model assumes that the distribution of words represents each abstract or latent topic, which is initially unnamed, and the distribution of topics represents each document. The goal of LDA is to map all the documents to topics so that these topics reflect the words in the documents. The process is iterative and begins with the random allocation of words to a predetermined number of topics, *K*, and the random allocation of topics to documents. The process ends when the two distributions of words for topics and topics for documents conform with the Dirichlet distribution. LDA is an example of unsupervised machine learning. The names for abstract or latent topics are decided by the human researcher, who looks at the words that characterize the topics. In the standard LDA analysis, an a priori decision is made on the number of latent topics (*K*), and then the analysis is conducted for various *K* to determine which value is the best choice (Lin & Katada, 2020; Sbalchiero & Eder, 2020). In the flexible LDA model, one decides on the maximum number of topics; in our case, we defined *K*=30 as suggested by Charemza et al. (2022). During the human validation phase, researchers identify the meaningful topics by assigning single names, such as *politics*, or multiple names, such as *politics_finance*, depending on the set of words that characterize each of the 30 latent topics. Finally, topics are grouped by their analytical relevance and semantic similarity. In our case, the analysis led to thirteen categories: politics, legislation, and legal affairs (POL); economy, finance, various sectors of the economy (ECO); military, war, protests, crime, security threats (MIL); international affairs, specific issues concerning foreign countries (INT); technology (TECH); family issues, culture, sport, education (FAM); regional issues and housing (REG); health issues and the COVID-19 pandemic (HEA); media (MED); accidents (ACC); religion (REL); the Soviet Union (USSR); and articles for which no topic could be determined (MISC). As shown above, the flexible LDA model is initialized with the *K*=30 maximum number of latent topics and ends with a human-validated thirteen meaningful topic groups. The regression analysis shows that this approach effectively detects meaningful topics that have very different topic-dependent sentiment or tone. It does not suffer from the traditional LDA requirement of having to select a fixed number of topics before the analysis, and it does not force the article to be assigned to a single topic, which reduces the loss of information. The traditional LDA model requires a single topic classification for each text, for example, *politics*, even if the keywords for this latent topic contain some keywords that a human researcher would classify as *finance*. As shown by Kim et al.'s (2019) heatmap analysis, such situations are observed in the data. The proposed flexible LDA with human validation

classifies such text into two topic categories, POL and ECO, because the latent topic name is *politics_finance*. This approach is especially useful when a corpus contains many very different newspapers, such as broadsheets and tabloids, and newspapers from many countries, as in our case. The full list of LDA-generated words in the original languages used to name the latent topics for each newspaper is available upon request from the authors. The examples with their English-language translation are provided in Appendix 2.

Appendix 2.

Examples of keywords (lemmas) for selected LDA-generated latent topics for the Polish media (English-language translation)

gazeta.pl, latent topic name: *finance*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: bank, banking (sector), credit, money, thousand, client, zloty (currency), live, financial, fee, year, amount, million, month, account, nbp (Polish central bank), percent, value, debt, banking (activity), payment, bond, transaction, person, example.

gazeta.pl, latent topic name: *politics_media*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: president, tvp (state television), talk, state (make statement), PiS (ruling party), Trzaskowski (politician's name), politician, Poland, Tusk (politician's name), journalist, write, television, campaign (election campaign), own, Duda (politician's name), program, state (country), Twitter, meet, choice, ask, Polish, want, word, conversation.

gazeta.pl, latent topic name: *legal affairs and legislation*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: court, case, judge, chairperson, prosecutor, have, minister, highest, decision, chief, become, committee, law, justice, information, concerning, year, conduct, act, motion (legal motion), position, claim, sentence, council.

rp.pl, latent topic name: *covid and health*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: case, person, infection, number, coronavirus, virus, covid, epidemic, sars, infect, cov, illness, health, detect, voivodship (region), lethal, new, Poland, sequence, die, coronavirus (alternative spelling in Polish), death, day, percent.

rp.pl, latent topic name: *culture*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: film (noun), theatre, prize, director, own, role, festival, live, actor, film (adj.), world, year, Polish, history, spectacle, spectator, hero, scene, series, another, time, play, great, cinema, priest.

wpolityce.pl, latent topic name: *war_international affairs*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: person, stay, pap (Polish press agency), France, government, attack, city, refugee, place, help, inform, Syria, French, police, attempt, thousands, die, immigrant, migrant, security, Turkey (country), victim, Korea, say.

wpolityce.pl, latent topic name: *protests*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: protest, woman, police, march, abortion, law, person, to protest, read, strike, street, independence, policeman, live, human, demonstration, participant, slogan, citizen, against, manifestation, Warsaw, want, PiS (party name).

wpolityce.pl, latent topic name: *politics*
Top 20 keywords generated by LDA: government, PiS, minister, premier, Poland, change, Szydło (politician's name), polish (adj.), say, Gowin (politician's name), justice, prime minister, deputy prime minister, Morawiecki (politician's name), politician, chairman, right-wing party, program, state, polish (noun), Beata (former PM first name), unite, want, chief, Kaczynski (politician's name).

Appendix 3.

Regression equations and explanation of the model parameters

$$sent_i = \alpha + \sum_j \beta_j io_{j,i} + \sum_m \gamma_m top_{m,i} + \sum_k \delta_k dip_{k,i} + \sum_k \vartheta_k c_{k,i} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

$$rsent_i = \alpha + \sum_j \beta_j io_{j,i} + \sum_m \gamma_m top_{m,i} + \sum_k \delta_k dip_{k,i} + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

$$sent_i = \alpha + \sum_j \sum_k \beta_{j,k} ioc_{j,k,i} + \sum_m \gamma_m top_{m,i} + \sum_k \delta_k dip_{k,i} + \sum_k \sum_j \theta_{j,k} iodip_{k,j,i} + \sum_k \vartheta_k c_{k,i} + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

$$rsent_i = \alpha + \sum_j \sum_k \beta_{j,k} ioc_{j,k,i} + \sum_m \gamma_m top_{m,i} + \sum_k \delta_k dip_{k,i} + \sum_k \sum_j \theta_{j,k} iodip_{k,j,i} \quad (4)$$

The parameters of the models are interpreted as follows:

β – measures how the IO name occurrences influence the tone of the articles. A positive estimate for an IO indicates that the legitimacy of this IO is strengthened in the media discourse in general (eqs. 1 and 2) or accounting for country differences (eqs. 3 and 4), and a negative estimate means it is weakened.

γ – captures how the topic or narrative impacts the tone of the articles. A negative estimate would, for example, indicate that articles discussing this topic usually have a negative tone. Articles about COVID-19 or accidents would be in that category.

δ – identifies the average tone of articles mentioning influential politicians from a given country. A high positive estimate would mean that politicians in this country are, on average, presented in a positive context.

θ – measures the impact of the influential politicians on the legitimation of the IO. A high and negative estimate would, for example, indicate that influential politicians in a given country use the media discourse to delegitimize a given IO. The number of θs equals the number of IOs under analysis times the number of countries under analysis, which in our case is equal to 12*6 = 72. Therefore, we use heatmaps to present the results.

ϑ – measures the country's impact on the tone of the articles and is used only when the absolute sentiment score is used to measure the tone.

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Understanding the discourse of the Visegrad Group during the migration crisis

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 117–135.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1260
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

The political stance of the Visegrad Group countries was primarily criticised by other European Union Member States when the migration crisis began. Officials from these countries expressed a negative view of migration, framing it as a security issue rather than a humanitarian one. The article explores the Visegrad Group's discourse during the European migration crisis. This study stands out because it examines the collective discourse of the Visegrad Group during the migration crisis rather than analysing each country separately. Three significant terror attacks in recent EU history have been incorporated into the analysis to see if they have increased the prominence of securitisation in the discourse of the Visegrad group. As the result of the Qualitative/Quantitative Content Analysis, we find that after the Charlie Hebdo Attack, the Visegrad Group discourse on the migration crisis began incorporating the security dimension. Following the terror attacks in Paris, the securitisation dimensions of the migration crisis intensified and remained through to the end of 2016. Our findings show that the communication style in the Visegrad group countries' declaration statements supports the security and terrorism linkage with migration.

Keywords: migration; security; Visegrad Group; discourse; terrorism

1 Introduction

The arrival of a large number of asylum seekers and migrants in a short period has presented European leaders and politicians with one of the most significant external challenges in the history of the European Union (EU). In the events of 2015, the Visegrad Group (V4), along with the majority of right-wing politicians/parties and conservative media outlets, presented asylum seekers and migrants as an existential threat to the EU's unity, security and stability. On the contrary, there were politicians and political parties, including certain members of right-wing parties, who declared a much more sensitive position towards asylum seekers and migrants. Politicians who portrayed newcomers as an existential threat claimed that the influx of undocumented immigrants should be perceived as

a 'security' risk and cannot be addressed as a purely 'humanitarian' issue. According to a study by Troszyński and El-Ghamari, the term 'illegal immigrant' was the most famous phrase across all types of the press in Poland from 2015 to 2018 (Troszyński & El-Ghamari, 2022). A study by Simonovits and Sik, which analysed the content of the media during the migration crisis in Hungary, shows that during the peak of the migration crisis in 2015, the word 'illegal' was frequently used (Sik & Simonovits, 2019).

In the case of the V4 countries, the discourse of heads of state and governments on the migration crisis centred on the idea that among a mass of mixed undocumented irregular migrants and refugees, there could be foreign fighters, potential terrorists, and enemies of European culture. At the same time, asylum seekers and migrants attempting to enter the EU illegally violate both international and EU regulations.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the academic literature by analysing the discourse of the V4 during the European migration crisis. Furthermore, the paper aims to examine if the terror attacks in the EU elevated the significance of the securitisation discourse of the V4. The author presents the following research question and hypothesis to accomplish the study's objective: How did the Visegrad Group communicate during the migration crisis? The study hypothesises that the V4's discourse on the migration crisis between 2015 and 2016 primarily focused on the security issues and the occurrence of terror attacks in the EU, helping to establish a strong foundation for their securitisation approach.

It is essential to highlight that this paper will not separately explore each V4 country but will analyse their collective response to the migration crisis. The fundamental rationale for choosing the V4 group's collective response for the study is their continuous opposition to the EU's migration policy from the beginning of the migration crisis, which included humanitarian aspects. Moreover, the V4 persistently demanded that migration be addressed as a matter of security rather than a humanitarian one. At the same time, the current academic literature focuses on the securitisation aspects of the migration crisis separately in the V4 countries but does not address their collective response. This notable gap in the academic literature acknowledges the need for more significant research efforts in the selected topic of this paper.

On top of that, the research will focus on the timeframe spanning from 2015 to 2016. The primary motive for choosing this time range is that it incorporates three significant terror attacks in recent EU history and coincides with the peak of the migration movement. The selected terrorist attacks are:

1. Charlie Hebdo Attack – 7 January 2015
2. Paris Terror Attacks – 13 November 2015
3. Brussels Terror Attacks – 22 March 2016

Additionally, in the first theoretical section of this research, emphasis will be placed on the concept of 'security-migration'. Migration is framed and prioritised as a security issue because elites and politicians place more importance on security migration. Also, the construction of a securitisation discourse, a narrative where politicians and elites portray migration as a threat to national security, defines this phenomenon as securitisation. This process keeps migration at the top of political agendas, showing the power of elite discourse to shape policy responses associated with migration. This will be explored through an analysis of the V4 discourse and in the first theoretical research section.

Furthermore, the article will explore the concept of 'terrorism-migration' in the second part of the theoretical section and its application by elites and politicians to promote anti-immigration discourse. Additionally, it presents key scholarly findings about the impacts of terrorism on attitudes towards ingroup and outgroup immigration. Moreover, references will be provided to V4 states' political discourse, highlighting terrorism and migration.

Following the theoretical section, the paper will present the results of the author's analysis of the V4 discourse. The results section is divided into three parts: statistical findings, monthly dynamics, and chronological analysis.

2 Security and migration

Many scholars argue that the security discourse started to be linked to migrants after the Cold War (Collyer, 2006; Wohlfeld, 2014). Traditional international relations theorists, who regarded states as the sole essential players throughout the Cold War, considered security in broad, military terms. Lippman suggested that 'a nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war' (Lippmann, 1943, p. 51).

According to Wohlfeld, the so-called new security agenda, which was constructed at the end of the Cold War and led to a widening and deepening of our knowledge of what defines a security threat or challenge, contains one of the most mentioned, yet also most controversial, topics: international migration (Wohlfeld, 2014). Koser argues that in recent years, the acceptance of migration as a threat to national security has unquestionably increased, in part because of the dramatic increase in the number of migrants, in particular, illegal or irregular migrants (Koser, 2011). Moreover, it is essential to note that real or imagined linkages to terrorism, health risk factors and organised crime are at the centre of the idea that irregular migration presents a security threat (Wohlfeld, 2014).

Huysmans remarks that once turned into a security issue, the immigrant appears to be an outsider who has entered a peaceful environment and harmed the harmony by entering it (Huysmans, 1995, p. 59). Furthermore, he argues that simply stopping the use of security discourse towards migrants will be enough to erase security issues because if the issue is no longer recognised and addressed as a security problem, it ceases to be a security problem (ibid., p. 65). However, Wæver and Roe reject Huysmans's idea by arguing that if migration is considered a security matter, it is highly challenging to reverse course, to de-securitise and perhaps even logically impossible (Roe, 2004).

At the same time, it is important to differentiate between securitisation and politicisation of migration issues as these two concepts partly overlap but also have distinct and crucial theoretical differences. Politicisation of migration involves framing migration as a political issue, leading to political discussions, negotiations and policy preferences among various actors. On the other hand, the Copenhagen School of Security Studies interprets securitisation as a process in which supposedly non-security subjects (such as immigration) become security issues due to securitising speech acts (Buzan, 1983). During this process, elites in power, politicians and experts identify and characterise risks and threats in concrete moments and at different levels regional, global and national (Estevens, 2018).

Then, they should justify the credibility of threats against society and neutralise them whenever possible.

Gigitashvili and Sidlo argue that in the Visegrad countries, through speech acts demonstrating migrants and asylum seekers as a threat to the nations, the securitisation of the refugee crisis was implemented (Gigitashvili & Sidło, 2015). The main features of the securitisation discourse identified are internal security (including economic security), sovereignty (i.e. state security), and (Christian) culture and identity (i.e. societal security). According to their study, refugees and migrants were portrayed as terrorists who wanted to impose their own (Islamic) values and cultures and get access to V4 countries' assistance, all with Brussels's approval and to enforce refugee quotas against the wishes of the governments (and people) of the Visegrad countries (ibid).

Securitisation is believed to begin when elite actors adopt existential threat rhetoric to bring 'low politics' public policy concerns into the sphere of 'high politics' (Messina, 2017, p. 27). According to Messina, the securitisation process is fundamentally intersubjective, and the elite's securitising acts consist of a speech, a report or legislation (ibid.). At the same time, the process must be justified by objective facts. However, it was argued that the concept of securitisation was not restricted to speech acts but was also deeply grounded in institutional development (Karyotis, 2007). Kazharski and Tabosa suggest that in the case of the Visegrad group countries, the political elites have been using speech acts to securitise migration and processes associated with it in various sectors, including: 'as a threat to national and regional security, as a threat to the state's sovereignty and its ability to decide upon immigration policies, as a threat to the national economy, and as a threat to 'us,' in identarian terms' (Kazharski & Tabosa, 2018, p. 78). Also, a study by Barlai et al. indicates that initially, migrants were portrayed as a threat to social and national security in Poland and Hungary (Barlai et al., 2017). Kabata and Jacobs point out that the Polish ruling party (Law and Justice) used securitising discourse from 2015 to 2017 on the migration crisis (Kabata & Jacobs, 2022). They identified five different elements: 'Security', 'Muslim other', 'We want to help, but . . .', 'The EU has gone astray' and 'Our other' (ibid., p. 11).

In summary, reviewing the 'security-migration' concept highlights the significance of elites and politicians shaping the perception of migration as a security issue. At the same time, discourse on migration as a threat to the state's national interest has intensified due to the nature of migration in recent years, including illegal/irregular migrants. Additionally, as revealed by earlier studies in the case of the V4 countries at the beginning of the migration crisis, migrants and asylum seekers were portrayed as a threat to national security through the speech acts of politicians and elites.

3 Terrorism and migration

Since the 9/11 terror attack, there has been a growing linkage between migration and terrorism. As a result of the 9/11 terror attack, the connection between migration and international terrorism appears to have reappeared due to a lesson learnt by states: terrorism is no longer restricted to nations or regions (International Organization for Migration, 2010).

The spontaneous terror attack presented an opportunity and played a significant role in the rise of the 'securitisation' of the migration concept (Zucconi, 2004). This was supported by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373, which stresses that states should

> Prevent the movement of terrorists or terrorist groups by adequate border controls and controls on issuance of identity papers and travel documents, and through measures for preventing counterfeiting, forgery or fraudulent use of identity papers and travel documents (Art.2(g)). (United Nations Security Council, 2001, p. 2)

Additionally, an IOM report published in 2010 stated that a significant impact of the 9/11 terrorist attack was that migration became more strongly linked to national security concerns (International Organization for Migration, 2010). Karyotins, in his paper, mentions that the securitisation of migration in the EU only intensified after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, the 9/11 attacks did not generate the 'insecurities, uncertainties, ambiguities and complexities regarding migration policy' but intensified processes already profoundly established in the emerging European internal security framework (Karyotis, 2007, p. 13).

According to the research of Cruz, D'Alessio and Stolzenberg, which tested the relationship between terrorism and immigration, terrorism impacts attitudes towards ingroup and outgroup immigration unevenly. In countries plagued by terrorism, the probability of favouring outgroup immigration decreases. However, the opposite is occurring regarding ingroup immigration (Cruz, D'Alessio & Stolzenberg, 2020).

Bove and Böhmelt find that terrorism can travel from one destination to another via migration, but immigration is unlikely to impact the rise of terrorism (Bove & Böhmelt, 2016, pp. 584–585). The theoretical framework of their research stresses that immigration from terror-prone states can be explored by a terrorist organisation that uses migrant communities as a recruitment pool (ibid.).

On the other hand, Iov and Bogdan mention in their work that the relationship between international migration and extremist and terrorist actions is used as a tool to increase the sense of insecurity in the host society by certain politicians or state representatives in their speeches (Iov & Bogdan, 2017, p. 15). When the mass migration movement peaked in 2015, political actors of the V4 countries claimed that the migration crisis was linked with terrorism. They increased their discourse on the securitisation of borders to avoid potential terrorists. For example, the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán told public radio while commenting on the terrorist attack in Nice: 'If we do not want to see cases such as those in Nice, we must not allow them. Apart from the few already here, we do not want new entrants, especially not [illegal] migrants' (Hungary Today, 2020). In the case of Poland, President Andrej Duda said: 'There is no doubt that the growing wave of terrorism is linked to migration' (Radio Poland, 2017).

At the same time, then Czech President Milos Zeman, in his speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, said:

> Migration is partially provoked by terrorist actions, for instance in Syria or in Iraq. But on the other hand, migration is connected to terrorism because some jihadists are hidden inside the migration wave. And in Europe and everywhere, they create sleeping units, lonely wolves and so on. (Prague Castle, 2017)

The Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said:

> There is an absolute link between migration and terrorism. It is clear that potential terrorists might have used uncontrolled migration, not only for passage, but also to bring weapons and explosives. Therefore, the probability there might be more individual terror attacks is very high because there is potential for such attack. (Deutsche Welle, 2016)

With the beginning of the migration crisis, the securitisation of migration and the linkage between migration and terrorism increased in the discourse of the politicians as they realised potential threats from the migration movement. A scholarly study shows that terrorism may use migrant populations for recruitment and has different impacts on sentiments towards ingroup and outgroup immigration. As noted above, the heads of state of the V4 countries frequently referenced migration-terrorism connections to justify security measures on migration.

4 Methodology

This study will use Qualitative/Quantitative Content analysis research methodology to analyse the collected data. Quantitative content analysis will assist us in quantifying and categorising particular elements within a dataset, but qualitative content analysis will be helpful in understanding and comprehending the underlying meanings, contexts, and nuances inside a dataset. Given the large amount of data and the systematic structure of the material to be assessed, content analysis is the most appropriate study method for this project.

In this study, the joint declarations and statements of the V4 were collected as a data source to analyse their discourse on the migration crisis. Within the framework of the research, a total of 23 materials were collected for the analyses, precisely 14 in 2015 and 9 in 2016. The collected materials for the analysis are listed in Appendix A and Appendix B.

On the other hand, after collecting the materials for analysis, dividing them into segments and identifying the research question, the next step was to build a coding frame. This study combines concept-driven (deductive method) and data-driven (inductive approach) approaches in the coding frame's structure. After building a coding frame, materials were separated into coding units (segments). Overall, from the selected materials in 2015, 61 segments and 60 segments were generated for the content analysis in 2016. The segments differ in one aspect: while some consist of only one or two sentences, others include a whole paragraph.

The next step was to test the coding frame using double coding to assess its reliability and coherence. Once the coding frame was finalised after the testing through double coding, the primary analysis started. In this study, to analyse the collected materials, four main categories were identified: 1) Humanitarian aspect of the migration crisis, 2) Measures to protect (im)migrants and refugees, 3) Security aspect of the migration crisis, and 4) Measures to strengthen security.

5 Results

This section of the paper presents the results of the author's analysis regarding the discourse study of the V4. It is divided into three sections: statistical findings, monthly dynamics, and chronological analysis.

5.1 Statistical findings

Figure 1 shows that in 2015–2016, the *'humanitarian aspect of the migration crisis'* category in the discourse of the V4 countries was practically identical. In 2015, the overall percentage for this category was 3.28 per cent, while in 2016, it was 3.3 per cent (2 codes each year). The results for the *'measures to protect (im)migrants and refugees'* category suggested only minor differences in 2015 and 2016. This category stood at 9.84 per cent (6 codes) in 2015 but decreased to 8.33 per cent in 2016 (5 codes). The findings from our analysis indicate that the percentage gap between years hugely widens for the latter two categories. The percentage of codes in the category measuring the 'security aspect of the migration crisis' increased from 29.51 per cent (18 codes) in 2015 to 51.67 per cent (31 codes) in 2016. Moreover, the overall percentage of the *'measures to strengthen security'* category in 2015 was 83.61 per cent (51 codes), but it slightly decreased to 80.00 per cent in 2016 (48 codes).

It is essential to highlight that in our analysis, the *'measures to strengthen security'* category had the highest percentage in 2015–2016. Another security-focused category, *'security aspects of the migration crisis',* had the second highest percentage for the defined time range of analysis. At the same time, the percentage of both humanitarian-focused categories was significantly lower than security-focused categories in 2015 and 2016. Furthermore, the *'humanitarian aspect of the migration crisis'* category had the lowest percentage among all the categories during the selected time frame. Based on our analysis, we can confirm that during 2015–2016, the discourse of the V4 predominantly focused on security dimensions over humanitarian aspects of the migration crisis. Nevertheless, the presence of humanitarian discourse in the published materials of the V4 is somewhat minimal.

Furthermore, Table 1 and Table 2 explain and illustrate the subcategories of the main categories discussed earlier. Referring to the tables provided below, we can find the key elements and themes used in the V4 discourse in 2015 and 2016.

Representation of the humanitarian side of the migration crisis within the discourse of V4 is categorised under the main category, '*humanitarian aspects of the migration crisis*'. This main category includes the subcategory *'protection rights of (im)migrants and refugees'*, which had 2 codes for 2015 and 2016, as indicated in Table 1 and Table 2.

Under the *'measures to protect (im)migrants and refugees'* category for 2015, 2 segments were coded under the *'access to asylum procedures'* and *'providing humanitarian assistance'* subcategories. Furthermore, *'providing funds to support humanitarian assistance'* and *'religious support'* has 1 code for each. On the other hand, the subcategory of *'providing humanitarian assistance'* was only coded once in 2016, while *'access to asylum procedures'* was coded 4 times.

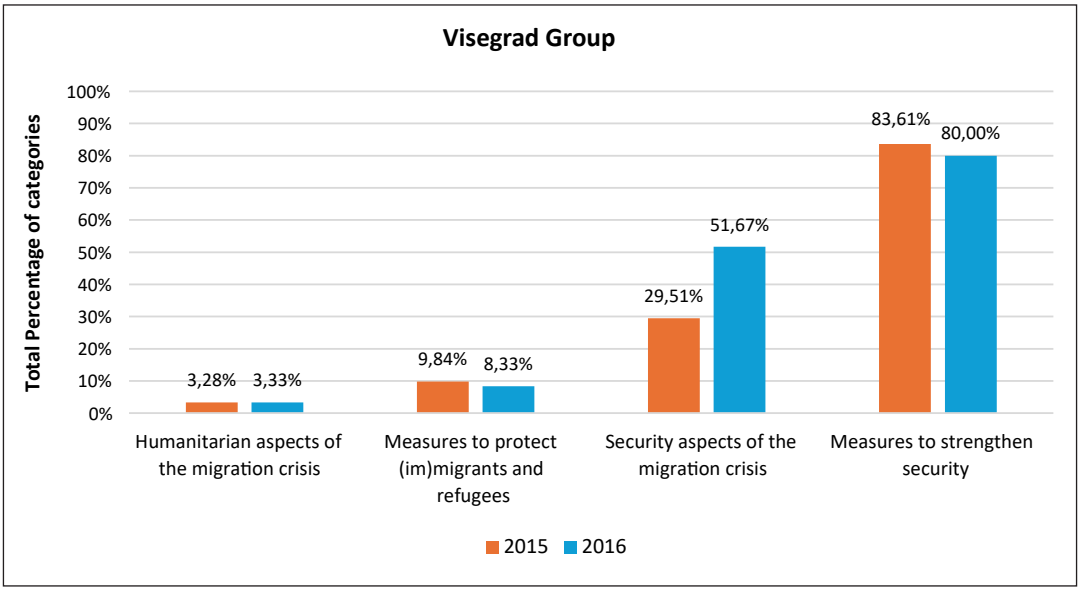

Figure 1 Visegrad Group Discourse 2015–2016

Source: Author's analysis – The results of the Qualitative/Quantitative Content analysis are explained in this Figure.

Table 1 Visegrad Group discourse (main – sub categories) 2015

VISEGRAD GROUP – 2015
Humanitarian aspects of the migration crisis: A total of 2 codes
Protection rights of (im)migrants and refugees (1.1 Sub cat.) – 2 codes
Measures to protect (im)migrants and refugees: A total of 6 codes
Access to asylum procedures (2.1 Sub cat.) – 2 codes
Preventing violation rights of (im)migrants and refugees (2.2 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Providing humanitarian assistance (2.3 Sub cat.) – 2 codes
Providing funds to support humanitarian assistance (2.4 Sub cat.) – 1 code
Religious support (2.5 Sub cat.) – 1 code
Security aspects of the migration crisis: A total of 18 codes
Public security threat (3.1 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Border / territorial control (3.2 Sub cat.) – 14 codes
Terrorist threats (3.3 Sub cat.) – 4 codes

Health threat (3.4 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Measures to strengthen security: A total of 51 codes
Anti-terrorist measures (4.1 Sub cat.) – 6 codes
Fight against human smugglers/traffickers (4.2 Sub cat.) – 5 codes
Border control measures (4.3 Sub cat) – 11 codes
Internal border control (4.3.1 Sub cat.) – 2 codes
External border control (4.3.2 Sub cat.) – 9 codes
Cooperation with third (transit) countries (4.4 Sub cat.) – 15 codes
Cooperation with (im)migrants and refugees sending countries (4.5 Sub cat.) – 14 codes

Source: Author's analysis – This table provides the qualitative/quantitative content analysis results. Also, with the help of this table, we can understand the discourse of the V4 on the migration crisis of 2015.

In 2015, the *'security aspect of the migration crisis'* main category included subcategories such as *'border/territory control'*, which accounted for 14 codes, and *'terrorist threats'*, which comprised 4 codes. Nevertheless, in 2016, the number of segments classified under the subcategory *'border/territorial control'* increased to 27, a significant rise from the previous year. Also, 4 segments were coded under the *'public security threat'* subcategory. The main difference in this case is that in 2016, border and territory control issues gained statistical significance, and public security features appeared while the terrorism threat subcategory disappeared. Also, it is essential to mention that illegal migration and V4 opposition to the mandatory quotas were considered border control issues in this context. Illegal migration exists where border control is not effective, and mandatory quotas undermine the state's ability to control who enters and stays in its territory.

The subcategory of *'cooperation with third (transit) countries'* under the main category *'measures to strengthen security'* had 15 codes in 2015 and 2016, making it the most coded subcategory overall. Regarding the *'cooperation with (im)migrants and refugees sending countries'* subcategory, 14 codes were assigned. In comparison, 11 segments were coded for the *'cooperation with (im)migrants and refugees sending countries'* subcategory in 2016.

The *'cooperation with third (transit) countries'* subcategory comprises hotspots, camps, and registration segments. Nevertheless, the *'cooperation with (im)migrants and refugees sending countries'* subcategory contains information that addresses concerns, including causes and repatriation.

Moreover, 11 segments in 2015 were coded for *'border control measures'* (2 were in the 'internal border control' subcategory, and 9 were in the 'external border control' subcategory). In 2016, 13 segments were categorised under *'border control measures'*, explicitly falling into the *'external border control'* subcategory. This suggests that in 2016, discourse within the V4 did not focus on internal border control challenges but instead emphasised efforts to protect external border control.

Furthermore, references to *'anti-terrorist measures'* occurred in 6 segments in 2015 and increased to 7 in 2016. In 2015, there were 5 segments coded under *'fight against human smugglers/traffickers'*, whereas in 2016, this number decreased to 2 segments.

Table 2 Visegrad Group discourse (main – sub categories) 2016

VISEGRAD GROUP – 2016
Humanitarian aspects of the migration crisis: A total of 2 codes
Protection rights of (im)migrants and refugees (1.1 Sub cat.) – 2 codes
Measures to protect (im)migrants and refugees: A total of 5 codes
Access to asylum procedures (2.1 Sub cat.) – 4 codes
Preventing violation rights of (im)migrants and refugees (2.2 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Providing humanitarian assistance (2.3 Sub cat.) – 1 code
Providing funds to support humanitarian assistance (2.4 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Religious support (2.5 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Security aspects of the migration crisis: A total of 31 codes
Public security threat (3.1 Sub cat.) – 4 codes
Border / territorial control (3.2 Sub cat.) – 27 codes
Terrorist threats (3.3 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Health threat (3.4 Sub cat.) – 0 code
Measures to strengthen security: A total of 48 codes
Anti-terrorist measures (4.1 Sub cat.) – 7 codes
Fight against human smugglers/traffickers (4.2 Sub cat.) – 2 codes
Border control measures (4.3 Sub cat) – 13 codes
Internal border control (4.3.1 Sub cat.) – 0 code
External border control (4.3.2 Sub cat.) – 13 codes
Cooperation with third (transit) countries (4.4 Sub cat.) – 15 codes
Cooperation with (im)migrants and refugees sending countries (4.5 Sub cat.) – 11 codes

Source: Author's analysis – This table provides the qualitative/quantitative content analysis results. Also, with the help of this table, we can understand the discourse of the V4 on the migration crisis of 2016.

5.2 Monthly dynamics

This section presents an analysis to illustrate the monthly fluctuations in the dynamics of each main category from 2015 to 2016.

Figure 2 demonstrates the monthly dynamics of each main category while the table below highlights three vertical lines implying terrorist attacks (January 2015 – Charlie Hebdo Attack; November 2015 – Paris Terror Attacks; March 2016 – Brussels Terror Attacks), which helps us understand how each attack elevated the discourse on securitisation in the V4 context. For example, following the Charlie Hebdo Attack, there was a steady increase across all categories, with the third and fourth categories outperforming the others in March. Also, there was considerable activity in the third category in June. At the same time, shifts were noted in three categories in September, except the first, followed by the fourth category reaching its highest. This can be explained by the fact that in September, the head of states of the Visegrad Group adopted a Joint Statement following the extraordinary Summit on Migration, and the Visegrad Group Ministers of Foreign Affairs released a joint communication. This shows that the securitisation discourse dominated the two press releases from separate events.

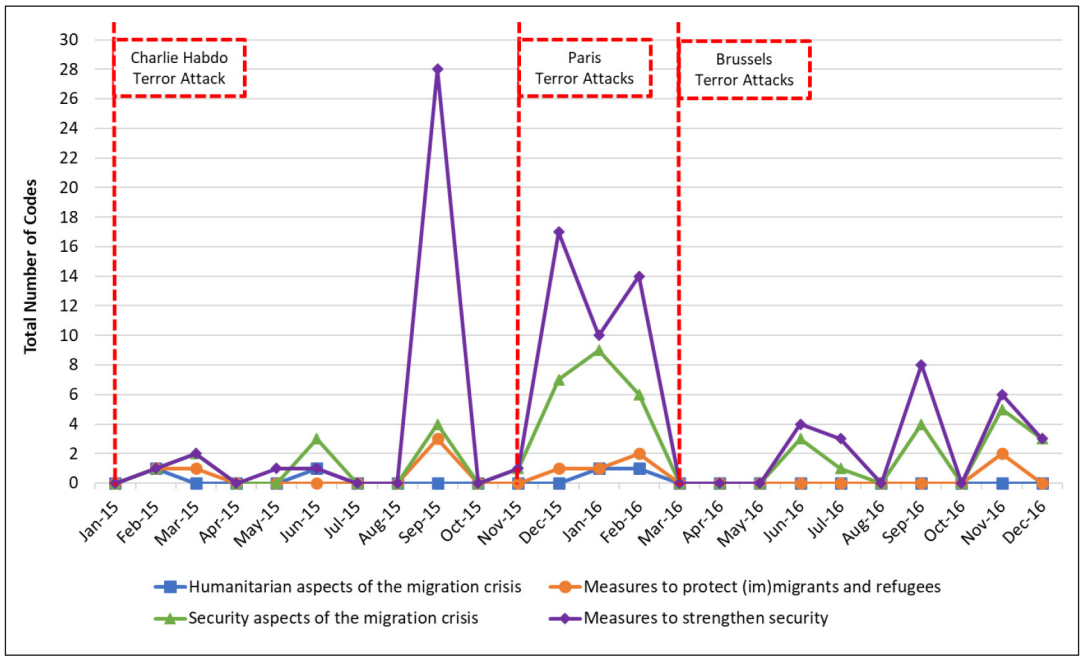

Figure 2 Visegrad Group discourse – monthly

Source: Author's analysis: This figure presents the results of a quantitative content analysis. Additionally, it helps in understanding the monthly fluctuations in the discourse of the V4 on the migration crisis in 2016.

On top of that, Figure 2 highlights the V4's immediate reaction to the Paris terror attacks. Both categories reflecting securitisation discourse increased sharply in December, January and February. Additionally, January was the best-performing month for the third category. In contrast to the swift responses to the Paris terror attacks, the V4's response to the Brussels terror attacks was observed in June 2016, with a minor rise prolonging into July. Furthermore, there was an increase in the categories corresponding to security in September and November. It is worth noting that the second category also showed a modest increase in November.

Figure 2 illustrates that after the Charlie Hebdo attack, there was a modest increase in the securitisation discourse. However, security-related categories reacted quickly following the Paris terror attacks. In contrast, there was no immediate reaction to the Brussels terror attacks, as there had been after the Paris attacks. Instead, the third and fourth categories showed a response in the later months.

5.3 Chronological analysis

The V4 countries have been the most prominent advocates for the securitisation approach since the beginning of the migration crisis. This section of the study provides a chronological explanation to understand key developments in the statements of the V4 on the migration crisis.

Following the Charlie Hebdo Attack at the start of 2015, the issue of terrorism appeared in the discourse of the V4. The statement on 25 February 2015 by the Foreign Affairs Committees of V4 parliaments highlighted terrorism as a threat to European security and civilisation and urged the EU to intensify its fight against terrorism. On the other hand, a document released by the V4 Representatives of Parliament urges their governments to assist in fulfilling the needs of internally displaced people, refugees, and religious minorities, especially Christians.

Moreover, the analysis results demonstrate that another element of securitisation, such as cooperation and strengthening of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), was included in the V4's discourse by the end of April. The following must be noticed: in the aftermath of the 23 April 2015 extraordinary European Council meeting, EU Foreign and Defence Ministers decided to establish EUNAVFOR Med as a naval force and begin the CSDP mission in the Mediterranean on 18 May 2015. The main priority was to dismantle criminal networks of smugglers and traffickers in order to preserve lives (Latici, 2023).

Concerns about the mandatory redistribution scheme for asylum seekers were raised while examining key developments in the V4 statements on the migration crisis in the first half of 2015. Also, V4 called for a more effective return process, border management, and the fight against hybrid threats, terrorism, organised crime, foreign fighters, and irregular migration.

The heads of state of the V4 highlighted measures on 4 September 2015, following the extraordinary Visegrad Group Summit on Migration, to reduce push factors and secure the external borders of the EU and the Schengen Area, namely by:

– Enhancing bilateral assistance and aid schemes with particular focus on countries of transit and origin.
– Providing experts and technical equipment for: EU external border protection, asylum procedure and relevant support actions and assistance to the border protection and migration management of the countries of the Western Balkans. (Visegrad Group, 2015a).

Furthermore, a released statement by the V4 as a result of the extraordinary meeting notes that vital aspects of the EU's common strategy for the upcoming months should include in particular: effective control and protection of the EU external borders; fulfilment of legal obligations by all Member States and of responsibilities by EU institutions; preserving the voluntary nature of EU solidarity measures; swift implementation of hotspots under the June European Council conclusions; strengthening the fight against organised crime and trafficking (ibid.).

On the other hand, a collective statement issued by the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group following their discussions with counterparts from the Luxembourg Presidency and Germany on 11 September 2015 mentioned the importance of putting attention on the Western Balkan migration route, stabilisation of the European neighbourhood, fighting against human trafficking and smuggling, and development and humanitarian assistance to countries of origin and transit of migration.

One interesting observation is that after the 13 November 2015 Paris terror attacks, the emphasis on terrorism started to increase in the V4 statements. Our findings demonstrate that the V4 continuously stressed the need for a fight against terrorism in the timeframe between the Paris and Brussels terror attacks (see Table 3). For example, between the Paris terror attacks and the Brussels terror attacks, the terms 'Terrorism,' 'Terror,' and 'Terrorist' appeared a total of 19 times in the selected publications of the V4. At the same time, addressing the root causes of migration, enhancing the protection of the European Union's external border and objection to the automatic permanent relocation mechanism were repeatedly expressed in the discourse of the V4 after the Paris terror attacks.

Furthermore, on 3 December 2015, the Prime Ministers of V4 countries issued a joint statement stressing that terrorism threatened EU security and called for the European Council to have a firm position on fighting terrorism and strengthening the security of the EU's external borders. The joint statement notes that:

> Given the nature and scope of this security challenge the European Union has to act. We underline that the upcoming December European Council must take a clear stance on fighting terrorism. The discussion should build on the action taken so far, identify further possible elements of a united and complex response of the European Union to the current security challenges and make sure this response is implemented quickly and effectively. All relevant means of countering terrorism must be mobilised. We place particular emphasis on the need to improve information and intelligence sharing within Europe, to finalise the Passenger Name Record Directive, on measures aimed at combatting financing terrorism and organised crime, as well as on a conclusive debate on a transparent EU framework for firearms control. (Visegrad Group, 2015b)

Table 3 Visegrad Group Discourse – number of the terms

Charlie Hebdo Attack to Paris Terror Attacks		
Terrorism	Terror	Terrorist
6	1	2
9		
10 - Documents in total		
Paris Terror Attacks to Brussels Terror Attacks		
Terrorism	Terror	Terrorist
16	0	3
19		
7 - Documents in total		
Brussels Terror Attacks - End 2016		
Terrorism	Terror	Terrorist
4	0	1
5		
6 - Documents in total		

Source: Author's analysis – The table presents the findings from a quantitative content analysis. It offers a detailed account of the frequency of selected terms within the chosen documents, focusing on the analysis of V4 during 2015-2016.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that on 15 February 2016, V4 released a joint statement in which they reiterated their objection to the automatic permanent relocation mechanism. At the same time, they urged the Council's position on the European Border and Coast Guard, on the effective management and control of EU external borders, and on a significant increase in the efficient return of irregular migrants.

The Joint Declaration of the Visegrad Group Prime Ministers on 8 June 2016 underlined how urgent it is to deal with migration by seeking European solutions that deal with the root causes, like resolving the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Also, the document stressed the significance of swift EU action to preserve trust in its institutions, assisting frontline and Eastern Partnership countries and pushing for consensus-based policies that protect external borders, hotspots, and returns. Additionally, Prime Ministers advocated for evidence-based rather than drastic modifications, opposing mandatory redistribution of asylum seekers, and promoted progressive reform of the Dublin system.

Furthermore, on 21 November 2016, V4 Interior Ministers proposed solutions to address the root causes of migration, which should decrease the number of illegal migrants entering the European Union, granting restored control over managing mixed migratory flows. The statement suggested that in order to achieve the goal of assisting third coun-

tries hosting large numbers of migrants, supporting effective processing of asylum claims, including tackling the phenomenon of the abuse of international protection for unjustified illegal entry into the EU, improving return and readmission rates of migrants not eligible for international protection in the EU (Visegrad Group, 2016).

Moreover, a joint statement by the heads of government of the V4 countries on 15 December 2016 emphasised the necessity of a solid external border system for European migration policy to fight migratory pressure effectively. They prioritised internal security and supported policies to increase public trust and safety, such as the Passenger Name Record and Counter Terrorism Directives.

The findings from this section of the study indicate that the security aspect of the migration crisis already featured in the V4 discourse after the Charlie Hebdo attack. However, due to the Paris terror attacks, the security dimension of the migration crisis started to intensify and continued until the end of 2016. The main security elements in the V4 discourse included the fight against terrorism and illegal migration, protecting external borders, managing the root causes of migration and preventing the EU's proposed automatic permanent relocation mechanism. It is important to note that the analysed documents of the V4 discourse included certain aspects of policy recommendations for EU institutions on how to fight terrorism and manage migration.

6 Conclusion

Our analysis confirms that between 2015 and 2016, the V4 placed greater emphasis on security aspects rather than humanitarian issues when discussing the migration crisis. The published materials from the V4 contained limited discourse on humanitarian topics, reflecting a broader trend in the group's strategic communications.

At the same time, our findings suggest that the securitisation elements on the migration crisis in the discourse of the V4 were visible after the Charlie Hebdo Attack but peaked after the Paris terror attacks and remained prominent following the Brussels terror attacks. This shows that the discourse of the V4 has been influenced by significant terror attacks in Europe, leading to an increased emphasis on security concerns. The V4 discourse included key security components such as the fight against terrorism and illegal migration, protection of external borders, managing the root causes of migration and preventing the EU's proposed automatic permanent relocation mechanism. Moreover, the figure that provided information about the monthly fluctuations of each main category confirms a slight increase in security discourse following the Charlie Hebdo attack, but security-related categories had a substantial rise following the Paris terror attacks. In contrast, there was no quick reaction to the Brussels terror attacks.

It is important to note that the Charlie Hebdo and Paris terror attacks strengthened the V4 group's position on the securitisation approach to the migration crisis. Additionally, the communication style in the V4 group's declarations and statements supports the linkage between security and terrorism with migration. The fundamental principles of the V4 group's discourse identify the migration crisis as a security threat.

This study could be further developed at the EU level, where it would examine EU institutions' discourse to determine if the V4 group's stance on migration impacted how

the EU institutions changed their communication style from a humanitarian approach to a securitisation one. Furthermore, future research could expand on this study by analysing how the V4's securitisation discourse has developed post-2016, particularly considering new global migration patterns and international relations developments.

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Appendix

A. Collected Data for the Analysis in the Case of the Visegrad Group – 2015

V4 Countries Progress in Defence Cooperation; Prague, 17 December 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/v4-countries-progress-in

Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group countries; Brussels, 17 December 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=283

Joint Statement of Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group and the President of the Republic of Korea; Prague, 3 December 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-statement-on-the

Joint Statement of the V4 Prime Ministers; Prague, 3 December 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the-151204

"We Offer You Our Helping Hand on the EU Path" – Joint letter of V4 Foreign Ministers published in Western Balkan dailies; Prague, 11 November 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/v4-ministers-in-joint

Joint Communiqué of the Visegrad Group Ministers of Foreign Affairs; Prague, 11 September 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-communique-of-the-150911

Joint Statement of the Summit of Heads of Government of the Visegrad Group Countries/Joint Statement; Prague, 4 September 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the-150904

Press Statement of the Summit of V4 Prime Ministers and the President of France; Bratislava, 19 June 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/press-statement-on-the

Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Prime Ministers; Bratislava, 19 June 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the

Bratislava Declaration of the V4 Heads of Government on Stronger CSDP; Bratislava, 19 June 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/bratislava-declaration

V4 and Turkey: Share Interest in Regular Dialog (V4 + Turkey Foreign Ministerial Meeting – Press Release); Antalya, 12 May 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/v4-and-turkey-shared

Joint Communiqué of V4 Ministers of Defence; Tomášov, 23 April 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-communique-of-the

Co-Chairs' Statement of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of V4 + NB8 Countries; High Tatras, 12-13 March 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/co-chairs-statement

Conclusions from the Meeting of Foreign Affairs Committees of V4 Countries; Bratislava, 25 February 2015 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/conclusion-from-the

B. Collected Data for the Analysis in the Case of Visegrad Group – 2016

Joint Statement of the Heads of Governments of the V4 Countries (V4 Prime Ministers); Brussels, 15 December 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-statement-of-the-161215-1

Joint Statement on the Migration Crisis Response Mechanism (V4 Interior Ministers); Warsaw, 21 November 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-v4

Joint Statement of the Heads of Governments of the V4 Countries; Bratislava, 16 September 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the-160919

Joint Statement of the Heads of Governments of the V4 Countries; Warsaw, 21 July 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the-160721

Towards Union of Trust and Action – Joint V4 Prime Ministers' Statement; Brussels, 28 June 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the-160629

Joint Declaration of the Visegrad Group Prime Ministers; Prague, 8 June 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-declaration-of-the-160609

Joint Statement of V4 Prime Ministers on Migration; Prague, 15 February 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-on

Joint Statement of V4 Prime Ministers on the 25th Anniversary of the Visegrad Group; Prague, 15 February 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the

Joint Declaration of the Interior Ministers of the Visegrad Group and Slovenia, Serbia and Macedonia; Prague, 19 January 2016 – https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-declaration-of

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Harmony expired: Why did the main mouthpiece of Latvia's minorities fail during the 2022 parliamentary election?

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 136–153.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3. 1283
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

Latvia is a small European state with a significant minority constituency. Minorities comprise a significant part of its political landscape, marked by a cleavage between ethnic Latvians and so-called Russophones. For over a decade, the political representation of Latvia's minorities was dominated by Harmony, an integrationist social-democratic political party that mobilized voters beyond ethnic lines. This study analyzes Harmony's campaign messages delivered by the party's key figures during the 2022 parliamentary election to identify the reasons for their failure. It argues that Harmony's strategies overlooked the challenges posed by political rivals, including those with similar constituency characteristics. The analysis of Harmony's electoral sustainability includes a comparison of the party's performance in all campaigns from the 2006 to 2022 parliamentary elections, with a specific focus on Riga and Latgale, the party's electoral strongholds. These findings suggest that integrationist parties are increasingly vulnerable to shifts in the political environment caused by changing domestic and international political contexts.

Keywords: Latvia; national minorities; elections; political communication; integrationist parties

1 Introduction

On October 1, 2022, a parliamentary election was held in Latvia. One of its major outcomes was the electoral failure of the 'Harmony' Social Democratic Party (Latvian: *'Saskaņa' Sociāldemokrātiskā partija*, Russian: *Sotsial-demokraticheskaya partiya 'Soglasie'*, hereinafter: Harmony). The most popular political group in the three previous parliamentary elections held in 2011, 2014, and 2018 received only 4.81 per cent of the votes.[1] As a result, it did not reach the five-percent threshold needed to secure its re-election to the *Saeima*.[2]

[1] All electoral data, rules, and other relevant information used in this text were retrieved from the website of the Central Election Commission of Latvia (https://www.cvk.lv, accessed: 29 November 2022) and via email communication with the Central Election Commission (2 December 2022). All subsequent calculations were made based on these data.

[2] The *Saeima* is the name of the parliament of Latvia.

For many years, Harmony was a stable element in Latvia's volatile party system (Nakai, 2018, p. 206). The most important aspect of Harmony's electoral failure pertains to the characteristics of its electoral constituency, primarily consisting of Latvia's national minorities. Harmony is essentially an integrationist party, that is, a political formation that 'promotes cooperation between minority and majority groups, and uses this feature to appeal to voters outside that group' (Nedelcu & DeBardeleben, 2016, p. 388). Although it was formed by politicians of both majority and minority backgrounds, the minority electorate has always formed its core, and people of minority backgrounds prevailed among its elected representatives at various levels. Being relatively large, Latvia's minority constituency can afford the existence of several political groups that claim to represent it (cf. Zhdanok & Mitrofanov, 2017). In 2006, Harmony Centre (Latvian: *Saskaņas Centrs*, Russian: *Tsentr Soglasiya*), the party's formal predecessor, became the most popular political group in Latvia's minority constituency, and subsequently started dominating or even *quasi*-monopolizing the parliamentary representation of this segment of the electorate (Németh & Dövényi, 2019, p. 798). Thus, its electoral failure in 2022 marked the end of this agency at the national level.

Pre-election opinion polls indicated a decline in Harmony's popularity (Factum, 2022). However, they all suggested that Harmony would be capable of entering the *Saeima*, as its rankings substantially exceeded the five-percent threshold. In an interview with LTV1 broadcast immediately after the election, Jānis Urbanovičs, Harmony's board chairman, explained the electoral failure as a combination of several factors. Specifically, the start of the party's decline coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic when Harmony advocated for vaccination. This was followed by the party's condemnation of Russia as an aggressor in its war against Ukraine, as well as some other activities of Harmony that allowed opponents to conduct an essentially negative campaign against the party (Rīta Panorāma, 2022). Some commentators also claimed that Harmony was quite passive and barely visible compared to its main political rivals, who campaigned more aggressively to attract the votes of Latvia's minority electorate (TČK, 2022).

This article aims to explain the electoral decline of Harmony, the political party that dominated the minority constituency in Latvia for one and a half decades. To this end, it analyzes the party's campaign rhetoric, focusing on the reasons for electoral failure. The rationale behind this effort is twofold. On the one hand, the study defines and assesses domestic and external drivers that contributed to Harmony's electoral failure. On the other hand, it analyzes Harmony's electoral capacity and identifies the dynamics of its core electorate. This study demonstrates that integrationist parties in ethnic democracies are more vulnerable to crises driven by domestic and foreign policy factors.

The 2022 electoral campaign was dominated by four thematic issues: 'the pandemic, war in Ukraine, [the] energy crisis, and LGBTQ+ rights' (Hofmane, 2022, para. 2). Three of these had already emerged after the previous parliamentary election held in 2018. The war in Ukraine has significantly impacted Latvian society and the country's minorities beyond electoral contexts. The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities notes in its Opinion on Latvia that 'public discourse [in Latvia] does not always distinguish between the actions of the Russian Federation and the domestic concerns of persons belonging to the Russian national minority, which is highly

diverse' (Fourth Opinion, 2024, p. 4). This confirms the observation that different issues, lists of contenders, and voters' readiness to embrace their campaign messages make every election unique (Guber, 1997, p. VII). It also explains why this study analyzes the context of a specific electoral campaign.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, it introduces the specifics of Latvia's society and domestic political configurations pertinent to majority-minority relations. It then discusses the main concepts and techniques used to designate and explain Harmony's electoral decline and assess its core constituency. Finally, the empirical section explores Harmony's campaign communication during the 2022 parliamentary election and analyzes the party's electoral capacities to measure the sustainability of its electorate compared to other political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies.

2 Relevant contexts and actors associated with Latvian politics

Latvia has a significant percentage of national minorities. According to the 2021 population census, ethnic Latvians made up 62.74 percent of the population, followed by Russians (24.49 per cent), Belarusians (3.10 per cent), Ukrainians (2.23 per cent), Poles (1.97 per cent), and Lithuanians (1.14 per cent) (National Statistical System of Latvia, n.d.). These figures include both citizens and non-citizens. In Latvian law, the concept of non-citizens refers to former Soviet citizens who were not automatically granted Latvian citizenship after independence and have not obtained any other citizenship since. As of 2021, non-citizens comprised 10.06 per cent of Latvia's population, a number that is gradually decreasing. This group almost entirely consists of national minorities. The main electoral characteristic of Latvia's non-citizens is their inability to vote or run for office. As of 2021, national minorities comprised 27.6 per cent of Latvia's electorate (Buzayev, 2021), offering them considerable potential for adequate electoral representation through various competing alternatives (Duvold et al., 2020, p. 86).

The division of Latvia's society along ethnic and linguistic lines is crucial for understanding the country's political landscape. As Auers (2013, p. 87) summarizes, 'the central characteristic of the Latvian party system is the deep and continuing cleavage between ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers.' This setting drives domestic nationalizing policies in Latvia. Being mobilized by internal or external threats, the dominant ethnic group claims its ownership over the state and 'make[s] it a tool for advancing their national security, demography, public space, culture, and interests' (Smooha, 2002, p. 475). Nevertheless, Latvia meets the formal criteria of a democracy, as it ensures equal rights for individuals, including the possibility to participate in elections and other political activities.

This approach aligns with Latvia's state identity as reflected in the country's Constitution and several judgments of the Constitutional Court. This official interpretation defines the Latvian language as a constitutional value that ties Latvia's current ethnolinguistic composition to the consequences of the Russification policy during the Soviet occupation, views the country's Russian-speaking residents as 'an artificial product of this policy,' and asserts that 'limiting the scope of the use of the Latvian language in Latvia

should be viewed as a threat to the country's democratic system' (Kascian, 2019). Meanwhile, the reactions of minorities to these policies are essentially shaped by 'the same tools of ethnicity and ethnically shaped memories [that] are developed and used by ethnic Latvians in the media and parliamentary discourse' (Hanovs, 2016, p. 134). Empirical evidence from Latvia shows that 'a[n ethnically] Latvian voter [typically] chooses among [ethnically] Latvian candidates' (Kolstø & Tsilevich,[3] 1997, p. 389). Similar patterns of electoral behavior are observed among Latvia's minority electorate. However, voting for a left-wing party usually conflicts with being seen as a 'patriotic Latvian' due to persistent ethno-political issues, prompting Latvia's minorities to vote based on their group interests (Duvold et al., 2020, p. 75). Latvia's ethnic cleavage is further illustrated by the fact that no party claiming to represent the country's minorities has ever been a part of the national governmental coalition. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine strengthened the old cleavages in Latvia's society. Latvia's ethnic Russians and, more broadly, Russian-speaking residents were trapped between their belonging to Latvia and attachment to the Russian cultural and linguistic identities, as the issues related to the use of the Russian language in public life became an important part of Latvia's domestic discourse that was synchronous with the 2022 electoral campaign (Dembovska, 2022).

Sensu stricto, Harmony was formally registered on February 10, 2010 (Register of Enterprises, no date). However, this was merely a legal reframing of previous political collaborations. The People's Harmony Party (Latvian: *Tautas saskaņas partija*, Russian: *Partiya narodnogo soglasiya*, hereinafter: TSP) was formed in 1994, although its founders were part of the electoral list 'Harmony for Latvia – revival of the national economy' (Latvian: *Saskaņa Latvijai – atdzimšana tautsaimniecībai*) during the 1993 parliamentary election. Since then, it has successfully participated in parliamentary elections with its own candidate list or as a part of an electoral alliance (Harmony, n.d.; Zhdanok & Mitrofanov, 2017). In 2006, it was part of a successful electoral collaboration called Harmony Centre. This political collaboration aimed to merge its members, which officially occurred in 2010, and by that time, TSP was a dominant element within Harmony Centre. It branded itself not as a party of Latvia's Russians or all national minorities but as a minority-friendly social democratic political group appealing to the electorate beyond ethnic lines and striving to establish itself as the country's major center-left party, though being more left-leaning than the other mainstream parties (Agarin and Nakai, 2021, pp. 524, 538; Bloom, 2011, pp. 381–382; Duvold et al., 2020, p. 84; Spirova, 2012, pp. 82, 88; Waterbury, 2016, p. 398). However, Latvian mainstream parties ensured that at the national level, Harmony 'remain[ed] a pariah without government experience' (Duvold et al., 2020, pp. 61, 84). Harmony's result in the 2022 parliamentary election was the first electoral failure of this political group at the national level since its formation, regardless of how its incorporation date is counted. This brief historical insight also explains why this study uses the 2006 parliamentary election as the starting point of the comparative analysis of Harmony's performance and equates the Harmony Centre and Harmony for this purpose (cf. Harmony, n.d.).

[3] Apart from this note, elsewhere in the text, he is referred to as Boriss Cilevičs.

Finally, parliamentary electoral rules in Latvia establish that 100 members of the Saeima elections are elected in five plurinominal electoral constituencies: Kurzeme, Latgale, Riga, Vidzeme, and Zemgale. These are shown on the map. The exact distribution of votes between these constituencies is adjusted before each election based on data from the Register of Natural Persons (Latvian: *Fizisko personu reģistrs*) and thus complies with the demographic trends in Latvia.

From 2006 to 2022, the number of MP seats allocated to the Riga constituency increased from 29 in 2006 to 36 in 2022. In Vidzeme, it remained unchanged, with 26 MP seats at stake. Kurzeme and Zemgale each lost two MP seats, leaving them with 12 and 13 mandates, respectively, while Latgale saw a decrease of three MP seats, resulting in 13 MP seats in the 2022 Saeima election. Riga and Latgale were traditionally considered Harmony's strongholds, yet the party was also quite popular in the other three regions. Although voters residing in Latvia's capital and Latvians living abroad jointly constitute the Riga regional electoral constituency, the analysis below separates these data. The reasons for this split are the somewhat different electoral preferences of these two segments of one constituency, as well as the possibility of a more precise analysis of the electoral dynamics in Latvia's capital, which has a significant minority constituency.

3 Conceptual framework

A seminal work on political representation by Pitkin (1972) distinguishes several types of representations, which this paper adheres to. As for Latvia's minority constituency, it is impossible to speak about its mirror representation because none of the parties claiming

to represent its interests relies exclusively on the minority electorate.[4] In the context of Harmony's case, this implies the party's responsiveness towards the predefined interests of the group it claims to represent (Garboni, 2015, p. 86), which typically stem 'from the structural position of minorities in society or preservation of minority culture' (Lončar, 2016, p. 704). Thus, Harmony's relationship with its predominantly minority constituency can be classified as substantive representation. The persistently dominant role of Harmony among Latvia's minority constituency, their ongoing decline in popularity in opinion polls, and different political contexts suggested that the party had to maintain responsive to its potential electorate's needs to sustain itself as the latter's representative at the national level against other political actors' attempts to attract Harmony's typical voters. The case of an integrationist party like Harmony has two interlinked implications for the design of the empirical section of this study.

3.1 Assessment of Harmony's campaign communication

The first implication is the party's communication during the electoral campaign. Previously, Harmony always took a pragmatic consensual approach, using inclusive language and opting for 'accommodation over conflict' (Cianetti, 2014, p. 996). However, in 2022, this approach was no longer possible due to 'a severe polarization across society' caused by public attitudes towards Russia's aggression in Ukraine (Hofmane, 2022). This polarization coincided with government efforts to accelerate minority education reforms, marginalize the public use of the Russian language, and remove all monuments related to the Soviet period (Auers, 2022). Consequently, the main challenge for Harmony's strategists was to persuade its once large minority constituency to come and vote for them again.

Since '[a]ds are one of the few forms of communication over which political actors have complete control' (Türksoy, 2020, p. 23), this paper first focuses on Harmony's offer to the electorate and the content of its campaign messages. Based on the premise that political ads are primarily tools used to persuade political consumers (McNair, 2003, p. 96), the analysis uses Harold Lasswell's (1948) famous 5W linear communication model – 'who (says) what (to) whom (in) which channel (with) what effect' – to explore the party's campaign messages. Specifically, it reviews Harmony's 2022 electoral program and campaign materials published on the party's official social media communication channels and use them as data items. Since Harmony was most active on its official Facebook page, the main data source is the party's short electoral videos available there.[5] The analysis includes 48 electoral videos in Latvian and Russian posted between August 28 and September 27, 2022.

[4] Although it prioritizes the interests of Latvia's 'Russian cultural and linguistic community,' the Latvian Russian Union describes itself as a party 'open to all people of goodwill' aiming to serve the needs of all Latvian residents, irrespective of their ethnicity and citizenship (https://rusojuz.lv, accessed: 12 January 2023).

[5] All relevant data were retrieved from Harmony's official Facebook page (https://facebook.com/saskana, accessed: 12 January 2023).

Vesnic-Alujevic and Van Bauwel (2014, p. 200) summarized the similarities between various classifications of political video ads proposed by different scholars. These classifications assume three different functions: acclaim (when candidates emphasize their own qualities), attack (when they target opponents' advantages), and defense (when they respond to opponents' strategies). Benoit et al. (2000, pp. 63–66) show that both acclaim and attack encompass two broad topics: policy issues and personal character. Policy acclaims and attacks cover past actions, future plans, and general goals. Character acclaims and attacks highlight personal qualities, leadership abilities, and ideals. This approach appeals to voters who prioritize specific issues as well as those who merely focus on the candidates' images (Benoit et al., 2000, pp. 63–66). Thus, Lasswell's 5 W linear communication model was employed across these three categories to reveal how Harmony tried to persuade its potential electoral constituency and its specific segments to vote for it (again) in the changed political environment of the 2022 *Saeima* election.

3.2 Assessment of Harmony's electoral constituency

The second element of the puzzle is associated with Harmony's longstanding dominance among Latvia's minority constituency and its stance vis-à-vis this electoral segment under changed political circumstances. As Bolleyer (2013, p. 76) demonstrates, the party's sustainability at the national level is achieved when it is capable of gaining repeated re-election. A proportional electoral system reflects the party's ability to sustain and consolidate its initial constituency, at least to meet the electoral threshold. Harmony did this prominently in the 2011 election, achieving its best-ever result at 28.36 per cent and becoming the most supported political group in the country for the first time.

Bolleyer and Bytzek (2017) offer a formula *(VoteElect2–VoteElect1)/(VoteElect1)* for analyzing the performance of political newcomers. In this context, *VoteElect1* describes the percentage of national votes cast for a new political group in its first successful parliamentary election. *VoteElect2* specifies the share of votes collected by a party in the subsequent election. This formula can be extended to measure the dynamics of the party's electoral constituency over longer periods of time, including a comparison of key milestones such as the party's first-ever election, the election when it achieved national sustainability, and its first-ever electoral failure. For ethnic or integrationist parties, it can also provide insights into their performance in specific regions of the country with significant minority electorates.

Thus, the second part of the empirical section analyzes these dynamics, both nationwide and in individual electoral constituencies, separating votes cast in Riga and abroad, as explained above. For an in-depth analysis of Harmony's performance in its strongholds, Riga and Latgale, the article also examines the party's dynamics during the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections in these regions vis-à-vis other political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies. In 2018, this included Harmony and the Latvian Russian Union (Latvian: *Latvijas Krievu savienība*, Russian: *Russkiy soyuz Latvii*, hereinafter LRU). This approach is backed by the history of electoral collaboration between the legal predecessors of these two political entities (Zhdanok & Mitrofanov, 2017, pp. 151–227). In 2022, these two political groups were supplemented by For Stability! (Latvian: *Stabilitātei!*, Russian: *Stabilnost!*, hereinafter: S!) and Sovereign Power (Latvian:

Suverēnā vara, Russian: *Suverennaya vlast*, hereinafter, SP). Key figures on S! and SP electoral lists were previously active in Harmony, providing additional justification for the comparison of these four political groups.

This approach has three limitations. First, it involves a list of relevant political groups. In 2022, several other parties competed for the votes of Latvia's minorities, including the Progressives (Latvian: *Progresīvie*), Latvia First (Latvian: *Latvija pirmajā vietā*) or For Each and Every One (Latvian: *Katram un katrai*) (Dembovska, 2022). The Progressives, a well-established social democratic party, challenged Harmony in terms of economic policy, whereas the 'Trumpian-style populism' (Hofmane, 2022) of Latvia First also attracted some segments of the country's minority constituency. However, evidence from the 2022 election suggests these political groups could hardly be designated as having predominantly or overwhelmingly minority electorates. Therefore, they were not included in this research puzzle. Second, the study focuses solely on the approval ratings rather than the absolute number of votes. On the one hand, it deals with the negative demographic developments in Latvia, which are embodied in population decline. On the other hand, this stems from the electoral threshold established as five percent of the total number of votes cast in all constituencies. Third, the focus on Riga and Latgale as single units overlooks internal discrepancies, such as Harmony's stronger performance in Latgale's urban areas compared to rural areas. However, this does not affect the fact that the seats in Saeima from each constituency were calculated based on the party's results.

4 Harmony's offer to voters during the 2022 election

During the 2022 *Saeima* election, Harmony was listed as seventh on the electoral ballot. However, the party did not capitalize on the 'magic' of this number in its campaign materials. Its electoral program outlined the recent upheavals Latvia had faced, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, energy crisis, and geopolitical threats. These were portrayed as weaknesses created by Latvia's authorities, who had failed to prevent the increase in the country's external debt, the rise of fear and aggression in society, and the erosion of trust in governmental institutions. Thus, the program called for immediate and decisive action, embodied in the slogan: 'Latvia needs a restart!' (Latvian: *Latvijai ir nepieciešams restarts!*, Russian: *Latviya nuzhdaetsya v perezagruzke!*). This strategy included implicit patterns of attack and defense, with the former targeting the negative assessment of the governmental coalition's activities and the latter suggesting a need for rebooting the country.

Overall, the contents of the program confirmed Harmony's characteristic as a minority-friendly social democratic party that addressed all segments of society while paying considerable attention to the needs of minority constituencies. Harmony specifically advocated for voting rights for Latvia's non-citizens in local elections by 2025. It also called for broader options concerning the choice of language of instruction in educational institutions at all levels. According to the party's strategists, these policies needed to resonate with the current challenges, labor market needs, and the wishes of students and their parents. Summarizing its program, Harmony portrayed itself as the only political group in Latvia capable of offering both changes and reforms while having sufficient public support

to implement and manage these initiatives. This approach was associated with clear patterns of acclaim and defense. The latter derived from Harmony's reliance on broad public support, and the former stemmed from emphasizing the party's unique position in Latvia's political landscape.

A similar approach can be found in the party's video ads. The first campaign video posted on Harmony's Facebook page on August 28, 2022, was the only ad featuring more than one candidate. Three persons appeared there, including the party's board members Regīna Ločmele and Anna Vladova. They attacked Latvia's government for failing to tackle the crisis again and emphasized that the time had come to make important decisions. Harmony's candidates invited the potential electorate to attend the party's meetings across all regions of Latvia, stressing the importance of this with phrases like 'it can't go on this way' and 'we are waiting for you.' Elements of acclaim can be found in their declaration of readiness for frank discussions in which voters' questions, complaints, grievances, and suggestions would be heard and solutions jointly found. On behalf of Harmony, they urged people not to stay disinterested but to come to the electoral ballots on election day.

The analysis of individual campaign ads can be based on their structure and the thematic issues raised by candidates. Structurally, the ads employed the dichotomy 'attack-acclaim,' illustrated by examples involving Harmony's board members. Some of the ads began with attacks on the ruling parties' failures in various policy domains, followed by the acclamation of Harmony's strengths and an appeal to the electorate to cast their votes. For instance, two addresses (in Latvian and Russian) by Harmony's board chairman, Jānis Urbanovičs, published on September 1, 2022, conveyed the same message. Urbanovičs argued that Latvia faced increasing societal division and that the ruling parties were using the situation in Ukraine as a tool for oppression. He warned that this growing division and lack of mutual respect could lead to great trouble, making Harmony more needed than ever. Urbanovičs emphasized that the party's team, comprising both experienced and young politicians, had all the capacity required to overcome the country's negative direction. He urged citizens to come and vote, asserting that all societal misfortunes derive from the silence and inactivity of its members.

Two short addresses by Boriss Cilevičs, published on September 15, took the reverse approach. In one ad, he presented his personal and professional history, underlining his active involvement in promoting human rights and ensuring equality in Latvia's diverse society. In another ad, Cilevičs claimed that Harmony was the only political party in Latvia that prioritized solidarity and mutual respect while rejecting nationalism. He then emphasized that the state must support those who need help, as everyone has the right to equal opportunities irrespective of ethnicity and other distinctive factors. Cilevičs's speech then shifted to attack mode, criticizing Latvia for lagging far behind in creating a European social model on its soil and failing to ensure equal opportunities for the younger generation. Both his ads concluded with the phrase 'I want,' demonstrating the politician's determination to continue working towards positive changes based on his experience.

Thematic issues can be categorized into sectoral and region-specific contexts and illustrated by the cases of Harmony's board members. The sectoral context is best revealed by the domain of education, stemming from Harmony's electoral program discussed above. This is exemplified by four videos by Anna Vladova, all published on September 12, 2022.

These contextually interconnected ads also employed the dichotomy 'attack–acclaim.' In the first video, Vladova underlined her longstanding loyalty and belonging to Harmony's team, explicitly stressing that only Harmony could get Latvia out of the protracted crisis caused by the ruling coalition. In her second video, she chose an attack approach and referred to her background as a school principal and a member of the Riga City Council. Vladova underlined that in these capacities, she could not solve the catastrophic situation in education because the authorities did not want to listen. In her capacity as MP, she planned to call the education minister to account, demanding she provide real answers instead of incomprehensible data presented in Excel tables. The third ad was an extended version of the second video. Vladova underlined the negative consequences of COVID-19 for schools. She claimed that the Ministry's reaction was chaotic, multiplied by the total neglect of teachers' needs and requests. Vladova described the staff shortage in schools as catastrophic and mentioned that the minister had publicly accused teachers of lying and hysteria. She illustrated the ministry's approach with the analogy of calculating the average temperature of ten hospital patients, five of whom were at death's door with a body temperature of 33 ℃ and the other five also at death's door with a temperature of 42 ℃. Vladova concluded that the summary table would reveal a seemingly normal average temperature of 37.5 ℃, although everyone was dying. She also stressed that all reforms must be stopped until Latvia had sufficient teaching staff and adequate educational materials. She warned that without these measures, the collapse of the country's education system would be unavoidable, leaving Latvia with no future if it could not teach its children. Vladova's fourth advertisement centered around acclamation. She said that the money for education and other community needs could be accumulated by proportionally reducing the number of civil servants in these areas, whose salaries were significantly higher than those of school workers. Vladova's main message to the potential electorate was embodied in the combination of the two final phrases of her first and second video ads: 'Only Harmony!' and 'I will be the voice of teachers, schools, and children!' On the one hand, she underlined her extensive experience in the education sphere. On the other hand, she demonstrated readiness to implement her ideas as a part of Harmony's team.

The region-specific context can be illustrated by Harmony's appeal to the electorate from Latgale, one of the party's electoral strongholds. This is exemplified by the addresses of Aleksandrs Bartaševičs and Regīna Ločmele, two of Harmony's board members. All the advertisements were posted on September 12, 2022. Two addresses in Latvian and Russian by Bartaševičs, mayor of Rēzekne, Latgale's second-largest city, with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, conveyed the same message. He used us-versus-them rhetoric and the 'acclaim-attack' dichotomy. Bartaševičs reminded voters that Harmony had successfully governed Rēzekne since 2009. He designated the city's ethnic and religious diversity as a precious asset that Latgalians were proud to share. In contrast, he claimed that 'Riga does not like us' because, as he believed, central authorities thought that Latvia should be a monoethnic country. However, Latgalians had learned to rely only on themselves. Bartaševičs assured voters that Harmony's electoral list in Latgale, led by Ločmele, was capable of solving the problems Latvia's government had failed to notice, such as inflation, low wages, and the poor quality of education and medical care. Bartaševičs identi-

fied indifference as the main reason for Latvia's failures and urged people to vote for Harmony, emphasizing the importance of each individual's vote to break the 30-year trend of Latvia returning the same government.

The same rhetoric and approach can be found in six video advertisements featuring Regīna Ločmele, the leader of Harmony's list in the Latgale electoral constituency. These were all published on September 12, 2022. Three of them were in Latvian and three others in Russian, with the longest videos in each language compiled of two shorter ones. Both language versions contained the same message, although the Russian ad, after a short introduction, contained a detailed overview of Ločmele's competencies and achievements as an MP. She underlined that her primary goal in politics was to help people, because without them, 'the state is a fiction, a beautiful but dead shell.' Further content in the ads in both languages focused on Latgale, which, in Ločmele's view, did not have to be an orphan in Latvia's backyard. She specified her connection to Latgale as the land of her ancestors and her desire to protect its people. This brought together the elements of an 'attack' and directed them in a region-specific context. Ločmele designated those people from whom she wanted to protect her fellow lands as enemies. Although she did not explicitly reveal the enemies' identity, the fact that this was the government coalition was easily guessable from her words. She accused these enemies of plundering the country, driving people into poverty, forcing them to become migrant workers, closing schools, forbidding speaking the native language, and 'making people forget and betray their family histories.' Finally, Ločmele encouraged people to vote for Harmony. She utilized the us-versus-them formula, arguing that otherwise, 'they will just decide that there are no us here.' She reinforced her belonging to the region and commitment to act on behalf of its residents with the phrase 'my country, my Latgale, my vote.'

Harmony's campaign video advertisements were an attempt to (re-)gain the support of its electoral constituency, with Latvia's national minorities as its core. Emphasizing the need for a restart for Latvia, Harmony used the 'attack-acclaim' dichotomy in its electoral video ads. On the one hand, the party's tactics focused on revealing and criticizing government failures while calling for immediate and decisive action to change that path. On the other hand, its candidates highlighted their individual and party qualities, experiences, and accomplishments, demonstrating their determination to achieve positive changes in the country. While focusing on sectoral and region-specific contexts, the party used the same attack and acclaim tools wrapped in us-versus-them rhetoric to persuade defined groups of its potential electorate that Harmony was the only political group capable of serving their needs and interests at the parliamentary level. While attacking the governmental coalition and its policies across various domains, Harmony maintained a self-centric and self-confident stance. In their ads, the party's candidates focused solely on portraying the ruling parties as a disaster for Latvia and proposing themselves as a viable solution. However, the candidates failed to explain why Harmony's potential electoral constituency with national minorities as its core should (again) choose this party over other minority-friendly political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies. This flaw in Harmony's strategies prompts the need to assess the sustainability of Harmony's electoral support in general and compare it to that of other minority-focused political groups.

5 How sustainable is Harmony's electoral support?

The success of a political party's electoral campaign is measured by its results in a specific election. Harmony, the most popular political group in Latvia over the past three parliamentary elections, received only 4.81% of popular support in the 2022 Saeima election, ranking ninth.

Table 1 Harmony's Results in the Saeima Elections

	Kurzeme, %/place	Latgale, %/place	Vidzeme, %/place	Zemgale, %/place	Riga, %/ place	Abroad, %/ place	Total, %/ place
2006	5.30 /6	27.59 /1	6.36 /6	5.28 /6	24.16 /1	5.68 /6	14.42 /4
2010	12.51 /3	45.59 /1	14.33 /3	14.79 /3	40.13 /1	12.86 /2	26.04 /2
2011	12.84 /5	52.09 /1	16.27 /4	17.23 /3	42.97 /1	14.32 /4	28.36 /1
2014	8.88 /4	39.54 /1	12.43 /4	11.31 /4	38.14 /1	9.88 /4	23.00 /1
2018	8.56 /6	35.73 /1	10.94 /6	9.91 /6	32.94 /1	6.45 /6	19.80 /1
2022	2.03 /11	11.47 /3	2.38 /11	2.26 /13	7.01 /6	2.66 /11	4.81 /9

Table 1 provides an overview of Harmony's electoral performance in *Saeima* elections, both nationwide and in plurinominal regional constituencies, including separate figures for the city of Riga and votes cast by Latvian citizens living abroad. The table demonstrates that Harmony consistently surpassed five percent in all regional constituencies except in the 2022 election. Riga and Latgale have always been its strongholds, where it was the most popular political group in all parliamentary elections from 2006 to 2018. In 2022, votes for Harmony only exceeded five percent in these two constituencies.

Table 2 Nationwide and Regional Dynamics of Harmony's Electoral Performance

	2010/06	2011/10	2014/11	2018/14	2022/18	2011/06	2022/06	2022/11
Kurzeme	1.360	0.026	−0.308	−0.036	−0.763	1.423	−0.617	−0.842
Latgale	0.652	0.143	−0.241	−0.096	−0.679	0.888	−0.584	−0.780
Vidzeme	1.253	0.135	−0.236	−0.120	−0.782	1.558	−0.626	−0.854
Zemgale	1.801	0.165	−0.344	−0.124	−0.772	2.263	−0.572	−0.869
Riga	0.661	0.071	−0.112	−0.136	−0.787	0.779	−0.710	−0.837
Abroad	1.264	0.114	−0.310	−0.347	−0.588	1.521	−0.532	−0.814
Total	0.806	0.089	−0.189	−0.139	−0.757	0.967	−0.666	−0.830

Table 2 is based on the data from Table 1 and reveals the dynamics of Harmony's electoral performance using the formula proposed by Bolleyer and Bytzek (2017). It also compares the party's performance in three non-successive parliamentary elections: 2006 (its first

campaign as Harmony Centre), 2011 (when it achieved sustainability at the national level), and 2022 (its first failure). In general, the table's analysis suggests three key observations.

First, in 2022, Harmony lost just over three-quarters of its constituency compared to the previous parliamentary election. Within Latvia, only in Latgale was the decline in the share of votes less than the nationwide average. In all other regions, it slightly exceeded Harmony's nationwide failure rate.

Second, the city of Riga and the region of Latgale have always provided Harmony with over two-thirds of its electorate in the parliamentary elections, as shown in Table 3. In 2006, this figure peaked at 77.47 per cent, while in 2011, it was the lowest at 68.23 per cent. This confirms that Harmony effectively expanded its electoral base to other regions in Latvia while securing its sustainability at the national level. From 2006 to 2011, Harmony more than doubled its support in Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Zemgale. However, it never became the most popular political party in these regions.

Third, Harmony's achievement of sustainability at the national level in 2011 coincided with its best electoral result. In 2022, it won only one out of every six of the votes it had won in 2011 nationwide. Among the votes cast within Latvia in all regions, except for Latgale, these figures were comparable or slightly above the national average. In Latgale, Harmony retained 22 per cent of its electorate compared to its peak popularity. Comparison between the 2006 and 2022 elections reveals another trend. The party lost two-thirds of its initial constituency nationwide. This figure was above the national average only in Riga, where Harmony retained just 29 per cent of its initial electoral base. This explains the need to analyze the regional dynamics of votes cast for Harmony, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Regional Structure of Harmony's Constituency according to the Saeima Election

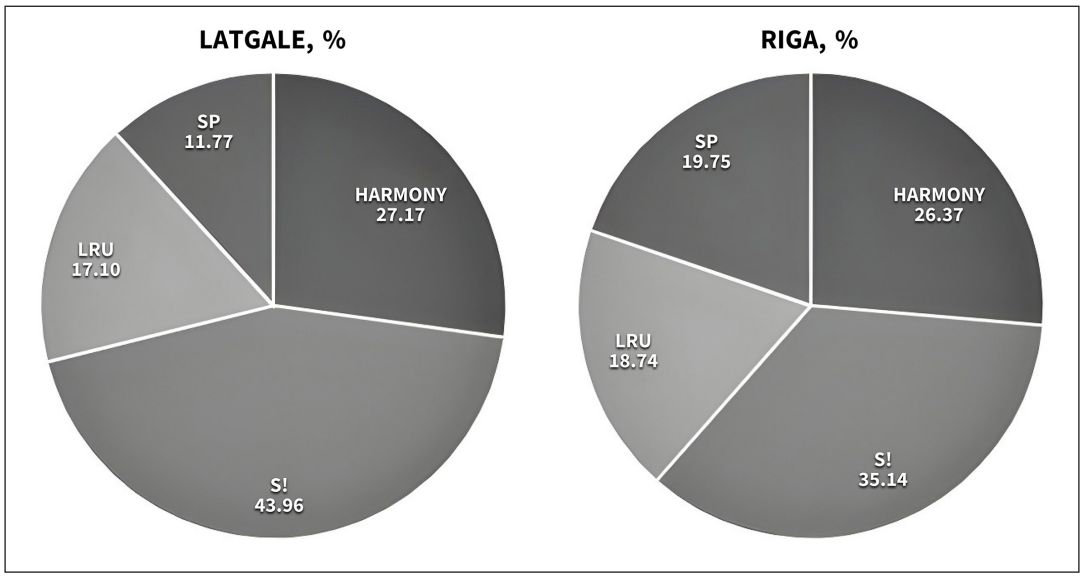
	Kurzeme,%	**Latgale, %**	**Vidzeme, %**	**Zemgale, %**	**Riga, %**	**Abroad, %**
2006	4.88	28.16	12.04	5,28	49.31	0.33
2010	6.18	23.58	15.46	8.21	45.91	0.66
2011	5.90	23.38	16.46	8.83	44.65	0.78
2014	4.91	19.94	14.97	6.87	52.22	1.09
2018	5.36	19.24	15.64	6.94	51.59	1.23
2022	5.30	29.01	14.19	6.64	43.34	1.52

The regional breakdown of all votes cast for Harmony during parliamentary elections from 2006 to 2022 should be adjusted for the aforementioned demographic changes and population mobility in Latvia, which led to the redistribution of mandates between the plurinominal constituencies. Combined with the data provided in Table 2, the interpretation of these figures results in three main conclusions. First, the share of Harmony's electorate from Riga dropped from 51.59 per cent in 2018 to 43.34 per cent in 2022, the lowest figure during the period analyzed in this study. For many years, Harmony enjoyed a position of power in Riga, being 'able to impose the Russophone voice as a necessary inter-

locutor for the national elite' (Cianetti, 2014, p. 997). However, the situation changed significantly over the intervening four years. Amid corruption scandals, Harmony lost control over Riga and a part of its electorate in the capital (Dembovska, 2022). The calculations suggest that if Harmony's decline in Riga in 2022 compared with 2018 had mirrored the situation in Latgale, the party could have secured parliamentary re-election. This implies that Harmony's electoral collapse in Riga, which has always provided nearly half of the party's electorate, was the key factor in its failure in the 2022 parliamentary election.

Second, the significant increase in the share of Latgalian votes in Harmony's 2022 results compared to the 2018 election (29.01 per cent and 19.24 per cent) demonstrates that the local electorate remained most loyal to Harmony. Latgale, a multiethnic and economically depressed region, has always provided Harmony with a larger proportion of supporters than other plurinominal constituencies. Moreover, the local politics in Latgale have always been 'characterised by a strong pragmatism prompted by the need to deal with real concrete problems,' and Harmony 'acted centripetally' to communicate these region-specific issues (Pridham, 2018, p. 203). As demonstrated in the previous section, Harmony's 2022 electoral campaign messages aimed to position the party as the region's primary mouthpiece at the national level.

Third, the discrepancy between Riga and Latgale, Harmony's two largest support bases, reveals the heterogeneity of Latvia's minority constituency. This divergence between Riga and Latgale is also evident from analyzing votes for parties with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies identified in the *Conceptual Framework* section above. An examination of aggregated votes cast for Harmony and LRU in the 2018 election shows that 77.09 per cent of the voters in Latgale opted for Harmony, while 22.91 per cent decided for LRU. In Riga, these figures were 88.88 per cent and 11.12 per cent, respectively. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of aggregated votes in Latgale and Riga for the 2022 election.



These figures again confirm the differences between minority constituencies in Riga and Latgale, backed by Harmony's greater decline in Riga and opposite trends in LRU's performance in the two regions. Additionally, the aggregate electoral support for political parties with predominantly minority constituencies, calculated using the Bolleyer and Bytzek (2017) formula, shrunk to -0.089 in Latgale and to -0.283 in Riga. This confirms that Riga's minority electorate demonstrated greater vulnerability and electoral diversity than Latgale's minority constituency, predetermined by the local contexts described above.

6 Conclusions

This study has analyzed a single campaign case study of Harmony in Latvia. The evidence suggests that its normative characteristics and dominant role in its potential electoral constituency made this integrationist political group more vulnerable in a changing political environment, even if it had been a stable element of a volatile domestic party system for over a decade. As the article has demonstrated, in its 2022 electoral campaign, Harmony was predominantly focused on emphasizing the need for a restart in Latvia due to the faults and flaws of the ruling government coalition. It employed an 'attack-acclamation' strategy, targeting the policies of the Latvian government and highlighting the qualities, accomplishments, and advantages of Harmony's team and its individual candidates. The contents of its sectoral and region-specific messages suggest that it used us-versus-them rhetoric to stress the party's commitment to the people's needs and interests compared to those of political groups whose representatives had made unpopular government decisions in the altered political environment, which included responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. These circumstances accelerated policies aimed at marginalizing the public use of the Russian language in Latvia, including in education.

However, the party's longstanding dominant role in representing Latvia's minority constituency in parliament led to virtually no effort to explain to potential voters why they should support Harmony over other minority-friendly political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies. The article has also demonstrated that the end of Harmony's dominance in Latvia's minority constituency had different contexts in Riga and Latgale, two former party strongholds. On the one hand, this confirms that Latvia's minority constituency is not homogenous. On the other hand, it shows that region-specific drivers might be important in the electoral performance of an integrationist party. Overall, the article reveals that integrationist political groups, being the major voice of a composite minority constituency, are potentially more sensitive to changes in the national political environment caused by external circumstances. It also demonstrates that their electoral strategies should adapt to the challenges of political rivals who target political consumers with similar or even the same characteristics.

The evidence from this case study and the general Latvian minority-related context during the 2022 parliamentary election may also be relevant for further case-focused and comparative studies dealing with minority and integrationist parties in the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe in changing political settings.

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Hayk Smbatyan

From civic mobilization to armed struggle: Tracing the roots of the Karabakh movement

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 154–178.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1121
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

Prior to the outbreak of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1991, the South Caucasus region had been seeing a gradually increasing mass mobilization of ethnic Armenians, turning into a civil uprising known as the Karabakh movement. This paper examines the dynamics through which the civic movement evolved into an armed mobilization, consequently nailing down the groundwork of what is now known to be one of the most intractable conflicts in the post-Soviet region. To trace the processes that translated cross-ethnic relations into mass mobilization, the study builds upon qualitative primary data, coupled with an extensive examination of secondary evidence. The study identifies motivating factors such as economic, political, and socio-cultural horizontal inequalities across ethnic lines as the core drivers of collective grievances. Repressive state measures as well as the Soviet *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies are observed as enabling factors further boosting the legitimization of the civic movement claims. This paper subscribes to a context-bound approach of studying intractable conflicts, and by addressing the theoretical gap between data on objective inequality and data on perceived inequality, marries local knowledge of rather marginalized conflicts with the wider academic discourse.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; ethnopolitical conflict; intractable conflict; mass mobilization; horizontal inequality; civic movement

1 Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict is the most prolonged ongoing conflict in post-Soviet Eurasia. In 1988, ethnic Armenians residing in NK demanded the transfer of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia. The escalating tensions resulted in an outright war as the Soviet Union disintegrated. The hostilities ceased in 1994, with Armenian forces controlling NK and seven adjacent regions. Over a million people were displaced, with Azerbaijanis fleeing Armenia and NK, and the neighboring territories, while Armenians abandoned their homes in Azerbaijan. Despite this, intermittent violent incidents continued from 1994 until 2020, with attack drones, heavy

weaponry, and special operations forces posing a constant risk of reigniting the war. In April 2016, a four-day intense fight broke out at the line of contact, resulting in hundreds of casualties on both sides, foreshadowing the events to come.

With its 2020 large-scale violent escalation—the second NK war—and the still ongoing political tensions, the NK[1] conflict is known to have been deadly and intractable (Burg, 2005; Hopmann & Zartman, 2010), provoking cleavages between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the last three decades. While many scholars have been concerned with the larger geopolitical, historical, and security aspects (e.g., Astvatsaturov & Babloyan, 2010; Kohlhagen, 2013; Ayunts, 2014; Perovic & Boskovska, 2018; Arzumanian, 2018; Mkrtichyan, 2019) of the conflict as well as the local memories, identities, and experiences of affected communities (e.g., Arutyunyan, 2006; Ayunts, et al., 2016; Ghahriyan & Atoyan, 2018; Smbatyan, 2018; Smbatyan et al., 2019), there has been little to no systematic scientific inquiry into the roots of this protracted conflict at group level.

This research paper contributes to this rather unexplored domain by retracing the outset of the conflict evinced by the 1988–1991 Karabakh movement, a collective action toward self-determination of ethnic Armenians then inhabiting NK. Specifically, the paper dives into the factors and conditions that would explain the split in cross-ethnic relations following (and despite) the long history of peaceful coexistence. Veering off the conventional and ideologically charged historiographic approaches pivoting on the restoration of historical justice, this study, instead, focuses on the horizontal relations between ordinary members of the two ethnic groups.

Being the first bottom-up mass mobilization in the Soviet Union since the 1920s (De Waal, 2013), the Karabakh movement[2] emerged in two epicenters—Stepanakert[3] and Yerevan[4]—uniting citizens of ethnic Armenian descent around a struggle for independence. Although the NK conflict has long attracted empirical studies within different social science disciplines, the mere puzzle of why coexisting ethnic groups would turn against each other has seemingly not been explored at an in-depth level, essentially muting the voices of ordinary participants of the movement from scholarly analysis. Zooming in on

[1] Disclaimer: Throughout this work, I have used neutral and mutually acceptable names to refer to locations. However, some location names may be specific to the context and appear based on commonly accepted versions within the societal narrative being discussed. When using direct quotations, I have reproduced the exact location names articulated by the respondents for consistency and convenience purposes only. It is important to note that there is no intentional or unintentional political agenda conveyed, regardless of the ongoing political status of the locations mentioned.

[2] I acknowledge the vitality of background knowledge of the Karabakh movement, both within the context of the NK conflict, and wider geo-political, socio-economic, and historical contexts, to be able to fully grasp the causal mechanism explored in the paper. Given that such knowledge can be widely debatable and extremely multi-faceted, I have refrained from delving into the larger contextual frames of the case within the scope of this paper. To avoid potential simplification of and one-sided viewpoint on the studied case, I highly encourage further reading on the conflict from supplementary perspectives, including ones representing rather impartial (such as De Waal, 2013) as well as Azerbaijani perspectives. This should guide grasping a better sense of the results of this study, as well as facilitate the comprehension of other dimensions of the movement and the conflict not covered by this piece.

[3] Stepanakert (same as Khankendi in Azerbaijani) was the capital of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh.

[4] Yerevan is the capital of the Republic of Armenia.

the inter-ethnic ties of this ethnopolitical conflict at the communal level raises a number of perplexing yet essential questions that deserve in-depth exploration. The academic research has by and large seemingly overlooked the reasons why, after decades of peaceful coexistence with Azerbaijanis, ethnic Armenians would set out a civic movement. Why would a struggle for independence be preferable, and what advantages would self-determination allow, that were not achievable otherwise?

The study centers on inter-group relations and seeks to address the question of why political mass mobilization arises, particularly in the context of the Karabakh movement. Drawing on meso-level theory, which posits that inter-group inequalities can give rise to civil unrest, the research hypothesis suggests that perceived horizontal inequalities (HIs) among coexisting ethnic groups are the underlying driver of political mass mobilization. To test this, a qualitative inquiry is conducted using a deductive-process tracing approach, applied to the case of the NK movement. The theory of HIs, as presented in Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013), is evaluated against the Karabakh movement. The study achieves the following scholarly objectives: (1) test and expand the explanatory potential of the theory on HIs; (2) augment our comprehension of the mechanism linking HI to mass mobilization by combining evidence on objective inequality with narratives of perceived and experienced inequality; (3) enrich existing scholarly insights into intractable ethnopolitical armed conflicts; and (4) enhance our understanding of the NK conflict through an in-depth examination of its origins based on accounts of people's lived experiences.

To trace back to the communal-level origins of this complex ethnopolitical conflict, I bring in an original comparative investigation of 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with movement participants from Stepanakert and Yerevan, supplemented by an exhaustive review of over 120 secondary sources on the subject, providing relatively robust evidence supporting the posited connection between perceived HI and the genesis of political mass mobilization.

2 Theoretical and conceptual lenses

Scholars examining armed conflicts in recent years have increasingly emphasized the role of group-level inequalities in fueling such conflicts. These inequalities are commonly referred to as HIs, which represent economic, political, social, and cultural disparities between culturally defined groups (Stewart, 2005). Such inequalities have been present in human societies throughout history, including during agricultural and sedentary forms of coexistence (Malesevic, 2010), and remain a characteristic feature of contemporary social systems (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Malesevic (2010) argues that group-level inequalities with a long history are often the result of political domination and conflict. This conceptualization departs from the traditional focus on vertical inequalities between individuals and households, instead emphasizing the meso, inter-group level of agency. The theory of HI suggests that 'high levels of group-based economic and political deprivation make armed conflict more likely' (Hillesund, et al., 2018, p. 464).

Research has found evidence of a positive relationship between economic HI and conflict onset across countries (Østby, 2008a; 2008b) and within-country sub-regions

(Nepal et al., 2011; Vadlamannati, 2011; Gomes, 2015). Social HI, such as inequality in education, has also been found to be associated with conflict onset (Østby, 2008b; 2008a). Additionally, political HI, such as group-level exclusion from executive political power, has been linked to increased participation in armed conflict (Cederman et al., 2010; 2011; 2013; Cederman et al., 2015). The interplay between identity, motive, and opportunity is a crucial factor in creating supporting conditions for individuals to initiate or join violent collective action (Gurr, 1993; 2000; Østby, 2013). Alongside these three factors, language and religion are also important in increasing inter-group demarcations and the intensity of group identification, making the motivation for risking one's life in an armed confrontation more likely (Gurr, 1993; Østby, 2013). Strong group identification, coupled with perceptions of injustice or unfairness, can lead to collective motives and shared emotions about inequality, which, when combined with leadership, framing, and social networks, can promote successful recruitment (Tarrow, 2011; Cederman et al., 2013; Hillesund et al., 2018).

Despite the existence of a nuanced relationship between objective and perceived inequalities, commonly known as relative deprivation, the literature has primarily concentrated on objective inequalities as the cause of conflict and overlooked the significance of perceived inequality. However, some studies have explored the role of perceived HIs in the causal chain leading to conflict. For example, studies have found that the perception of unfair treatment of one's group by the state is associated with increased participation in demonstrations and support for political violence (Kirwin & Cho, 2009; Miodownik & Nir, 2016). The importance of people's evaluation of injustice and their tendency to assign blame to the other group or government has been emphasized in the broader literature on social movements and civil wars (Tarrow, 2011; Cederman et al., 2013), and this is particularly relevant to the current work. Overall, these insights highlight the importance of people's perceptions of their group's status compared to that of other groups in the relationship between inequality and armed conflict (Bahgat, et al., 2017).

According to Cederman et al. (2013), the formation of ethnonationalist wars is linked to the concept of relative deprivation, which arises when ethnic groups perceive themselves as being inherently different from others. While the politicization of HIs can lead to the establishment of collective grievances, the emergence of a large-scale armed struggle depends on the mobilization of the challenger group and the response of the state. Mobilizing structures, formed through social institutions and networks, play a critical role in transforming immaterial claims into actions. The state's response to the group's demands is also crucial, with states that regulate or abolish perceived economic and social injustices being less likely to become the target of political demands than those that are seen as causing or reproducing such injustices. If the state continues to exclude mobilized groups from power, violent outcomes become more probable, reinforcing the justifiability of violent and radical reorganization of mass mobilization (Tarrow, 1994; Goodwin, 1997; Cederman et al., 2013). This theoretical approach essentially serves as the basis of this research paper.

The causal link between group-level inequalities and within-state armed conflict is specifically outlined using the approach developed by Cederman et al. (2013), which investigates the empirical relationship between inequalities and civil war outbreak at the group

level (ibid., p. 35). To operationalize the original theoretical concepts and arrive at 'pieces of data that provide information about context, process, or mechanism and contribute distinctive leverage in causal inference' (Seawright & Collier, 2010, p. 318), a strategy for causal process observations (CPOs) is constructed. Table 1 presents the operationalization of the key theoretical concepts and visualizes the theorized claim regarding the association between HI and mass mobilization.

Table 1 Causal process observations of current inquiry

	IV	**Step 1**	**Step 2**	**Step 3**	**DV**
Theory	Horizontal inequality →	Relative deprivation →	Collective grievance →	Joining the movement →	Mass mobilization
Operationalization	Economic, political, social, cultural	Did people assess their status as comparatively underprivileged?	Did people collectively legitimize their state as unfair?	Did people join the movement?	Political engagement of masses voicing a collective demand
Data	Secondary data (statistics, research & policy papers)	Primary data (in-depth interviews)	Primary data (in-depth interviews)	Primary data (in-depth interviews)	Secondary data (stats, research & policy papers)
Indicators	Morphological evidence of factual inequalities	Account evidence via Q3, Q4, Q5*	Account evidence via Q5, Q6, Q7	Account evidence via Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11	Historical evidence of mass mobilization

* Refer to Appendix 1 for questions used as indicator measurements.

I explore four possible causal steps from HI to mass mobilization. The first causal step is from HI to relative deprivation, observed through primary data expressed in the narratives of those who lived in Stepanakert or Yerevan during 1988–1991 and participated in the Karabakh movement. The second causal step is from relative deprivation to collective grievance, studied by looking at primary evidence collected through interviews on whether and how people collectively legitimized their state as unfair. The third causal step is from collective grievance to joining the movement, viewed in terms of citizens' decision to actually join the movement, and is studied through primary evidence. The last causal step is from joining the movement to mass mobilization, which depicts emotional and structural factors that contribute to transforming the support and agency expressed by people into a mass movement and is studied through account evidence. These steps appear in a diverging intensity, sequence, and level of demarcation. Therefore, the causal process has been further investigated on the basis of the current framework as long as observed evidence does not offer clashing perspectives.

3 Methodology

The paper presents a qualitative inquiry, built upon a single-case study, designed as a deductive process tracing (Bennett & Checkel, 2015), utilizing a within-case comparison over time. The study tests the theorized causal link between HIs as an independent variable and mass mobilization of the Karabakh movement as a dependent variable. The Karabakh movement is considered a typical case that aligns with the proposed theory's 'regression line' (Gerring, 2008). This implies that both HIs and mass mobilization, the independent and dependent variables, respectively, were evident in this case. Consequently, this case study is assessing how well the theory can account for the case in terms of the portrayal of the causal mechanism, and whether an extension of this theory's explanatory scopes can possibly include other similar cases of political mass mobilizations that have eventually led to an armed conflict.

To strengthen the internal validity of the study, it observes two within-case sub-regional locations where the case was manifested most extensively. Those locations are Stepanakert and Yerevan. Stepanakert is a typical manifestation of the characteristics of the case, showcasing the direct experiences of HI in NK. In contrast, Yerevan is observed as an anomaly as it still showcases a large wave of mass mobilization during the same period despite being geographically beyond potential inter-group inequalities.

The study's primary temporal focus is between 1920–1991, including two time periods before and after 1988: 1920–1988 and 1988–1991. The latter period accounts for the Karabakh movement mass mobilization, and the two within-case sub-regional locations, Stepanakert and Yerevan, were strategically selected because they represent the primary epicenters of the Karabakh movement. It should be emphasized that the case of this study is still the Karabakh movement, and Stepanakert and Yerevan solely represent the main sites of the case manifestation and are not selected as sides of the comparison.

This study relies mostly on primary data collected through participant interviews. Due to the lack of sufficient secondary data available at the time of the research, the need for primary data was driven by the requirement for a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the contextualized situation and conflict realities during the Karabakh movement. Therefore, the interpretations of people who experienced the conflict and possess local knowledge are vital in answering the research question explored in this study. The method of in-depth interviews was used through the utilization of a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, in the Armenian language, between March 25 to April 12, 2022.

A purposeful sampling strategy was applied for in-depth interviews. To select participants, two criteria were employed, namely participation experience and place of participation. Participation experience ensured that primary data was gathered from individuals who had direct involvement with the Karabakh movement. Place of participation was also crucial, as Stepanakert and Yerevan, were the primary centers of the movement, where most mass demonstrations occurred. Stepanakert was particularly significant since it experienced HI directly, while Yerevan represented a more indirect experience. Consequently, the study conducted in-depth interviews with ethnic Armenians who participated in the Karabakh movement in Stepanakert (NK) or Yerevan (Armenia) between 1988, the official formation of the movement, and 1991, the outbreak of the first NK war.

The sample of interview participants was additionally balanced by age group, gender, and level of participation. A total of 12 interviews were initially planned to be conducted; however, the data collection was concluded after the 11th interview, since data saturation was achieved then (see Table 2).

Table 2 Sample for in-depth interviews

Location	**Stepanakert (5)**		**Yerevan (6)**		**11**	**Totals**
Year of birth	1958–1970 (2)	<1958 (3)	1958–1970 (3)	<1958 (3)	**1958–70 (5)** **<1958 (6)**	
Gender	Man (2) Woman (0)	Man (1) Woman (2)	Man (2) Woman (1)	Man (1) Woman (2)	**Man (6)** **Woman (5)**	
Level of participation	Active (1) Moderate (1)	Active (2) Moderate (1)	Active (2) Moderate (1)	Active (1) Moderate (2)	**Active (6)** **Moderate (5)**	

Ethical considerations were also taken into account. The only identifying information collected during the fieldwork was the name and contact details of each respondent, which were used solely for scheduling interviews. As soon as the fieldwork was complete, the interviews were transcribed and anonymized, and direct quotations were used anonymously in the analysis. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, no third parties were given access to the data collected at any stage of the study. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Yerevan State University.

In addition to primary data, this study has analyzed secondary data through desk research, including a systematic review of existing reliable data and research. The purpose of this was to understand what is already known about the research problem and to serve multiple objectives such as describing variables, producing a timeline of events, depicting causes, and verifying primary data. Document analysis was selected as the method of secondary data collection and analysis, where over 120 units of secondary material were reviewed systematically, including books, articles, reports, archival notes, and raw data. The collected materials served as a complement to primary data and were analyzed through several steps, including initial screening, filtering, systematization, and incorporation with respective citations.

4 Results

This section examines the events and processes leading up to the Karabakh movement from 1920–1988, as well as its establishment between 1988–1991. Instead of providing a comprehensive historical account, this section presents an in-depth thematic analysis of key factors that may have contributed to the emergence of the Karabakh movement, utilizing a combination of primary and secondary sources. The study draws on anonymized excerpts from in-depth interviews with movement participants. Although the study is

qualitative in nature, the analysis is structured in a way that may resemble a positivist paradigm due to the deductive theory testing process tracing design. Hence, observing this section within the methodological context it was written in is likely to benefit the enhanced comprehension of the paper.

A chronological approach is deemed insufficient due to the complexity of the subject matter; hence the findings are presented thematically across three segments: preceding the Karabakh movement, during the Karabakh movement, and a comparison between these two time periods. The first segment is a systematic analysis of the years leading up to 1988, combining factual evidence with morphological data. This approach involves frequently shifting back and forth between the years within this period, to lay down a historical context for the movement. The second segment delves into mass mobilization from 1988 to 1991, a critical period under scrutiny as it marked the inception and evolution of the Karabakh movement, centering the analysis on the repressive measures employed against the nascent movement and its political reactions to those measures. The third and final segment offers a comparative analysis of these two temporal period observations to evaluate the potential causal relationship between HI and mass mobilization over time, assessing the contextual meaning of the assumed causal story.

4.1 Karabakh movement antecedents: 1920–1988

4.1.1 Uncovering horizontal inequalities: 'Pity you are Armenian'

The study found evidence of HIs experienced by ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) prior to 1988. The HIs were reported to have cultural/symbolic, economic, political, and social dimensions. Cultural and symbolic HI was the most frequently reported, with respondents recounting incidents of dehumanizing expressions, superiority messages, and subtle expressions of dislike based on ethnicity. Despite guarantees of rights for language and culture development and education in their native tongue, Armenian teachers were only allowed to study in Stepanakert or Baku, and not in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. In addition, schools in Azerbaijan taught 'The History of Azerbaijan' in Armenian, while Armenian schools in Azerbaijan were not permitted to teach 'The History of the Armenians' (Yamskov, 1991).

Economic HI was also reported, with perceived disparities in income levels, access to economic goods, and vocational opportunities across ethnic lines. The study also revealed accounts of political and social HI, including restrictions on mobility and unequal treatment by healthcare and educational institutions. The interviews with movement participants from Yerevan, Armenia, revealed that Armenians in Armenia experienced the HI vicariously through their NK counterparts (Quotations 1–3).

The key factor underlying all dimensions of HI was negative perceptions of the opposing ethnic group, indicating that ethnicity played a significant role in group identification. However, interviews conducted with participants of the movement in Yerevan, Armenia, reveal a somewhat indistinct yet striking portrayal of perceived disparities and pressures, primarily within socio-political and cultural/symbolic spheres. This phenome-

non is intriguing as it illustrates that Armenians in Armenia, who lacked direct exposure to these events, experienced them vicariously through the shared ethnic identity they held with their friends and colleagues from Nagorno-Karabakh, as conveyed through personal connections (Quotations 4–5).

According to Tchilingirian (1999), the underlying factor of all types of HI is the negative perceptions held toward the opposing ethnic group, thus emphasizing the continued significance of ethnicity as a basis for group identification. However, negative perceptions alone are not enough to generate ethnic conflict, as Yamskov (1991, p. 633) notes, 'much more is required for conflict, i.e., negative perceptions are necessary, but not sufficient for ethnic conflict'.

The subsequent subsection outlines additional factors that contribute to the layering of conflict on top of ethnicity-based HI.

4.1.2 Relative deprivation forming collective grievance: The 'insignificant others'

Empirical evidence reveals that the ethnic composition of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) population underwent significant changes over time, particularly from the 1920s to the late 1980s, with a considerable rise in the number of ethnic Azerbaijanis and a gradual decrease in the comparative proportion of Armenians. The Azerbaijan Rural Census (1924) indicated that the population of the newly created NK Autonomous Oblast in 1921 was 131,500, consisting of 94.4 per cent Armenians and 5.6 per cent Azerbaijanis. Yamskov's (1991) statistical data demonstrated that between 1921 and 1979, the number of Armenians declined from 124,100 to 123,000, while the number of Azerbaijanis increased almost fivefold from 7,400 to 37,000. In the 1970s, the Armenian population in NK remained relatively stable (120,800 in 1970 and 123,000 in 1979), while the Azerbaijani population continued to grow rapidly (27,200 in 1970 and 37,000 in 1979). By early 1987, the population of Nagorno-Karabakh was estimated to be 133,200 Armenians and 43,900 Azerbaijanis, which accounted for 74 and 24.4 per cent of the overall population, respectively (Starovoitova et al., 1988). Consequently, the Armenian population of NK increased by 8.3 per cent for the period of 1979–1987, while the population of Azerbaijanis increased by 18.9 per cent during the same period (ibid.).[5]

While numbers and percentages from historical records may contain methodological and accuracy-related limitations, what is critical to note is how significant ethno-demographic changes, particularly the rapidly increasing presence of Azerbaijanis in NK, were perceived by ethnic Armenians in the context of ongoing inter-ethnic tensions. As the interviews revealed, reoccurring relative deprivation, feelings of alienation, feelings of 'insignificant others,' and 'foreigners' were becoming more apparent and common among Armenians in NK (Quotation 6).

Based on both in-depth interviews and desk research, evidence suggests that grievances regarding experienced HIs have been present since the 1920s. Throughout the 1930s, 50s, 60s, and 80s, demonstrations, petitions, letters of complaint, and various other forms of political communication were utilized (Tchilingirian, 1999). However, these efforts received

[5] Other examples of statistical perspectives include Bruk (1986), Mirzoyan (1988), and Sarkisyan (1992).

little attention or resulted in forceful measures from the Soviet authorities and former Azerbaijani SSR (Merridale & Ward, 1991). Scholars such as Libaridian (1988) and Khachatryan & Abrahamyan (2011) have mapped and documented several dozen of these incidents (Quotation 7).

The 1965 'Letter of the 13,' which received little attention, constituted the ultimate grievances of Armenians in NK. The letter detailed the Azerbaijani SSR's nationalist policy against the Armenian population and the systematic and endless violations of their interests—'The situation is intolerable. Discrimination is everywhere and in everything… Everything is happening behind the veil of friendship and brotherhood.'[6] – It also highlighted the restrictions on rights and the destruction of the region's autonomy. Interestingly, the grievances established in the letter later became some of the cornerstones of the Karabakh movement argumentation in the late 1980s.

These socio-political processes, which arguably built upon each other by 1988, further exacerbated the majority-minority divide between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in NK to a degree where authorities, as noted by Kapuscinski (1985), could no longer 'put up with a nation that gets on its nerves; [and] the nation cannot tolerate an authority it has come to hate.'

It is important to highlight that, despite the relative deprivation experienced by Armenians in NK until the 1980s, this did not appear to have been a prominent feature in the perceptions of Armenian–Azerbaijani relations among the people of Yerevan. As the interviews indicate, the Karabakh issue did not become a part of the public narrative until the 1988 movement (Quotations 8–9).

These are only a few examples of interviewees who reported being unaware of the Karabakh issue at that time. Therefore, it is evident that the societal attitudes in Armenia and NK were fundamentally different in terms of motives up until the start of the movement. With the foundation for the movement laid by 1988, a new period (1988–1991) emerged as a crucial timeframe for the onset of one of the longest-standing conflicts in the South Caucasus region. The subsequent segment delves into this period in detail, examining the factors that further contributed to the emergence of the Karabakh movement.

4.2 Karabakh mass mobilization: 1988–1991

National movements that challenge the existing political order often face resistance from the authorities responsible for maintaining it. The protests on the Karabakh issue were also met with attempts to suppress and silence the goals of the movement through political detentions and violent repressive methods by both the Azerbaijani SSR and the Soviet Union. However, the movement's claims became legitimately and constitutionally in line with the declared doctrines of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, leading to parallel processes in Stepanakert and Yerevan (De Waal, 2013) (Quotation 10).

[6] The full content of the letter can be found in Khachatryan and Abrahamyan (2011, pp. 39–45).

During the 1980s, political processes aimed at uniting NKAO with Armenian SSR were met with latent and later open repression from the authorities. Forcible displacements and cases of local violence were reported in NK, but the Sumgait pogroms marked a significant turning point (De Waal, 2013). The Sumgait events shrank the possible space for a peaceful solution, as they created a condition of 'nothing to lose' guided by feelings of revenge among ethnic Armenians, according to some interviewees (ibid.) (Quotations 11–12).

De Waal's (2013) quote depicting the Sumgait events illustrates the intensity of the situation, as angry young men sought to identify and harm Armenians. The events not only led to a sharp need for protection from Azerbaijani authorities but also a deep mistrust for the Gorbachev administration. The interviews conducted with participants revealed that the possible areas of dialogue between the movement and the authorities were replaced with a significant gap and a sense of insecurity, which undermined the chances of a peaceful resolution (Quotation 13).

In addition to Soviet curfews and restrictions on demonstrations, the authorities detained members of the already-established Karabakh Committee. These measures were intended to quell the movement, but instead fueled collective grievances, increasing people's feelings of injustice and motivating them to resist even more persistently (De Waal, 2013). The repressions served as 'sparks' that reignited the movement, which had been dormant for several decades, and Gorbachev's announced glasnost and perestroika provided an opportunity for a new phase of the struggle for Karabakh in 1988 (Tchilingirian, 1999, p. 444.) (Quotation 14).

The state's repressive measures initially silenced the Armenian movement but ultimately proved to be ineffective as the movement had already spread throughout Armenian societies in the period 1988-1989. With the implementation of curfews and detentions, the movement became less centralized, which allowed for more meso-level agency and proactive initiatives organized by various groups.

During this time, the mobilizing structure of the mass demonstrations changed in Yerevan, shifting from a solely NK-oriented narrow political movement to a collective celebration. Abrahamian's (1990; 1993) anthropological account describes mass mobilizations as an 'archaic festival' with ritualistic elements. The author notes,

The people were joined in a kind of united body, much like that of the medieval European carnival keenly characterised in a famous study of Michael Bakhtin (1965). This immense body, which probably amounted to a million people at the peak of the demonstrations (and this is in a city with a population of a million), was not created mechanically. It had a united spirit, a common thought and finally a common sense of ethnic self-consciousness. According to the statements of many participants, they had a wonderful feeling of being present everywhere, in every place occupied by that huge body of people. (Abrahamian, 1993, p. 101)

This phenomenon was also articulated quite commonly by the participants of in-depth interviews from Yerevan (Quotations 15–16).

The demonstrations brought different layers and groups of society to the same level and eliminated structural inequalities. The euphoria of crowds and 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1995) laid crucial foundations for the institutionalization of the mass movement, linking the processes in Stepanakert and Yerevan.

Considering the preceding analysis, the critical question left to be addressed is what distinguishes the two observed periods, namely 1920–1988 and 1988–1991, and how do these distinctions contribute to answering the research question and furthering the implications for the theory? This question is addressed in the final segment of the analysis.

4.3 Comparative analysis and discussion

4.3.1 Causal relationship: Covariation, isolation, and temporal order

This study employs account data and morphological materials to examine the causal relationship between HIs (independent variable) and mass mobilization (dependent variable). Specifically, the study investigates whether a change in the manifestation of HI is covariant with the emergence of mass mobilization and whether such covariation demonstrates temporal order and isolation from other confounding factors. The results of the analysis suggest that for Observation I (years 1920–1988), the causal path from HI to collective grievance is detectable, as evidenced by a significant amount of data. However, no changes in the values of causal step 3 and the dependent variable have been identified for this period. In contrast, Observation II (years 1988–1991) exhibits variations in the values of both step 3 and the DV.

Table 3 shows a change in the IV covaries with a change in the DV across temporal observations. This over-time comparison also secures some extent of isolation through counterfactual reasoning, by cross-examining control (Observation I) and treated (Observation II) units.

Table 3 Covariation between HI and mass mobilization

	Horizontal inequality (IV)	**→ Relative deprivation (Step 1)**	**→ Collective grievance (Step 2)**	**→ Joining the movement (Step 3)**	**→ Mass mobilization (DV)**
Observation I. 1920–1988	Observed	Observed	Observed	Not observed	Not observed
Observation II. 1988–1991	Observed	Observed	Observed	Observed	Observed

The fact that similar values are observed in the IV across the two observations when values in the DV vary, reduces the possibility of other confounding factors that could constitute a spurious relationship. Furthermore, the chronological order of events provides additional support for the causal relationship. The manifestation of IV occurs earlier than that of the DV, making a reverse-causal scenario practically nonviable.

4.3.2 Causal story: Mechanism linking HI to mass mobilization

The article addresses the question of why political mass mobilization emerged in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia only after 1988 despite HI existing since the 1920s. The study establishes the significance of the findings emphasizing the need to look closely into the mechanism linking HI to mass mobilization. Figure 1 illustrates the causal steps identified in the theoretical framework and the two key factors that emerged as decisive functions, namely state repression and the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* during Gorbachev's leadership.

State repression further fueled mobilization efforts instead of eliminating them. The violent repressive measures against mobilization initiatives in the 1980s became a motivating condition for the mobilization efforts to reignite after each phase of exposure to violent or restrictive deeds. Moreover, Gorbachev's policies created enabling conditions for the civic movement to legitimize its demands. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* provided an opportunity for the movement to claim its demands to be constitutional and politically acceptable. Both factors were crucial in making sense of the causal chain in the Karabakh movement.

As a result of empirical research, an interesting and key aspect emerged that is also demonstrated in Figure 1. The processes that were initially different in Yerevan and Stepanakert eventually merged into one political movement. The vicarious experience of collective grievance fed by HIs that the NK Armenians were exposed to play a fundamental role in terms of problem identification for Armenians of Armenia. This was met with Soviet state repressions and led to mass mobilization to follow the same purpose, like that among the branch of the movement going on in NK (Quotation 17).

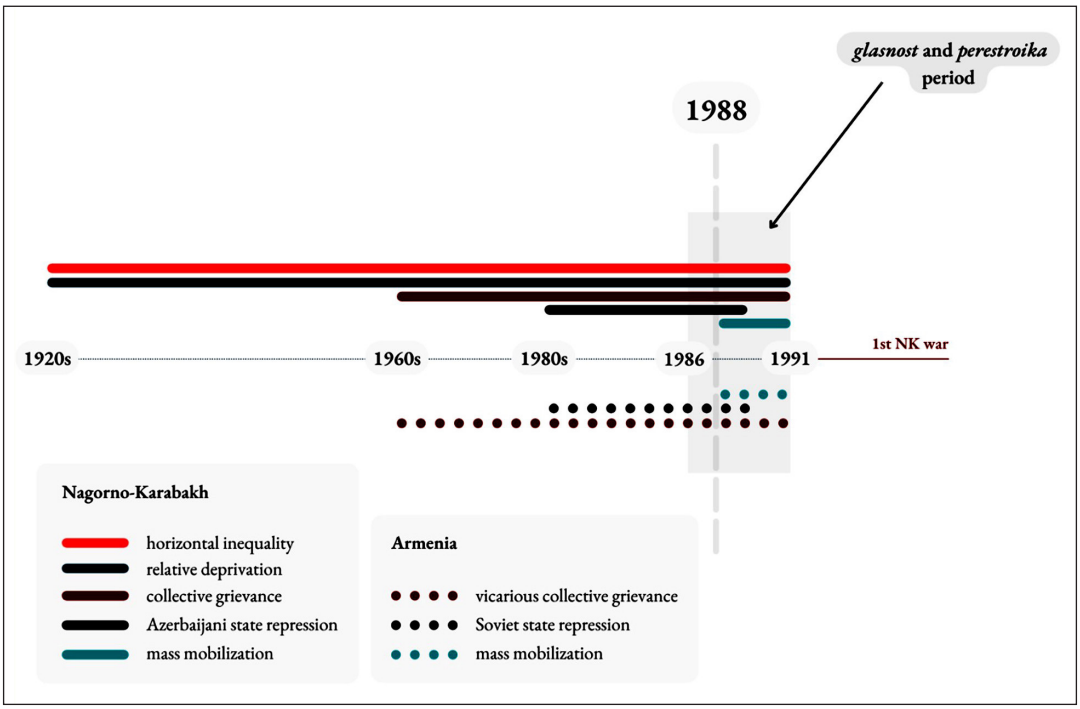

Figure 1 Illustrative roadmap from HI to mass mobilization in NK and armenia

According to Forsberg (2014), when an ethnic group involved in armed conflict has kin members living in a nearby state, there is an increased possibility that the kin group in that state will also engage in armed conflict. Such ethnic bonds and similarities are more likely to be underscored when kin members nearby have the opportunity and willingness to mobilize for rebellions.

Table 4 matches the empirical findings in relation to both locations with the supporting conditions of mass mobilization from a joiner's perspective—identity, motive, and opportunity. The Table displays that HIs in NK were also viewed as a window of opportunity in terms of gaining independence from the Soviet state, which directed the two originally altering paths to amalgamate into one across locations.

The comparative analysis of empirical data suggests that perceived HIs between coexisting ethnic groups underlie the emergence and evolution of political mass mobilization. This analysis also answers the research question of why political mass mobilization emerges, establishing support both for the theorized causal mechanism and the causal relationship (covariation, temporal order, isolation) between the phenomena of interest. Despite methodological limitations, this study provides relatively strong evidence in support of this hypothesis.

Table 4 Supporting conditions for joining the Karabakh movement

	Stepanakert (NK)	**Yerevan (Armenia)**
Identity	Ethnic belonging (Armenianness)	
Motive	• Prevent HI • Protect from state violence	• Prevent HI • Protect from state violence • Eliminate Soviet rule
Opportunity	• *Perestroika* and *glasnost*	• *Perestroika* and *glasnost* • Collective grievance in NK

5 Limitations

I do acknowledge that the study naturally comes with a number of methodological, theoretical, and empirical limitations, which are briefly reflected upon in the points below.

First, the study explores the Karabakh movement, a mass mobilization that emerged specifically among the Armenian populations of NK and Armenia and was framed and politicized specifically in the Armenian narrative. Studying the Armenian perspective is inherently dictated by the scope of the study. Solely due to this, and not because of any bias, the study may appear one-sided, since it does not draw on the Azerbaijani perspective on the matter. The latter falls beyond the scope of this examination, and rather belongs to a wider scholarship on the NK conflict. Nevertheless, future research could benefit from a balanced examination that includes then claims of the Azerbaijani side to the territory and the transnational status of Armenians having lived within the NK, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the conflict.

Second, the validity of the measurements is somewhat compromised since qualitative study with open-ended questions cannot allow for much standardization across interviews, even though the measurements have been based on a theory-driven operationalization. Data triangulation using desk research results has helped to partially address these limitations, and despite possible drawbacks, no instances of starkly divergent viewpoints have been found across methods. Nonetheless, the sample size of eleven participants in the primary data collection may pose a risk of overgeneralization, and the perspectives captured may primarily represent urban populations from Yerevan and Stepanakert, since these are the locations where the movement saw its highest extent of mobilization. Future research could benefit from a broader and more diverse sample to enhance the robustness and representativeness of the findings. Including participants from rural areas, especially from former NK, and various socio-economic backgrounds could provide a more comprehensive view of the mass mobilization process and its implications.

Third, external generalizability is another limitation here, as the study is a single-case process tracing that cannot provide valid external implications. Internal comparability across the temporal ranges should also come as a relative limitation, as the observations are timespans built around a single year, making comparisons across those observations asymmetrical. Additionally, the focus on a single historical and sociopolitical context limits the applicability of the findings to other regions and conflicts. Including a broader regional perspective, such as the post-USSR and Black Sea contexts, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by and large. This broader perspective would help in understanding how regional geopolitics and historical legacies shape local dynamics and contribute to the conflict's persistence and evolution.

Fourth, there is one theoretical limitation that should be noted, which is that the original theory by Cederman et al. (2013) is set to explain civil wars, while the 1st Nagorno-Karabakh war is not a civil war per se. Furthermore, driven by deductive theory testing design, the analysis might imply linearity, while mass mobilization in reality is a rather nonlinear process driven by multifaceted factors and contextual peculiarities. Moreover, theory-driven nature of the paper already assumes a rather channeled theoretical lens, rather limiting the room for other significant standalone theories and alternative explanations to come into play. There is also a need to address the international and regional dimensions of the conflict more thoroughly, which this paper does not aim to cover. The involvement of transnational actors and the broader geopolitical context could play critical roles in the conflict's dynamics and outcomes. Examining the roles of international organizations, neighboring states, and diaspora communities are beyond the scope of this piece, however, could provide valuable insights into the external influences on the conflict and its potential exits.

Fifth, and another pertinent limitation, is that which concerns the study's focus on historical periods, which may not fully capture the current state of NK. The region's status has significantly evolved, especially after the 2020 NK war, which altered political and social dynamics. This paper inherently refrains from drawing on this, since the current state of the affairs of the conflict was originally not deemed under the focus of the study, and hence, any retroactive meaning making of the current status quo through the lenses of historical evidence would in this case inevitably lead to interpretative biases and poten-

tially speculative argumentation. Moreover, given the fluidity and rapid developments of the conflict, any such attempts would likely lead any scholar into endless loops of interpretations, since the pace of the conflict's dynamics are rather incompatible with that of scholarly publishing. Nonetheless, future research could explore how these recent changes are arguably influenced by the historical traces of the mass mobilization processes and horizontal inequalities. Considering the present circumstances and how the findings contribute to understanding the ongoing situation in NK would provide more immediate and presently relevant insights.

Finally, while the study draws on existing theories of horizontal inequality (HI) and mass mobilization, there is an opportunity to integrate additional secondary literature and empirical studies that could provide a quantitative evaluation of HI in NK. This would help establish a stronger empirical foundation for the theoretical claims and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the conflict's underlying causes. Incorporating quantitative data on economic disparities, educational inequalities, and access to resources could complement the qualitative findings and offer a more holistic view of the HI's impact on mass mobilization. Additionally, incorporating further relevant literature on horizontal and vertical inequality and violent conflict could strengthen the theoretical framework and empirical support.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the scholarly contributions to studies in sociology of conflict and social science scholarship, in general, are not less significant, providing a deeper outlook on the NK conflict, as well as the aspects of the theory that have been put to test. Future research could pay attention to ensuring measurement validity and reliability and addressing external generalizability and comparability across temporal cases. In this, the valuable insights into understanding complex cases of armed mobilizations that this paper provides could serve as scholarly grounds for future scholarship.

6 Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of primary and secondary data, this study aimed to test the hypothesis that the emergence and evolution of political mass mobilization were driven by perceived horizontal inequalities between coexisting ethnic groups, establishing a covariation between the phenomena of interest, as observed in the Karabakh movement case (both in Stepanakert and Yerevan sites of observation). There are a number of additional theoretical and empirical contributions that this paper makes to the sociological scholarship on peace and conflict, which, together with the limitations of this study, are discussed in this section. Several of such theoretical contributions include the confirmation of a causal relationship, to the extent that process tracing design can allow, between HI and mass mobilization, as well as the exploration of the causal mechanism between these two variables and the context-bound nature of the theory under test. The study also addresses a theoretical gap in linking objective inequality to perceived injustice and attitudinal support for violence. In sum, it will be fair to conclude that the meso-level analysis of inter-group relations can provide relevant insights into understanding complex manifestations of conflict, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Further research endeavors on this specific case, and other similar cases of ethnopolitical, intractable, and/or contex-

tually Soviet-related conflicts, could potentially contribute to improving the explanatory potential of the theory, and marrying local knowledge of less-discussed conflicts into a larger scholarly exchange.

Acknowledgement

Part of the primary data underlying this research paper was collected through the generous financial support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. In-depth interview guide

Introduction and general settings

Hello. I am [Name, Surname]. First, I wanted to thank you for agreeing to talk to me today!

I am currently enrolled in the [Department] at [University]. I am conducting a study on the root causes of the emergence of the Karabakh movement. For this purpose, I am talking with people who have resided in Stepanakert/Yerevan upon and during the emergence of the movement. You have been recommended as an interviewee by _____, and I am genuinely interested in hearing your memories and experience about this topic.

I will be asking you some questions and will truly value if you could answer these clearly and honestly. The information you provide will be treated confidentially, so, no information disclosing your identity will appear anywhere. The interview is planned to last for approximately an hour, however, please, do not feel restricted by this, if you feel like you have more to share. Again, I appreciate your time and commitment to talk with me today.

Do you have any questions you would like to ask before we proceed?

Informed consent

Now let us, please, go through a few pieces of information important for me to communicate with you as part of your informed consent:

1. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. For this, you can feel free to ask any questions about the purpose and the nature of this study, in order to base your decision on a full awareness.
2. You can withdraw your participation at any time or refuse to answer any questions without consequences of any kind. If need be, within a week after the interview is complete, you can withdraw your consent over the already provide answers, too. In this case, all interview materials will be destroyed and no data from the interview will be part of the analysis.
3. You will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
4. If you consent, I would like to kindly ask for your permission to record the interview in order to not miss any important reflections of yours in the phase of data analysis. If you do not wish to be recorded, I will only take written notes.
5. As soon as we complete this interview, the recording (if applicable) will be transcribed in a way that does not contain any information that can help identify you. As soon as transcribed, the recording will be destroyed.
6. The anonymized transcript and the recording (until being destroyed), will be stored in a hard drive, only available to me.
7. Disguised extracts from your interview may be quoted in reports produced as part of this study. In any report on the results of this research, your identity and that of the people you speak about will remain confidential.
8. At any time during and after the interview you are free to contact me to seek further clarification and information (*relevant contact information*). If need be, you can also reach out my academic supervisor (*relevant contact information*).
9. I will gladly clarify any of the above-mentioned points, may you see the need.
10. I want to highlight that I personally, and my University, as well, take such ethical considerations very seriously, thus our conversation and its results will be treated very carefully and responsibly.

Main section

Let's begin. As I mentioned already, I am studying the emergence of the Karabakh movement, and I am particularly interested in your memories and experiences of those times. To best understand them, I want to ask you to help me visualize your experience through your eyes. So, please, try to imagine as if you are able to travel back in time, and figuratively go back to your life in 1980s. This is before even the Karabakh movement began. Please, take me with you as you travel back, and walk me through your experience, while I will ask a few specific questions.

1. Where were you born? Where does your family originate from?
2. What do you remember from 1980s? What was life like back then? Where were you living? With whom? What was your main occupation?

3. In the beginning of the 1980s, what did you know about Azerbaijan and the people living there? How did you obtain that knowledge? Did you have relatives, friends, or neighbors of Azerbaijani origin? And did any of your Armenian acquaintances live in Azerbaijan? Please, tell me a little bit about them.
4. What was the relationship between regular Armenians and Azerbaijanis like back then? What were the similarities and the differences between these groups, based on your memories?
5. How were ethnic Armenians of Karabakh being treated by Azerbaijanis? How were you and the people you knew feeling treated? What made you think/feel that way? Please, share some examples.
   Probes (ask to specify, if not addressed already):
   5.1. Cultural inequalities: access and freedom to practice language, traditions, holidays, religious ceremonies etc.
   5.2. Political inequalities: access to the central decision-making power
   5.3. Economic inequalities: level of income and employment opportunities
   5.4. Social inequalities: access to education and other public goods improving social status
6. Try to remember the day when you very first time thought or realized that the relationship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis could worsen. What led you to that thought/realization? Can you recall the year or an event around it? Please, elaborate.
7. Can you, please, remember the day when you learned that there is a civic movement emerging? How did that information reach you? What were you thinking about it, what were your first reactions? What did you do after that?
8. There are several explanations that circulate about how and why the Karabakh movement emerged. Some say that it was only a result of instructions dictated top-down. Some others say that it was the demand of regular individual citizens that made the movement possible at all. What are your thoughts about this? How did the movement emerge after all?
9. What do you think motivated regular ethnic Armenians to decide to join a movement like that? What did people expect to achieve through it, that wouldn't be possible otherwise?
   Probe (ask to specify, if not addressed already):
   9.1. And what would you say motivated you personally to join/support the movement?
10. Can you remember how the civic mobilization around the movement was happening? How would people in your city receive information about the movement? Who were active? Why? Where?
11. What do you think made it such a large mass mobilization? What were the contributing factors?
12. During the mobilization, what were your friends and neighbors thinking about the possibility of the war? Were you and people like you expecting that it could happen? Why? Can you bring examples?

13. Was it possible at all to keep the war from happening? What could have been done back then to avoid war? What would you personally have done differently?
14. When do you think Armenians and Azerbaijanis can coexist peacefully again? How do you imagine that possibility?

This concludes our talk today. How are you feeling right now? Is there anything else you would like to share, before we close?

Thank you very much for your time and participation.

Appendix 2.

Direct quotations from interviews

Number as appearing in the text	Quotation and respondent details
1	In Karabakh, the salary has always been lower […] even the best specialist in the construction sphere [was getting] 7-8 rubles, [while] in Aghdam (Azerbaijani town) up until 25-30 rubles. Of course, the workforce would go there… (*man, 67 years, movement participant from NK*)
2	We had a feeling that, you know, there was some sort of oppression, that there was some kind of deficiency of real life. For instance, we did not have some goods in our stores that they had in regions of Azerbaijan. There was this close-by city Fizuli; we would always drive there to [buy] a bottle of sunflower oil. (*woman, 75 years, movement participant from NK*)
3	To my recollection, all masons were Armenians, hairdressers were mostly Armenians, like this… In the sphere of handicraft work, Armenians were the majority. But again, coming across Armenians in the authorities – that was a bit problematic (ref. rare) already. (*man, 55 years, movement participant from NK*)
4	The pressure was mostly coming from the acknowledgment that '*we (ref. Armenians) are the owners of this land, we are the majority, but the minority is the one ruling and dictating.*' There were many Karabakh Armenians working at our institute, and they would tell us that they were being oppressed in that it was hard for them to advance [career-wise], and take on some positions, but I haven't been there myself, this is not my experience, it's what we have heard from them… The first person [status-wise] of the regions and towns was always Azerbaijani, the second person – Armenian… But hardly the other way around. (*woman, 71 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
5	Someone [from NK] that I have been in touch with since childhood had a house there, when they were visiting us, they were telling [us] very subtly, but the main message was that '*we, Armenians, are constantly tolerating certain problems created by Azerbaijanis.*' (*man, 58 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
6	… you know, Karabakh was feeling sort of alienated. Through word of mouth, it was getting heard that the people are under some kind of oppression. Yes. And that there was a need to get free of that oppression. Moral oppression, do you understand? (*woman, 75 years, movement participant from NK*)

Number as appearing in the text	Quotation and respondent details
7	When in July 1921 the decision of the Bureau was adopted and was decided that Karabakh becomes part of Azerbaijan, there were already people, who were expressing complaints reaching Moscow, then they would prosecute those people, imprison some, murder some others. For instance, on the road from Aghdam to Gandzak, they would kill them, as if they attempted to escape. It was Azerbaijan doing it, of course with the sponsorship of the Soviet rule. This kind of thing happened since 1921, yes. […] For instance, before 1987, there were mass complaints in the 60s, too. People have resisted once in 1949, then in 1965… Those who were expressing political demands were being labeled as *dashnak* (ref. nationalist) or *antisovetchik* (ref. anti-Soviet). Such stigmatization was happening a lot in Karabakh. (*woman, 75 years, movement participant from NK*)
8	It was way later, only after the 1988 movement. Because when the '88 movement began, back then I was associating it with justice, and up until the 88, maybe even later, I was not viewing the Azerbaijanis (ref. their factor) in this, just like the 99 per cent of our people [in Yerevan], if not all of them. I was not seeing any problem from their (ref. Azerbaijani) perspective. (*man, 58 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
9	Well, it was only after the beginning of the movement. During the first days, we sort of weren't getting our minds on thinking or analyzing it. (*man, 68 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
10	The people wanted unification, unification. The single main thought was so that we could unify [with Armenia]. [Especially] that Gorbachev mentioned freedom and rights of nations [for self-determination]. And so, we took that peaceful road toward that. (*woman, 63 years, movement participant from NK*)
11	… but until Sumgait, no, it was a national movement, and after Sumgait, a [sense] of vengeance stirred. And even that wasn't the reason, but the fact that they (ref. authorities) didn't want to hear us. That was the problem. When we would do something, and then notice that Moscow doesn't respond adequately. After Sumgait, when it happened and it did so openly, [it meant] '*here, you wanted an example, here's one for you.*' And from then on, [we] stopped believing and trusting Gorbachev anymore. And because we were going for the demonstrations, and we knew that we are clean and what state media was talking about us on the contrary. But I am there, after all, right? I am seeing what's happening, but when I turn on the first [TV-]channel of Russia and I see '*a group of nationalists*' and other rubbish like that. (*man, 55 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
12	Azerbaijanis kept coming, and one could sense that some were sent from Baku on purpose. And on May 15, I believe, it was the first time that they demanded us to leave Shushi. (*man, 55 years, movement participant from NK*)
13	That neighbor of ours from the first floor would tell us that they (ref. Armenians in NK) would call her and say, '*Ohh, they (ref. Azerbaijanis) have smashed and slaughtered us, they come in in the night and look for addresses where Armenians are living, they get in, and they kill people.*' This was already widespread and was being heard and seen. (*woman, 61 years, movement participant from Armenia*)

Number as appearing in the text	Quotation and respondent details
14	First and foremost, it was the freedom of speech and acting, of being self-reliant as a human and as a citizen of a free country. That was the awareness that I had […] and that because Gorbachev has announced *glasnost, perestroika*, now you have a much larger space (ref. opportunities), and you can at least explore it. (*man, 55 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
15	Oh, [we were] very excited, very [much so]. Every day with our whole collective, we would go to the [Freedom] Square and would stand there for a long time, demonstrations, continuous demonstrations, demonstrations… (*woman, 70 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
16	… I remember, I was there, when someone announced from the platform, '*The thieves of the city of Yerevan are announcing that they are stopping the thefts from residences, dear people, be carefree…*' It was an odd, unique, and, so to say, miracle-like thing, and that itself was already a magnet [pulling] you to join and know what is happening. […] Of course, Karabakh as a topic was the core 'glue,' but to be honest, except for the small number of local Karabakh people who were there, no one [back then] really knew what Karabakh was, and what was happening there. (*man, 58 years, movement participant from Armenia*)
17	Our vectors were different, it's just that at some point those vectors overlapped. Two very important vectors overlapped. Overlapped at the right time, in the right place. The wish of the wide masses to make Karabakh part of Armenia and the wish of broad-minded ones to be independent and making own decisions. These two things merged. (*woman, 71 years, movement participant from Armenia*)

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Solidarity work, duty to care, and commoning during the pandemic crisis

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 179–198.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1298
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

The article explores civic solidarity acts during the first lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on qualitative research conducted in Hungary largely online, we explore how solidarity work initiated civic collaborations that reconfigured human effort, time, and labor to mitigate crisis conditions in multiple ways and shaped the political potentials of solidarity practices. The inquiry captures different reasonings and practices associated with managing the division, valuation, and responsibilities in solidarity work. It also examines how the sense of duty to care became an essential component in the pandemic operation of solidarity. We identify three different modes of articulating and organizing the duty to care in response to crisis conditions, which embraced various engagements with the principles of *commoning* in solidarity spaces and beyond: reparative, sheltered, and transformative modes of *commoning*. Our inquiry also contributes to the discussions on the transformative potentials of civic experiments in collective solidarity actions in societies governed by an authoritarian regime, such as Hungary.

Keywords: solidarity work; duty to care; commoning; authoritarian conditions

1 Introduction

It has been widely discussed that during the dramatic lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21, various forms of solidarity action mushroomed in societies, including rich and poor and democratic and autocratic alike (Gomez, 2020; Myhre, 2020; Illés et al., 2021). In parallel with widespread fear, solitude, and uncertainty, the drive to assist, encourage, and care became paramount. Exceptionally intensive emotional states mobilized experienced and new solidarity actors with an 'almost Durkheimian collective effervescence' (Alteri et al., 2021, p. 10) due to the recognition of the interdependence of heterogeneous individual interests (Alteri et al., 2021, p. 10).

We teamed up to investigate the visions, forms, and effects of solidarity actions in Hungary as a real-time endeavor during the first lockdown period of the pandemic in 2020. Our inspiration stemmed from the understanding that crises and catastrophes are

events that profoundly inform social and scholarly thinking about suffering and well-being and the relations between the extraordinary and the everyday (Povinelli, 2011, p. 14). We were eager to observe actors who had reacted to two specific manifestations of pandemic-related hardships: the immediate disruptions of everyday conditions of life and social marginalization that had preceded the crisis but was exacerbated during it. Of our manifold observations, this paper explores how solidarity work initiated civic collaboration, reconfiguring the meanings and values of human labor to mitigate crisis conditions in multiple ways and reshape the understanding of the duty to care through solidarity practices.

The context of our inquiry is Central and Eastern Europe, where neoliberal authoritarian political and governance paradigms have gained traction since the early 2010s, although these trends have unfolded unevenly across the region. Hungary stands out as a textbook example of the most stubborn and enduring political and policy apparatus of this kind. Related scholarship has been rich and manifold, uncovering how the aspirational rulers of authoritarian regimes use the state apparatus against those who might challenge their monopoly on power. Another vital component of these regimes in managing crisis conditions has become equally salient, as we closely observe in Hungary. These are the mechanisms by which the central powerholders govern all public matters, most notably those concerning social reproduction. By tightly controlling central resources and diminishing autonomous spaces, they manage social services and social assistance by combining xenophobic, racializing, homophobic, and productivist narratives to mark deserving and undeserving groups in society and adjust redistributive decisions accordingly. On top of this, the Hungarian regime increasingly represses the space for rights-based and equality-promoting civil society entities. In contrast, it lavishly supports pro-government ones (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020; Gerő et al., 2022).

When the first wave of COVID-19 reached Europe, Hungary's general crisis management, health care, and education system had been in poor condition, and its economy showed strong dependence on car industry production chains and tourism. Hungary's health spending per capita had reached about 60 per cent of the OECD average, resulting in a life expectancy five years below the EU 27 average (OECD, 2020). The education system embraced extreme inequalities and subsequent pedagogical challenges, disinvestment, and a growing shortage of teachers. The social assistance system had been hit by diminishing public resources, faced a split between religious and secular institutional systems, and embarrassing regional inequalities. Expert opinions converge that the erosion of the country's social service infrastructure largely contributed to the ultimately devastating consequences of the pandemic (Ágh et al., 2021). By the summer of 2021, the healthcare system was trembling, and the total death toll per 100,000 inhabitants climbed to the highest in Europe. Mid-term reports on the pandemic acknowledged that half of the unemployed in the country did not receive any support from the government (Győri, 2021). The authorities failed to mitigate the digital inequalities that hindered labor and educational engagement during the lockdown. This increased the already widening divide between urban centers and rural settlements, especially in the marginalized regions, and perpetuated the exclusion of most Roma. A great part of the Hungarian public believed that the government's crisis management had neglected the problems of the losers of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ágh et al., 2021; Csurgó & Kovács, 2023).

First, the government tried to downplay the severity of the public health risks, but then it quickly introduced relatively strict lockdown measures. As early as March 2020, the government's two-thirds supermajority in parliament adopted the so-called Coronavirus Defense Act (also known as the Authorization or Enabling Act). This enabled the government to suspend or override any laws, as well as suspend by-elections and referendums, as well as proceedings at ordinary courts (Győri, 2021). Instead of relying on democratic institutions, the military patrolled public spaces to enforce curfew regulations. The military was charged with controlling strategic companies in the telecommunications, transport, and healthcare sectors. Hospital commanders, who reported to the Minister of Interior Affairs, were appointed to oversee medical management decisions. Regarding wider societal mobilization for solidarity activities, the larger church-based charities received the bulk of the centrally distributed financial support and unconditional moral endorsement. In parallel with this, the government used the pandemic to weaken the political opposition further using diverse instruments, reduce revenue sharing with municipalities led by oppositional forces, and vilify autonomous media and civic mobilizations by criminalizing critical voices for spreading 'fake news' and fearmongering (Ágh et al., 2021).

The paper sets out to introduce the research that informed this article and the respective solidarity field in broad brushstrokes. Then, we present highlights from the scholarly discussions on civic solidarity in times of crisis. The following section addresses the organization and valuation of different forms of work incorporated in solidarity initiatives. This leads to exploring the modalities of engaging with the duty to care through solidarity activities through the conceptual lens of *commoning*. In the conclusion, we discuss the emancipatory qualities and potentials for resilience of solidarity initiatives in an authoritarian regime during the crisis and beyond.

2 The research and its initial inspiration

Social scientists who address societal reactions to crises tend to assume that disasters embolden the powerful (typically state- and market-) actors who possess financial, human resource, and administrative power. These actors accept that charity organizations may contribute to their assistance infrastructure (The RHJ, 2020). Notwithstanding this, our inquiry strived to identify collective entities aside from the most resourceful state, market, and professionalized charity actors active in Hungary during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. We were intrigued by the old and new citizen groups and civic organizations that engaged in solidarity activism by redirecting and multiplying their capacities, reshuffling their social networks, and mobilizing new alliances in micro-settings and broader societal arenas. Our interest in civic solidarity is part of an enduring inquiry that explores solidarity activism in Hungary, starting with the 'refugee crisis' of 2015–16. Then, we continued observing smaller reactions in subsequent years that multiplied during the COVID-19 pandemic. We strive to understand the politics and practices of solidarity and their complex nexus with wider inequality patterns in a society shaped by junctures in contemporary and longer-term transformations.

Our attention to the civic solidarians is partly inspired by our understanding that actors' motivations, moral and political imaginations, and social liaisons have impacts

way beyond the solidarity spaces they populate. We are at odds with the dominant paradigm in current scholarship that finds weak trust in collective action and low-level civic involvement amidst authoritarian political conditions in Central and Eastern Europe (Gerő et al., 2022; Sik & Zakariás, 2021). This paradigm is particularly stressed in the case of Hungary by highlighting the fundamentally demobilizing effects of the ruling regime's contempt for autonomous, grassroots, or simply horizontal forms of collective mobilization.

To find our informants, we systematically searched social media and regular news media about solidarity action during the pandemic in 2020, which resulted in a preliminary dataset of 242 initiatives. Then, we applied qualitative representativity, narrowing our sample to fifty-two relevant cases. We conducted largely online semi-structured interviews with the selected solidarity actors between April and June 2020. Among our fifty-two informants of almost full gender parity, forty-two were leaders or coordinators of collectives, and the rest were regular volunteers. One-half of our sample operated in the larger cities of Hungary (Budapest, Pécs, Miskolc, and Debrecen), and the rest came from other settlements of varied sizes. More than half of the solidarity actors provided basic services and goods to the most vulnerable and the marginalized; several others delivered health and social assistance to 'ordinary people' and 'essential workers' and distributed hardware and know-how for online teaching and learning. Several actors combined their activities to preserve employment during dramatic disruptions of the economy through social services and the alternative provisioning of basic goods. In this article, we more closely examine twenty-six initiatives mastered by *citizens* mobilizing other fellow citizens, *civic groups* viewing themselves as solidarity actors, and *civil society organizations* (see a list of the cases with descriptive data in the Annex).

We relied on grounded theory building by identifying first-level analytical aspects of solidarity activities in our interviews and then processed and cross-read the data in conversation with the relevant theoretical alternatives. Accordingly, in the interviews, we explored the participants' motivations for becoming active solidarians in relation to individual and institutional biographies, the framings that solidarity actors chose to make sense of their practices, and understandings of solidarity work in broader social and political configurations. Information gathered in these descriptive dimensions allowed us to acknowledge more complex agendas that tailor solidarity spaces. In this article, we will dwell on two associated puzzles. First, we discuss the evolving norms and deeds in relation to valuing the variety of *human labor* deployed in solidarity work. Second, we unveil how experiments in collectively provisioning the basic goods of life inspired the respective actors to interpret the *duty to care* in and beyond the immediate spaces of solidarity. These two issues allow us to contemplate how certain types of civic solidarity prefigure, prepare, and generate resilient practices in authoritarian regimes.

3 Crisis and solidarity—concepts and crosscurrents

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first major juncture to prompt conceptual discussions suggesting that solidarity mobilizations are intrinsically entangled with crises. Inspired by classical anthropological thought and the Polanyian double movement theorem, years before the pandemic, Rakopoulos argued that solidarity networks are the offspring

of crises and simultaneously the means of containing their most destructive outcomes (Rakopoulos, 2016, p. 147). In reflection on solidarity actions associated with the impact of post-2008 austerity policies and the 2015–16 arrival of refugees to Europe on a massive scale, he also stressed that in the unsettling conditions of crises, temporary bridges are built over the gaps that widen between state and society amidst crumbling basic services, and pre-existing social structures are both resuscitated and reconfigured (Rakopoulos, 2016, p. 143). Other renowned scholars of austerity and neoliberal crisis reactions propose that contemporary solidarity actions derive from and react to the precarity associated with neoliberal social and political structures (Muehlebach, 2012). Despite this tension, it is not farfetched to conclude that solidarians constitute their practices as an antidote to such crises (Rakopoulos, 2016; Rozakou, 2016; Lahusen et al., 2021).

In the broader scholarly debate on the 'refugee crisis' in 2015–16, inspired by the critique of humanitarianism (Fassin, 2011; Ticktin, 2011; Brkovic, 2017), leading voices argued that solidarity-based assistance inadvertently contributed to social inequalities and confirmed pre-existing power structures. Others demonstrated that the very act of helping inspired the voicing of critical positions in the public and assigning political responsibility (Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2019; Mourão et al., 2023). The notion of 'subversive humanitarianism' captured the transformative power of solidarity assistance (Vandervoordt & Verschaegen, 2019). In view of various hybrid forms of solidarity acts during the coronavirus pandemic, Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) advocated for capturing boundary-crossing political and apolitical activities. Most recent social movement studies (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022) have called for recognizing indirect, implicit forms of politicization that motivate ordinary and everyday acts of collective problem-solving (Jakobsson & Korolczuk, 2020, p. 131).

Another important stream of the literature contemplates how solidarity actions that emerge as resilience to a neoliberal governing logic further strengthen neoliberal social policies and forms of provisioning (Shachar, 2020). It is emphasized that in an era of increasing vulnerability, people must rely on personal and institutional dependence grounded in the ideology of self-help. Moral economies of reciprocity, embraced by solidarity acts, may rescue members of society from harsh exploitation, yet this acts to undermine the potential revolutionary spirit of the oppressed and depoliticizes it (Narotzky, 2020, pp. 15–16). Muehlebach (2012) conceptualizes moral neoliberal citizenship, which encourages and exploits voluntary work by those who are excluded from paid labor. This human condition is generated and cherished by neoliberal states, which endorse creating zones of 'non-numeration seemingly untouched by the polluting logic of market exchange' (Muehlebach, 2012, p. 7). This mode of solidarity enacts minor palliative corrections in stubborn neoliberal orders.

Even those scholars who offer the most powerful warnings about the limits of bottom-up solidarity mechanisms also acknowledge the transformative potential of these acts as they challenge relations of dispossession and exploitation (Narotzky 2016; 2020). Moral arguments of worth which describe and endorse various economic activities may become political expressions of conflict and struggle that address social inequality. Therefore, one needs to analyze 'entanglements and articulations of differential social values for their ability to maintain or transform the conditions of possibility for making a living and leading a life worth living' (Narotzky, 2020, pp. 15–17). Other renowned scholars of capitalist exploitation and inequalities, such as Graeber (2006) and Skeggs (2014), argue that

people are not automized laborers reproducing material relations, and the realm of care embraces spaces that deny the logic of exploitation and material accumulation. According to Graeber, human life is 'being attended to and cared for' through loving, educating, honoring, and hoping for one another in our closest relations (2006, p. 74). Skeggs proposes that care through affectivity and love for one another enables people to flourish in their everyday lives within the fragile conditions of capitalism (2014, pp. 11–17).

The newest solidarity literature reflects upon the cross-cutting, complex, and global pandemic-related experiences in dialogue with ongoing discussions on humanitarian solidarity and civic interventions during the economic (2008), the 'refugee' (2015), and climate-change related crises (2020s). In this intellectual arena, critical thinking on the *commons* has entered the stage to scrutinize social practices that emphasize protection against enclosure and everyday stewardship over shared resources, as well as the cultivation of spaces of non-hierarchal respect and mutuality. Commons are understood as places where notions of deservingness are erased because people's entitlement to the basic means of living is not rendered by their comportment, social status, legal citizenship, or other factors that often disqualify people from care (Woodly et al., 2021). Commons are discussed as opportunities for radical resource redistribution and deconstructing domination to produce horizontal relationships of equality, mutuality, and responsibility.

Care is a prime method of imagining, prefiguring, and enacting alternative ways of being together in a non-exclusionary and non-sentimental manner (Ticktin, 2021, p. 916). Ticktin's engagement in this ontological move towards explaining various forms of local, everyday, and crisis-mitigating citizens' cooperation is profoundly telling. 'While I have long critiqued forms of care such as humanitarianism, I join this interest in renewed and emerging forms of materially grounded care insofar as they are co-constitutive of a new set of political formations – what I'm calling a decolonial, feminist commons' (Ticktin, 2021, p. 919). Actors of commoning are often inspired to open up, establish connections, and reshape institutions from the ground up through expanding commoning (De Angelis, 2017, p. 24). This expansion may rely on 'subversive commoning,' which motivates communities to preserve their autonomy in parallel with engaging in 'boundary commoning' – linking with other domains and communities through common interests (Birkinbine, 2018, p. 301). Commoning not only involves fostering new means of production but also creating new subjectivities and ways of being in common (Nightingale, 2019).

In parallel with conceptualizing the political hope of commoning, experiences show that commons are contingent achievements and may be imbued with ambivalence and power-related contradictions (Nightingale, 2019, p. 18). Thus, '[…] commoning efforts involve a renegotiation of the (contested) political relationships through which everyday community affairs are organized and governed' (Nightingale, 2019, p. 25). In other words, efforts at promoting inclusive well-being may still generate the effects of exclusion. These insights pertain not only to overwhelming neoliberal and authoritarian (or combined) policy regimes but to any kind of bottom-up and horizontal civic activities that rely on mutuality, disinterested care, and unconditional support in circumstances alien to these principles.

Despite a genuine concern with the disconcerting potentials of civic solidarity, in this inquiry, we were compelled to seek forms of solidarity which transgressed and reassembled groups of people and registers of valuations to enact reciprocity and mutualism and to build transversal social relations. We purposefully selected our solidarity actors

among those who discovered, nurtured, or explicitly targeted perspectives that we consider emancipatory in some fashion, being ready to expand human conditions and relations to encompass more equality, rights, and dignity.

4 The nature and value of solidarity work

In the context of emerging shortages of goods and services during the pandemic-related lockdowns, meeting life's basic needs required quick social reactions. Our empirical investigations revealed that two saliently different types of actors (market-friendly and market-critical) largely continued their work according to a pre-existing operational logic. In the former case, we observed a university-based business incubator unit and small and mid-size entrepreneurs who strived to protect their employees' jobs and upgrade their constituencies' crisis-coping skills. Regarding the latter end of the scale, we explored civic groups engaged in social economy and cooperative production experiments prior to the pandemic that strived to safeguard these spaces. These two types of actors composed a smaller part of our informants. Most of our solidarity actors positioned themselves in-between with their aspirations to re-tailor mainstream market structures and/or create separate spaces of exchange outside of the market through solidarity acts. Among them, we identified owners of restaurants, master chefs, independent artists, self-employed professionals, neighborhood and NGO activists of different socioeconomic statuses, and occasional volunteers from different walks of life. For example, horizontal collaborations of catering industry entrepreneurs, artists, and managers of temporarily closed cultural institutions and linked civic actors delivered food and other supplies to 'essential workers' and provided material and non-material support to the temporarily or permanently vulnerable of different walks of life. Business managers, IT professionals, and inclusive education-supporting civic actors found each other to establish and operate knowledge platforms to boost online pedagogy innovations.

Gradually, cooperation emerged between people of different social statuses, and the possibility of horizontally organized participation became tangible. These horizontal liaisons embodied transversal inspirations and practices that cut across three well-established distinctions in organizing human labor in late modern (Global North) societies: between lay and professional knowledge, between blue- and white-collar work, and between paid and unpaid contributions. Most of our informant action groups and collectives did not see major challenges in defining the in-house rules, coordination protocols, and division of labor in their activities. As a rule of thumb, the participants of the civic engagement track records took the lead in shaping the operations of the new action groups. Credibility and capacity to coordinate were judged by former solidarity and community organizing experience. An activist from an established civil society group supporting inclusive education acknowledged that '…civic actors are accustomed not to waste any opportunity and [can] navigate from crisis to crisis. They know what to do, or to be more precise, they know where to place what they know. Then the professionals hook up who have some technical expertise and material infrastructure.' Further, the grounds for taking a central coordination role were tied to the intensity of commitment reckoned in daily or weekly hours of availability. However, many of the solidarians acknowledged that

responding to inquiries from the assisted users of a new service in the most helpful manner was becoming increasingly demanding for volunteers of diverse backgrounds. For example, a knowledge platform that boosted online pedagogy innovations created a workflow, '…which enabled our activists to turn to a rapidly growing in-house inventory of case knowledge to make the best decision, to avoid mistakes, and seek advice only for the most sensitive matters'.

Several solidarity actors repurposed their primarily market-based knowledge in human resource management. They became the most active innovators in connecting paid and unpaid work, pairing skilled and unskilled tasks, and lacing together social reproduction and economic regeneration in micro-practices. They stretched the boundaries of their entities, converging the positions of owner, laborer, and solidarity broker, being open to transactions with both classical market actors and charity organizations but not merging with those. One of the many urban catering entrepreneurs who stepped into such solidarity coordination work appeared to be a particularly vocal interpreter of the experimental ethos and praxis of organizing work. He explained that solidarity experiments led to positive surprises, satisfaction, and pride in that the 'horizontal logic of mobilizing labor is doable, effective, and liked by those involved.' These solidarity entrepreneurs mindfully acknowledged that these innovations fared well when the focus on market efficiency and profitability was temporarily deemphasized or ranked secondary to maintaining meaningful work and employment. These groups acted as vernacular Polanyians, establishing embedded reciprocities through structures parallel to the market or safeguarding these spaces by controlling their channels to market.

These examples revealed distinctive modes of valuing labor in solidarity work. Participating in fixing supply chains, substituting broken infrastructures, and connecting social spaces became valued contributions regardless of the providers' original social and cultural capital. The possibility and willingness not to register and measure solidarity labor contributions according to rigid metrics, let alone in monetary terms, promoted forms of valuation inherent to various *commoning* practices (Woodly et al., 2021). Simply being on board as co-workers in solidarity actions by accepting specific internal rules of cooperation generated valuable work and recognition for participants. Value was most importantly defined through the *sense of meaningfulness* of solidarity work. Provisioning basic goods to the needy and essential workers (in some cases for a whole neighborhood) became a compelling experience of productive work. This experience of profound worth resonates with Graeber's explanation of how the social value of labor often becomes detached from its market value (Graeber, 2019). Our solidarians turned upside down what Graeber called 'bullshit' jobs by generating gratifying assignments that contributed to tangible and socially relevant goals. Further, the multi-layered and vibrant space of solidarity acts enacted relational (*phatic)* work, as conceptualized by Malinowski and advanced by Elyachar (2010). This quality of work connects citizens and enhances social bonds beyond the immediacy of the encounters. For our solidarians, the effects of rolling out the meaningful work of caring for others, paid or unpaid, helped reorganize or enhance neighborhood or temporary collectives' connections. All this also resonates with how the elevating aspects of otherwise disconcerting neoliberal citizenship have been discussed in relation to conditions of Southern European austerity after the 2008 economic crisis (Muehlebach, 2012, p. 205). Volunteers hone and cultivate human relations by mobilizing the sensibilities and sociabilities built into their solidarity work.

Despite the gratifying aspects of solidarity work, the pandemic-related solidarity operations revealed that horizontally organized work rarely exists without tensions and contradictions when inequalities are manifold in society. Some cracks in the sense of meaningfulness and unnoticed or intentionally trivialized 'expenses' of solidarity work were revealed by a few solidarians. For example, social workers who teamed up in a civic group with unpaid volunteers in a deprived neighborhood in Budapest regularly took on second and unpaid shifts in addition to their formal municipal employment to help people in need during the pandemic. They reported that '…we never feel that we have done something successfully; we are always anxious because we cannot win, even in obvious cases'. Another action group which was supporting the most vulnerable families in the countryside through various forms of provisioning argued: 'We help mitigate the gravest consequences of the crisis, but we cannot fundamentally change the marginalized conditions of those people we help. It is the state and its authorities that should step in.' In other words, the limited outcomes of volunteering social assistance during the pandemic occasionally questioned or reduced the sense of worthiness of the solidarity work. These insights surfaced in conversations with our informants on work, the organization of everyday activities, and achievements. Several solidarians noticed that lockdown-related vulnerabilities were inextricably intertwined with the impacts of enduring marginalization that *commoning* during the crisis was only partially able to mitigate, let alone transform.

Another widely discussed controversy concerning unpaid volunteering remained largely hidden in our interview conversations: the naturalized impacts of *self-exploitation.* Most solidarity actions were composite outcomes of paid and unpaid work in different configurations. This duality surfaced in the operational logic of the collectives as well as in the lives of the solidarians. However, for some action groups, the proportion of unpaid work was much larger than the paid one, and in the lives of the solidarians, the lines of production and reproduction were often completely erased. This did not generate much tension in the lives of those who volunteered together with their family members or who were able to negotiate a decent sharing of caring work at home. But for those whose caring duties had been disproportionate vis-a-vis other family members or could not rely on anyone except for themselves, the unpaid work had multiplied and expanded their working time, often exorbitantly. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, this experience was scarcely mentioned explicitly by our informants. In those rare cases when it was voiced, for example, by a new action group taking care of fragile elderly people with no daily supporting services during the lockdown, the utterances were dramatic: 'No one can doubt it: we take over state responsibilities and sweat 24 hours a day.' Another group in a mid-sized city engaged in providing various services to vulnerable families accounted for their work as follows: 'We are used to doing this: we fill in the cracks, mobilize people, we do not care about working hours, just the dedication to complete the task. This is the essence of the civil attitude.' According to this reasoning, limitless availability is readily naturalized.

Our interviews did not explicitly address the gendered nature of volunteering work in anticipation that its relevance would pop up. Several informants, indeed, observed that women were more active and systematically engaged than men in solidarity work. This experience resonates with the general distribution of paid and unpaid work in society and the naturalized expectation that women should live up to these social norms at times of crisis as well. Some of our civic actors reported on their aspirations to increase the presence of male volunteers to parity with women without mentioning specific actions.

Disproportionate gender participation was primarily detected by the active-aged activists and less by the young and elderly ones, presumably associated with generational differences in equality norms and political awareness. The discomfort with the imbalanced gender composition, however, did not become a primary concern for our informants. We assume that their enthusiasm for the solidarity upsurge that cut across different social ranks and positions overshadowed this feeling. The relatively fair gender balance in the leadership of the formalized civic groups active in the solidarity operations may have also helped mitigate the reported discomfort with the uneven gender participation in solidarity work.

Despite these briefly portrayed adversarial conditions, our informants' overwhelming experience was that non-hierarchical valuing and organizing human labor and reciprocal praxes of solidarity work effectively substituted the public sector and the market in provisioning basic goods amidst broken chains of production and service delivery and contributed to repairing social bonds. In parallel with reshaping and making sense of work, they strove for fairness in the distribution of material goods, attention, and care in society in crisis conditions and broader vistas. This leads our discussion to the second key component of solidarity operations.

5 Making sense of the duty to care

As the previous section has revealed, in organizing and making sense of solidarity work, citizens and civic groups all showed an essential openness and creativity across the board in organizing labor in collaborative and non-proprietary ways. These actors, however, were saliently diverse in how they explained the causes of the ruptures, marginalization, and abandonment in pandemic crisis management and reflected upon the nature of their solidarity activities in wider public affairs. Further, their understandings of responsibilities in organizing systemic care in society, i.e., the reproduction of material and non-material conditions of life on individual, community, and societal scales, also significantly diverged. These understandings reckoned formal assignments and administrative, political, and material power in relation to human well-being, needs, and vulnerabilities.

We have identified three modalities of producing visions and duties of care in pandemic solidarity operations. We found the first among several solidarity actors who fostered moral transformations by changing individual attitudes and spreading the spirit of collective action in more expansive societal spaces. The norms of selflessness and reciprocity framed as either humanist or religious convictions appeared as the primary motivations behind these solidarity operations. Moral reasoning was often entangled with a middle-class-based sense of responsibility attuned to social disparities and the unmet needs of the marginalized. In some accounts, the reciprocity in solidarity acts was understood as a thick concept that entailed that the roles of givers and receivers were interchangeable, and the distinction between the carer and the cared destabilized. Reflections on the internal power relations of the solidarity space thus generated a first-level public concern.

This sort of activism strived to achieve social change by reshaping people's beliefs by engaging them in volunteering activities in addition to their paid jobs or the lack or temporary collapse of these. Interestingly, most informants of this conviction were experi-

enced volunteers who had already been active in previous crises. They conceptualized their work by envisioning individual or small group-based solidaric acts resulting in a proliferation of citizen involvement and mutuality. One of the established smaller civic organizations in the capital city helping to provide food to health workers popularized solidarity work among young people by noting that: 'We reach out, help, and do good things that everyone can do. We show to people that you and you can also do this. We are not super-heroes; we demonstrate that participation builds the community, and we invite others to become active.' In this form of mobilization, social and political structures were seen as subject to improvement and repair, and grassroots activism was hoped to reconfigure social ties and, thus, address unequal citizenship and differential access to social services. Notably, the respective groups in our sample resisted working closely with the more prominent faith-based charity organizations, regarding those as exclusionary and authoritative in their solidarity practices. We argue that solidarity actors who proposed to mobilize citizens through moral reasoning and grassroots community work enacted *prefigurative commoning*: they advocated for and conducted the non-hierarchical valuing of solidarity work, envisioned the transposability of small-scale actions to wider social structures, and genuinely believed that solidarity work contributed to repairing the societal system of care.

The second type of solidarity actors boosted everyday solidarity acts, delivering assistance in mitigating a lack of attention, care, and resources to maintain the elementary conditions of human life. At the center of their helping activities were quotidian details of social reproduction, yet essential ones in times of crisis. They showed similarities with the former type of actors in their practices, yet major differences in their reasonings. They ushered in meaningful work, provisioning, and reconnecting supply chains as everyday solidarity acts. In doing so, they also nurtured reciprocity-generated resources and sociabilities protected from market principles and state policies based on differential deservingness, at least in micro-settings. 'If you start acting only with small contributions, you can be reassured that later, if you are in need, you will get it back in a community which is connected by this mutuality,' – stated a food provisioning action group's unofficial spokesperson concerning their spirit of action. The informant cited above also proposed that '… citizens' contribution to the common good is essential at times of the paramount and enduring inaction of the state.' This solidarity actor, like several other ones we consulted, proposed causal relations between the ruling regime's poor social service provisioning work and the unmet needs of several social groups during the crisis. Another sort of state failure was experienced by those civic groups that strived to offer para-medical services to hospitals and other medical institutions, their personnel, and clients. These groups learned that civic solidarity acts had to be limited to food delivery for medical health teams in public hospitals, regardless of the potential expertise offered. This happened despite paramount shortages of high-quality safety equipment in clinical settings at the beginning of the pandemic. The state proclaimed itself the only capable actor in certain service provisions, encouraging several civilians to establish autonomous spaces of action.

Quite a few helping actors deliberately distanced their activities from controversial public affairs. They explicitly valorized citizens, volunteering, and local actions in contrast to state or municipal services. The solidarity space became a sanctuary which protected practices, relations, and collectivities against the mainstream relations of exploitation and

unfairness. As sharply articulated by a self-help food producing and distribution group activist in the capital: 'We build an alternative world, which is protected against exclusionary values. It stands as an island based on egalitarian relations among people – the caring and the cared-for as well.' This position was frequently expressed by labeling public affairs 'politics.' The respective solidarity actors often advocated for a polis in which civic actions are 'protected from politics.' Their principled practices of caring for the vulnerable, the ones who care for others and are exposed to health risk, and in general for rebuilding public goods in crisis, resonated with the ideals of the *commons*. Solidarity actors worked to build transactions and relations resilient to dispossession and marginalization. By non-exploitative provisioning, they embraced an explicit civic duty to care by positioning the latter as a reversal of mainstream configurations. Creating alternative domains, promulgating reciprocity instead of self-interest or one-sided gift-giving, and building connectivity to replace abandonment represented serious statements about public affairs. Some of these civic actors advocated for multiplying these spaces imbued with a duty to care but were not (yet) confident about the latter's transformative power.

Further inquiry is required to explore if the everyday acts of sharing labor, time, affect, and primary goods and connecting those who are separated do have the potential to generate social change beyond the immediacy of solidaristic relations. With respect to the perseverance of the solidarity groups concerned, another recent publication that emerged from our research explains that the new solidarians, especially in the areas of health care and education, often become subject to co-optation or appropriation by powerful business and governmental operations in the long term (Feischmidt & Neumann, 2023). This is reminiscent of the *enclosure of the commons* through state or corporate exploitation and control in various non-crisis settings as well. The time horizon of our research was not long enough to examine another potential threat to the new solidarity commons. It is Hungary's paramount material, social, and political dependency relations instigated by an authoritarian neoliberal regime, which saturates almost all domains of life (Szombati, 2021). These dependency relations generate narratives and practices that differentiate the deserving and the undeserving parts of society and assign distinctive routes to means of employment, citizenship claims, well-being, and belonging. The solidarity actors observed in our research acknowledged these dependency mechanisms and lucidly captured them as more layered and complex in urban contexts than in rural ones and, thus, less menacing to those actors pursuing communing-spirited solidarity. As a consequence, urban solidarians were relatively confident in their resilience capacities against the dependency mechanisms that saturate production and reproduction in this society.

Finally, a smaller portion of the civic groups represents the third modality of the duty to care. They had a more extended history of an astute and active public presence involving addressing *social injustices* and *inequalities* from broader historical and global perspectives. For them, the pandemic was not an extraordinary event but one in which pre-existing structural inequalities became more visible and further accentuated. This propelled the building of their networks with green, feminist, and left-wing civic and political mobilizations. They hoped to promote changes from bottom-up alternative economic organizations, cooperatives, and solidarity-based consumption and production collectives. To this end, their grassroots presence was also intensified during the pandemic.

An action group with a track record in cooperative experiments took pride in kicking off a small-scale courier service that employed a reversed model of the exploitative platform enterprises in delivery services. For them, the duty to care was embraced for those who participated in the production and those served by it. Another civic group which had organized online pro-democracy civic and human rights activities prior to the pandemic also intensively engaged in solidarity work during the crisis. They upscaled their networks and online platforms to engage in explicit 'social justice' advocacy and macro-social and political change. They took pride in the fact that two-thirds of their regular donors and petition signatories were located outside the capital city, thus bridging the differently conditioned urban and rural public spaces. They also encouraged the most politically vocal civic actors to become active in mitigating the materiality of the crisis. This articulated the conviction that engaging in everyday acts of care did not compromise political standing.

Both the alternative economy-centered and the advocacy groups expect(ed) broader structural changes from their solidarity work with the high hope of building alliances of like-minded organizations (Gagyi, 2020). 'We build autonomous groups that furnish their independent operation by their own rules. They enact models of solidarity in production and reproduction, which informs political activism as well,' – this summed up the underlying logic of the operation of an activist facilitating the networking activities across these groups. Further, many of the established civil society groups supporting marginalized communities with hands-on welfare services positioned themselves as outspoken advocates against social injustices before and during the pandemic solidarity operations. Their political vision occasionally reiterated the rationale of protecting solidarity spaces from politics, but more often, they vocally promoted the transformative potential of *commoning*. Overall, the duty to care became an explicit political agenda for the initiatives in the third modality of solidarity actions. They endorsed the relations and norms of *commoning* as defined by Ticktin, Woodly, and others and advocated for transformative changes through bottom-up civic practice and institution building.

In sum, our civic actors enacted three modalities of the duty to care through solidarity practices and reflections: the first one embraced *prefigurative commoning* through expanding the moral grounds of inclusive horizontal interactions and sociabilities, thus improving and repairing societal care. The second established various sheltered *commoning praxes* by altering the modes of collective action, protecting its own spaces and valuations, and positing itself as 'anti-political' – yet, in fact, taking anti-hegemonic positions. The third one relied on visions of social change by embracing inspirations and visions for *subversive commoning*, geared to transforming systems of production and reproduction beyond their own solidarity spaces. For us, the most diverse and less known experiments took shape in relation to the second modality to which most of the initiatives we studied belonged. The respective actors crafted critical reflections on the adversaries of pandemic crisis management and broader socio-political conditions. They demonstrated dedication and creativity in reframing and reassembling the relations of the market, state, social institutions, and micro-collectives in order to mitigate vulnerability and promote care and well-being.

6 Conclusions

Amidst massive disruptions in all domains of life due to the COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity acts reacted to people's immediate and pressing need to reorganize the basic conditions of life and livelihood. In the cornucopia of cooperation associated with everyday matters of delivering care, provisions, and social contacts, these acts reflected on and intervened not only in pandemic-related but enduring social inequality problems as well. These collective actions played a role in some fashion in actively undoing spaces organized by forces of exclusion, dispossession, and neglect by market, state, and larger religious charity organizations and their often intersecting powers.

In this article, we have ventured to explore the horizontal, bottom-up, and reciprocity-spirited collective acts and their transformative potential to link individual, micro-collective, and societal scales of action and relations. We have argued that the duty to care, as evidenced in the reorganizing of pre-existing divisions of resources, human capacities, and worths, became an essential component of solidarity operations in our examined context. Solidarity actors sharpened their practical knowledge and critical reflections on creating social spaces of reparative, alternative, or transformative agendas. We have revealed that these reflexive capacities are not the exclusive assets of politically experienced and outspoken actors. Several civic actors had an astute understanding of the frailty of *commoning* practices and that 'becoming common' depends on perseverance over time and space (Nightingale, 2019). Nonetheless, the conviction was widely shared that *commoning* acts, precisely because of their transitory and partial nature, must move beyond the politics of subsistence to actively promote the general commonwealth (Birkinbine, 2018).

The solidarity actors we observed often saw their resource allocation activities as embedded in political, social, and moral values, in line with broader Polanyian thinking (Somers & Block, 2020). Some explicitly sought a countermovement to separate market and social values; others embraced radical ideas of alternative political economies and governance through *commoning*. Their political thinking also ventured to protect civic solidarity spaces from authoritarian state operations or to strategically use them for transformative changes. We were particularly keen on capturing these diverse reasonings and practices of counterhegemonic potential, acknowledging that the newly shaped valuations and forms of cooperation might have turned to complacency and compromise in subsequent phases of the pandemic. In another publication based on the larger research initiative we implemented during COVID-19, the authors stress the limitations of civic solidarity acts in pursuing longer-term structural changes (Feischmidt & Neumann, 2023).

During the 2015–16 'refugee crisis' in Europe, power, status, and resource relations among the privileged and the precariat, the deserving and the undeserving, remained relatively undisturbed, if not reinforced in most solidarity contexts. During the COVID-19 lockdown events, however, vulnerability and abandonment cut across societies' socioeconomic, cultural, ideological, and spatial cleavages. Solidary acts fostered the connection between the concerned privileged and the neglected marginalized, as well as groups with various imaginaries regarding undoing or redoing the social order. The pandemic evoked a 'hopeful time of action' in which solidarity actors, on the one hand, felt that they did have control over what was happening, at least in their solidarity practices, but often beyond those (Zamponi, 2024). On the other hand, they also developed varied practices in

care, labor, and public discussions that reacted to the extraordinary times and conditions yet always incited the 'normal' and the regular experiences in the recent past and envisioned those for the future. In reflection of these efforts, scholars, including the authors of this article, also made formative journeys during the pandemic crisis by contemplating civic experiments in collective actions and understanding rudimentary or more articulate imaginations about the feasibilities of fairness, well-being, and dignity in provisioning and care.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to members of the research group who worked with us on the *Solidarity during the Covid-19 epidemic* project (Judit Acsádi, Judit Durst, Eszter Neumann, Domonkos Sik, Ildikó Zakariás, and Csilla Zsigmond). We thank the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences (MTA) for the financial support and our colleagues who encouraged our thinking on the topic: Márton Gerő, Gabriella Lukács, Attila Melegh, Andreas Streinzer, Jelena Tošic, and two anonymous reviewers.

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Annex List of examined solidarity initiatives

Case number	Actor	Form of collective action	Solidarity activity during pandemic
1	Engineer entrepreneur	Citizen initiative	Producing basic protective devices for health workers and mobilizing peer entrepreneurs
2	University-based business incubator head	Citizen initiative	Supporting young entrepreneurs in kicking off their own enterprises in crisis conditions
3	Activist from enduring nexus associated with volunteering groups and city government	Citizen Initiative	Mobilizing local community for volunteering, donating, social assistance to the most vulnerable
4	General medical doctor	Citizen initiative	Coordinating volunteering among health workers and advocacy on crisis management in health
5	Experienced volunteer mobilizing citizens for local community work	Citizen initiative	Home-based services to all citizens with high health risk, including health, everyday wellbeing needs
6	Neighborhood group galvanized by the pandemic	Civic group	Domestic service and daily shopping for the elderly and disabled
7	Cooperative formation for eco-conscious consumption	Civic group	Expanding green consumption community in alliance with production cooperatives
8	Small action group around a star chef	Civic group	Operating an online platform to bridge labor supply and needs starting as catering enterprise and expanding to solidarity initiatives
9	Cooperative experiment pursuing social economy	Civic group	Enhancing social economy experiments by strengthening civic alliance and creating a new cooperative-based courier service entity

Case number	Actor	Form of collective action	Solidarity activity during pandemic
10	Ad-hoc group of allied professionals and volunteers	Civic group	Providing regular, quality hot meals to essential health workers
11	Education and parenting support-centered civil initiative	Civic group	Online call-in help for parents concerning online learning, IT, and hardware support for schools and parents
12	Ad-hoc action group of likeminded professionals	Civic group	Collecting cash donations and regranting to the most vulnerable children's families
13	Local parish community of the Lutheran Church	Civic group	Producing basic health devices (masks) through mobilizing the temporarily unemployed in volunteering, reaching out to the most marginalized urban poor
14	Civic cooperation office of capital city district with large volunteer network acting like a civic group	Special office of local government	Interlacing the human resources of closed social service institutions and the volunteers, coordinating the activity of hundreds of active solidarians
15	Established urban group supporting homeless people	Civil society organization (CSO)	Adding special health/sanitation packages to regular and systematic food deliveries to the homeless
16	Community and civil society development group	CSO	Fundraising for marginalized communities and distributing digital devices to public education actors
17	Pro-active foundation supporting community building and entrepreneurship	CSO	Crisis-related support for small enterprises, assisting digital teaching and learning, and delivering basic food and sanitation packages to marginalized communities
18	Established group for community and civil society development	CSO	Providing low threshold emergency micro-funds for local grassroots and upgrading online networking and knowledge sharing among them
19	Social workers and volunteers supporting urban marginalized	CSO	Providing regular hot meals to the most vulnerable and marginalized urban families
20	Pro-active foundation mobilizing young volunteers	CSO	Collecting and distributing sanitation goods and food donations for the most vulnerable villages
21	Established organization offering after-school education for the most marginalized (rural)	CSO	Specialized help for most deprived families to assist children to engage in online education and material support with everyday coping

Case number	Actor	Form of collective action	Solidarity activity during pandemic
22	Established organization for after-school education for the most marginalized (urban)	CSO	Specialized help for most deprived families to assist children to engage in online education and material support with everyday coping
23	Established group providing regular support to deprived communities	CSO	Connecting the most vulnerable and the urban upper middle class through regular food and clothing drives
24	High outreach online platform and policy advocacy umbrella facilitating civic participation	CSO	Material and psychological assistance to essential workers at the frontline of health services
25	Alliance of professionals and trade union activists	CSO	Phone-based assistance to families caring for fragile elderly and crisis-sensitive knowledge sharing
26	Established CSO supporting home-based elderly care	CSO	Mutual support group for families caring for the disabled and advocacy action

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The role of capital income in Hungarian income distribution from 2007 to 2021

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 199–220.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1295
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

Capital income represents a significant and growing share of total income at the aggregate level in most countries. However, the link between capital income and overall income inequality is not clear, as it is influenced by the distribution of capital income among individuals and its overlap with labour income. Using administrative personal income tax data, we explore the characteristics of taxable capital income in Hungary for the period from 2007 to 2021 and assess its role in overall income inequality. Capital income, which accounted for 8 to 12 per cent of total taxable income in the period under review, was distributed among just 5 to 7 per cent of taxpayers. The highest income percentile obtained 74 per cent of capital income, while the share of the highest income decile exceeded 90 per cent in 2021. Given its concentration at the top of the total income distribution, capital income significantly increased income inequality. By decomposing the change in inequality measured by the Gini index, we show that although the increase in overall income inequality is largely attributable to the growing concentration of labour income, capital income also exerted a major influence during this period. In our simulation, we demonstrate that an increase in the share of capital income within total income leads to a notable increase in inequality.

Keywords: income inequality; capital income; personal income tax; Gini index

1 Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, there has been a notable surge in professional and public interest in the evolution of income inequality and the role of capital income in this process. Although Asia's economic development has reduced global inequality in recent decades (Milanovic, 2022), the empirical evidence points to an increase in within-country disparity (Chancel et al., 2023). Increases in income inequality may have consequences for economic growth (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2015), social mobility (Chetty et al., 2014) and social cohesion (Vergolini, 2011). Some research suggests that increasing inequality is due to an increasing share of capital income, which tends to be more concentrated than labour income (for example, Piketty, 2014; Ranaldi, 2021). While the literature generally agrees that capital

income has increased as a share of overall income in recent decades, various explanations have been proposed to elucidate the underlying reasons. According to Piketty (2014), the increase in the capital income share is due to the fact that the return to capital income exceeds economic growth in the long run, resulting in an increase in the capital-labour ratio. Alternative explanations include the globalisation of production, such as the outsourcing of certain production phases (Elsby et al., 2013; Decreuse & Maarek, 2015), the decline in the relative price of capital goods (Karabarbounis & Neiman, 2014) and automation (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018). A further explanation is the emergence of 'superstar' firms (Autor et al., 2020) and the consequential rise in average market power and average profit rate in recent decades (De Loecker et al., 2020).

However, an increase in capital income as a share of total income does not necessarily increase overall income inequality. Total income inequality, as measured by the Gini index, is determined by three factors: the share of labour and capital income, the concentration of these two types of income, and the correlation between each type of income and total income. This correlation reflects the degree of overlap between groups of income earners (Schechtman & Yitzhaki, 1999). This is in line with Ranaldi's approach (2022), which highlights that if capital income is concentrated at the top of the income distribution and labour income at the bottom, this leads to a strong positive relationship between functional and personal inequality. The complexity of the relationship may contribute to the conflicting research findings on this topic. While several studies (Bengtsson & Waldenström, 2018; Fräßdorf et al., 2011) have found that an increase in capital income increases income inequality, others (e.g. Francese & Mulas-Granados, 2015) have not found a relationship between the two variables.

Considering this background and based on personal income tax files, we explore the characteristics of personal taxable capital income and its influence on income inequality in Hungary between 2007 and 2021. Our research aims to investigate how the concentration of pre-tax and post-tax capital and labour income and their relationship changed throughout our sample period and how these factors shaped the distribution of total income.

On the one hand, our work can be considered a follow-up to research by Tóth and Ábrahám (1996) and Tóth (1997), which are the earliest papers, to the best of our knowledge, to investigate inequalities in capital income in Hungary based on personal income returns. On the other hand, our work is closely related to a new wave of research published in the second half of the 2010s that focused on income distribution in Central and Eastern European countries using administrative databases, typically based on personal income tax returns. These studies provide comprehensive analyses of the evolution of pre-tax total income inequality in Poland (Bukowsky & Novokmet, 2017), Czechia (Novokmet, 2018), Slovenia (Stanovnik & Verbic, 2014) and Croatia (Kump & Novokmet, 2018). The same approach is applied by Mavridis and Mosberger (2017), who explore changes in Hungarian income distribution covering the period from 1914 to 2008. Our paper contributes to this literature by extending the surveyed period to 2021 and highlighting the role of capital income in the change in income inequality.

Survey-based empirical evidence indicates that income inequality in Hungary started to rise in the early 1980s and rose more rapidly after the transition from the socialist regime to a market economy in the second half of the 1990s (Éltető & Havas, 2009; Tóth

& Szelényi, 2018). Then, evidence based on both administrative and household survey data suggests that income inequality stagnated until roughly the mid-2000s (Kovács, 2011; Mavridis & Mosberger, 2017), and according to some measures, it may have declined (Tóth, 2015). The Great Recession and the introduction of a flat tax system in 2011-2012 have exerted a major influence on income inequality. Microsimulation estimations show that the policy measures that followed the 2008 financial crisis led to a widening of inequality. Based on 2011 data, tax reform was expected to further increase income inequality in the early 2010s (Benczúr et al., 2012; Tóth & Virovácz, 2013). Household survey data also demonstrate an increase in income inequality until 2014 (Tóth & Szelényi, 2018; Huszár, 2022).

Only a few studies were published on the evolution of income distribution in the subsequent period using administrative data, but these tend to concentrate on specific aspects of income distribution. Krekó et al. (2023) focused solely on labour income and pointed out that by 2020, the redistributive effect of personal income tax on income inequality had declined to zero. On the other hand, Svraka (2021) exclusively examined pre-tax incomes and, covering the period from 2012 to 2019 found that the rise in overall pre-tax income inequality was accompanied by a decrease in the concentration of pre-tax labour income. This highlights the increasingly important role that capital income has played in income distribution alongside labour income over the last few decades. This is underlined by the fact that capital income as a share of total income exceeded 7 per cent by the second half of the 1990s and 10 per cent by the turn of the millennium (Kovács, 2011). Furthermore, Mavridis and Mosberger (2017) found that in 2008, the top 0.1 per cent and the top 1 per cent of earners accrued 25 per cent and 50 per cent of capital income, respectively. This clearly demonstrates that by 2008, capital income played an important role in income distribution.

Some of the papers mentioned above used the administrative dataset to investigate the distribution of pre-tax (Svraka, 2019) or post-tax (Krekó et al., 2023) income, while some looked at household survey data to explore post-tax income inequality. Others considered capital income in exploring the evolution of income inequality over time, although only until 2008 (Mavridis & Mosberger, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, our paper is the first to combine all these approaches. The novelty of our paper is its comprehensive approach, as well as the administrative dataset covering recent years that includes labour and capital income before and after taxation and covers the whole range of the income distribution, which is necessary for measuring inequalities. In addition to describing changes to the pre-tax and post-tax inequality of labour and capital income, we identify their roles in total income inequality through decomposition.

We find that capital income is more concentrated than labour income. The top income decile based on overall income was receiving more than 90 per cent of total capital income by the end of the surveyed period, while this proportion was around one-third in the case of labour income. While capital income constitutes a relatively small share of total income, it markedly amplifies overall income inequality due to its high concentration compared with labour income and strong correlation with total income.

Inequality indicators substantially increased between 2007 and 2021. The decomposition of the Gini indicator reveals that the bulk of the increase occurred between 2007 and 2015 due to a growing concentration of post-tax labour income. Notably, the Gini

index of pre-tax labour income did not experience a significant increase in this period, suggesting that the introduction of the flat tax system played a major role in the heightened concentration of labour income. Subsequently, between 2015 and 2021, we observe a further slight increase in the overall Gini index, driven by an increase in capital income as a share of total income.

In the next chapter, we introduce the dataset. Then, we present the main characteristics of capital income compared to labour income based on data from 2021. In Chapter 3, we describe the changes in pre-tax and post-tax inequality using different indicators from 2007 to 2021. We consider both capital and labour income and identify their contributions to total income inequality. This is followed by a simulation to evaluate the impact of (further) increasing the share of capital income on overall income inequality. Chapter 5 summarises our findings and concludes the paper.

2 Data

We use anonymised individual-level personal income tax (PIT) returns from the National Tax and Customs Administration (NTCA) for the analysis. For the years 2015 and 2021, we have a complete database of returns, while for the year 2007, we have a database containing a random sample of 10 per cent of the returns.

In many respects, the administrative databases of tax returns provide a more accurate picture of taxable income than the survey data. They include both the lower and upper-income strata of the population and are not biased by interviewer or respondent errors. Lakner and Milanovic (2013) show that adjustment for the likely under-reporting of top incomes in survey results considerably increases the global Gini index measured solely based on surveys.[1] B. Kis and Tóth (2016), based on a comparison of questionnaire surveys (EU-SILC at the European level and the Tárki Monitor, which includes Hungarian households) with administrative data, conclude that questionnaire surveys typically do not reach the top 5–8 income percentiles of the population at all. Therefore, they show an income distribution narrower than the actual one, and 23 per cent of total income is not covered. Flores (2021), comparing national accounts and survey data in many countries, demonstrates that capital income is even more underreported than labour income. As a consequence, surveys significantly exaggerate the impact of labour income distribution and underestimate capital share and its dynamics.

Individual tax-return data also have their own limitations. The distribution of individual earnings may not accurately reflect the true income situation of individuals, given the potential impact of intra-household income sharing and as social transfers are not included in the data.

Against this background, while household surveys or household level administrative data might more suitable if the main question of interest is the welfare of individuals. Household administrative data from tax returns can be more useful to answer questions such as the role of top incomes, distributional impact of capital incomes and the impact of personal income tax on the distribution of income.

[1] From 70.5 to 76 in 2008. They use the gap between national accounts consumption and survey means in combination with a Pareto-type imputation of the upper tail to adjust the income distribution.

In addition, research suggests that major swings in individual-level inequality correspond to changes in household-level inequality. Substantial evidence from numerous developed countries indicates a tendency for individuals to choose partners with similar socio-economic backgrounds and education levels. Given the strong correlation between potential income and formal education, assortative mating results in a higher level of inequality at the household level compared to the individual level. A study by Greenwood et al. (2014) reveals that the increasing returns to education, the rise in married female labour force participation, and the growing prevalence of assortative mating have collectively heightened inequality in the United States over the last few decades. For Hungary, Naszódi and Mendoca (2022) document the high prevalence of homogamy, with more than two-thirds of marriages being between spouses who have the same level of education. In addition, along with the other four countries, they demonstrate an increasing trend in the preference for selecting a spouse with a similar education level between 2000 and the early 2010s.

In our study, labour income is represented by the consolidated tax base included in the income tax return, while capital income is represented by separately taxable income and, from 2015, by income from abroad that is taxable in the home country. For economic reasons and to ensure comparability between years, we reclassify or exclude certain income types when defining the primary indicators of our analysis, namely labour and capital income (For a summary of tax returns and main income categories, see Table 1). The most important of these changes is that income related to self-employment and agricultural holdings is excluded from both consolidated and separate taxable income. On the one hand, the methodologies of the national accounts and the economics literature (e.g. Valentiny & Herrendorf, 2008) include self-employed income as a third category alongside capital and labour income, within which the separation of capital and labour income is rather arbitrary. On the other hand, with the introduction of the itemised lump sum tax construction for self-employed (KATA) in 2013 and its gradual take-up, income tax returns cover a steadily decreasing share of self-employed income (see Appendix A for further details on the definition of income). Our analysis is based on the personal income tax database, but in calculating the tax liability and, through this, the taxable income, we impute social security contributions paid by employees for all taxpayers in accordance with tax year legislation.

3 Characteristics of capital income

Personal taxable capital income (hereafter: capital income) represents a much smaller share of taxpayers' total income than labour income. Between 5 and 7 per cent of taxpayers reported having some capital income between 2007 and 2021, which ranged between 8 and 12 per cent of total income (see Table 1). The share of capital income depends on the economic cycle. It declined sharply during the financial crisis between 2008 and 2010,[2] but started to rise again with the recovery and exceeded the level of 2007 in 2021. The largest

[2] Source: Annual reports of NTCA.

category of capital income is dividend income (50–70 per cent depending on the year), with significant income also coming from property rental, property sales and capital gains on financial investments (see Table 1).

It is important to note that the share of capital income in total taxable personal income differs in concept and is much smaller in magnitude than the share of the capital factor in gross domestic product (GDP). There are several income components in the property income of households in the national accounts that are not included in tax returns: income from foreign investments and income taxed exclusively abroad, as well as non-taxable capital income, such as interest income on government securities and yields on long-term investment securities accounts or pension savings. The PIT returns do not include any information on the personal income tax paid by income provider agents (for example, the financial institution which pays the interest income). However, this missing taxable capital income made up a relatively small share of total capital income, equivalent to 3 per cent on average in the surveyed years.[3] In addition, income that has not been legally earned or has not been reported is not included in the database, so could not be considered in our analysis.[4] It is also worth emphasising that an assessment of wealth, which is clearly one of the main factors determining the financial status of individuals, goes beyond the scope of this document. However, capital income can reflect wealth in several ways.

In addition to household property income items that are not taxable or reported by financial intermediaries, the aggregate capital share includes many components that do not show up in personal capital income. The most important items are the depreciation of capital, imputed rent paid by homeowners to themselves, the capital income of foreign residents paying taxes abroad, and undistributed profit. On the other hand, income from selling property – which is included in the capital income concept used in the study – is not included in the national accounts but is considered a change in net worth (UNECE 2011). While the share of capital income in total income in the tax records does not exhibit an explicit rise, the aggregate labour share in Hungary decreased significantly between 2007 and 2018 (see Kónya et al., 2020).

The impact of capital items not included in our data on income distribution is not straightforward. While imputed rents from owner-occupied housing are presumably less unequally distributed, income from foreign investments might be even more unequal than other types of capital income.

In the following, we present the main characteristics of capital income based on 2021 data. Although the overall share of capital income is small, its distribution is markedly more uneven than that of labour income, which finding is in line with international trends.[5] The Lorenz curves for capital and labour income before tax (see Figure 1) reveal a

[3] Source: Authors' calculation using NTCA database.

[4] Regarding labour income, Benedek and Lelkes (2011) determined that income-underreporting accounts for 9–13% of reported income, with the highest rates in the two poorest tenths (29–30%). However, Filep-Mosberger and Reiff (2022) pointed out that the rate of underreporting decreased in the 2010s. In the case of capital income, we do not have information about the size and the trend of underreporting.

[5] Attractive as it may be, comparing our results directly with foreign trends would encounter serious difficulties. This is because our analyses are based on personal income tax returns, and even if we only considered studies that use the same administrative database in different countries, fundamental differences in tax regulations result in different income coverage. Because of this, the comparison would involve serious distortion and misinterpretation.

sharp contrast, demonstrating the concentration of capital income at the upper percentiles. Since capital income comprises only 11.5 per cent of total income, the Lorenz curve for total income closely resembles that of labour income, albeit with a noteworthy impact at the highest levels of the income distribution.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics from the PIT databases

	2007	**2015**	**2021**
Number of tax files	4 568 170	4 624 677	4 998 343
Number of persons with taxable income	3 638 860	4 342 602	4 679 774
Number of persons with labour income	3 604 350	4 275 552	4 580 901
Number of persons with capital income	237 360	243 385	344 551
Share of taxpayers with capital income (%)	6.5	5.3	6.9
Share of capital to total income (%)	10.5	8.0	11.5
Total income (billion HUF)	7296	10 744	20 678
Labour income (billion HUF)	6528	9 882	18 308
Capital income (billion HUF)	769	862	2 370
In total income:			
Mean (HUF)	2 005 073	2 474 180	4 418 660
Median (HUF)	1 306 045	1 642 700	3 045 571
1. decile (HUF)	349 333	299 455	375 616
9. decile (HUF)	3 766 700	4 668 200	8 148 840
9. decile/ Median (HUF)	2.9	2.8	2.7
Decomposition of capital income (%):			
Dividends	48.3	69.8	65.4
Income from property rental	8.2	7.0	9.6
Capital gains	10.2	7.2	7.3
Income from property selling	28.1	4.7	6.6
Income also taxed abroad	1.7	5.3	3.9
Other	3.5	6.0	7.2

Source: NTCA database

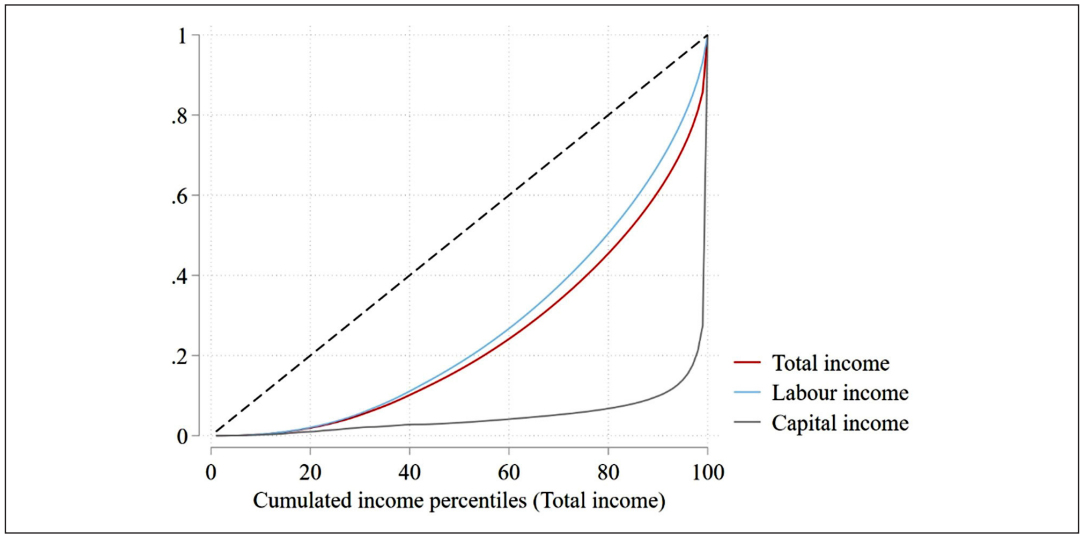


Figure 1 Lorenz curve – share of income percentiles based on capital, labour and total income (before tax, 2021)

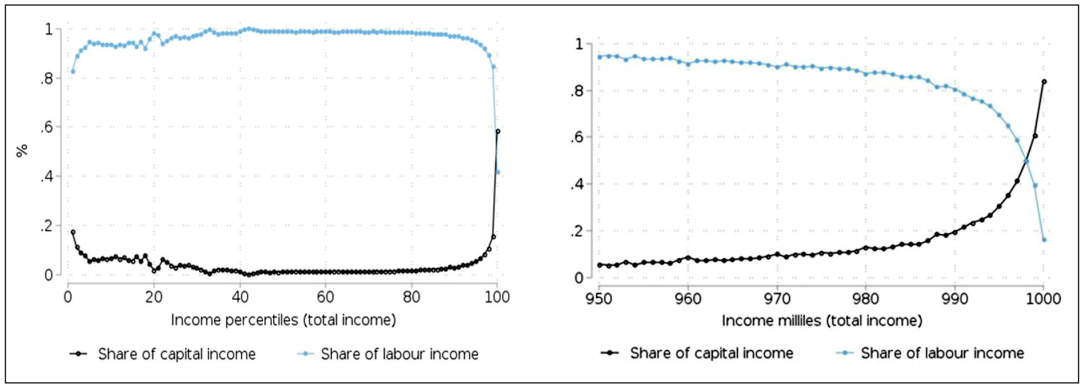
Notes: The Lorenz curve shows the share of labour and capital income at each cumulative income percentile. The diagonal line represents the case in which all taxpayers have the same share of total income.
Source: NTCA database

The division of total income between labour and capital income shows that capital income is concentrated at the highest end of the total income distribution, playing a dominant role only in the top income quintile. Its share of total income remains negligible across most of the income distribution, exceeding 20 per cent only in the top income percentile and 50 per cent in the top three-thousandths of the distribution (Figure 2). The share of capital income exceeds 80 per cent in the top thousandth of the income distribution, showing that the main income source is capital income for the highest-income taxpayers.[6] In addition to the highest end of the income distribution, the share of capital income exceeds 10 per cent at the bottom of the distribution. However, it should be noted that the bottom two income brackets have low incomes below the minimum wage, a significant share of which is irregular or one-off income, so the fluctuation in the share of capital income is not surprising.

Nevertheless, capital and labour income is not fully segmented, as capital income earners also tend to have high labour income. There is a strong relationship between the level of labour income and the share of taxpayers with capital income at each percentile. In the bottom seventy labour income percentiles, 5 per cent of taxpayers have capital income, but the share rises steeply towards the top of the income distribution, reaching over 30 per cent for the top 1 per cent of the income distribution (Figure 3). In addition, there is

[6] The concentration of capital income at the highest end of the income distribution is not specific to Hungary – for example, Piketty (2014, p. 215) presents a similar chart for the United States in 2007.

a significant share (12 per cent) of taxpayers with capital income among those whose earned income equals the guaranteed minimum wage – the minimum payable salary to full-time employees hired for jobs requiring at least a secondary school qualification or secondary vocational qualification. Presumably, this arises from entrepreneurs who are employed at their own firms at the lowest possible wage and take the remaining income from the enterprise as capital income.[7]



A: by income percentile *B: In the top fifty income milliles*

Figure 2 Share of capital and labour income in total income, 2021

Source: NTCA database

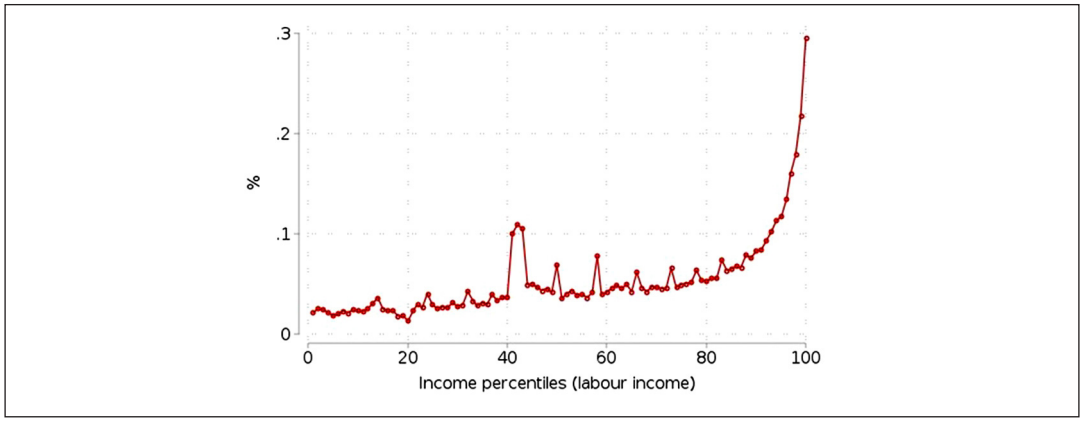


Figure 3 Share of taxpayers with capital income by percentiles of labour income

Source: NTCA database

[7] Although we exclude sole proprietors and self-employed farmers to exclude mixed income, owners of companies are usually registered as employees at their own company to meet social security payment obligations. The division of labour and capital income can also be arbitrary in this case.

To examine in more detail the factors associated with the existence and amount of capital income, we carried out a regression analysis (Table 4). First, we used a linear probability model and a logit model to examine factors related to the binary variable, which represents whether a taxpayer has any capital income. The explanatory variables in the model are the taxpayer's sex, age, county of residence, and labour income decile. Consistent with Figure 3, high labour income increases the likelihood of capital income: the odds of receiving capital income in the top labour income decile are almost five times higher than in the bottom decile, while for earners in the eighth decile, the odds ratio probability is 1.8. The odds of receiving capital income increase with age: taxpayers between 31 and 40 are about 2.6 times, and taxpayers over 50 are almost five times more likely to have capital income than taxpayers under 30. Residence in Budapest is also associated with a higher probability that a taxpayer has some capital income.[8]

Table 2 Regression results: determinants of capital income, 2021

	OLS	**Logit (odds ratio)**	**OLS (conditional on capital income) (thousand HUF)**
	Dependent var: has capital income		
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**
Labour income			
8. decile	0,0181***	1,798***	
	(0,000478)	(0,0219)	
9. decile	0,0324***	2,311***	
	(0,000479)	(0,0272)	
10. decile	0,107***	4,850***	
	(0,000486)	(0,0538)	
Labour income (thousand HUF)			0,330***
			(0,00786)
AGE			
31–40 years	0,0189***	2,615***	476,3
	(0,000326)	(0,0263)	(773,3)
41–50 years	0,0383***	3,817***	3042***
	(0,000311)	(0,0364)	(728,9)

[8] The absolute values of the remaining county dummies in the logit regression were much smaller than that of Budapest. This indicates that regional variation between other counties is smaller than between Budapest and the rest of the country. In addition, we carried out a regression with Budapest being the only regional variable, without adding other county dummies, and obtained a similar parameter value for Budapest.

Table 2 *(continued)*

	OLS	Logit (odds ratio)	OLS (conditional on capital income) (thousand HUF)
	Dependent var: has capital income		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Above 50 years	0,0535***	4,947***	3833***
	(0,000300)	(0,0462)	(701,7)
Male	0,00996***	1,246***	4706***
	(0,000212)	(0,00540)	(302,4)
Budapest	0,0334***	1,720***	3219***
	(0,000690)	(0,0246)	(980,8)
Constant	0,00247***	0,0116***	−2102*
	(0,000790)	(0,000192)	(1,158)
Number of observations	4 506 834	4 506 834	341 375
R^2	0,037		0,007

Note: standard errors are in brackets
*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$
Source: NTCA database

Similar factors affect the amount of capital income received by taxpayers, but the importance of each variable varies. For example, although the odds of having some capital income are predicted to be 1.24 times larger among men (controlling for age, labour income and county) than they are among women, the average capital income of men is higher by almost five million HUF (conditional on having capital income). This implies that whether a person has capital income depends only moderately on the gender of the taxpayer compared to the impact of age and labour income, but it is the most important factor in determining the amount of capital income.

4 Changes in inequality between 2007 and 2021

Income inequality within a population should be assessed using several indicators together, as each indicator may give different results depending on which part of the distribution it captures. Accordingly, in this chapter, by using different indicators, we try to provide a comprehensive picture of how inequality of income distribution before and after tax evolved between 2007 and 2021, highlighting the separate roles of capital and labour income.

The Gini index measures the concentration of the overall income distribution: zero if everyone has exactly the same income and one if all income is concentrated in the hands of one person. For labour income, pre-tax income inequality did not change significantly,

with the Gini index fluctuating between 0.47 and 0.49 (Figure 4). In contrast, for post-tax labour income, the index rose sharply from 0.39 in 2007 to 0.48 in 2015 and stabilised until the end of the period under review.

The significant difference between the Gini indices of pre-tax and post-tax labour income indicates that the increase in income inequality in the first half of the surveyed period is mainly explained by the introduction of the flat tax system in 2011 and the phasing out of the tax credit. Meanwhile, the abolition of the social security contribution ceiling moderated their impact to a lesser extent. From 2015 onwards, the concentration of pre-tax and post-tax labour income was equal, indicating that this channel of state redistribution left the concentration of income unaffected, which conclusion is in line with the results of Krekó et al. (2023). However, this does not mean that income redistribution through the tax system was no longer implemented after 2015, but instead that this did not change the overall inequality of income distribution. For example, the number of children still affected tax liability after 2015.

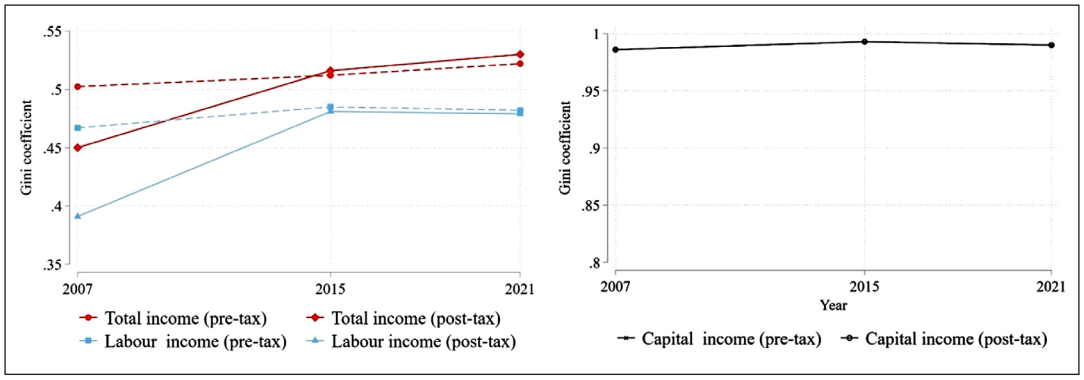


Figure 4 Changes in the Gini index for total income, labour income and capital income (2007–2021)

Source: NTCA database

For capital income, whether we look at pre-tax or post-tax income, the Gini index was very high at 0.99 and did not change significantly over the period. For total incomes, including labour and capital income, pre-tax inequality increased slightly from a Gini index of 0.50 in 2007 to 0.52 in 2021. In contrast, for total post-tax income, the changes observed for labour income caused the index to jump from 0.45 to 0.52 between 2007 and 2015, indicating a significant increase in inequality. Thereafter, it increased by a small amount to 0.53 in 2021.

As mentioned in the introduction, the evolution of capital and labour income can affect total income inequality through several channels. To explore these channels, we use the decomposition method developed by Schechtman and Yitzhaki (1999):

$$G_0 = \sum_{i=1}^{n} S_i \, R(Y_i, Y_0) G_i \tag{1}$$

where G_0 is the Gini index of total income (Y_0), G_i is the Gini index for each separate income group (labour and capital income), is the weight of these income groups in the

total income, $R(Y_i,Y_0)$, and the correlation between these income groups and the total income. This shows that total income inequality can increase if inequality increases for any income type, if the weight of the income type for which inequality is higher increases, or if the correlation between each income type and total income, i.e. the overlap between groups of income earners, increases.

By decomposing the change in inequality in this way, we find that the slight (one percentage point) increase in the Gini index for the total pre-tax income between 2007 and 2015 is due to an increase in the concentration of labour income by 1.6 percentage points, which was moderated by a fall in the share of capital income (Table 3). The latter is a typical phenomenon in times of economic downturn. Subsequently, in the second half of the decade, the reason for the further one percentage point increase in the concentration of pre-tax total income was the growing share in capital income. Between 2007 and 2021, the Gini index for total pre-tax income increased by two percentage points, mainly due to a moderate increase in labour income inequality and, to a lesser extent, an increase in capital income as a share of total income.

Table 3 The effect of changes in various factors on the change in the Gini index of total income

The impact of changes in various factors	Pre-tax income			Post-tax income		
	I. Period (2007-2015)	II. Period (2015-2021)	Total period (2007-2021)	I. Period (2007-2015)	II. Period (2015-2021)	Total period (2007-2021)
Share of capital and labour income	-1,1%	1,5%	0,5%	-2,0%	1,7%	0,2%
Gini of labour income	1,6%	-0,3%	1,3%	7,5%	-0,2%	7,4%
Gini of capital income	0,1%	0,0%	0,0%	0,1%	0,0%	0,0%
Correlation between labour and total income	0,5%	-0,3%	0,2%	0,7%	-0,3%	0,5%
Correlation between capital and total income	-0,1%	0,1%	0,0%	-0,3%	0,1%	-0,2%
Indirect effects	0,1%	0,0%	0,0%	0,6%	0,0%	0,1%
Total change in the Gini of total income	1,0%	1,0%	2,0%	6,6%	1,4%	8,0%

Source: authors' calculation

Similar changes were observed in post-tax income simultaneously; however, the magnitudes of these changes were significantly larger. Between 2007 and 2015, total income inequality increased by 6.6 percentage points, mainly because of an increase in the concentration of labour income (largely as a result of the 2011 tax reform), which increased total income inequality by 7.5 percentage points (Table 3). The increase in the correlation, that is, the overlap between income groups for total income and labour income, made a smaller contribution to the growing Gini index (0.7 percentage points), while their impact was moderated by the aforementioned reduction in the weight of capital income (two percentage points). In the following period, between 2015 and 2021, the Gini index for total income increased slightly (1.4 percentage points), mainly due to the rebound in the weight of capital income, while the impact of other factors remained largely unchanged. Over the whole period, the eight percentage point increase in post-tax total income inequality was driven by the increase in the Gini index for labour income.

The relative position of the highest-earning taxpayers is measured by the share of income received by the top total income percentile (top row of Figure 5). For labour income, the income share of the top 1 per cent fluctuated between 6 and 8 per cent for both pre-tax and post-tax income, remaining broadly unchanged throughout the period. However, for capital income before and after taxation, the indicator jumped from around 60 to 72–73 per cent both before and after taxation between 2007 and 2015 and stabilised at this level for the rest of the period. As a result of the increasing concentration of capital income, the overall income share of the top 1 per cent has also risen slightly. Their share increased from 13 to 14 per cent of pre-tax income between 2007 and 2021 and from 13 to 16 per cent of post-tax income. To sum up, in contrast to the Gini indicator and the share of the top 10 per cent (see below), the increase in the income share of the highest income decile from 2007 to 2021 is mainly driven by capital income.

The relative income position of a broader group of high earners is measured by the ratio of the top 10% of incomes to the total income (middle row in Figure 5). Again, the difference between labour and capital income is remarkable: The top income decile accrues around one-third of labour income but 90 per cent of capital income. For pre-tax labour income, this proportion declined slightly over the period, after a small increase, but fluctuated between roughly 33 and 35 per cent. For post-tax labour income, the share of the top 10 per cent of earners jumped from 28 to 34 per cent between 2007 and 2015, following the introduction of the flat tax reform, and then declined to 32 per cent by 2021. The co-movement of the pre-tax and post-tax labour income indicators between 2015 and 2021 suggests that the slight reduction in the share of labour income in the top decile of total labour income is due to changes in market income, with the impact of tax policy being neutral.

For the top decile, there was a smaller jump in the concentration of capital income than for the top percentile. The indicator started from 89 per cent and increased by one percentage point for pre-tax income and two percentage points for post-tax income between 2007 and 2021, which means that roughly 90 per cent of all capital income during this period went to those in the top total income decile. The difference between the top percentile and the top decile over time suggests that while the top decile's capital income-earning advantage has not changed significantly, the capital income of the top percentile rose much faster than that of all taxpayers between 2007 and 2015.

The time trend of the top decile for total income is somewhat similar to that for labour income. For pre-tax income, the share of income received by the top 10 per cent has fluctuated between 39 and 40 per cent. For post-tax income, the share rose from 36 to 40 per cent between 2007 and 2015 and remained at roughly this level until 2021. The latter can be explained by the fact that for the top decile, the decline in the share of labour income was offset by a moderate increase in the share of capital income.

The opposite end of the income distribution, namely the relative position of those who earn less than the median income, is captured by the following indicator, which compares the income of the bottom 50 per cent with the income of all taxpayers (bottom row of Figure 5). For pre-tax labour income, this share gradually declined from 20 to 18 per cent between 2007 and 2021. In contrast, for post-tax income, the share of income fell from 25 to 19 per cent between 2007 and 2015, largely due to the introduction of the flat tax system and the abolition of the tax credit, and then declined by a further one percentage point by 2021.

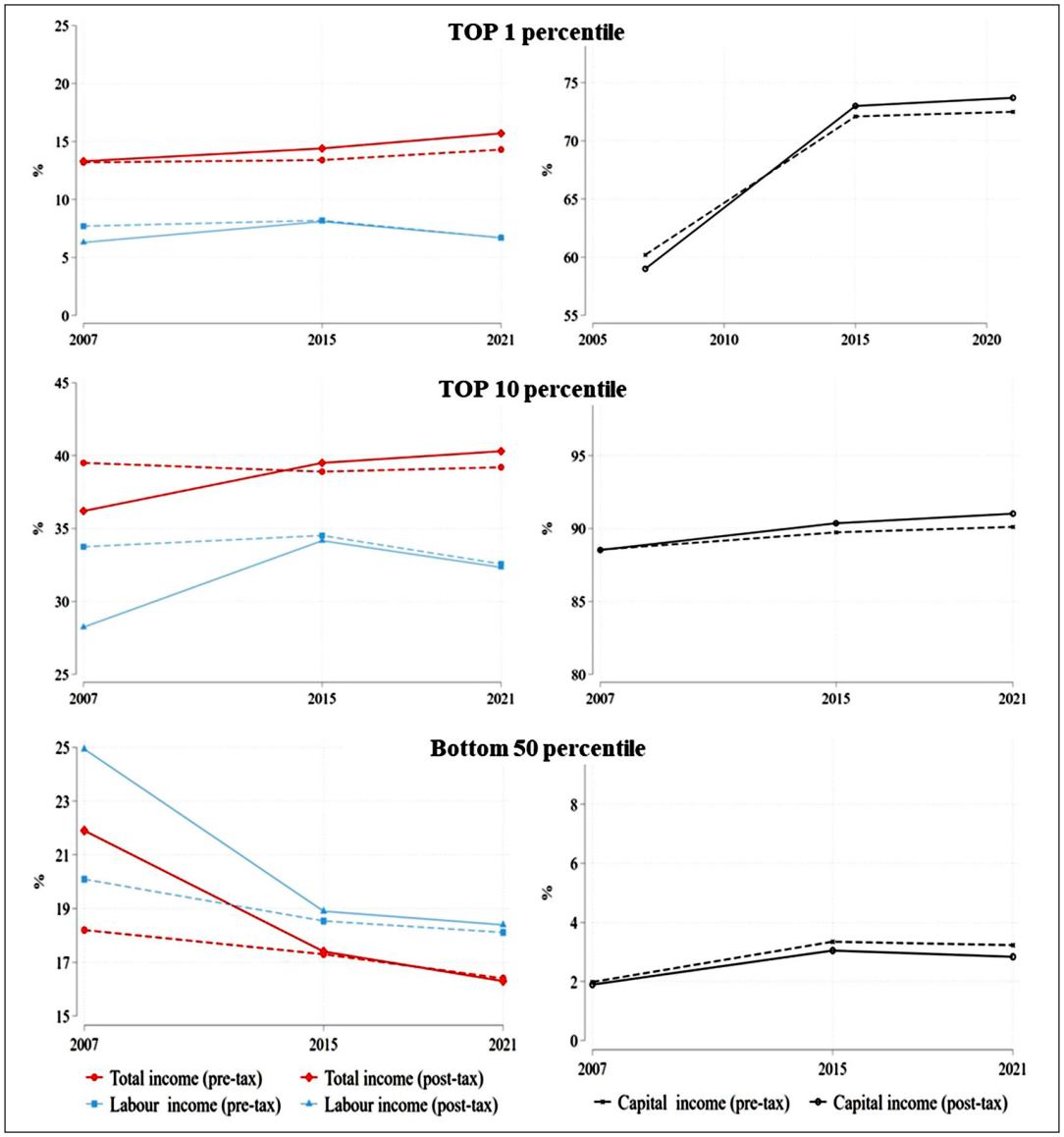


Figure 5 Income shares of the top 1% (top row), top 10% (middle row) and bottom 50% (bottom row) for total income, labour income and capital income (2007–2021)*

Note: the top 1, top 10, and bottom 50% represent taxpayers in the top 1%, top 10% and bottom 50% of the distribution based on total income.

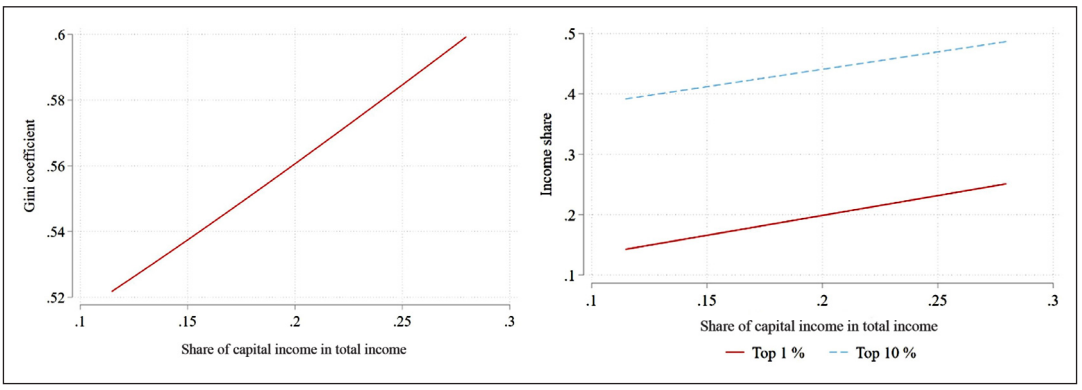
Source: NTCA database

For capital income, the share of pre-tax and post-tax income in the bottom 50 per cent has risen from two per cent by one percentage point. As the share of capital income among those earning less than the median income is very low, the indicator for all incomes describes a similar picture to that for labour income. For total income before taxation, the

share of income in the bottom 50 per cent has gradually declined over the surveyed period, while after taxation, the indicator first fell significantly between 2007 and 2015 due to the restructuring of the tax system and then declined by a small amount.

5 Simulation exercise

The aforementioned evidence indicates a positive correlation between capital income and total income, showing a concentration of capital income at the upper end of the income distribution. This implies that if the share of capital income increases, income inequality is anticipated to rise. To quantitatively assess the potential impact of an increased share of capital income on overall income distribution, we conducted a simulation exercise as follows: using the 2021 distribution of capital income among taxpayers; we raised the capital income of all holders by the same percentage while keeping labour income unchanged. Subsequently, we calculated inequality indicators for the simulated sample.



A: Gini coefficient *B: Top income shares*

Figure 6 Simulation: the impact of an increase in the share of capital income on inequality indicators

Notes: The figures display the result of a simulation exercise in which the capital income of all capital earners is increased by the same percentage. Source: NTCA database

The results reveal that if the share of capital income in total income rises from the current level of 11.5 to 20 per cent via a proportional increase in the capital income of all capital income earners, it would elevate the Gini indicator by four points and the share of the top decile by five percentage points. In comparison, the Gini index increased by eight percentage points between 2007 and 2021.

Future developments in the share of capital income in household income in Hungary are uncertain. Kónya et al. (2020) show that Central-Eastern-European countries typically have lower aggregate factor labour shares in gross value added than other EU countries. However, this is not indicative of the share of capital income in domestic households' budgets, as a significant proportion of profit goes to foreign-owned companies. Although

differences in taxation hinder international comparability, capital income and business income accounted for about 24 per cent of the total taxable income (excluding retirement income) of taxpayers in the United States in 2020,[9] suggesting that the convergence of the economies of Central and Eastern European countries to the level of developed countries may result in heightened inequality through an increase in the share of business and investment income of domestic taxpayers. However, its impact on inequality might be less than major changes in income taxation.

6 Conclusion

Growth in capital income as a share of total income is a global phenomenon, as is rising inequality within countries, so the relationship between these two factors has become highly relevant in the last few decades. However, survey-based data, which have been widely used to measure income inequality, give misleading results when considering capital income inequality. In light of this, we used administrative data to examine the role of taxable capital income in the income distribution for the period from 2007 to 2021.

We found that capital income plays an important role in the structure of income in Hungary in several respects. Between 2007 and 2021, 5 to 7 per cent of taxpayers were receiving taxable capital income from investments or businesses, accounting for around one-tenth of total taxable personal income. On the other hand, capital income was much more unequally distributed among taxpayers than labour income. While the top decile received one-third of labour income, their share in capital income was 90 per cent in 2021. More of the highest-earning taxpayers had capital income: while the share of people with capital income was only 5 per cent in the bottom seven labour income deciles, this rose steeply towards the top of the income distribution, reaching over 30 per cent for the top percentile.

Post-tax inequalities increased significantly between 2007 and 2021, but their size and source varied across periods. The bulk of the increase occurred from 2007 to 2015 and was driven by the growing concentration of labour income, partly due to the flat tax reform introduced in 2011. This effect was mitigated by the temporary decline in capital income as a share of total income. Overall income inequality increased slightly after 2015, driven by an increase in capital income as a share of total income. By decomposing the change in inequality measured by the Gini index, we found strong evidence of the significant influence of capital income on changes in overall income inequality. Our work contributes to the literature on compositional inequality since our results can be considered new evidence of the positive relationship between functional and personal inequality. In our simulation exercise, we also demonstrate that an increase in the share of capital income within total income is likely to lead to a notable increase in inequality.

Our findings regarding the role of capital income in Hungary partly reflect experiences observed in other developed and transitioning countries. Capital income tends to be significantly more unevenly distributed than labour income (Ranaldi, 2022), with concen-

[9] Source: taxfoundation.org

trations primarily at the upper echelons of the income distribution (Piketty, 2014; Ranaldi, 2021). Consequently, it disproportionately contributes to overall inequality compared to its share in total income, especially when considering inequality indicators focusing on the upper strata of the income distribution (Fräßdorf et al., 2011).

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Office, project No. K-143420. The authors acknowledge the helpful comments of Anikó Bíró, Pálma Filep-Mosberger, László Halpern, László Á. Kóczy, István Kónya, Gábor Oblath, Rita Pető, Daniel Prinz, and András Simonovits, participants of the MKE conference, seminars in the Finance Ministry and the National Tax and Customs Administration. We are thankful to the KRTK Databank, especially Zsuzsanna Sinka-Grósz and Melinda Tir, for their help processing the dataset. Any remaining errors are those of the authors.

Data availability statements

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the National Tax and Customs Administration (NTCA), but restrictions apply to their availability. These data were used under licence for the current study and are not publicly available.

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Appendix A

Income calculation used in the study

Labour income was calculated by the consolidated tax base in the personal income tax return, while capital income was based on separately taxable income and, from 2015, on income from abroad (also taxable in the country) reported separately (on form 05). For economic reasons and to ensure comparability between years, minor adjustments to the consolidated tax base and separately taxable income have been made by reclassifying or excluding certain income types to define the primary indicators of our analysis, namely labour and capital income (for a summary of tax returns and main income categories, see Table 1.) The most important of these adjustments is that we have excluded income related to self-employment and agricultural holdings from both consolidated and separate taxable income for economic and practical reasons. On the one hand, the methodologies of the national accounts and the economics literature (e.g. Valentiny & Herrendorf, 2008) include self-employed incomes in the category of mixed-income, within which the separation of capital and labour income is rather arbitrary. On the other hand, with the introduction

of the itemised lump sum tax form in 2013 and its gradual take-up, the income tax returns cover a steadily decreasing share of self-employed income. Our analysis was based on the personal income tax database, but in calculating the tax liability and, through this, the taxable income, we imputed social contributions paid by employees for all taxpayers in accordance with tax year legislation.

The main income categories were adjusted as follows.

1) In 2007, non-taxable benefits were excluded from consolidated income. Although these incomes (e.g. pensions, childcare allowance) are not taxable, they increased the tax base until 2010, which increased the tax burden under the progressive tax system.
2) In 2007, a special tax on individuals was added to the tax on labour income, amounting to 4 per cent of income above the pension contribution ceiling subject to the consolidated tax. It was not included in the tax on the consolidated tax base but on a separate sheet (sheet 07).
3) For the years from 2015 to 2021, rental income from real estate has been reclassified from consolidated income to separate taxable income on the basis that it is considered capital income in substance. Note, however, that in 2007, it was possible to declare income from the rental of immovable property as part of consolidated income, but this cannot be separated from income from other independent activities. As the tax rate on separate income (25 per cent) was lower than the top rate (36 per cent), we believe that a significant part of the income was presumably declared under separate income, and the resulting distortion is not significant.
4) The income of self-employed persons and farmers subject to lump sum taxation has been excluded from the consolidated tax base.
5) In 2007, the dividend income of sole proprietors was excluded from separately taxable income. From 2015 onwards, the income of sole proprietors not subject to consolidation has been included on a separate sheet (sheets 13-05; 13-06), so that in those years, the income of sole proprietors was excluded from the separately taxable income.
6) The tax on the income withdrawn from the consolidated tax base was reduced in proportion to the ratio of the income withdrawn to the consolidated tax base and, in the case of the transfer of income from the rental of immovable property, the corresponding amount was added to the tax on capital gains.
7) Each year, we deducted the flat-rate lump-sum tax for the caterer from the tax on separately taxable income. No income is included in this line; the tax is based on the number of rooms issued.
8) In addition to personal income tax, we have also taken into account the contributions payable by taxpayers on after-tax income. The family tax credit and the contributions payable by taxpayers on capital income are also included in the social security database, while the contributions payable on earnings are calculated on the basis of the current annual employee contribution rates.

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The criminalization of informal patient payments in the Hungarian healthcare sector

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 221–235.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1251
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

Informal patient payments represent a semi-legal phenomenon in many countries with a low GDP. This institution does not only exist in post-state-socialist states. In Hungary, from 1 January 2021, informal patient payments have constituted a crime of corruption. The only opportunity for patients to express their gratitude to healthcare workers materially is in the form of a gift of small value provided after care. Hungarian doctors' salaries have been greatly increased, though nurses have not been remunerated in similar measure. Corrupt payments in the Hungarian healthcare sector are prosecuted. Covert agents thus create situations in which doctors and nurses might be trapped. The Hungarian efforts are top-down measures. Positive general prevention should ultimately be stressed. Certainly, taxing legal gift-giving would promote transparency in the Hungarian healthcare system.

Keywords: informal patient payments; corruption; positive general prevention; post-state-socialist healthcare culture; Hungary

1 Introduction

Corruption is more than a technical term in criminal substantive law. It is also a criminological term, which has a wider meaning than the crime of corruption. Some sociological forms of corruption do not fall within the scope of criminality. For example, the corruption of social capital, the erosion of social cohesion, corrupting citizens' way of thinking about good and bad, and the moral corruption of the doctor-patient relationship do not necessarily violate a national Criminal Code.

The guilty act is usually a criminal act; however, the sociology of crime also encompasses social phenomena that are not necessarily tantamount to a crime according to the law. National Criminal Codes throughout the world criminalize different kinds of corruption, and the social relevance of the wider sociological term of corruption is indisputable. There is a common standard for corruption in the national criminal law in the great majority of countries. Offering money for illegal benefits is a crime in states under the

rule of law. However, it is the legislature that determines what is illegal, for example, in a provider-patient relationship. Corruption is partly a legal question and partly a cultural one. In criminal law, liability for corruption can only be established if it is proven in court with 100 per cent certainty.

Zhang et al. (2009, p. 213) hold that 'increased social support, measured as public expenditure on the healthcare needs of citizens, reduces a nation's level of corruption'. This claim is clearly true; however, corruption in healthcare and the impact of this on nationwide corruption are two different matters. Corruption in healthcare is not only found in post-state-socialist countries and other states with especially low GDP, nor does the quality of healthcare necessarily depend on the state subsidising the healthcare sector. Indeed, healthcare systems in wealthy countries are based on patients paying for healthcare services, while others offer them free of charge. For instance, in the area of medical malpractice, the avoidability standard applies in a few wealthy countries. However, most countries with a high GDP maintain the negligence standard.

2 Methodology and data

The article is based on information retrieved from the recent literature on how Central and Eastern European countries have responded to the challenges of state-socialist remnants like informal patient payments, with a focus on Hungary. The similarities and differences between these countries yield added value. Indeed, the different kinds of informal patient payments in Central and Eastern Europe call for a nuanced understanding.

Cases from the Hungarian Collection of Court Decisions and fresh data on integrity testing among healthcare workers by the Hungarian National Protective Service *(Nemzeti Védelmi Szolgálat),* which is an anti-corruption police force, *inter alia*, point to serious attempts to eliminate informal patient payments in Hungary.

3 Informal patient payments in the post-state-socialist and early Hungarian healthcare cultures

Informal patient payments can be universally defined as giving cash or gifts to the healthcare provider as an incentive to violate their obligations to the patient. The payments (1) are informal; i.e. they do not represent a legal fee for healthcare services and might constitute a crime; (2) are provided to obtain a privilege or to ensure a normally legal patient right; (3) can be supplied in cash, in kind or in any other form; (4) comprise the offering of an undue benefit to the provider; and (5) are ethically and/or legally prohibited by law.

Informal patient payments are not only a Hungarian phenomenon. We encounter them in most post-state-socialist countries, such as Croatia (Franic & Kojouharov, 2019, p. 49) as well as Bulgaria and Ukraine (Stepurko et al., 2017, p. 454). In Western Balkan countries, cash is 'the most common form of bribery in two-thirds of all bribery cases' (Mejsner & Karlsson, 2017, p. 630). Gift-giving is less frequent in healthcare. Gifts of small value, given after care, are considered less detrimental to society in Central and Eastern

European post-state-socialist countries. This recognition influenced Hungarian lawmakers in maintaining the legality of giving gifts of small value after care.

The 2017 Special Eurobarometer Report on Corruption showed that among the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, informal payments in the healthcare sector were 'most widespread in Hungary (reported by 17 per cent of those who had used healthcare in the previous 12 months), while Slovenia and Estonia occupied the opposite end with 3 per cent of users paying informally' (Tambor et al., 2021, p. 20). According to Horodnic et al. (2021, p. 1), in the EU in 2020, 'the highest rate of informal payments, used in the form of bribes, was encountered in the medical sector (6 per cent of all respondents), with 22 per cent of patients in Romania making such payments and 19 per cent in Bulgaria'. In Slovakia, despite the healthcare reform of 2003 introducing fees for such services as hospital stay, a visit to the physician and transport by ambulance, informal patient payments have been maintained because patients still wish to purchase a standard level of care and are not aware of what they have to pay for and what they do not (Cimova, 2024, p. 462). The case of Slovakia demonstrates that the introduction of visit fees in the Hungarian healthcare system in 2007 would likely not have eliminated informal patient payments had it not been cancelled as a result of a plebiscite in 2008.

Villanueva (2023, p. 144) points out that 'the complicated relationship between state and civil society may undermine the supposed positive impact of civil engagement in anti-corruption'. There is still much to do to make the dialogue between civil society and the state more effective in Central and Eastern European post-state-socialist countries. Civil society in post-state-socialist European countries has played less of a role than expected during the three decades after the regime change. Social capital is not at the level of Western European countries. This has led to a weak impact of civil society on social phenomena, such as corruption in healthcare.

This sort of corruption is immanent in the national culture of the countries concerned. It is indeed not only a legal question, but also a cultural one. It is related to the low level of the rule of law, to the economic situation of the country and to existing cultural norms rooted in citizens' attitude towards such white-collar criminality.

Informal patient payments are mostly tied to some groups of states. However, approximately 7.3 per cent of all health expenditures globally are lost to healthcare fraud and abuse annually (Vian et al., 2022, p. 1). The self-assessed health status of patients in the public healthcare sector and the quality of public healthcare are lowered by the phenomenon of informal patient payments. Among the post-state-socialist Eastern European countries, the situation is the direst in Armenia and Georgia (Mavisakalyan et al., 2021, p. 994). In Armenia, unsatisfactory public financing of the healthcare system has led to the privatisation of a great many healthcare institutions (Zopunyan et al., 2013, p. 42). We can see similar privatisation in other Eastern European post-state-socialist countries as well. Informal patient payments are meaningless in the private healthcare sector.

The criminalization of informal patient payments in the healthcare sector is the focus of my recent research. On the one hand, if we regard the *objectum sceleris*, informal patient payments are not as detrimental to society as pharmaceutical companies corrupting providers. On the other hand, informal patient payments corrupt not only the doctor-patient relationship, but also the foundations of the social contract. These main forms of healthcare corruption are not comparable to each other.

In the history of post-state-socialist states, informal patient payments appeared before state-socialism and developed into its corrupt form during the state-socialist era. After the political changes around 1989, they generally continued. Before state-socialism, unpaid junior trainee doctors in Hungary received money from patients as an expression of gratitude. Older doctors also used to offer the informal patient payments they had received to their underpaid younger colleagues. In the first half of the 20th century, it was rather an honour to be a medical doctor than a well-paid profession. Only experienced physicians represented a true value in the marketplace of health professionals, and it was a long road for a physician to become recognised monetarily by wealthy patients.

In the early years of modern medicine, the medical profession was characterised by mysticism, which gradually disappeared with the development of diagnostic and treatment techniques. The 'doctor knows best' principle was long maintained. By that time, the medical profession in Hungary was passed from father to son, while women were rare among medical doctors.

In any case, being a young doctor without connections was not an attractive prospect. Until the 19th century, some ethnic minorities were excluded from the legal profession in Hungary; however, they could opt for a medical career. It was an excellent opportunity for upward mobility: the medical profession was open to all without ethnic discrimination, though it was not as well paid as the law. However, in Hungary, Act XXV of 1920 introduced a *numerus clausus*, and its executive order limited the number of ethnic students in medical schools, law schools and other areas of higher education.

Only rich families could afford to hire a physician to work for them, and public healthcare in its modern form did not exist in Hungary before World War II. Act XIV of 1876 on Public Healthcare laid down that towns and villages with a large number of inhabitants should employ a physician to ensure healthcare for the poor free of charge. Groups of small villages had to employ a district doctor *(körorvos)* collectively. Act XXXVIII of 1908 maintained this regulation, with §27 stipulating that towns and large villages should employ a midwife, while groups of small villages could finance one collectively. The task of municipalities and the state was to finance a physician and a midwife for the poor. The county controlled the functioning of the healthcare system for the poor. Salaries paid to doctors and midwives were low. Patients who could afford it gave money to the physician and midwife; however, the less well-off usually offered chickens, fruit and vegetables, if anything, which was not an attractive extra remuneration. Most of those who opted for the medical profession in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century found themselves faring no better than a teacher, a priest or any average state employee. By that time, informal patient payments had not emerged as a form of corruption in Hungarian court practice.

The social status of physicians changed in state-socialist Hungary following a short period after World War II. They gained privileges and an exceptional reputation within society, backed by the state. As concerns informal patient payments, the state-socialist leaders of Hungary briefly discussed this problem in the 1950s and, in the end, remained inert. The Minister for Health (Anna Ratkó) and the head of the physicians' labour union (Emil Weil) proposed a significant pay rise for medical doctors in an effort to eradicate informal patient payments. Nonetheless, the Politburo of the state-socialist party that governed Hungary (the Hungarian Working People's Party) did not agree to a rise in salaries.

The Politburo decided to postpone a decision on the problem for three years and allowed the acceptance of informal patient payments until then. Today, we know that no measure was taken to tackle healthcare corruption after this deadline.

In Hungary, according to Act II of 1972 (i.e. the state-socialist era Act on Health), only physicians working in public healthcare were allowed to have private consultations for extra money. Mostly, it was dentists who opened private consulting rooms. Only a few medical doctors followed this practice. In fact, this led to a certain form of 'privatisation' of the dental profession under state-socialism, thus producing a fairly high income for dentists. To a certain extent, this resulted in a gap between dentists and physicians. Dentists did not need informal patient payments, while physicians were dependent on them. In state-socialist Hungary, gifts of high value were also given to doctors besides cash. It was common for expensive alcoholic beverages to be offered to them. A long list of alternative gifts were also given from labour-saving devices to foreign journeys. As maintained by the preamble to the state-socialist era Act on Health, 'the state shall provide the people with healthcare in accordance with the principles of socialist healthcare'. This Act often referred to 'socialist morals' as a standard in healthcare, which meant something different from today's medical morals; it also implied faithfulness to the state and the state-socialist party governing it. Patients resorted to informal payments because they did not trust paternalistic state provision (which was based on an extremely hierarchical relationship between doctors and patients), and/or because they wanted advantages in a universal-egalitarian system not available to everyone.

Ádám (1989, p. 315) argues that in Hungary, 'The habit of giving a gratuity [to doctors] became so frequent at the end of the 1950's that countermeasures were enacted. These have been completely ineffective.' On 13 January 1959, the Politburo of the state-socialist party argued that the working people were entitled to a high level of healthcare for free and that the corruption, the vending of beds to patients and the blackmailing of patients were to be stopped by educative and administrative measures (Ádám, 1984, p. 547).

In Hungary, as a general rule, Act C of 2020 bans public healthcare workers from concurrently practising in private healthcare. However, as an exception, the option is legally upheld by §4 of the Act if permitted by the National Directorate General for Hospitals. At present, we see a great many medical specialists receiving this authorization.

There are some common features in post-state-socialist customary rights orientating the institution of informal patient payments. At first sight, we could draw parallels. Nevertheless, if we examine the causes of informal patient payments in those countries in depth, we find healthcare systems based on differing social values. However, corruption is ubiquitous in all those healthcare cultures.

4 Informal patient payments as a crime in the Hungarian legal system

In state-socialist Hungary, the Act on Health of 1972, §75(2), forbade informal patient payments. Patients were to be informed of this ban, which was made public in written form at the entrance to every healthcare facility. Nonetheless, informal patient payments were inherent in the Hungarian healthcare culture and were not generally prosecuted. Only

exceptional cases were brought to court. The state was mostly silent on informal patient payments, as in neighbouring state-socialist countries. In this way, in part, patients financed public healthcare instead of the state. Still, informal patient payments theoretically remained a crime. Selective prosecution was an important tool in the hands of the state-socialist state.

With reference to the Act on Health of 1972, §75, quoted above, the Hungarian Supreme Court declared in ruling EBH 1999.18. that an informal patient payment after care was not contrary to law; however, informal payments could not successfully be claimed as indemnity in a civil suit for damages. Thus, legally, it was understood as a true expression of gratitude that was not requested by the provider.

In 2001, informal patient payments amounted to Ft 16.2–50.9 billion (i.e., €64.8–203.6 million or $77.1–242.4 million) in Hungary. This means that informal patient payments constituted 1.5–4.6 per cent of total health expenditures (Gaal et al., 2006, p. 86). The distribution of informal patient payments among healthcare workers was unequal under the old regulation, and the existing latent informal payments are still unequal in Hungary. Mostly, this money goes to physicians and not to nurses (Julesz & Kereszty, 2022).

In Hungary, before 1 January 2021, under the Act on Health of 1997, according to ruling EBH 2015. B.27. of the Hungarian Supreme Court (named the Curia since 2012), informal patient payments did not constitute an act of corruption if (1) they were provided by the patient or a relative after care, (2) this was not done under duress, and (3) they did not incentivize the provider to violate their legal obligations.

In Hungary, informal patient payments have constituted a crime from 1 January 2021, even if provided after care (Criminal Code, §§290–291), with both the patient and the healthcare worker being punishable for corruption. The criminalization of informal payments to doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers is a milestone in Hungarian medical law. For long, informal patient payments were not punished, and healthcare workers expected them (Julesz, 2018). Ambrus (2020, p. 10) argues that §290(6) of the Hungarian Criminal Code criminalizes a subsidiary case of corruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed back the number of doctor-patient encounters and, as a result, informal patient payments. Hungarian legislative reform was brought about during the pandemic. At any rate, informal patient payments significantly decreased. This may be due to the criminalization of such payments as well as to the fewer occasions to hand over cash or gifts (Julesz, 2022, pp. 34–35; see also Ságvári et al., 2021; Vicsek & Mikó, 2023). Horodnic et al. (2021, p. 12) hold that '12 per cent of the patients in Central and Eastern Europe made at least one informal payment during the analysed period [the COVID-19 pandemic]'.

The reasons for informal patient payments today are the low salaries earned by health professionals other than physicians (e.g. nurses) and the low level of trust placed in the ethical behaviour of healthcare workers. Horodnic et al. (2022, p. 6) argue that the high prevalence of informal patient payments is linked to low trust in public authorities. The authors offer the examples of Romania, Lithuania and Bulgaria. They arrive at the following astonishing result: 'Only for Hungary is the value of the Institutional Trust Index very close to the average registered across all the 27 EU countries: 0.55 compared to 0.52' (Horodnic et al., 2022, p. 6). Sakalauskas points out that 32 per cent of Lithuanians admitted to having corrupted someone in 2004, while 10 per cent had engaged in corruption in

2021. Corruption in Lithuania is common in the healthcare sector (Sakalauskas, 2022, p. 309). It also exists in healthcare in Western European EU Member States, such as Germany, though there it usually means something completely different, for instance, when a provider proposes a blood glucose meter produced by a chosen firm in exchange for a bribe (Sommer, 2018, p. 465). Such healthcare corruption is not comparable to informal patient payments in post-state-socialist EU Member States.

Since informal patient payments were criminalized, a few criminal proceedings have been initiated against doctors and nurses in Hungary. The first aim of the state is to punish corruptible healthcare workers in the service of general prevention. In particular, I agree with Hirtenlehner et al. (2023, p. 85) that positive general prevention is more favourable to society than negative general prevention.

Patients who pass on illegal money are engaging in active corruption and are only prosecuted in low numbers. The Hungarian Act on Health and the Criminal Code were modified with the primary aim of eliminating corruption in the healthcare sector and with the secondary aim of changing the mindset among Hungarian patients in the long run. The secondary aim would best serve the goal of positive general prevention. Meanwhile, doctors and nurses have been tested for corruption by covert agents.

Natural situations have also occurred; however, they are difficult to spot. If there is an unbroken chain of indirect proofs, this may be sufficient. However, if any doubt arises, the accused person should be acquitted. In a doctor-patient relationship, it is usually not easy to find direct proof of informal patient payments. In the main, indirect proof can justify the accusation, such as a doctor's bank account bearing out the spending of more money than officially earned or testimony from colleagues and neighbours, testimony from unsatisfied nurses etc.

In the professional literature, *informal payment* is the most frequently used term for an inappropriate payment in the healthcare sector. Other terms also exist, though with specific meanings, such as *hongbao* ('red packet') in China (Xu & Yuan, 2022, p. 1), under-the-table payment and under-the-counter payment. Sircar (2024, p. 365) points out that, 'in post-communist Europe, while in Slovakia the term *pozornost* ("attention") is ambiguous, *aploksne* ("envelope") only has negative connotations in Latvia'. The Hungarian literature on informal patient payments also uses the terms *paraszolvencia* ('supplementary payment') and *hálapénz* ('gratitude payment'), while the fresh Hungarian professional literature disputes the outcomes of the stricter criminalization of this institution (Gaal et al., 2021; Velkey et al., 2022, p. 1670).

In Hungary, the purpose of the stricter criminalization of informal patient payments is to protect an ethical principle by means of criminal law. Rules of ethics had already banned the acceptance of informal payments by healthcare workers long before. In Hungary, we find such rules against informal payments for medical doctors as well as for nurses and pharmacists (the Code of Medical Ethics of the Hungarian Medical Chamber, the Code of Nursing Ethics of the Chamber of Hungarian Healthcare Professionals and the Code of Ethics of the Hungarian Chamber of Pharmacists).

In Hungary, according to the Labour Code, §52(2), since 1 July 2012, 'The employee may not accept or demand any remuneration from a third party without the prior permission of the employer' (Somogyvári, 2013, p. 543). Thus, acceptance of an informal patient payment needed to be authorized by the director of the hospital or university clinic, and

the informal payment became legal under labour law. The quoted passage strengthened the old practice and made it semi-legal. This legal norm is still in effect in the Labour Code; however, it is no longer applicable to the acceptance of informal patient payments.

According to the Hungarian Supreme Court, only informal payments provided *ex ante* constituted corruption before 1 January 2021. The courts did not punish *ex post* informal payments in the doctor-patient relationship, so it was semi-legal. The obligation of healthcare workers to declare an accepted informal patient payment legalized this institution in respect of administrative tax law. The legislature decided to alter court practice until then leaving room for corruption disguised as an expression of gratitude (gratitude payment) (Day et al., 2020, p. 2303).

Today, informal patient payments constitute a crime of corruption in Hungary. However, the criminal character of informal patient payments does not make the healthcare worker that accepts it tax exempt. As stipulated in the Act on Personal Income Tax, §1(7), it represents taxable income. Otherwise, according to the Criminal Code, §396, liability for tax evasion can also be established. I find it important to note that any payment in lieu of cash (e.g. a book voucher) can be an *objectum sceleris* of healthcare corruption.

Moreover, in civil law, informal patient payments tend to appear in fictitious contracts. For example, the doctor and patient enter into a loan agreement as if the informal payment were a loan granted by the doctor and paid back by the patient. A patient may also pay for suture removal in private healthcare, though this should be part of a patient's treatment in public healthcare.

These practices can erode legislative reform in the field. In Hungary, according to the Code on Criminal Procedure, §20, a case of informal patient payments as a form of corruption is initiated before a regional court (a higher court), not before a district court (a lower court). This may be explained by the fact that such cases require a high level of judicial professionalism, and that corruption is particularly detrimental to society. Thus, doctors and nurses who accept informal patient payments are ranked among the most serious criminals. The laxity of previous legal policy was intended to protect healthcare workers from being treated like criminals. Now, criminal policy has changed, and the state's attitude towards corruptible doctors and nurses has been reformed.

Dogmatically speaking, informal patient payments represent a form of corruption. Even so, gifts of small value (not exceeding 5 per cent of the minimum monthly wage) given after care fall outside the scope of the crime of corruption. In the case of long-term in-patient care, a gift of small value may be given by the patient or their relative once every two months (Act on Health of 1997, §138/A). From 1 January 2023, in Hungary, 5 per cent of the minimum monthly wage was Ft11 600, i.e., approximately €31 or $33; from 1 December 2023, 5 per cent of the minimum monthly wage was Ft13 340, i.e., approximately €36 or $38. This is a legal loophole in the Act on Health of 1997, decriminalizing a less dangerous kind of informal patient payment. A gift of small value given after care maintains an old custom among patients who wish to express their gratitude to doctors and nurses. However, it is the healthcare worker's task to estimate the value of the gift at the moment it is received. If it is seemingly above the legally permitted 5 per cent of the minimum monthly wage, it should be refused immediately. If it turns out to be above the legal limit later, the healthcare worker should not be punished for not recognising the true value of the gift. There might be a fine line between legally permitted and punishable

gift-giving. The patient ought to know the commercial value of the gift, so, in such a situation, the healthcare worker should not be trapped. Indeed, a healthcare worker is not liable for an *error in facto*. If there is no question about such an error, the healthcare worker must thus be acquitted. Nevertheless, the patient can be found criminally liable if they knew that the exact value of the gift was above the legal limit. This legal permission to give a gift is suited to decriminalizing phenomena similar to payment into the *Kaffeekasse* in Germany and the *caisse de café* in France; however, from the aspect of the rule of law, it might run counter to legal certainty because it leaves doubts. Finally, it will be for the court to decide whether a gift of a value around the legal limit can be an *objectum sceleris* of corruption in a specific case.

The retail price of the gift may vary. That is why the sum of money paid for the gift by the patient counts. If it cannot be proven or the gift is homemade, the market price of a comparable object is taken into account. However, if an expert witness testifies that the price of the gift may vary from above to below the legal limit, the court should apply the principle of *nullum crimen sine lege certa*. At any rate, the giving of cash before or after care constitutes a crime of corruption, even if it does not exceed the legal limit on *ex post* gifts. Naturally, the payment due, according to the legal rates, i.e. the fee for healthcare services, is legal and mandatory, while payments above the legal rates are not tolerated by the state. This problem may arise in public healthcare. Informal patient payments mostly remain unknown in private healthcare because the fee for services is determined by the provider there. In private healthcare, the patient knows that they are receiving the standard level of healthcare for their money. In my opinion, a standard level of healthcare should not be purchasable. It is a legal right enjoyed by all, deriving from the basic right to health and healthcare.

In Hungarian legal language, a gift can be anything but money. In fact, a true expression of gratitude is not in breach of the law or morality. The legislature's message to both healthcare workers and patients is that it intends to eliminate corrupt payments. On the other hand, giving chocolate or flowers corrupts neither doctors nor nurses. In Hungary, nurses usually received small sums of money or gifts, such as coffee, chocolate and perfume, before the regulatory changes in 2021. Except for cash, this practice has been upheld. The ban on informal patient payments mainly affects doctors, whose loss of income has been counter-balanced by a significant pay rise. An increase in nurses' salaries is underway (Julesz & Kereszty, 2021, p. 1858; Julesz & Kereszty, 2022, p. 362). There is no direct link between low healthcare salaries and healthcare corruption; however, a large pay rise in the healthcare sector in Hungary may be as beneficial as it has been in Slovenia and the Czech Republic (Mihályi, 2009, p. 47).

In Romania, since 2018, there has been a large pay increase (over 100 per cent) in the healthcare sector; nonetheless, the Romanian Ministry for Healthcare reported 4200 cases of informal patient payments detected in January–September 2022 alone. In Romania, certain patients feel obligated to provide informal payments, while others see it as a sign of gratitude to healthcare staff (Tuchilus et al., 2022, p. 7). The authors consider certain Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine and Moldova, as rifer with informal patient payments than others; however, they conclude that the problem exists as a post-Soviet tradition in all Eastern European countries (Tuchilus et al., 2022, p. 6). In Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova, informal patient payments are still common, and informal personal connec-

tions are also used with the aim of accessing good-quality healthcare (Miteniece et al., 2023, p. 212). This latter sort of informality may also be found in Hungary. Hungarian lawmakers have endeavoured to overcome this problem by minimizing patients' options to choose their treating physician in public healthcare.

According to Popa et al. (2017, p. 2), 'Eastern European countries have fallen behind Western European countries in terms of health care quality since the 1970s because of the lingering influence of communist policy throughout the region'. The authors argue that Eastern Europe is 'dominated by corruption, informal payments and the need to reform' (Popa et al., 2017, p. 2). In Hungary, now that doctors' salaries have been raised, nurses' salaries will also be increased in the hope that the entire Hungarian healthcare system will become free of corruption. Corruption exists everywhere in wealthy countries within the borders of 'normal' criminality. The true aim of Hungarian lawmakers is to reach this 'normal' level of corruption, which would spell the ultimate end of informal patient payments in Hungary. However, time is needed to clean up the healthcare sector. It is the task of the investigative authorities to uncover latent corruption in healthcare and thus to enforce a legislated ban. It is always difficult to totally change a healthcare culture which dates back to the early years of state-socialism.

The Hungarian Collection of Court Decisions contains criminal cases of corruption via informal patient payments, and those are not only from before the regulatory changes in 2021. For example, in June 2021, the Hungarian Curia qualified the act of a chief physician receiving cash for prioritizing patients as corruption under the former criminal regulation (Curia, Bhar.III.254/2021/13.). In a fresh case, the Hungarian Curia established the criminal liability of a corrupt physician and sentenced the doctor to two years of imprisonment with a suspension and imposed a fine. The Hungarian Curia found that the acceptance of bribery is a crime, regardless of the benefit provided for in §138/A of the Act on Health of 1997 if the benefit promised to the healthcare worker is unlawful and is tied to their regular activities (Curia, Bhar.I.1375/2022/5.).

In case No. 25.B.68/2023/14/III., the regional court of Debrecen found a nurse guilty of complicity in corruption because a surgeon who had received Ft 30 000 and a bottle of wine from a patient on 8 October 2021 for an otherwise free suture removal in public healthcare (a university clinic) passed on Ft 5000 to the nurse, who accepted it. The punishment imposed on the nurse was one year of imprisonment with a suspension and a small fine. Thus, in less serious cases of healthcare corruption, the courts tend to impose a short term of deprivation of liberty with a suspension.

In Hungary, the National Protective Service creates situations in which doctors and nurses can be tested for corruption in public healthcare. The Service is not active in private healthcare. Many cases initiated by the National Protective Service have not yet arrived at a court decision. By 6 November 2023, the National Protective Service had completed 414 preparatory procedures, secretly collected information in 255 cases and conducted 103 integrity tests. Dozens of cases have ended up with charges being brought.

According to earlier court practice, it was not permitted for cash to exchange hands before treatment; however, *ex post* cash giving did not constitute healthcare corruption, since the Hungarian Curia had allowed cash giving after care. This was a compromise based on the social contract. Healthcare workers were strapped for cash, and patients had

to purchase a standard level of care. It was the Hungarian Curia and not the legislature that had to legalize cash giving after care in order to eliminate corrupt payments in advance. Tax was thus levied on informal patient payments. This notwithstanding, most doctors who received cash did not declare the actual sum, and it was difficult for the authorities to control. In many cases, patients paid informally before treatment, and both active and passive corruption remained undetected.

The fact that the practice of informal patient payments was based on a decision of the Curia before 2021 necessitated a precise legislative norm in this area. According to the law, since corruption is prohibited by an Act of Parliament, it was necessary to decriminalize it partially with another Act of Parliament.

5 Conclusions

In the last few years, among Central and Eastern European countries, Hungary has made the greatest steps to stamp out informal patient payments. However, the question arises whether Hungary has attained the results of Estonia and Slovenia. There is still much to do in the field of legal practice so as to bring the legislated norms into effect. Hungary has a larger patient population and a greater number of healthcare workers than Estonia and Slovenia, making it harder to tackle corruption in healthcare.

The Hungarian effort to eradicate informal patient payments could be an example for quite a few Central and Eastern European countries. The prevention of corruption in healthcare is one of the main current socio-economic problems in a great many countries in the region. Many of those countries struggling with informal patient payments could use the Hungarian National Protective Service's efforts and methods as a model. It is not enough to pass a ban on informal patient payments. Enforcement of the law is paramount. The cons of the Hungarian efforts are that those are top-down measures. Additionally, the educational effect of positive general prevention should be further emphasized.

At present, according to the Act on Health, §138/A, legal gifts of small value (not exceeding Ft13 340) do not exceed the duty-free legal limit (Ft150 000) in Hungarian law (Act on Duties, §11(2)). Research among Hungarian nurses allows me to conclude that, given the low income among nurses, these gifts might corrupt some of them (Julesz & Kereszty, 2021; 2022). Even if constituting a crime, if a gift offered to a healthcare worker amounted to more than Ft150 000, a duty would be levied. The tax authority should use investigative measures to control this. A duty should be levied on gifts of small value as well to ensure the transparency of the Hungarian healthcare sector.

Thankful patients transferring money to the bank account of a hospital or clinic foundation is a transparent way to back treating physicians. Elected members of the foundation's board of governors may use this money for the scientific advancement of clinicians. In Hungary, there has long been a tradition in this regard. According to Hungarian tax law, it is also possible for patients to donate 1 per cent of their tax to a civil society organisation, such as a clinic or hospital foundation. Indeed, while the legislature has criminalized informal patient payments, it has left the door open for legal and ethical support of conscientious doctors and nurses.

In Hungarian court practice, previously legal *ex post* informal patient payments were not added to the damages awarded to the claimant in a lawsuit after a car crash or other accident. In my view, a legal gift of small value offered after care should not amount to damages today. After all, a gift is given out of gratitude, and it is the patient's choice whether to offer it or not. If a small gift were interpreted as damages suffered by the victim, it would lose its role of expression of gratitude towards the healthcare worker. Ultimately, the institution of small gifts is immanent in the provider-patient relationship, and a defendant who caused health damages should not be involved in this relationship.

All in all, with informal patient payments, the accent should be placed on positive general prevention. The educational effect of punishment on both providers and patients could prevent them from emulating the guilty act. However, the punishment of corrupt health professionals should be stricter than that of intimidated patients, since the latter offer money illegally under *vis compulsiva*, which mitigates their culpability.

Acknowledgements

The author of this article wishes to express his gratitude to Lieutenant Colonel Csaba Nagy for data retrieved from the Hungarian National Protective Service as well as to the reviewers for their precious remarks.

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Communication law as a new challenge for information society

Intersections. EEJSP
10(3): 236–252.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1043
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

The research framework is the information society. In these societies, the role and importance of communication has increased in social, economic and legal terms. Communication law has developed into a new interdisciplinary, plural, sui generis branch of the science of law and legal studies that integrates normative acts related to communication into the legal system and is capable of independent value articulation. The aim of this research is to facilitate the development of the topic by supplying related definitions and presenting its context and challenges. At the same time, it points out that the rise of social media, automation, COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian war are bringing about regulatory challenges that require new solutions. In addition to reviewing the international and domestic literature on the topic, the author bases his findings on previous empirical research. According to the research conclusions, the wide-ranging innovative application of information technologies and the suppression of abuses are desirable, which presupposes the further development of the legal environment, communication law, and the elaboration of legal developments that respond to the changes. The research leads to specific recommendations and develops the related theoretical areas.

Keywords: communication; information society; information pollution; communication law; communication rights, challenges

1 Introduction

1.1 Basics

In the information society, the role and importance of communication and information have increased in social, economic, and legal contexts. Communication law has been born as a new area: a new interdisciplinary, mixed branch of law that integrates all the communication-related normative actions associated with the legal system. This is forming an independent legal matter.. As a result of the development of the law, the place and role of communication law are still being shaped, but it is a legal branch of the present and future.

One of the basic conditions for moving forward is the definition of communication law in terms of its legal terminology, the scientific definition of its place in the legal system and the clarification of the concept and main features of information society determining the development of this area of law, which I intend to facilitate within this article though conceptualisations and presenting the context of this topic. I also wish to articulate the related challenges that are appearing in all societies.

1.2 The new challenges

We live in a world of global transformation that is posing new challenges to democracy, society, the state, and markets. The global economic and health crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian war have significantly impacted this transformation, *with new roles, tasks to be solved and challenges for all actors*. The aim is to overcome the crisis, develop new growth paths, achieve *sustainable development*, and apply innovative solutions. The use of information technologies, the *development of information societies, and the creation of a legal environment that supports this can play an important role in achieving this objective.* In accordance with this, I would like to make three statements that indicate the challenges:

- Due to communication and information revolution, *the innovative use of information technologies* may lead to significant cost reductions and efficiency gains, thus providing a solution and a *way out* of the economic crisis.
- *Communication is an industry* that plays a decisive role on a global scale and *appears as a power factor*. However, its transparent functioning and the integration of its appropriate legal environment into an integrated system are necessary for *creating new value for states*, society, and markets alike.
- Due to the inappropriate legal environment and the lack of compliance and enforcement, we are encountering significant abuses and harms that generate serious losses at global and national economic levels and pose a significant challenge to states, society, and markets, so it is desirable to reduce them. The solution is integrated legislation tailored to real social and economic processes that forms and shapes the material of communication law. This para-legal branch, therefore, is a legal branch of the present and the future.

2 Information society

2.1 The role of information society

In parallel with the formation and development of information societies, the emergence and dynamic growth of communication law and related legal areas can be observed and monitored in Hungary and the legal systems of the world's developed countries. Trends such as globalisation and the current global economic and health crisis have brought the role of information societies and the need to develop them even more to the fore. They have also clarified the latter's key role and status in competitiveness compared to other factors. Thus, due to the development of communication law, which is one of the bases for the functioning of information societies and governs the growth of the digital world and

the fundamental situation of communication, significant laws and legal norms are being created worldwide. At the same time, legislators cannot keep up with the social and economic transformation, so the need to clear up a myriad of loopholes requires the clarification of fundamental regulatory issues.

2.2 The definition and characteristics of information society

The conceptual approach is multilateral, so the information society is also called the 'knowledge society' or 'knowledge-based society'. Also related to information society (its system of tools), the terms 'electronic society' (Török, 2002), 'network society' (Castells, 1996), 'information economy', and 'electronic economy' (Grimm, 2002) are used. Scientists have described the information society as the society of the future, where knowledge is the most important resource and information is a necessity/economic product. Consequently, the latter takes the form of goods/services, thereby creating an independent market. The driving force behind the transformation and development of society is not the production of material goods but information goods (Komenczi, 2002).

Information society can be defined as *an information-driven knowledge society based on the flow of information and digital literacy, where social, political, and economic development and continuous growth are driven by the innovative application of information techniques and technologies that ensure competitiveness and its wide range in all areas.* This is, of course, a process whose effectiveness is determined by the ability to innovate and to adapt rapidly. Information is at the heart of the functioning of information society. The driving force is the development of information technology infrastructure, which leads to a positive and significant change in competitiveness, reduces costs and prices, improves efficiency and helps develop more modern systems. The driving force is the improvement of IT infrastructure (Róna, 2011). At the same time, information technologies embedded in society have a *significant ability to create and shape human consciousness and knowledge*, as well as behaviour, activity and relationships. The former determine the creation of other forms of consciousness and knowledge, behaviour and communication that require new social and economic models and legal solutions. According to the European Community, 'information society' is a term used to describe numerous and various challenges and opportunities that have come to life due to the development of modern information and communication technologies that have taken place in the economy and politics.

3 Communication

3.1 The importance of communication nowadays

Communication and *information as factors of production have become more and more valuable recently,* beyond what was previously experienced. Significant action has been taken worldwide to improve the speed and effective availability of information and build an up-to-date information infrastructure*, showing this above-mentioned increase in value* (Tattay, 2010). The resulting networks are woven throughout the world, comparably to the human nervous system. Changes are due to a disarmingly simple phenomenon: the flow

of information (Gates, 1999), in which the role of the communication and technology industry is relevant. Research shows that communication significantly impacts organisational performance (Kuráth et al., 2023). Communication as a criterion of competitiveness is expressed in some form in the system of conditions in every field.

Another effect of global competition is that the physical content of GDP in developed countries is decreasing rapidly while immaterial goods (e.g. goodwill) are playing an increasing role in the evaluations of companies. Creating added value is the main motive of the economy. Support areas and services, including breakout points, organisational communication (PR/Public relations),[1] IT development and information security will become central in the strategies of value-creating companies. At the same time, the world of communication and mass media has been transformed by the rise of the Internet, which has created conflicts with existing laws (Bagdikian, 2004).

3.2 Conceptual scope of communication

Living circumstances are connected to communication. Thus, the definition of communication itself undergoes transformation; its semantic content gets increasingly richer. Several definitions of the concept of communication have been published, but they involve different content in both lay and professional scientific terms. The formal manifestations of communication (from signal systems to the mother tongue, modern media to the World Wide Web) and the content of messages (what we communicate, information) have undergone significant development in parallel with the history of human evolution, as well as the range of available media. The broadest definition of communication comes from Weaver, a prominent representative of the theory of mathematical communication. According to Weaver, *the concept of communication includes all the procedures by which one consciousness affects another.* This covers written and spoken language and comprises music, painting, theatre, and ballet; in fact, it embraces all kinds of human behaviour (Szeles, 2006). According to the modern approach to the concept, *communication means transmitting information in any form, way and content can be carried out by requesting, collecting, transmitting or denying information, or abstaining.* This includes not only the forms of active communication between persons and specific content but also all manifestations thereof. Communication content is de facto infinite in terms of its manifestation and shape (through animal dance and cockatoos to Facebook) and meaning. Communication is a natural part of all human behaviour and action.

Every behaviour is communication, and every form of communication is behaviour (Watzlawick et al., 1968). The nature of communication is to be generative. Communication generates communication. The media multiplies the generative effect of communication, resulting in multi-level publicity and the communication systems of modern society. This results from thousands of years of development (Buday-Sántha, 2018). The media

[1] Public relations: overseeing and shaping the communication of an organization, building and managing its reputation (Konczosné, 2014).

plays an important role in public and social communication. Nowadays, pervasive mediatisation is essentially a meta-process that transforms the entire conditionality of socialisation and social life through the interiorisation of media-mediated news and stories, also creating new social forms and enriching our image of the community-forming role of communication with previously unknown nuances (Szécsi, 2019).

4 Communication law

4.1 Definition of communication law

In the world of communication and information, continuous change has led to the formation of countless new relationships, and new regulatory demands have arisen in relation to such everyday legal relationships. Due to this, many new laws and pieces of legislation have been created, and new legal areas and branches of law have emerged. A demand for new norms has also arisen concerning everyday communication situations. Therefore, new legal regulations have been created to ensure the legal management of fundamental living conditions. As a result of the development of law, besides the branches related to the profession of communication (e.g., media law), several other fields have evolved and been defined, such as marketing law, competition law, advertisement law, consumer protection and the legal regulation of public relations. In addition, there are countless legal parts of the itemized law that regulate communication issues (Buday-Sántha, 2019a).

Communication also plays an outstanding role in the fields of legislation, the application of the law, and the interpretation of the law in our everyday lives. It also appears as an element of legislative and enforcement bodies. In addition, the number of disputes and cases related to communication and communication activities is increasing yearly. A crucial factor is that the fundamental rights underlying these standards are the source of constitutional communication rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of information.

The sub-parts of communication are at different stages of development and levels of regulation. At the same time, they are closely related in countless areas, as are the conditions they regulate. Their formation is influenced by culture, legal culture (Cotterrell, 2006), the moral and social psychological components pervading the law (Szilágyi, 2021), and other social subsystems. The norm-set of ethics, which is part of the culture of all societies, has undergone countless changes (Boros, 2019), and whose importance is appreciated, partly makes up for the legislative deficit caused by rapid changes. This is indicated by the increase in the number of codes of communication ethics. In parallel with the integration processes that occur in everyday life in the areas of communication, sources, tools, channels, and institutions (i.e., in the communication industry and under the influence of continuous legal development), the combination of the areas of law constituting communication law may constitute a distinct right. The totality of these regulations is the right to communicate, which is currently characterized by its continuous development and the expansion of its legal material. Constitutional standards of communication rights form the basis, and specific areas of communication law are based on it. 'Communication law' as legal terminology is associated with its own conceptual system.

According to the general definition in legal terminology, communication law is the sum of the communication conditions governed by legal norms. These de facto run through the whole legal system, from the constitution to case law, from supranational and EU standards to ethical standards, self-regulation and co-regulation. Communication law is a *set of laws relating to communication,* a field of law that integrates all the laws and other standards related to communication in everyday life. 'The purpose of communication rules is to ensure freedom of expression and communication as a fundamental legal value' (Caristi & Davie, 2012, p. 45).

The need for regulation is also justified by the fact that communication is a complex and multidirectional process, or so to say, a 'double-edged weapon', 'which can generate balance or imbalance, equivalence or inequalities, progress or decline, have a productive or counterproductive effect, create culture or inaction, promote information or uninformation' (Ambrus, 2010, p. 14).

4.2 The systemological situation of communication law

Considering its taxonomic nature, communication law is an object of jurisprudence, an individually delimited, new, developing, interdisciplinary, plural, *sui generis* branch of the science of law, which, because of its integrative nature, combines the standards and legal instruments regulating communication. It forms a special set of different branches of law. The *genus* (common) *de facto* element is communication. In the network-like system, *humanities* are incredibly important as *semina rerum* ('the seeds of things'), freedom of information is sine quo non (a basic condition), and the freedom of communication *genus proximum*. This fundamental right refers to the basic freedom of communication rights, the protection of which is aimed at ensuring diverse manifestations of free communication, the forms of which are almost unlistable. The legal branch of communication law will never be like traditional branches of law since, due to its mixed nature and multiple features, it has countless specificities (Buday-Sántha, 2018).

The social importance of communication law is proven by the fact that the relevant orders are held together by the Constitution as a dogmatic unity. The legislation governing public communication and mass communication is heterogeneous and non-homogeneous; public communication and mass media are governed by different legal provisions. The legal matter to be examined equally includes statutory instruments of constitutional law, administrative law, criminal law, and civil law. Therefore, communication law encompasses a new field of law that is made up of legal matters beyond the traditional branches of law; essentially, it is the grouping of regulations from a particular perspective, and we consider those legal orders here that are *relevant from the perspective of communication* (Gálik & Polyák, 2005).

This branch covers countless sub-areas, and of course, its fields are closely interrelated and brought together by common principles and institutions. Each of the norms forming communication law is diverse and far-reaching, and all legislation *can be found among them.* The regulation of subareas appears both at the level of acts and the level of inferior statutory instruments. Missing regulations are mainly substituted by a significant number of ethical codices, EU directives and standards associated with case law, but active

self-regulation and joint regulations are common, too. The collection of these new and valid legal standards regulates rights and connected obligations within wider and wider bounds, as well as the barriers to the use of means.

Developments in information society also indicate *the integration process* of communication tools, channels, forms and professions. These must be followed by legislation. In the United Kingdom, the first *communication act* (Communications Act of 2003) included the reform of media regulation and contained instructions concerning the communication industry concerning the liberties of communication. In 2014, the European Union accepted the Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline, indicating this area's importance (European Council, 2014).

In Hungary, too, there is a need for a *communications code*, *an integrated codification* of communications law in a statute book, which would lay down the most important communication principles for society, define the basic concepts and norms of the operation of the various communications industries and professions, the institutional system, and rules for communications messages and media. The Code would allow for the differentiated regulation of various media and means of communication, as necessary, while at the same time creating a systematic approach to the regulatory elements affecting communication based on uniform principles and ensuring their consistency. The Code would demonstrate the global importance of communication and its regulation today, combine an interdisciplinary approach to legal communication problems, and go hand in hand with an increase in legal literacy, compliance, and enforcement as a form of *added value*, as in the case of other codes. Under the current legal system, the 'fragmented' regulation of communications in different laws and legal places is an obstacle to achieving all these objectives.

4.3 Areas of expression of communication law

The rapid increase in real information and demands for information, as well as the huge political, social, cultural, and economic role of telecommunication means and institutions, are all claimed to be among the achievements of our era. Constitutional and statutory legislation on communication, therefore, plays an important role (Ádám, 1999).

Communication has several fields of manifestation, and these are partly regulated. Legal standards in the field of communication law form a special system. If we approach this from the perspective of the fields of expertise in the communication market, then this para-branch includes:

a) the *general part: communication rights* (fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution),

b) *dedicated parts* of the following areas:

- *PR law* – the specified (standards connected to the building and protection of good reputation),
- *advertising law* – the specified (for market communication; legal rules relating to promoting the sale of goods and services),
- *media law and press law, copyright, competition law, data protection law, internet law, consumer protection laws, info-communication law, marketing law – 'associated law'* (all the standards that play a role in the successful manifestation of communication such as the sharing of messages).

According to this, the basic rules, the dogmatic unity, and the so-called basic law of the system forming communication law are made up of the standards of fundamental communication rights, or to say, the communication rights written in the constitution (freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of information), which can be treated as the general part of communication law. The sum of the derived rights, sectoral and inferior laws derived from these constitutional provisions constitute a special part of this area of law.

The domain of these rights and the related barriers include individual communication and all communication activities and information emissions of any subject or nature and their means of manifestation in the branches, thus in judicature (courts, prosecutors' offices, police stations, executive and penitentiary institutions, lawyers, notary publics), central and local governments (local governments, governmental organisations, political parties, politicians), media (electronic media, printed media, online media and its system of institutions with professional representations), the economy (economic organisations, enterprises, representations of interest) and civil sector (inhabitants, civil organisations) (Buday-Sántha, 2018).

5 Problems, hazards, and risks

Communication and communication law are fraught with many problems and dangers. The sources of these are multi-directional. They stem from the information environment and technologies, such as susceptibility or lack of the conspiracy theories of organized groups on social media (Krekó, 2018). Among the current problems and dangers, I would like to draw attention to the principal areas of manifestation that severely impact the development of communication law and society.

5.1 Dangers of information technology and problems in the legal environment

The technological boom is leading to the transformation of societies. The innovative application of information technology determines social and economic processes and is an opportunity to solve problems, but it also involves countless risks and dangers. At the same time, the law is a system that follows the development of social and economic processes, and therefore, the former's development significantly determines the direction of legislation, the development of legal systems, and individual pieces of legislation. Legislation can also influence the development of a society in a positive or negative direction.

5.1.1 Technology: Inconsistencies in regulation

In the near future, technology may radically transform all areas of law (Lawyers' Journal, 2019). Concerning the communication revolution, the technologically disrupted nation-state has not created a set of conditions that would enable reliable, predictable legislation. We may imagine and implement regulation within the framework of the nation-state

because we see the legitimacy of regulation only within the framework of the nation-state. The question is how successful the establishment of a regulatory basis for technology. Nowadays, technology and regulation are in serious conflict. The financial crisis of 2008 broke out because international and national regulatory systems could not keep up with the pace of development (Róna, 2011).

5.1.2 Robotics, artificial intelligence: Lack of a regulatory environment

Artificial intelligence has notable potential for addressing global societal challenges, but there are significant dangers associated with any delay in creating an appropriate regulatory environment (European Parliament, 2019, Article 6, point Y). The EU considers that regulatory uncertainty has resulted in overly cautious reactions from the industrial sector (European Parliament, 2019, Article 14, points 2.50).

In addition to industrial robots performing mechanical operations, more advanced robots with 'consciousness', 'personality' and special intelligence are expected to gain ground. Some mechanical structures may already operate autonomously due to their sensors, collect and communicate data about their environment, have self-learning ability and physical existence, can adapt to their environment and draw conclusions from environmental changes (Udvary, 2018). With the rise of robots and other technical products with artificial intelligence, more and more pressing constitutional, communication, information, personality and other legal issues (e.g., market introduction, standardisation, licensing, warranty, contract supplies, industrial standards, liability, data and consumer protection) arise, further shaping communication legislation. According to Gates, smart robots are being replaced by skilful robots (Lichfield, 2019).

The time has come to establish legislation that applies to unconscious machines and the humanoid robots that replace them to control their development (Buday-Sántha, 2021). The EU believes that all regulatory frameworks should remain flexible (European Parliament, 2019, Article 15, points 3.54) with regard to comprehensive AI regulation, being general enough but also specific to the extent that they meaningfully influence the sector (European Parliament, 2019, Article 22, points 4.116). It is an important and hopeful step that the European Parliament approved the Artificial Intelligence Regulation (the 'AI Act') on March 13, 2024, which will spur innovation while guaranteeing our safety and fundamental rights (European Parliament, 2024, AI Act).

5.1.3 Multilevel publicity – information segregation – polarised society

In the information society, the widest possible spread of multi-level publicity and the multiplication of media are transforming the need for constitutional and legislative regulation. Ensuring equal opportunities for communication and information is conditional on ensuring that all citizens are informed and that pluralistic information is ensured in each society. Even if *media pluralism* is realised, individual citizens will be exposed to different informational content due to their characteristics – their values, interests, orientations, differentiated media access, digital literacy, and other personal conditions. As a result of

such different information exposure, different images of reality ('Reality 2.0', 'reality bubbles') and knowledge of the same subject are created. On the other hand, variable access to information (e.g., digital literacy or the lack of access to digital platforms) is creating a class of citizens 'isolated' from real and pluralistic information. Differentiated access to information increases *polarisation in society*. Equality of information could be ensured through education and free state access, and media pluralism may be guaranteed through broader legal guarantees.

5.1.4 Legislation – legal constraints – general concepts

The number of official cases and court cases concerning communication and information rights is increasing linearly, with countless consequences. How legislation is created impacts the enforcement of communication rights. The use of general concepts or the non-implementation of legislative concepts provides for interpretations and jurisprudence other than the legislator's intention. The limitations associated with individual fundamental rights also impact the enforcement of communication rights and vice versa. The legal limits of communication rights constitute a basis for reference for rights-holders and obligors, even if there is no legal basis for this (Buday-Sántha, 2019b).

The COVID pandemic and the state of emergency declared because of the war provide an opportunity for regulatory governance and restrictions on fundamental and communication rights. By their very nature, the restrictions entail the potentially abusive exercise of rights by legislators, enforcers, and practitioners alike.

5.1.5 Legislation – adaptation deficit

In parallel with the development of information society, communication law can be traced to the legal systems of the world's developed countries, which is the most dynamically changing and expanding legal material. The *legislative boom also raises the issue of the lack of quality legislation, constant changes in legislation and a lack of quality standards* (for example, between 2010 and 2015, 60,000 more pages of legislation were published in Hungary than in the total number of bulletins in the sixty years between 1945 and 2005; Körmendy, 2016).

The trend harms legal literacy, compliance, and enforcement. Primary research about communication law has also shown that there are many loopholes and that legislators cannot keep up with social and economic transformation and real regulatory needs (research details in Buday-Sántha, 2018).

5.2 Communication abuses, grievances, and risks

We can encounter communication abuses in everyday communication and the operation of the communication industry on a daily basis. The form and number of such incidences are constantly increasing and pollute the information space, distorting publicity and the perception of reality.

5.2.1 Information pollution – fake news

Information pollution, i.e., a high level of advertising noise in the mass flow of information, misleading, fake news, conspiracy theories, the growing number of campaigns based on them, etc., makes it difficult for individuals to *obtain and identify factual information*. Manipulative communication abuses reduce the reliability of information and the *information trust index*, posing a severe threat and concern in the field of privacy, information rights, and public affairs. *Media abuses* such as hoaxes, fake news, online harassment, revenge porn, clickbait, offensive expressions, hate speech and propaganda[2] (European Parliament, 2018), as well as discrimination in communication,[3] play a dominant role in the promulgation of distorted information content in the *information space*; communication discrimination involves nationalism, populism, the coercive service of journalists to the holders of information power due to their existential dependence, the role of the state, economic factors, political media control and pressure, along with psychological violence. Legal regulation, education, increased crime prevention, and easier access to justice can alleviate this trend. The phenomenon of fake news causes many problems in our everyday lives. In today's media environment, fake news is spreading rapidly as barriers to information consumption have disappeared, and social media sites have become open, free and unlimited platforms for sharing and consuming news. The latest report on the relationship between social media and fake news shows that 41.8 per cent of the traffic on fake news sites comes from social media. In comparison, traditional and latest news portals account for only 10 per cent of total traffic (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news is damaging the health of the information environment and people's access to reliable and accurate information (OSCE, 2020). The opportunities offered by artificial intelligence can also boost the spread of fake news.

5.2.2 Communication violations

According to primary research on communication violations, the most common areas of violation involve spam, promotional products, unauthorised data processing and use, the infringement of personal rights, copyright, and reputation. The figure below further details the nature of communication abuse.

The respective study showed that respondents were also offended by 'other' issues, such as state-, information-, mass communication- and political activities; also, by telecommunications harassment, telemarketing, organisational internal communication damage, and discrimination.

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[2] The resolution *'On the freedom and diversity of the media in the European Union'*, adopted by the European Parliament on 3 May 2018, refers to certain forms of abuse affecting mass media.

[3] Communication discrimination is nothing more than the distinction between the subjects and target groups of communication in the transmission of information, news, and data transmission.

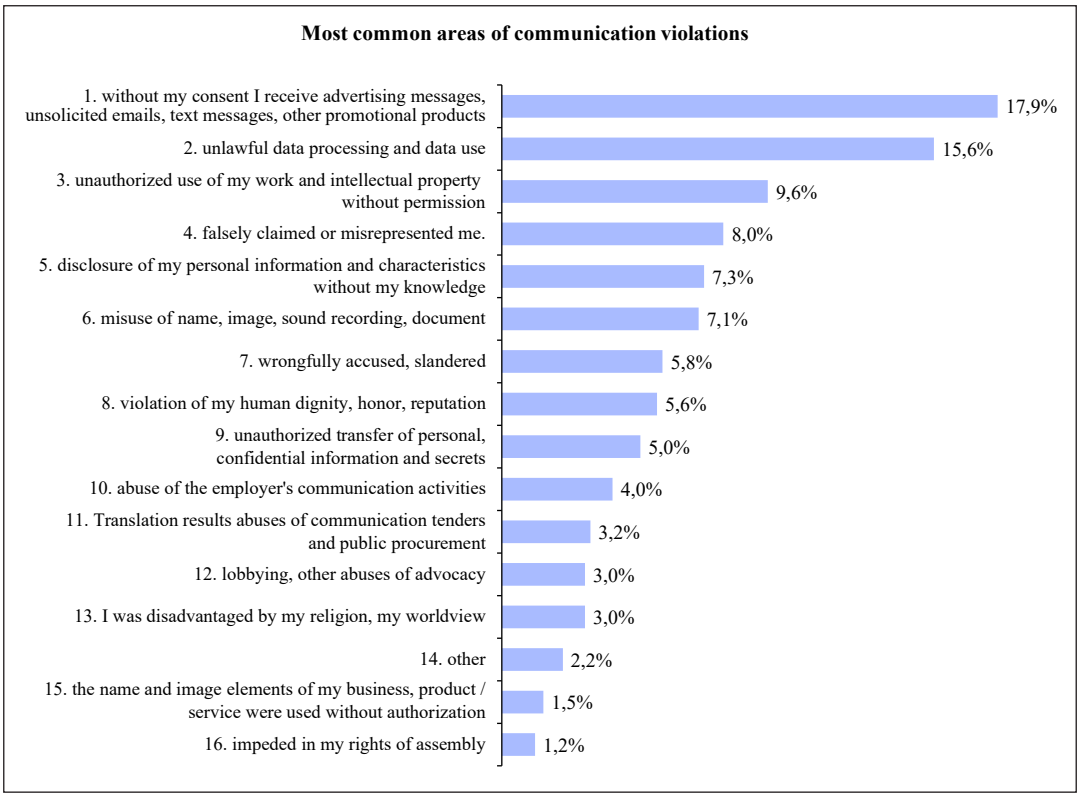

Figure 1: Communication violations

Source: Buday-Sántha (2018, p. 232).

The survey results also highlight that, in the case of the violation of norms, 87.4 per cent of the victims did not turn to forums to obtain any legal remedy (ethical body, authority, or even court); only 12.6 per cent did so. This suggests that there is a high level of latency due to a lack of enforcement, as most grievances are neither disclosed nor remedied (Buday-Sántha, 2018).

5.2.3 The COVID pandemic – 'Infodemia'

According to recent international research by the Reuters Institute, information demand, media consumption, and the need for reliable news increased during the health epidemic. In international comparison, trust in the news is highest in Finland, at 65 per cent, and lowest in Hungary (together with Slovakia), at 30 per cent (Reuters, 2021). The economic and social damage of fake news is uncountable but could be curbed by legislation.

The 'Digital News Report 2021' assessed the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the audience, the media market, and the news industry as a 'dark cloud'. The general trends in the report are as follows:

- The crisis, coupled with closures and other restrictions, has increased the decline in print newspapers, the financial difficulties of independent media companies, and the number of redundancies of journalists.
- The closures have had a negative impact on the distribution of print media, accelerating digital media consumption. The future is digital media.
- Companies were alarmed by the global economic downturn and revised their spending and traditional ads.
- New business models have emerged, such as fundraising based on subscriptions and memberships. Media publishers have turned to subscriber/membership/donation models to reduce the pressure on them.
- The gap between the 'best and the other' media has widened, as has the trust gap between news media and social media.
- Confidence in news increased by an average of 6% in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Most media consumers trust the news.
- Reliable brands also perform better online.
- The research revealed worrying inequalities in audience and news consumption. The global spread of misleading, false information and conspiracy theories is common. The survey shows that concern about misinformation may be described as follows (Newman et al., 2021):
  - compared to the previous year, concern about misinformation is a little higher at 58 per cent (+2).
  - in terms of territorial distribution, Africa is the biggest concern (74 per cent), followed by Latin America (65 per cent), North America (63 per cent), and Asia (59 per cent), while it is lowest in Europe (54 per cent).
  - on average, people say they saw more false and misleading information about the coronavirus (54 per cent) than about politics (43 per cent).
  - 'Other' topics of false information included material about celebrities (29 per cent) (actors, musicians, and sports stars), 22 per cent products and services, and climate change (20 per cent) (Newman et al., 2021).

The pandemic amplified the importance of having access to credible and reliable information and the production of health-related content for Internet users, generating huge social media traffic (Nan & Thompson, 2020). According to the WHO, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the first global *information pandemic* of the social media era. The term '*infodemia*' refers to excessive information about a particular problem, making it difficult to identify the solution. This can lead to the spread of misinformation and rumours during health emergencies (UN DGC, 2020). In this situation, the responsibility of the state to ensure the broadest possible freedom of information and to fulfil its constitutional protection obligations increases (Polyák & Nagy, 2021).

5.2.4 War-related disinformation and cyberattacks

The classic means of warfare are data theft, espionage, and disinformation. The use of these tools has also been established in the information space. Military, political and business cyberattacks and cybercrime are becoming more frequent and sophisticated. This

trend is expected to intensify in the future, with an estimated 22.3 billion devices connected to the Internet of Things worldwide by 2024 (European Council, 2021). The cyber warfare associated with the Russo-Ukrainian war[4] is characterized by information dumping, false news, manipulated photos, false statements, falsifications, state propaganda and extensively forged videos in cyberspace. In this fight, the Ukrainian side also uses fake news to improve morale. Worryingly, the quality of fake news is getting better, and month by month, it is becoming increasingly difficult, for example, to distinguish real news from fake news, real photos from fake ones produced using artificial intelligence, and deep fake videos from real ones, which distort reality and make the news consumer vulnerable, make the news consumer control the news, and at the same time encourage the media to educate. The Deutsche Welle news portal helps the reader understand misleading news by collecting and classifying the most widespread fake news. Verifying the facts shows how to see through deception and the main trends in counterfeiting (Wesolowski, 2022).

6 Summary: Proposals for the development of communication law

The widespread innovative use of communication and information technologies in all areas, and thus the further development of an information society and the creation of a legal environment, are some of the developments involved in overcoming the global economic crisis and underdevelopment and maintaining growth and development.

The study shows that several factors influence the development of communication law. Eliminating the trends and problems observed worldwide will require clarifying fundamental regulatory issues. At the same time, the regulatory quality of communication law is dependent upon the legislator's ability to follow changes and provide a meaningful legal framework that responds to the challenges of communication law and ensures the enforcement of communication rights. An ideal communication law norm system will *create a legal environment that represents actual processes and a framework for legislation that follows changes and eliminates loopholes that demoralise and criminalise in the absence of a legal settlement and is also essential for proper legal certainty, compliance and enforcement.* For this, it would be necessary:

- At the national level
  - for the constitution, with constitutional force, to expand fundamental communication values and declare the freedom of communication.
  - to broaden the guarantees of communication rights.
  - to broaden the scope of constitutional state institutional protection obligations.
  - to design uniform principles for the communications industry by creating a comprehensive communication law. Modifying outdated regulations and replacing missing sub-regulations would make everyday business, organisational, and even personal communication more transparent and predictable.
  - to increase the legal guarantees of the independence of institutions responsible for professional management and supervision.

[4] Microsoft claimed that it recorded 37 cyberattacks in Ukraine between February 23 and April 8, 2022 (MTI, 2022).

  - to strengthen crime prevention and to broaden options for redress.
  - to develop education concerning communication and its legal regulation.
- At the EU level
  - to ensure equal opportunities for acquiring information, in addition to the four fundamental freedoms – the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour – and to declare communication, the free movement and flow of information, as the fifth fundamental freedom.
  - to adopt a regulatory directive to prevent the misuse of communications, forms of expression and communication rights.
- At the international level
  - to internationally regulate the phenomenon of fake news and the legal issues of robotics, artificial intelligence, and cyberattacks.
  - to take more serious action to eliminate monopolies on information sources and services and their multi-nationalisation and to prevent their exclusive ownership in other forms.

These changes in communication law would significantly contribute to today's global transformation, eradicating the global economic crisis and supporting sustainable development and individual and global security. In the field of communication law, further research is needed on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russo–Ukrainian war, and AI.

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BOOK REVIEW

Turchin, P. (2023). End Times: Elites, Counter-elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration. Penguin Press.

https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1344

What if we could find a scientific way to predict the future of humanity? The complexity of human phenomena has always been at the root of the seemingly impassable difference between the social and natural sciences; while the first deals with the unpredictability of human behavior, the second is usually based upon scientific laws that have been rigorously put to the test using the scientific method, which has not been possible regarding human action.

Peter Turchin is a Russian-American biologist who decided to take on the risky mission of trying to identify a method by which human history can be studied as an exact science. For this, he left his original field and began studying economic history and historical dynamics. This epistemological mixture was the origin of a new discipline, of which Turchin is the founder: 'cliodynamics,' the mathematical modeling of historical processes.

Turchin is Editor-in-Chief at *Cliodynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution*, a scientific journal that publishes the studies of scholars interested in developing this brand-new discipline, including, of course, Turchin himself and the team of researchers he leads to deepen the development of his theories.

His first interest when he jumped into the social sciences boat from the ship of biology was demography, which became the foundation for his study of why nations and empires rise and fall – all of this is the main core, to this day, of his studies. His cyclical conception of history can be compared to the work of historians such as Ibn Khaldun and Oswald Spengler, but in *End Times*, Turchin glimpses a slight resemblance between his discipline of cliodynamics and the fictional 'psychohistory' mentioned in the *Foundation* series of sci-fi writer Isaac Asimov.

In the mid-20th century, historical determinism and the predictability of social sciences were major issues for scholars. For instance, Oscar Kaplan (1940) stated that human beings can be predicted by man-made laws. For Kaplan, any science of society associated with good predictability must seek data in the natural sciences as well and encompass different social disciplines that lead to better predictions when understood as tied together. This point of view bears a strong resemblance to Turchin's efforts approximately 80 years later.

On the other hand, Karl Popper (1957) is one of the major thinkers who refutes the belief that the human future can be predicted because scientific knowledge is unknowable in advance. Turchin responds to Popper in *End Times* by arguing that the most important limitation regarding this claim is understanding the process of knowledge accumulation – hence, the future growth of scientific knowledge is not unknowable but merely unknown, implying that better predictability depends on developments in data collection.

Turchin's first best seller was *Ages of Discord: A Structural-Demographic Analysis of American History* (2016), a work in which the author exposes the fundamentals of cliodynamics and uses this discipline to explain the turbulent events happening in the United States – precisely in a year in which the American audience was trying to understand its own political process marked by the election of Donald Trump as president.

The aim of *End Times* is to introduce cliodynamics (and the main features and conclusions derived from it) to a wide audience, so it is written in a very simple and pedagogical way, including real-life and even fictional examples to clarify every concept Turchin introduces. Even though Turchin tries to position cliodynamics as a universal tool, his main and most recurrent example is, again, the United States, as he recognizes that this is the study case he has worked on most.

In the preface to *End Times*, Turchin specifies that the purpose of the science of history he has introduced is to anticipate how collective choices can lead to (or away from) a better future for people. With this in mind, cliodynamics studies the patterns of human history that conform to the cycles of political integration and disintegration of societies. The basic mechanism that explains the disintegrative phases of nations and empires is founded on the 'wealth pump,' the process by which the elites accumulate wealth at the expense of commoners; this provokes popular immiseration and elite overproduction, the main variables associated with political disintegration.

The book is organized in three parts, containing nine chapters. Part 1 *The Cliodynamics of Power* focuses on introducing in more detail the main variables and features studied in cliodynamics. This contains chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 1, *Elites, Elite Overproduction, and the Road to Crisis,* introduces and explains the main components of social systems and how the relations between them can lead to disintegration processes. First, Turchin defines elites as power holders and argues that there are four types of the latter: those based on force, those on wealth, bureaucratic-administrative, and ideological. Elite overproduction is the phenomenon by which more elite aspirants in society are created than there are positions for them to occupy, so frustrated aspirants may become counter-elites – revolutionary factions that seek to overthrow the established elites to occupy their positions.

On the other hand, elite overproduction is fed by the wealth pump, which provokes popular immiseration that can be detected when real wages stop growing. Immiserated people and frustrated elite aspirants together are an explosive combination that forges 'ages of discord,' times of instability, and a high risk of societal disintegration and collapse. In this sense, Turchin assumes a position that accords with the line of thought of scholars such as Joseph Stiglitz (2012), for whom inequality undermines social cohesion, increases political polarization, hampers economic growth, and affects a society's health, education, and social mobility. This implies a remarkable break from extremely liberal economic perspectives that dismiss inequality as an issue that justifies intervention (especially from the state).

Chapter 2, *Stepping Back: Lessons of History,* deepens understanding of the historical structure of integrative and disintegrative phases that societies pass through. Integrative eras are characterised by internal peace, social stability, and cooperation between elites. On the contrary, in disintegrative times, we observe social instability, the breakdown of intra-elite cooperation, and political violence. While integrative phases can last up to 200 years, disintegrative phases can last up to 100 years. All in all, the full cycle can last between approximately 100 and 300 years and is shorter in polygamous societies given their more abundant biological reproduction. Moreover, waves of instability can hit many societies at the same time because of external or natural forces or the contagion of social phenomena.

After Chapter 2, the author asks whoever is interested to read the annexes before reading parts 2 and 3. In these annexes, Turchin provides an in-depth justification of his goals and relates how the strictly scientific methods he employs to achieve them work, but the most remarkable item in these annexes is the clarification of the epistemological structural-dynamic approach that supports cliodynamics; while the elites and the commoners are parts of the societal structure, societal dynamics include all the different forms of synergy between these parts, meaning that these dynamics can be changed to avoid social catastrophes. Also, Turchin declares that his epistemology is materialistic, meaning that, for cliodynamics, material interests are the most important feature that characterises human behaviour.

Part 2, *The Drivers of Instability*, encompasses chapters 3 to 6 and focuses on explaining the characteristics of every actor in the structure. Chapters 3 to 5 begin introducing fictional characters that represent, in order, an immiserated commoner, a frustrated elite aspirant, and members of the elite. This exercise is helpful for non-scientific readers.

Chapter 3, *The Peasants Are Revolting,* focuses on popular immiseration. It describes how it is harder for American workers today to get a steady job or save money. It also explains that, compared to the period between 1950 and 1980, workers now must work many more hours to reach the same level. Turchin considers as indicators of popular immiseration, besides real wage compression, a lowering of the average height, shorter life expectancy, and higher rates of 'deaths of despair' (suicides and deaths associated with addiction). Turchin considers that since 1980, in the United States, because of Reagan's neoliberal policies, social institutions that nurture social life and cooperation have declined. So, market fundamentalism, while replacing a focus on societal well-being, has provoked a new social contradiction: the educated vs the immiserated.

Turchin's immiserated are theoretically aligned with the figure of the 'precariat' defined by Guy Standing (2011), a concept that refers to a class of people including the unemployed, the underemployed, and the employed in temporary, part-time, or insecure jobs, all of whom lack the stability, decent wages, security, healthcare, pensions, and benefits associated with traditional forms of employment. A key issue for the people considered part of this precariat is their uncertainty about the prospects of maintaining a decent standard of living.

Chapter 4, *The Revolutionary Troops,* focuses on elite overproduction. It argues that between 1950 and 1980, very few people went to college, and those who did were frequently guaranteed a position after graduation. The situation has changed now: there is now a greater supply of youth with advanced degrees than demand for them, so degree holders

become part of the precariat; in fact, Mao, Lenin, Robespierre, Castro, Lincoln, and Gandhi were all part of this social group. Turchin introduces here the ideological element, stating that most sectarian ideologies have an advantage in ages of discord.

Chapter 5, *The Ruling Class,* focuses on American elites. The author introduces the notion that the United States is a plutocracy, a state dominated by economic elites. At the top of American society is a corporate community that includes owners and managers of corporations, banks, and firms. American plutocratic elites have four main characteristics: they want to augment their wealth, they influence society through different mechanisms (from lobbying to media control), they have no center (the phenomenon involves a non-hierarchical network of thousands of individuals), and they maintain rigorous secrecy.

Chapter 6, *Why is America a Plutocracy?* Justifies the author's provocative stance about the United States being a plutocracy. Turchin explains that plutocracies are rare in human history, but in the United States, the northern oligarchs won the Civil War, and having no military rivals on their own continent, they were able to rule the country without the need for a militocracy. The author describes how, in some historical periods, elites work for their own benefit, while in others, they compromise to benefit society. The complexity of plutocracies is that, as they have no hierarchical order, when they work for their own benefit, intra-elite cooperation declines, accelerating societal disintegration.

So, ages of discord can end in only one of two ways: collapse, which may include revolution or civil war, or the elites pulling together, suppressing rivalries, and cooperating. In the American case, the author emphasizes the need to shut down the wealth pump and reverse inequality. Moreover, he declares that to avoid a violent end, economic elites must be persuaded to pursue reforms that go against their own lucrative interests. Turchin states that contemporary American elites tend to promote tax lowering and radical left cultural causes, both having disintegrative consequences.

Part 3, *Crisis and Aftermath*, examines the disintegrative phase currently occurring in America and exposes the author's ideas about how to deal with it. This part is composed of chapters 7 to 9.

Chapter 7, *State Breakdown,* focuses on the process of societal collapse itself. It starts by telling the story of the Roman emperor Nero, who lost his power the day that all the members of his government abandoned him. Using this historical example, Turchin argues that the most frequent cause of state collapse is the implosion of ruling networks. The author suggests that political leaders are usually overrated because, at the end of the day, they would not be able to do anything if not for their supporting networks. Also, people on their own are not able to seize power after a revolution; only organized actors can do that, which is why it is analytically important to consider what the most influential interest groups within a society are, for they represent the expression of counter-elites acting to overthrow the system.

Provocatively, the author says that (even more important than considering whether a political regime is a democracy) what should be observed to anticipate collapse is whether the elites are acting to promote the well-being of the population and what the state of the structure and dynamics of a society is. Turchin adds to this the premise that plutocracies are extremely vulnerable to implosion due to intra-elite competition.

Chapter 8, *Histories of the Near Future,* focuses on the process of societal collapse occurring in the United States nowadays. Considering that ages of discord can only end with downward social mobility executed in violent or non-violent ways, the author states that a

social cataclysm in the 2020s is unavoidable, and the number of members of the elite will be reduced by the end of this decade. As radicalization is still rising, and considering that the State does not seem to be imploding, dissidents are using the Republican Party as a platform for political transformation, occupying the institutions from the inside because the Democratic Party, on the other hand, has become the party of the elite.

The author does not imply that the necessary changes will be good but states that they will inevitably occur if American society does not want to stay trapped in a cycle of internal violence. After a painful decade, moderates should overcome radicals, and a new time of peace should begin – although cliodynamics shows that disintegrative stages tend to have two peaks, so a new age of discord may be expected to happen in the 2070s, approximately. All in all, the author reiterates that the most peaceful way out of the turmoil is to shut down the wealth pump by bringing wage levels up.

Finally, chapter 9, *The Wealth Pump and the Future of Democracy,* focuses on the possibility of a peaceful solution to the 2020's American age of discord. Keeping in mind that the author considers that the last American age of discord was peacefully overcome due to the New Deal, which involved a pact of cooperation between the state, the elites, and the commoners, the current crisis can be overcome if fear make elites engage in reforms that help avoid societal collapse because they usually risk losing too much after revolutions, even their lives. At the end of the day, there may be no permanent solution because elites tend to be tempted to look after their own benefits at the expense of society, so leaders – who are necessary – need to be constantly reminded to act in ways that benefit everybody. Turchin considers that the cumulative cultural evolution of humanity may help societies seek more civilized solutions to ages of discord.

This book raises very interesting questions about the relationship between political economy and social cohesion. Addressing popular immiseration is something that political decision-makers today must not forget. The author is, without a doubt, proposing an ethos of concord and an Aristotelian equilibrium among the components of society, even regarding wealth, yet without resorting to egalitarian extremism, as he recognizes that elites are necessary.

However, some questions may be raised. First, the aim of identifying an exact science of history may be the origin of an unhealthy tendency to determinism – if one considers that societal dynamics are only mechanical and that the human future is totally predictable and cyclical. Second, the materialist epistemology of cliodynamics may overlook the deep differences between political ideologies, as it considers ideology only a secondary aspect of counter-elite formation.

Third, the solution of raising wages to shut down the wealth pump looks very simple when written down – as if it only depended on the goodwill of the state and elites – but many more economic factors are involved. Fourth, the idea of the elites acting against their own interests needs to be detailed better regarding its limits. Otherwise, it may be used as an excuse for egalitarian extremism. Related to this point, the stability of the Stalin and Lukashenko regimes in their exercise of power is considered by the author as a consequence of their personal modesty and good use of their networks accompanied by general well-being, which is a questionable assumption and might be perceived as the basis for the relativization of actions by those regimes against their citizens. A final question may also be raised about the feasibility of a new kind of 'New Deal' in a globalized world in which nation-states seem to be weaker.

All in all, this book is a very interesting piece. It may be recommended to anyone who wants to learn about a very innovative point of view regarding the political crises of the contemporary world.

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