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Solidarity test: challenges of forced LGBTIQ migration and activism in Central-Eastern European countries in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine

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ABSTRACT
When Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, many LGBTIQ Ukrainians, like hundreds of thousands of their compatriots, were forced to leave their homes and move to safer areas. Those who could and chose to leave the country, fearing for their safety, entered the bordering EU member states, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, known for their unfriendly attitudes towards homosexuality. As neither the Ukrainian government nor the authorities in these states were willing to pay attention to LGBTIQ refugees and their needs, the task of accommodating those fell on the shoulders of NGOs and volunteers in host countries.

This article focuses on the efforts by LGBTIQ human rights organizations and activists in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) into mobilizing resources to help LGBTIQ Ukrainians fleeing to Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia or staying in Ukraine. It explores how these LGBTIQ organizations responded to the forced migration of LGBTIQ Ukrainians. It argues that during this critical time, they have been indispensable for supporting displaced LGBTIQ Ukrainians. At the same time, stressing the importance of cross-border cooperation, this article addresses some challenges that LGBTIQ organizations in Central-Eastern Europe face in trying to survive in a homophobic political climate.

Introduction

During the Pride month of 2022, the Ukrainian national flag and other Ukrainian symbols could be spotted at Pride marches across Europe and the Western world. Contrary to the principle of staying out of politics

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and forgoing whatever may look like a nationalist symbol, Pride march organizers across many regions, including Baltic countries, the US, Canada, Slovenia, Germany, France, Poland and Taiwan, agreed to place large Ukrainian flags next to a big rainbow flag as proof of solidarity. In many cases, posters with anti-war messages were allowed, while the organizers ensured that the participants carried no Russian flags. In this way, LGBTIQ[1] rights activists and organizations demonstrated their strong support for Ukraine and its people, particularly the LGBTIQ community.

During 2012–2022, mostly due to pressure from the EU institutions and the promises of political and economic benefits, the Ukrainian state made some advancements to make Ukrainian legislation more LGBTIQ-inclusive. For example, since 2015, the Labor Code of Ukraine has prohibited discrimination in the workplace based on one's sexual orientation and gender identity and, in 2012, a law to combat and prevent discrimination was adopted that protects, albeit implicitly, LGBTIQ people in the everyday too. Nevertheless, none of the Ukrainian governments were particularly LGBTIQ-friendly or expressed open support for the LGBTIQ community. Not surprisingly, when the war in Ukraine escalated after the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, no specific steps were taken to address the worsened conditions of LGBTIQ Ukrainians (Shevtsova 2022).

As the governments of the EU member states joined their efforts to assist Ukraine and its displaced population, LGBTIQ organizations and activists in these countries were also quick to react to the new issues. During the first weeks of the invasion, crowdfunding campaigns were launched in many countries to help LGBTIQ Ukrainians; safe shelters and LGBTIQ-friendly housing databases were set up; and additional resources were pulled to meet the basic needs of newcomers, such as food and clothing, as well as hormonal and HIV treatment that LGBTIQ refugees needed regularly.

Scholars studying LGBTIQ activism in the European context have argued before that there is a relationship between increased migrant inflows, growing queer activism and networks of LGBTIQ rights organizations. Thanks to the migration, the 'bonds of solidarity' have been born, leading to queer mobilization transnationally (Ayoub 2016; Ayoub and Bauman 2019). Furthermore, quite a few academic works

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[1]Throughout this article, the abbreviation 'LGBTIQ' is used as an umbrella term to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and questioning people. While acknowledging the limitations of this abbreviation, I have chosen to use it as the abbreviations LGBTI and LGBTIQ (ЛГБТ, ЛГБТІК, ЛГБТіК, ЛГБТІ) are the ones most often used in public spaces by Ukrainian LGBTIQ rights organizations (for example, the National LGBTI conference). I also use the term 'queer' when quoting other authors who have chosen to use it, but I avoid applying it to the Ukrainian LGBTIQ community since there is no common agreement within the community on how and referring to whom this term should be used.

have already been written discussing queer activism and political and emotional attachments of LGBTIQ migrants both in the European context and beyond it, relationships that activists have with the state and their involvement in regional politics, and queer migrants' interactions with host communities (Chavez 2016; Fellner and Nossem 2018). The case of displaced LGBTIQ.

The case of displaced LGBTIQ Ukrainians at the time of Russia's full-scale invasion stands out due to several factors. The first to consider is the population's demographic, including the LGBTIQ community, which in many cases was forced, though a small number were simply allowed, to leave their homes. Then there has been the unprecedented support and effort by the European countries to accept and accommodate huge numbers of Ukrainian refugees. The final, and probably most important for the present research piece, factor is political homophobia in the countries where LGBTIQ Ukrainians ended up right after crossing the border.

Due to geographic proximity, neighboring countries such as Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia became the ones receiving the largest number of displaced Ukrainians, either on their way further West or planning to settle down or to stay for a longer or a shorter time (UNHCR 2022). However, these are all countries that, like Ukraine, have never been particularly LGBTIQ-friendly. In Poland, several regions were declared 'LGBTIQ-free zones' by local authorities several years ago (Graff 2020), and Hungary is notorious for expelling gender studies programs from its universities and making the transition for trans people almost impossible with its recent legal changes (Barát 2022). In Bulgaria, mass protests took place against the Istanbul Convention against gender-based violence, and homophobic rhetoric was among the driving factors of those protests. In other words, it was clear from the start that operating an organization hosting LGBTIQ refugees from Ukraine in such countries would not be easy. Still, it was a challenge that LGBTIQ organizations in all these countries accepted.

This is a research article drawing on the most recent data collected during the first months of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022. This article uses the data collected through interviews, content analysis and participant observation to explore how LGBTIQ organizations in Central-Eastern Europe responded to the challenges related to the forced migration[2] of LGBTIQ Ukrainians. It argues that, in this

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[2]In this article, I use a general term 'forced migration' defined by UNHCR as the movements of refugees and internally displaced people (those displaced by conflicts within their country of origin); it also includes movements of people that have been displaced by natural or environmental disasters,

critical time, LGBTIQ activists and organizations played a crucial role in supporting LGBTIQ refugees coming to the EU, other LGBTIQ organizations and people staying in Ukraine. At the same time, this article addresses some challenges that LGBTIQ organizations in Central-Eastern Europe face and questions what these challenges mean for sexual and gender equality in the region. Among other things, the article points out that, besides political homophobia and resistance to promoting LGBTIQ rights in CEE countries, the problems faced by LGBTIQ organizations are largely related to structural inequality in their countries and strong dependence on support from donor organizations from abroad.

The article is structured as follows. It starts by introducing the case background and the research methodology. Next, it introduces several themes identified in the collected data using thematic content analysis. The analytical part of the article discusses how these themes relate to the major obstacles faced by LGBTIQ organizations in Central-Eastern Europe and some of the strategies used to deal with those. The article also addresses the reaction of the Ukrainian LGBTIQ community to the ongoing war and their response to the current situation. It concludes with a discussion of the most pressing issues and the limitations of the current research project 'in the making' and offers directions for future studies for scholars working in the field.

Background: LGBTIQ Ukrainians and the large-scale invasion of 2022

When the large-scale invasion began on 24 February 2022, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, especially those in the southern and eastern regions of the country and Kyiv, the capital, were forced to leave their homes and move to safer areas. Almost immediately, by the decree of the President of Ukraine, martial law was imposed on Ukraine that banned male citizens aged 18–60, with a few exceptions, from traveling abroad (Decree of the President of Ukraine no. 64 dd. 24.02.2022).

The imposition of martial law in the country influenced the demographic of LGBTIQ people fleeing to other countries.[3] Crossing the

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chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects. (https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/forced-migration-or-displacement)

[3]While it is not the topic of the present article, it is worth noting that many LGBTIQ people have made a conscious decision not to leave the country despite all the risks; moreover, there have been LGBTIQ people serving in the military forces and joining territorial defense forces. As with many other Ukrainian citizens, LGBTIQ Ukrainians volunteered in their cities as well as worked to collect money and

border became impossible for most cis-gender gay men, nor were trans women and intersex people with male gender markers on their identification documents allowed to leave Ukraine. Many of them fled to the safer regions from occupied or soon-to-be occupied territories, in fear for their safety as the Russian government is infamous for its political homophobia, and information was spread about the lists of human rights activists that the Russian military forces reportedly held. While cis-gender gay men, in most cases, had to stay in Ukraine, several LGBTIQ rights NGOs mobilized their efforts to assist trans people through the medical examination and other bureaucratic formalities required for them to be allowed to leave the country. Nevertheless, due to the low level of trust in state institutions where LGBTIQ people in Ukraine often face homo- and transphobic treatment and lack of resources, compounded by hectic war communications, only several hundred trans people could get such help and left Ukraine. While this number is low for such a large country as Ukraine, it translates into extensive work undertaken by LGBTIQ rights organizations in the country and beyond its borders.

This article focuses on the host organizations for LGBTIQ Ukrainians in CEE countries and the experiences that LGBTIQ Ukrainians have had with some of them. This section offers some background on the living conditions of LGBTIQ Ukrainians in Ukraine before and after the large-scale invasion, which will help one better understand the current situation in the region and the factors shaping the decisions to leave or to stay that many LGBTIQ Ukrainians make.

Formally, the Ukrainian state offers rather limited legal protection from discrimination and homo- and transphobic crimes; same-sex marriages or partnerships are not allowed in the country, and, since 2015, almost no substantial steps have been taken by public authorities to make Ukrainian legislation more LGBTIQ–friendly. There are a few important exceptions to this. For example, in 2016, Ukraine adopted a new clinical protocol for medical care for gender dysphoria, significantly facilitating the medical part of gender transition for trans people. This change has made Ukrainian legislation on this issue one of the most trans-friendly in the CEE region. In 2021, the ban was lifted on blood donation for persons having homosexual relations (Kravchuk *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, during 2016–2021, public authorities in Ukraine's

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humanitarian aid for displaced people and for the Ukrainian military forces (see, for example, Bakyeva 2022; Shevtsova 2022).

larger cities, thanks to the advocacy efforts of LGBTIQ activists and pressure from EU member states and institutions, became more accepting and cooperative in their relations with LGBTIQ rights NGOs. As a result, the visibility of LGBTIQ people has increased, too. Since 2015, the number of Equality Marches – the Ukrainian name for Pride Marches – and their security and attendance have steadily grown across Ukraine. In 2021, protected by the state security forces and supported by foreign donors, Equality Marches for LGBTIQ rights took place in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia. As the reports from NGOs and international organizations show, the large-scale Russian invasion has impacted the situation of LGBTIQ Ukrainians in various ways (Kravchuk *et al.* 2022; Iryskina 2022).

First, as for any other vulnerable group, the large-scale invasion has increased LGBTIQ Ukrainians' vulnerability, adding to overall inequality in the society. In addition to economic hardships, such as losing sources of income, being in a precarious position in the shrinking job market, and often without access to safe housing and healthcare,[4] LGBTIQ Ukrainians have also become exposed to more homo- and transphobia. From 24 February until 30 August 2022, the LGBT Human Rights Nash Svit Center (2022) documented 62 cases of homo- and transphobic crimes and several organized attacks on the offices of LGBTIQ rights organizations. This number is not to say that levels of homo- and transphobia increased across the country. Rather, psychological tension has been growing against the backdrop of the general militarization of the country. At the same time, access to weapons became easier for some groups of the population, and some groups got credit for their 'legitimate' use of violence. For example, among documented homo- and transphobic crimes, 30 were committed by law enforcement and security bodies, such as police or territorial defense forces (LGBT Human Rights Nash Svit Center 2022). In numerous cities, religious and far-right groups and some conservative politicians continue homophobic campaigns online and offline and repeatedly speak against any advancements for LGBTIQ equality in the country. Finally, previous research in other countries has suggested that 'homophobic violence is an intrinsic component of armed conflict and political transition' (Serrano-Amaya 2018). While there is only scattered data and no detailed research on this for the case of Ukraine, it is highly likely that LGBTIQ people also

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[4]For one of the reports on the condition of LGBTIQ people in Ukraine, see EOP (2022) 'Problems and needs of vulnerable groups of the Dnipro region: LGBTIQ people'. Available in Ukrainian at https://www.eop.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/zvit-lgbtik.pdf

face higher risks of sexualized gender-based and homo- and transphobic violence in the territories occupied by the Russian forces.

At the same time, the Nash Svit Center reports significant changes in societal attitudes toward LGBTIQ people in 2022. Since 2016, when a similar national survey on attitudes to LGBTIQ people was conducted, the number of LGBTIQ-friendly responses increased by between two to five times, depending on how the questions were framed, with an almost doubled number of respondents supporting full equality for LGBTIQ Ukrainians (from 33.4% to 63.7%) (LGBT Human Rights Nash Svit Center 2022). In July 2022, the petition regarding the legalization of same-sex marriages in Ukraine collected 25,000 votes, the number necessary for its consideration by the President of Ukraine.[5]

While it is too early to make assumptions regarding whether Ukraine post-war will become more liberal and tolerant towards non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities, this reported change is an important social trend that may influence LGBTIQ people's intentions to leave Ukraine or stay there despite the war. LGBTIQ Ukrainians who could and decided to leave the country, in fear for their safety, mainly had to transit or stay in the bordering EU member states, including Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, which are known for their unfriendly attitudes towards homosexuality and even strong state-level homophobia, as in the cases of Hungary and Poland. Despite the political pressure in those countries, LGBTIQ human rights organizations and activists put much effort and resources into fast mobilization to help LGBTIQ Ukrainians, whether fleeing abroad or staying in Ukraine.

Methods and limitations of the study

The present research article is a qualitative study drawing on the most recent (March to early October 2022) data. An important part of the data is in-depth semi-structured interviews. From May to October, I collected five interviews with the representatives of Ukrainian, Polish, Slovakian, Hungarian and Slovenian organizations that work directly with displaced LGBTIQ Ukrainians. With the help of a research assistant, I have also conducted ten interviews with LGBTIQ Ukrainians in Ukraine (aged 18–45; half of them are displaced within Ukraine; one identifies as a trans person, one as non-binary, the others are lesbian

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[5]President Zelenskiy responding to this petition said that he had already asked his government to take a deeper look into the issue; but, according to his declaration, there would be no such move as long as the war with Russia continued (Reuters 2022).

women and gay men or cisgender) to gain a better idea of the situation for those who have decided, been forced or are still hesitant to stay. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min. Most of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, with a few exceptions where recording was not possible and I had to use my notes. I also used some notes from communications with the representatives of the Ukrainian, Slovenian and Polish LGBTIQ organizations, during which I explicitly stated the topic and focus of my research. While I do not quote speakers from such conversations in this article, they also inform the research findings. Finally, this article is informed by participant observation at several LGBTIQ rights-related events in CEE countries, such as Warsaw Solidarity Pride and Ljubljana Pride Week in June 2022 and meetings with Ukrainian LGBTIQ activists and community leaders in Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

In addition to the above-mentioned data, I also used online materials (social media posts, interviews with the activists, both Ukrainian and in host countries, reports by several international organizations, and recordings of discussions between human rights activists, representatives of international organizations, and researchers or scholars). Considering the ethical debates around using social media as a data source, I have only used materials intended for the broader public and never private posts or comments.

I also need to acknowledge my positionality as a social scientist, LGBTIQ ally, and human rights activist of Ukrainian origin (and with Ukrainian citizenship) who lived and worked in another country when the full-scale invasion started. During the interviews and studying and analyzing selected materials, I needed to stay aware of my own safe and privileged position that allowed me to conduct research from a safer place. At the same time, I had to consider my own bias as a Ukrainian who has been involved in both grassroots and professional LGBTIQ rights activism for years and observed many aspects from the inside. While my position granted me access to interview people I needed to interview, it also informed and shaped, in a way, our conversations.

Finally, it is important to point out that one of the limitations of this research, apart from those mentioned already regarding the short timeline and limited sampling, is that this article does not distinguish between various groups united under the abbreviation LGBTIQ. It is crucial to acknowledge that the challenges these groups may face – also in combination with other factors, such as one's class, (dis)ability, ethnicity, health condition and citizenship status – may vary significantly, as

do their experiences. This research article is but a quick 'snapshot' of the situation, and deeper research is needed into each group to create short- and long-term policy solutions.

For the data analysis, I have chosen thematic content analysis (TCA), which was introduced in the last century in psychology and was later largely used in various fields of social sciences for its practicality and applicability to different types of qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis includes such stages as: familiarizing oneself with the data, which also involves detailed or verbatim data transcription; initial coding that can be done manually; searching for and defining potential themes; reviewing selected themes concerning the whole collected data; finally, naming the themes and analyzing the data according to the specifics of each of them (Braun and Clarke 2006). TCA is sometimes criticized or dismissed by social science scholars for not having theory-generation as its goal and for often being used in a merely descriptive way to report the research findings (Humble and Mozelius 2022). Nevertheless, in the present situation of research of a case in the making within a situation that has been changing dramatically for the last seven months, and that will change even more by the time this article is published, and with all the limitations of TCA, I found it the optimal method to report my research findings. In the concluding part of this article, I discuss in more detail the potential for further studies in using a more elaborate set of data analysis methods.

Following the scheme described above, and while familiarizing myself with the collected data, both primary and secondary, when collating the materials I saw that similar topics were discussed, the same terminology was used, or similar grievances were mentioned. While I did not put challenges and problems at the center of our conversations, as the analysis below shows, they were discussed more than achievements and small victories. My interpretation is that this was not to downplay the work done by LGBTI organizations but rather that it signals existing concerns and issues that are still not being addressed by the governments of host countries and international organizations. After looking through the collected and sorted data, I have designated a 'theme' for each group of statements: solidarity, political homophobia/local homophobic attitudes, competition for resources, lack of trust in international institutions, and lack of communication. When analyzing them, I also aimed to support my arguments by previous research done on these topics. While these titles can be changed by other researchers, my goal is to bring the attention of scholars and policymakers to the key messages behind them and consider what further steps are needed to improve the

current situation. The following sections are structured around these themes, discussing their possible implications for LGBTIQ Ukrainians in Central-Eastern European countries.

Solidarity

The issue of transnational solidarities has been occupying a central place in the literature on feminist and LGBTIQ movements; nearly two decades ago, Tarrow (2005) was writing of transnational activism with reference to building and operating networks of activists or civil society organizations across borders. Various authors also speak of transnational solidarity in the case of Poland's EU accession, as LGBTIQ organizations from other countries used pre-accession negotiations to pressure CEE countries to comply with the current LGBTIQ human rights standards (Gruszczyńska 2009; O'Dwyer 2010). Binnie and Klesse (2012) argue that, in the 2000s, the LGBTIQ movement in Poland gained momentum against the backdrop of growing state homophobia and Europeanization processes in the region, where a particularly strong mobilization around LGBTIQ politics emerged. Feischmidt and Neumann (2022) speak of politicizing solidarity, discussing the growing civic activism in the pandemic years with narrated ideas on responsibility, collective action and social change. In the case of the Ukrainian LGBTIQ community, the theme of transnational solidarity proved crucial in the mass evacuation of people from the country during the large-scale war.

The theme of transnational solidarity with the Ukrainian LGBTIQ community came up in almost all the interviews and conversations I had with activists from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Solidarity was also the recurrent theme of most Pride marches in the EU countries, where Ukraine's flag and political claims were largely present. As a representative of an LGBTIQ organization in Slovenia commented in an interview:

> Our usual position at Ljubljana Pride is not to allow any flags as we want to stay away from nationalism, but this year we decided on a Ukrainian flag as a sign of solidarity with our Ukrainian friends (Ljubljana, June 2022).[6]

The solidarity theme was particularly strong in the Warsaw Pride in Poland, which was even referred to as a Pride march of solidarity with

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[6]The direct quotations I use in this article are from the interview recordings or notes made during the summer of 2022. They were mostly verbatim; in cases when they are translated from other languages, the translations were done by me as closely to the original spoken word as possible.

Ukraine, where KyivPride and Warsaw Pride would 'march for peace and freedom of Ukraine and against Russian aggression in Ukraine' as it was written on the European Pride webpage.

Interestingly, the theme of solidarity with Ukraine against the common enemy – Russia – became so strong in Polish public discourse that, despite the rather homophobic policies of the government (Mole et al. 2021), the Pride march in the center of Warsaw was permitted by the local authorities and took place peacefully with very few opponents protesting. I do not argue that the homophobia of the Polish government decreased against the background of the large-scale invasion. There were no legal improvements in the situation of LGBTIQ Poles. However, accepting a large mass gathering for the human rights of Polish and Ukrainian LGBTIQ people signals that solidarity with the Ukrainian people is prioritized by the Polish authorities.

Both KyivPride and Warsaw Pride organizations used the opportunity to promote the KyivPride manifesto calling for various groups, from politicians to grassroots activists, to stand in solidarity with Ukraine:

> We call on the brotherly and sisterly queer communities of Europe and the world to show maximum solidarity with Ukrainian LGBTI + people – solidarity in values, ideology, and politics. Affected by Russian aggression, we are still in need of your help. The resources we receive from you are being converted into saved lives and fates (KyivPride 2022).

Solidarity was also mentioned as something at the core of the motivation of LGBTIQ activists in CEE countries to use various resources to help LGBTIQ Ukrainians. Activists from Slovakia, Poland and Hungary to whom I talked said that, from the first days of the large-scale invasion, LGBTIQ people in their countries volunteered to go to the border to meet LGBTIQ Ukrainians or to host them in their homes. The organizations that cooperated with Ukrainian LGBTIQ rights NGOs contacted them asking about the help needed and mobilized to collect money, humanitarian aid and hormonal treatment for trans people, as it was known that there would be problems with supplies. In many countries, hormones can be obtained by medical prescription only, and some activists told me how people from their local communities were telling their doctors they had lost their hormone medication, in order to get one-month supplies to send to Ukraine. Crowdfunding campaigns were announced in all the countries mentioned above, and much personal and organizational attention was directed to the situation with LGBTIQ Ukrainians.

In other words, the concept, or the theme, of solidarity was fundamental to helping LGBTIQ Ukrainians in the host countries. At the same time, as the following sections will show, other themes voiced by LGBTIQ activists and organizations in CEE countries indicate challenges that, if unable to be overcome, may damage the overall effectiveness of these joint efforts.

Political homophobia/homophobic politics

Many human rights activists mentioned negative attitudes toward LGBTIQ people in countries neighboring Ukraine as one of the main obstacles to protecting LGBTIQ Ukrainians crossing the borders. Several activists mentioned political homophobia or homophobic governmental politics in the interviews and informal conversations.

In social sciences, the concept of political homophobia coined by Weiss and Bosia (2013) is used to refer to 'a state strategy, social movement, and transnational phenomenon, powerful enough to structure the experiences of sexual minorities and expressions of sexuality'. The authors consider political homophobia as:

> purposeful, especially as practiced by state actors; as embedded in the scapegoating of an 'other' that drives processes of state building and retrenchment; as the product of transnational influence peddling and alliances; and as integrated into questions of collective identity and the complicated legacies of colonialism (2013: 2).

Importantly, it is not necessarily the conservative or anti-homosexual attitudes within society that lead to the instrumentalization of homophobia by political elites. Often the use of political homophobia is a deliberate choice by the government to distract the citizens from any governmental misconduct or a local problem and, instead, choose a specific enemy to blame (Shevtsova 2020; Slepcov 2018).

This contrast between how the government conducts homophobic politics, outsiders' external perception of a country, and the real situation in the society were well reflected in the interviews with and commentaries from the activists. In the case of Hungary, as several LGBTIQ activists from this country remarked, its reputation as a homophobic state prevented LGBTIQ Ukrainians from even trying to enter the country. As one of the representatives of a local organization that worked to support LGBTIQ refugees commented:

> When the invasion started, we had so many LGBTIQ people offering to host queer Ukrainians at their places, but, in fact, so many LGBTIQ Ukrainians never came to Hungary. Some activists mostly contacted us for recommendations on passing through Hungary to other countries, such as Germany or Austria, or for some other practicalities. It seems that people mostly considered Hungary a transit country rather than a point of destination (Ljubljana, June 2022).

The interviews with LGBTIQ Ukrainians made it clear that they never considered Hungary a destination country due to the 'reputation' it had in international media.[7] At the same time, activists in Slovakia, where one of the first shelters for LGBTIQ people was organized in a city close to the border with the common effort of Amnesty International, local and Ukrainian LGBTIQ activists, these were locals who insisted that their country was not the best place to stay. As a representative of a Slovakian LGBTIQ rights organization commented:

> We tell Ukrainians straight away that our country is not very LGBTIQ-friendly; we do not have it easy here. They should move further to countries like Germany or the Netherlands, where the situation with LGBTIQ rights is much better (Ljubljana, June 2022).

Interestingly, Ukrainian activists in Slovakia did not share this opinion of the country; moreover, several months after the large-scale invasion had started, they opened one more shelter in Bratislava with a larger capacity. When I asked my interviewees about the situation with LGBTIQ rights in Slovakia, and whether they felt safe there, they responded by saying that, compared to the situation in Ukraine, they see Slovakia and Bratislava as quite comfortable places to stay and did not feel like they needed to move to other countries because of societal homophobia. One of the activists even commented:

> Look, I saw such things back in Ukraine – bombs falling and a radical-right group attacking me and my colleagues – their [Slovakian] homophobia can hardly scare me. Moreover, we are not going just to sit here and seek protection. We are ready to put hands to work, to help them with campaigning or LGBTIQ rights advocacy; we can bring our experience to the table (Bratislava, August 2022).

The Polish example is worth attention, too, as Poland is a country with a rather conservative and homophobic government yet also with a vibrant,

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[7]It is worth noting that, apart from its homophobic attitudes, other issues, such as Hungary's position during the war, i.e. its reluctance to support Ukraine with weapons and financially, and its difficult language, were also among the factors mentioned by Ukrainian refugees who rejected Hungary outright as an option to stay.

dynamic and strong LGBTIQ activism (and in its civil society overall); furthermore, from the first days of the war, Poland declared itself as one of the staunchest allies of Ukraine. LGBTIQ activists and organizations in Poland, especially in Warsaw, mobilized very quickly. Despite the popular knowledge that the ruling party in the country treated LGBTIQ people badly, not only did Poland host the largest number of LGBTIQ people passing through the country toward the West, but many of the displaced queer Ukrainians also decided to stay there. Polish activists explained this to be, among others, because of the cultural and historical proximity of the countries and the presence of many Ukrainians, including LGBTIQ Ukrainians, in the country before the invasion.

> We have Ukrainian activists working with us in the office, so we could, from the beginning, set up a webpage in the Ukrainian language for people seeking help, and we could organize the Polish language courses right in the office. We also try to learn some Ukrainian ourselves. Many activists offered their places to stay so we could put many people in private accommodation as there was no help from the government.

To my question about homophobic attitudes of the government, they answered:

> Yes, this is true that our ruling party is very conservative, but, also, our civil society is very strong. We just continue doing our job and helping people; they [the government] cannot do anything against it (Ljubljana, June 2022).

The perception of a country as homophobic or safe enough to stay for LGBTIQ people was among the central themes discussed by host organizations and by LGBTIQ Ukrainians. The centrality of the topic does not mean that this was the only criterion influencing the decision; like heterosexual people, LGBTIQ refugees also had to consider the language issue, personal or professional connections in the host country, availability of safe housing, access to healthcare, and overall support for Ukrainians. In the future, further research will be needed to see how those factors together shape LGBTIQ Ukrainians' experiences in the longer term.

Competition for resources and lack of communication

This article focuses on the organized response of LGBTIQ organizations in Central-Eastern Europe to the evolving humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. While societal attitudes to LGBTIQ people and political homophobia of the government or some political actors largely influence the

capacity of local NGOs to provide effective and timely support for incoming LGBTIQ refugees, this section discusses another factor that proves no less important.

The lack of resources and the need to fight to secure the organization's everyday work and have stable funding were one of the major concerns voiced explicitly or implicitly by many activists. These activists referred to the need to plan their work from one funded project to another, time-consuming applications, and reporting processes with low shares of funding allocated to administrative needs and institutional core support of organizational activities. At the same time, considering state-sponsored homophobia in the CEE region, the majority of LGBTIQ organizations in the host countries have been the main provider of support for LGBTIQ Ukrainians while also fully depending on foreign support and private donations as they have no funding from the state.

The so-called 'project culture' of national NGOs depending fully or predominantly on foreign donors' support has been for quite some time criticized by researchers in the context of the Europeanization of the EU neighborhood. The previous works on this topic (Kuzmanovic 2010; Shevtsova 2021) show that project culture – a special and widely spread approach to 'performing the work of the civil society' through largely recognized techniques of project management, monitoring and evaluation – resulted, on the one hand, in a Europeanization/Westernization and professionalization of civil society activism across the CEE countries and EU neighborhood. At the same time, it also created hierarchies among civil society activists and organizations as well as made researchers and activists question the authenticity of democratization struggles framed within the requirements and values of international organizations rather than being shaped by the local needs, culture and context.

While in none of the studied countries – CEE EU member states and Ukraine – did a network of NGOs replace the whole idea of civil society (even if there may be such a perception in public opinion), in the case of LGBTIQ activism professionalized NGOs do present the main form of self-mobilization and support for the broader community. Therefore, in analyzing the role of LGBTIQ organizations in helping displaced LGBTIQ Ukrainians, one must differentiate between the professional activism and so-called 'active citizens'. A local population, engaging in helping refugees and migrants, has to deal only with their resources and can decide whether and how to share them. Their assistance, too, can include multiple activities aiming at solidarity with those in a

vulnerable position (Ambrosini 2022). Nevertheless, for professionalized LGBTIQ activism, the situation is more complex as foreign donors' and institutions' resources are granted (or not), and the way the resources are distributed and used is largely regulated.

As previous studies showed, human rights NGOs' dependency on foreign aid in developing democracies often leads to the increase of detachment of employed activists from domestic terrain and tensions in relations with the national authorities (Panighello 2010). Similarly, this dependency has made the organizations more cautious about distributing financial and other resources. Working with the people from already vulnerable groups now fleeing the war resulted in activists being even more careful than usual about sharing information and maintaining transparent communications.

Two examples from my fieldwork illustrate the consequences of this competition and the fear of unfair distribution of resources. In June 2022, during Pride week, Ljubljana hosted a panel discussion on the problems of displaced LGBTIQ Ukrainians, to which representatives from Hungary, Poland and Slovakia were invited. As it transpired during the event, though all three organizations had already for several months been helping LGBTIQ Ukrainians to cross the borders and find accommodation in their respective countries, there had been no previous contact and cooperation between them in this regard. While the discussion initiated in Slovenia can be seen as having potential for the beginning of more coordinated cooperation, to my knowledge there were no major developments in this direction as of September 2022.

Another case took place when I was interviewing some of the activists in Poland and discussing the possibility of the needs assessment and conducting a joint research project to address the problems of LGBTIQ Ukrainians across CEE countries. The suggestion met with serious concern expressed by the activists as to other people or organizations getting funding for the work this Polish organization had done for months. The project therefore never took off.

It is necessary to acknowledge that there are various national platforms for the communication and cooperation between LGBTIQ activists, and there have been attempts to create transnational projects – especially when those were encouraged or required by donor organizations. Nevertheless, the described tension, lack of sustainability, and struggle for resources are, together with state-sponsored homophobia, among the most substantial obstacles to efficient cooperation in the current conditions. While for academic purposes it is important to separate the

factors shaped by the state and political actors and those related to the role of international institutions, they all need to be considered when developing new policy solutions.

(Dis)trust in international institutions

Finally, one more theme of concern voiced by many activists in the interviews and informal communications was disappointment and distrust in international institutions and organizations. Their criticism applied to major international institutions such as the UN or the Red Cross and donor organizations funding LGBTIQ rights projects. Most complaints were related to complex and rigid bureaucratic procedures, lack of flexibility, and detachment from the real-life situation on the ground. These challenges, discussed by activists in both host countries and Ukraine, add to those described in the previous section concerning restricted and unevenly distributed funding. For example, here is a couple of quotes from Ukrainian LGBTIQ activists who had to help LGBTIQ people to move to safer spaces after 24 February 2022:

> Some donors were flexible and helpful. We cannot submit a receipt to report transporting a trans woman from one city to another when we pay the driver with cash. We cannot always buy things in the way that aligns with Ukrainian accounting, and then we just send people cash to their bank cards so they can buy stuff they need, like food, or pay for the data on their phones themselves. So, some donors allowed us this and others not (Interview via Zoom with a Ukrainian LGBTIQ activist based in Bratislava, Slovakia, August 2022).

> We have sent several complex funding applications but have not received any reply. Maybe they are simply afraid to give us money now as the situation in the country is so unstable, and they do not trust we can organize the promised activities. We will have to wait (Interview via Zoom with the head of a Kyiv-based LGBTIQ organization, August 2022).

Similarly, LGBTIQ organizations and activists in CEE countries seem reluctant to donate money to larger organizations and try instead to donate to smaller NGOs and grassroots initiatives. They also comment that they prefer specifically to help LGBTIQ people arriving in their countries. The activists justify it by having personal experiences of exclusion and not being covered by international funding and humanitarian assistance. Governments and homophobic politicians ignore the increased vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ people, but also, among LGBTIQ people, there are those in a particularly marginalized position.

Furthermore, the activists referred to the international institutions as not quick to react and not to understand the situation.

> We were contacted by X [name of a major international institution] asking to provide them with a list of urgently needed supplies. We mobilized everyone and sent them the list the same day or the day after. Then they disappeared for two weeks. Two weeks later, we received the letter again asking us to send them the list of the needed items. We simply ignored it (Meeting with the activists, Ljubljana, June 2022).

Several times, as a scholar and an activist working with the LGBTIQ community in Ukraine, I was contacted by the representatives of a couple of international organizations with the same requests that seemed detached from reality. For example, I was asked to provide official medical prescriptions for hormonal therapy written in English or German for Ukrainian trans people so that an international organization could send these medicines, supposedly free of charge. However, obtaining such a prescription in a foreign language is a big challenge in Ukraine, even in more peaceful times. The smaller NGOs were much more efficient and quicker because of their non-rigid structure and work processes. Many quickly mobilized a crowd-fund and sent cash transfers or bought goods for shelters online to be delivered to LGBTIQ refugees in various cities. This section does not aim to accuse international organizations of ignoring the needs of LGBTIQ people or not doing enough, as, during these seven months, one could observe multiple reports, policy recommendations, and events discussing the need to protect LGBTIQ Ukrainians and consider their vulnerable position. The aim is, however, to critically engage with traditional mechanisms and approaches that displayed lower efficiency and not-fast-enough response in the conditions of the large-scale war. Hopefully, the experience with the Ukrainian crisis will make larger international institutions consider the growing gap between what they can currently offer and what their target audiences, in this case, LGBTIQ communities in developing democracies, are expecting from them.

Concluding remarks

Written seven months after the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this article has looked at where transnational LGBTIQ activism in CEE countries is now, against the background of the active war in the EU neighborhood. In this text, my goal was to highlight the indispensable

contribution of LGBTIQ organizations and activists across the region in helping Ukrainians, particularly LGBTIQ Ukrainians, who flee the war to find safety abroad or who stay in the country. As the sections above demonstrate, the lion's share of assistance and support for LGBTIQ Ukrainians, such as specific types of humanitarian aid, fundraising by local NGOs, and safe shelters and housing for LGBTIQ refugees, would not have been possible without the efforts of local organizations and activists. The theme of solidarity with people affected by war and homo- and transphobia became central to public messages and communications of LGBTIQ activism in Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland – and across Europe overall.

The analysis of the interviews and communications with the LGBTIQ activists in the host countries mentioned above, and Ukrainians who were forced to move there, identified several key themes other than solidarity that proved important for understanding transnational networks and LGBTIQ activism in times of war.

First, political homophobia in CEE countries indeed affected the decisions of LGBTIQ Ukrainians as to which country to enter and whether to stay there or pass through toward more friendly countries, even though this was not the sole factor defining their long-term choices. For example, many LGBTIQ activists decided to stay in Poland despite the homophobic politics of the country's government. A number of factors contributed to that, such as the availability of a strong and active LGBTIQ activist network, linguistic and cultural proximity, and easier access to the job market (some people could continue working with their employers' Polish offices). In other cases, such as in Hungary, the state's reputation as homophobic could play an additional role in the decision not to stay there despite being offered help.

Second, the shortage of resources for LGBTIQ organizations in CEE countries and competition for them, together with the project- and output-oriented project culture of international donor institutions, resulted in a lack of transparent communications and cooperation between organizations across the borders and in the same country. The tension and a certain mistrust produced by this competition for resources prevent LGBTIQ organizations from developing more transnational and regional projects and building more alliances, and are also more likely to lead to doubling the project's activities or striving for higher visibility and short-term projects with immediate results that can be reported rather than focusing on the long-term projects with potentially higher sustainability.

Third – and this is one of the limitations of the present research article, of which I am aware – there is a need for more systematic comprehensive research across the CEE region. Such research must first include a thorough needs assessment of displaced LGBTIQ Ukrainians and, second, evaluate the challenges that prevent effective cooperation between regional and national LGBTIQ human rights organizations. While much has been written on political homophobia in the region, this article has shown that multiple international actors representing the 'progressive and liberal' global West are also responsible for creating additional challenges and tensions among NGOs and activists. Due to constant competition for funds and a shortage of resources, many organizations and volunteers focus on immediate results and not longer-term solutions. It is also not uncommon, as revealed in the interviews with some LGBTIQ Ukrainians, for displaced people to be seen as victims in need of protection, which leads to patronizing treatment that deprives the people of their agency and responsibility for their future. While it may be perceived as an easier solution and immediate relief at the beginning, Ukrainian LGBTIQ activists themselves voiced their fears that they do not see such strategies as helping the Ukrainian LGBTIQ people to be integrated into the host society and less dependent on state support or assistance from the volunteers and human rights organizations.

Finally, all the activists demonstrated a high level of distrust in major international organizations and strongly preferred helping small grass-roots initiatives and activists in Ukraine. At the same time, language issues, problems with the limited online presence, and even such things as having a bank account in a foreign currency excluded many smaller organizations and communities from such support.

Overall, the first several months of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine proved strong resilience and potential for political change and cooperation between LGBTIQ rights activists and organizations across Central-Eastern Europe. As this article mentions repeatedly, it is difficult to overestimate the contribution of the volunteers and professional activists in helping LGBTIQ Ukrainians in Ukraine and abroad. Nevertheless, this article has also aimed to make clear that national NGOs and activists fall short of providing long-term sustainable support to displaced people due to the identified challenges.

As Russia's war on Ukraine is ongoing, further comprehensive research is needed, bringing together scholars and policymakers to evaluate and further address the needs of vulnerable groups. More importantly, conducting such research and developing policy

recommendations – and then monitoring and evaluating their implementation – will only be efficient when LGBTIQ Ukrainians are largely involved in this process. In other words, informed and efficient policy decisions can only be made when they are discussed in close cooperation between transnational civil society, international organizations, and academia.

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