

Chapter 10

Negotiating non-heteronormative identities in post-Soviet Belarus and Lithuania

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Introduction

The fall of the Soviet empire resulted in what Borenstein (2008) has called a ‘delayed’ sexual revolution. However, this liberalisation of attitudes towards sexuality was short-lived, as the recent introduction of the Russian Federation’s so-called ‘anti-gay propaganda law’ in 2013 and the insistence on heteronormative values (Healey, 2017) indicate. As sexuality becomes intrinsically linked to reproduction, its other manifestations are increasingly considered to be deviant. By exploring non-heteronormative identities in the two frequently overlooked post-Soviet states of Lithuania and Belarus¹, this chapter argues that changing assumptions about non-heteronormative sexuality in the context of the conservative turn in the post-Soviet space have had a profound effect on the sexual subjectivities of LGBT Lithuanians and Belarusians.

The choice of states is driven by the differences in their contemporary economic and political development and the divergence in their values and components of their collective memories, all factors which can shape social attitudes to sexual difference. Pursuing different paths of development, these two states constitute two poles of experience, which can be characterised as ‘(re)Sovietisation’ (Miazhevich, 2009) in the case of Belarus and ‘modernisation’ in that of Lithuania. The difference in the states’ economic development – ‘distorted transition’ in Belarus (Smallbone et. al., 2001:254) and the embrace of the free market in Lithuania – is coupled with a divergence in cultural values and traditions and in the interpretation of their shared past.

Lithuania is the largest of the three Baltic States, with a population of around 3 million and Catholicism as the dominant religion (Lithuania, 2014). Belarus’s 9.7 million citizens are mostly Orthodox, with Catholicism prevailing in its western regions. Lithuania campaigned to leave the USSR along with the other Baltic States, and gained independence in 1991, becoming a member of the European Union (EU) in 2004. Lithuanians tend to consider the Soviet era as a time of oppression (Smith, 1996), linking their identity with Western Europe and the Nordic countries (Clemens, 2001). In contrast, Belarus remains closely ideologically linked to its Soviet past (Marples, 2014). Indeed, it has been called the ‘last Soviet republic’ (Parker, 2007). Both Lithuania and Belarus have decriminalised homosexuality – in 1993 and 1994, respectively² – but are also both pursuing conservative nation-building agendas, with political figures, such as Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (Nechepurenko, 2014) and Lithuanian parliamentarian Petras Gražulis (Aalia and Duvold (2012), having made overtly homophobic statements.

This chapter examines interviews conducted with representatives of the LGBT communities in 2014 in Belarus and Lithuania.³ The interviews identify instances of both divergence and

convergence in the experiences of LGBT people in the two states. Noticeable differences in the narratives of the non-heteronormative communities in Lithuania and Belarus emerge from the growing socio-cultural and political divergence of the two countries, while a degree of convergence arises from the interpenetration of cultures, partly attributable to accelerated transnational information flows, thus pointing to a complex interplay of past and present as well as of Western and local norms and attitudes in the region. The biographic narratives are influenced by the context (including the wider socio-political context and the immediate context of the interview) and change over time, revealing constructions of the self throughout the lifespan. Here narrative analysis (Bruner, 1991; Riessman, 2008) is used to deconstruct the cultural dynamics and power relations which are embedded in language through thematic choices (e.g. topics for discussion), concepts used, rhetorical strategy (what is foregrounded or silenced), incoherencies, etc.

The chapter will begin by discussing approaches to culture and socio-cultural change in the post-Soviet context, before highlighting the potential of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). for enhancing our understanding of cultural transformation in the former Soviet Union. I will then provide background information on attitudes towards LGBT in both countries. In the analysis of the interviews, I will first look at my LGBT respondents' narratives towards the transition and the Soviet past (the inter-temporal dimension), before then exploring their perceptions of the inter-spatial (local, regional, Western) dimensions. Before outlining my conclusions, I will discuss their narratives through the prism of the multidimensionality of identity.

Framework of analysis

In this chapter, culture is understood as 'the product of human agency' and also as permeating any form of social interaction (Archer, 1988:77). So far, models describing the inconsistencies and irregularities of cultural change in the region have resorted to several, somewhat limited, frameworks. For instance, the transitional process in former Soviet Union (fSU) countries was seen by Feichtinger and Fink (1998) as a culture shock, which entailed a process of collective acculturation. This presupposes a slow process of mental adjustments (Slomczynski et al., 1998) involving, presumably, a unified set of coherent selves changing through time. While the process of cultural change is gradual (Schwartz and Bardi, 1997), it does not necessarily mean that it represents a 'smooth and cumulative model of progress' (Tonkiss, 1998:43).

Kelemen and Kostera (2003) are among those few scholars who attempt to draw attention to temporal factors and the dramatically *uneven* processes of cultural change in the post-Soviet region. An exploration of a (presumably) more complex *interplay* between past heritage and current cultural values is in order. This premise constitutes the departure point for this study, which argues for a more nuanced understanding of the process of change of post-Soviet culture. I attempt to go beyond the existing, predominantly linear, models of cultural change mentioned above by viewing post-Soviet transformation in a holistic and dynamic fashion. I have argued in earlier publications that Lotman's (1990) model of intercultural dialogue, which is concerned with the dynamic of translation between different cultural codes, can be used to explain the complexity and non-linearity of changes in the post-Soviet region (Miazhevich, 2009). By

adopting the framework of intercultural transfers and looking at value change as a dynamic relationship between ‘importing’ and ‘exporting’ cultures, this study follows a similar logic. However, as it attempts to account for the shifting identities of the post-Soviet agents, this study also draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT).

SIT is suitable for clarifying the direction and meaning given to change in norms because it pays special attention to the processes by which we perceive and act towards our own and other groups. According to SIT, social identification with others stimulates the so-called ‘in-group bias’ phenomenon (Hogg et al., 1995). Apart from providing a sense of distinctiveness, belonging to a particular group means following a particular set of values and norms (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This research focuses on the notion of *cultural identity*, which encompasses *a specific set of cultural elements regularly used by group members in their self-descriptions*. The nature of cultural identity as conceived within SIT permits us to bridge the divide between structure and agency and between the collective and the individual.

My analysis takes it as axiomatic that the post-Soviet cultural milieu reflects changes in cultural patterns, which are fostered by globalisation. They include the emergence of diverse, accessible interpretations of the world. Those might stem from potentially conflicting sub-cultures existing in the same society. The LGBT community constitutes one of these groups. It is located closer to the social-cultural periphery (exposed to cross-cultural flows) and is expected to be more susceptible to change in comparison with the more resistant cultural centre inhabited by groups with more power. After establishing the premise of this study, I will clarify the attitudes towards LGBT in two countries in question.

Attitudes towards sexual minorities in post-Soviet Lithuania and Belarus

Despite joining the EU more than a decade ago, Lithuania has yet to grant fundamental rights to its LGBT community (such as the rights of non-heterosexual couples in civic partnership) and in 2009 it even approved a controversial Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information on the grounds that homosexuality is a threat to family values (Vitureau, 2010). Although the Lithuanian Parliament (2012-16) led by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party was not, in most cases, overtly homophobic, the political discourse in Lithuania at the time of the interviews was gradually changing and becoming more negative. To a certain extent it was triggered by Russia’s conservative turn after the ratification of the anti-gay propaganda legislation of 2013.⁴

The process of ‘Othering’ is a cornerstone of the Belarusian state’s unfinished nation-building process, which represents the West as the enemy and views homosexuality as a manifestation of anti-Belarusian values (e.g. the ‘Gay-Europe’ discourse). Both the official Belarusian establishment and oppositional political leaders express homophobic views (Nechepurenko, 2014; Karmazin, 2014). Although Belarus lacks legislation prohibiting exposure to materials deemed to promote non-heteronormative sexuality, such changes might be imminent (Newsdesk, 2014).

While Lithuanians display homophobic grassroots attitudes (Eurobarometer, 2015; Kropaite, 2015), surveys by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) consistently place Belarusians as even more intolerant (ILGA, 2016 and 2017). Strict control by the Belarusian establishment over various spheres of life has resulted in fewer LGBT initiatives (e.g. *makeout.by*), while the key LGBT groups – GayBelarus and GayAlliance – are unregistered and therefore in a precarious state. By contrast, the key LGBT groups in Lithuania – the Lithuanian Gay League (LGL) and the Tolerant Youth Association (*Tolerantiško Jaunimo Asociacija*) – are institutionalised, while various initiatives are openly publicised (such as “LGBT friendly” by a young filmmaker Romas Zabarauskas; also see Miazhevich, 2017).

Finally, the diversity and plurality of the mediascape in Lithuania contrasts with a more state-controlled media discourse in Belarus (Freedom of the Press, 2013). In general, however, the general post-Soviet mediascape is characterised by explicit homophobia in the mainstream mass media (Tereškinas, 2003; Freedom of the Press, 2013; Karmazin, 2014), which either silences or marginalises the alternative voices of sexual minorities. Although alternative non-heterosexual subcultures and social media-enabled practices (e.g. ‘closed’ Facebook groups and online creative projects) could potentially challenge, inform, mediate or authenticate establishment discourses, LGBT voices are fragmented (Miazhevich, 2018) and (self-) censored (especially in the Belarusian case). Thus, in both countries, a quasi-patriarchal outlook permeates social attitudes, media representations and everyday communication. The question here is how this plays out in the identity narratives of LGBT communities in the two states in question.

Methodology

The study is based on a set of semi-structured interviews held with LGBT individuals in spring 2014 in Vilnius, Lithuania (6 interviews) and Minsk, Belarus (5 interviews). Despite the small sample size, the method of data gathering (biographic semi-structured interviews) and the approach to the data analysis (constructivist narrative analysis), it is still possible to draw conclusions informing a broader discussion.

Within psychology, narrative is typically understood as a sense-making mechanism, as a means of dealing with disruptive events (e.g. illness) and key life events (Riessman, 2008). However, this study does not stay within a narrow psychological inquiry concentrating on the micro-psychosocial processes of individual respondents. Instead, it takes a broader view and follows the constructivist approach (e.g. Gergen 1999)⁵ in that it treats narrative as a form of social action (Hole, 2007), foregrounding the influence of such factors as socio-cultural context, language and dominant discourses. Next, the narrative approach is particularly useful with marginalised groups, stigmatised by society (Plummer, 1995), as their stories reveal power mechanisms. In this case, it is expected that LGBT narratives will highlight perceptions of their identity as in part shaped by prevailing discourses of normalcy and heteronormativity. Thus, the interview narrative is both a text revealing the formation of the self (in this case the construction of sexual identification, coping mechanisms, etc.) and containing a reflection on the societal discourses informing the self.

The participants were accessed via the snowball sampling technique (May, 2001:130), which allowed access to respondents in a highly normative country context characterised by a small number of LGBT people and low levels of trust towards ‘outsiders’ (especially in Belarus). Obviously, this sampling may have led to some bias and the findings need to be extrapolated with care. The respondents included both active LGBT campaigners and people un-affiliated with organised LGBT movements. The Lithuanian interviews were conducted in English, those in Belarus used Russian or Belarusian language, and they were audio recorded with the participants’ informed consent. Table 1 lists basic demographic data; other relevant characteristics such as occupation, capital/regional affiliation, LGBT activism, study abroad or forced immigration status cannot be revealed due to the confidentiality agreement.

Table 1. Belarusian and Lithuanian interview respondents

		Country	Male/Female	Age
1	Vladimir	Lt	M	47
2	Jokubas	Lt	M	27
3	Andreas	Lt	M	26
4	Laura	Lt	F	35
5	Lukas	Lt	M	28
6	Edita	Lt	F	36
7	Tania	B	F	34
8	Nick	B	M	38
9	Oleg	B	M	33
10	Dima	B	M	26
11	Natasha	B	F	33

Although the mean age of the respondents is 33, they are considered as belonging to a distinct generation of people in that they either (i) had a brief encounter with the Soviet ideological apparatus, and then were thrust into the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in their teens; or (ii) they grew up in a transitional environment characterised by the circulation of post-Soviet cultural codes and practices (e.g. in education), which were gradually diffused with other cultural codes resulting from globalised information flows.

The interviews were constructed in such a way as to elicit discussion of the respondents’ sexual identification and how this was shaped by and shaped their relationships with various institutions, including the family and educational establishments (Griffin, 2016), as well as Belarusian/Lithuanian history and society and the broader European region. The interview transcripts were analysed in detail and coded to reveal common/diverging themes. Thematic analysis of the narratives (Reismann, 2008) resulted in the following themes: *sexual identity negotiations*; *reflections on the LGBT and broader community*; and *geopolitical identity markers*.

The analysis below is divided into two parts according to the respondents' reflections on the transition and the Soviet past (the inter-temporal dimension) and globalisation/Westernisation (the inter-spatial dimension of analysis). In both subsections, there is a certain inevitable intersection between the spatial and temporal dimensions. I compare Belarusian and Lithuanian data in parallel, rather than separating them out (the country is indicated beside each respondent's name: 'Lt' for Lithuania and 'B' for Belarus).

'Temporal' component of LGBT identity negotiations in post-Soviet Lithuania and Belarus

Sexual identification and biographical narratives

Most participants found the post-Soviet environment more accommodating than the Soviet past. Older respondents described the Soviet era as a time of *'double standards'* leading to irretrievable *'identity loss'* and life *'in the closet'* (Vladimir, Lt). It was a period when the lack of sexual education led to *'misunderstanding one's own sexuality and the cultivation of narrow-mindedness. It means that now people have to go back to their childhood [and realise that they] missed something important [to] become their true self (samim soboi).'* (Nick, B) However, for most of the respondents, issues of sexual identification only came to the fore after the fall of the USSR. All of the participants mentioned various key moments in their lives when they started questioning their sexual selfhood and belonging. This was a solitary process for most of them, without guidance or support (from friends, relatives or specialists). Some found schooldays particularly difficult: *'when I was at school I was bullied and barely went a day without being called a fag [...] school is the worst thing.'* (Lukas, Lt) Jokubas (Lt), Nick (B) and Oleg (B) keenly agreed. Dima (B) described enduring verbal and physical violence from his classmates and difficulties with teachers during his teenage years, when his sexual identification became obvious.

Respondents from both countries recalled harassment, bullying and personal struggles, especially at school and/or with family members when they *'came out'*. Their identity renegotiations were also informed by societal changes of the early 1990s, such as increased access to Western media, liberalisation, sexual freedoms and sexual education at school. One respondent reflected that: *'Ten years ago nobody was talking about it in school and now teenagers know what "gay" or "lesbian" means [...] so at least you can try to identify yourself [...] in some ways it's easier, you can find your identity faster.'* (Laura, Lt) However, others found the post-Soviet environment less welcoming: *'There was nobody I could talk to and discuss life, about being homosexual, I thought they don't exist here, because they were absent from the media [or] only shown in a negative light.'* (Andreas, Lt)

The Lithuanian respondents were more open about sharing their personal experiences of growing up and negotiating their sexual identity than the Belarusians – although this might be due to the more oppressive Belarusian environment. However, all the interviewees described using coping mechanisms to alleviate the tensions and pressures of society on their *'Otherness'*. Some took an opportunity to study abroad to inform their understanding of gendered selfhood and their own societies' patriarchal structures (Tania, B; Edita, Lt). Other mechanisms involved

writing or other creative projects, consciously avoiding certain public spaces, institutions or withdrawing from an uncomfortable societal environment (including emigrating). Some were prompted to become involved with LGBT activism (as a part of a group or independently). Their activities included campaigning for wider social causes, such as promoting diversity in schools, advocating equal parental rights, and educating media professionals.

Parents and relatives

In both countries, the respondents' parents were of the 'Soviet' generation and many found it hard to understand and accept their children's sexual identification. This was linked to a multitude of factors, including Soviet ideology, the church or media, as Laura (Lt) explained: '*She [my mother] thinks that it's a sin ... she's not young ... and she's listening to those religious radio [programmes].*' Interestingly, the role of religion in the two states was rarely mentioned in the narratives.

Andreas acknowledged the '*huge pressure of having such a child, because nobody else has a gay child*', although this awareness is now improving. Several respondents said that, even after they 'came out', their parents still hoped that '*this phase*' would pass, their child would marry and have children (Lukas, Lt). Two of the interviewees (one in each country) had not explicitly declared their sexuality. One had sent a 'coming out' letter, followed by '*a book [about] the history of homosexuality through the ages*' (Andreas, Lt), whilst the other participant's family had never discussed the issue, although were '*possibly aware of it*' (Tania, B).

Typical initial parental reactions of anger and/or disbelief were replaced by acceptance and, eventually, support, after some time: '*It took around two years. I experienced insults and humiliation [...] I did not live at home for some time.*' (Dima, B) Jokubas (Lt): '*My brother found some gay videos and he outed me to my mother [and] my mother stopped using the word pederast in her vocabulary.*' Lukas (Lt): '*My brother, he's quite homophobic [...] but he doesn't feel any danger when I am with his children [...] when people know you [...] you are not perceived as a threat.*' Participants in both countries described both older and younger generations (parents and siblings) accepting the situation, then promoting tolerance and attempting to withstand societal homophobia. For instance, some parents joined gay pride marches and campaigning, helping with legal cases and charitable work. In several cases, gaining a boost to their social capital from the respondents' sexual identification (e.g. via study abroad) helped legitimise their selfhood to family members.

However, the attitudes are still somewhat fluid: '*Sometimes when she [my mother] gets angry [with me], she says you are doing that because you are a faggot [laughs].*' (Lukas, Lt) Jokubas (Lt): '*When we argue, she [my mother] says [something] like I forgive you many things and I think that she is thinking about me being gay.*' As Oleg (B) said, '*Maybe we're not really gonna talk about it, but maybe after a couple of drinks [at a family wedding] casually chat about it, but yeah it's kind of like silently accepted.*' More extreme family reactions included: '*Why [expletive] did you go there [to gay pride], what are you thinking [...] what is wrong with you? [...] you should [...] shoot those paedophiles.*' (Laura, Lt) While all these contributed to

respondents' dilemmas in sexual identity negotiations, they also had to contend with other societal pressures in their daily lives.

Broader societal context

Although themes discussed below bridge both temporal and spatial dimensions, the frequent references to Soviet mentality and the USSR legacy placed this discussion more within the temporal axis of the analysis. In considering the broader socio-cultural context, participants stated that grassroots homophobic attitudes are prevalent in both states. According to Lukas (Lt), LGBT people should be hidden *'in the basement – do whatever you want but don't show it to society,'* just as they were tolerated during Soviet times as long as they remained out of sight (Baer, 2013). Dima (B) said that gays are *'the most marginal group, the lowest caste, as it is associated with (Soviet) prison culture'*. When Edita discussed the 'Gayrope' discourse, she observed: *'It actually reminds me of Jevropa [...] from Jewish Europe [...] it's a strange [...] cocktail of hatred [...] they are guilty of everything or connected with everything [...] Some old professor somehow managed to connect the phenomena of genetically modified vegetables with homosexuality.'* Natasha (B) commented that: *'people are scared of differences and need to categorise [them]'*, while Lukas (Lt) gave an example of *'teachers [...] spreading homophobia in the university [...] Students were even invited to [...] join an internet hate group'*.

Andreas (Lt) remarked that, even people who were not actually homophobic, were generally ignorant, *'expect[ing] the same attributes, the same behaviour [irrespective of sexual orientation]'*. Lukas (Lt) also mentioned the low level of public awareness; for instance, his colleagues told homophobic jokes in front of him, which they did not consider insulting. One lesbian respondent from each country cited being unwittingly referred to as *'it'* or *'ono'* (neutral gender in Russian), while Nick (B) recounted how shocked some media professionals were (especially those from the state mass media) when a training discussion *'moved from general to more specific LGBT topics'*.

Lithuanian interviewees were more reflexive about the Soviet past. They agreed that there were generational differences: *'Older people who might be more homophobic'* (Jokubas, Lt) and considered exposure to different cultures important for change, noting, however, that: *'mentality cannot decriminalise so fast'* [Lithuania was the last of the three Baltic States to decriminalise homosexuality]. *'I thought that the younger generation would be a fresh [wave], that people will travel a lot and this will change and at least help people to see what's going on with LGBT rights abroad, but [...] it will be at least three generations before attitudes change.'* (Vladimir, Lt)

At the same time, there were some disagreements about the Soviet legacy. Laura (Lt) praised the *'Soviet [time when] the position of women was different [...] more independent'*, while Andreas (Lt) was more negative: *'Being homo sovieticus is, as I mentioned before, having those masks, so many different characters, not sure if people know how to behave, which mask to use, whether to use those masks, if they fully understand that they are not required to wear*

those masks, afraid of being somehow different'. So, there is a lack of unanimity in the rejection of the Soviet culture by Lithuanian respondents.

Belarusian respondents focused more on the current state of affairs. They felt unable to express themselves in a hostile, unwelcoming environment. This resulted in widespread feelings of alienation: *'I do not feel there is a place for me here.'* (Tania, B), fear: *'People are very afraid to talk.'* (Nick, B) and marginalisation: *'I feel that I need to explain at certain point (why I'm with a girl).'* (Natasha, B) However, the narrative foregrounded patriarchal norms (over the Soviet past or present-day authoritarianism): *'This is a conservative society [...] It is very difficult to live openly [...] you immediately become extremely vulnerable'* (Tania, B).

Lithuanian society was also described as conservative (in discussions about the countries' political establishments). So, Vladimir, Lukas and Jokubas all asserted that politicians pursued an anti-LGBT agenda to advance their own interests: *'Right-wing politicians and maybe [their] ticket to join the European Parliament, [...] I see how readily some candidates use this homophobic rhetoric to try to get [...] votes [...] Lithuania being quite a conservative country, while [...] at the same time part of Europe, which is supposed to be tolerant, politically correct.'* In Belarus, there were even stronger views that homophobia was widespread among both mainstream and oppositional political forces (who theoretically should support marginalised groups). Natasha (B) was surprised that minority Belarusian parties, which had experienced discrimination themselves (in other areas such as native language), still discriminated against another (sexual) minority. Nick (B) overheard a discussion between *'our democratic'* oppositional (pro-Christian) leaders, who referred to LGBT negatively, while Dima (B) was verbally attacked by them. Thus, narratives in both states demonstrate varying re-codings of persistent cultural norms as European liberalism competes with critiques of Western 'political correctness' and exposes pronounced homophobia among social groups situated closer to the cultural core. The subsections below on the LGBT community and geo-political markers of identity will touch on related issues but within a spatial dimension.

Spatial dimensions of LGBT identification and belonging

Identity negotiations and the LGBT community

In both states the respondents focussed on the rifts between the lesbian and gay communities. Laura (Lt) said that the groups arranged separate activities: *'I would say lesbians are quite active in arts and literature [and] prefer to have cute parties [at home],'* with the subculture being more than *'just drinking and mingling'* (Natasha and Tania, B). Interviewees even mentioned 'lesbophobia' as lesbians were viewed as a secondary priority, while the *'gay community is more frequently mentioned'* (Natasha and Nick, B), and exposed to different dynamics and expectations: *'It's like once you're 'out' there, there is no way back [laughs], and for girls it's more fluid.'* (Edita, Lt) Paradoxically, gay men were expected to be more outgoing socially, with lesbians more settled at home (Laura, Lt; Tania, B), often with stable partnerships and children (Dima, B; Edita, Lt). This division replicated traditional gender role

divisions, where the private is considered the women's realm and the public sphere is for men – possibly a subconscious replication of the patriarchal public/private societal divide.⁶

According to respondents from both states, the Lithuanian LGBT community is more visible in organising diverse activities. However, some members of the community felt misrepresented, since other people (leading a more institutionalised part of the LGBT movement) were speaking on their behalf, *'giving interviews or being on the news'*. This prompted more individualistic and non-coordinated actions (e.g. a 'coming out' YouTube video), as they strove to show that *'the gay community can be different'* and do different things to promote their rights (Andreas, Lt). Thus, the LGBT movement in Lithuania was both more institutionalised and, at the same time, individualised and fragmented.

Lithuanian respondents frequently framed their agenda within human rights discourse and a notion of (Western) civic society, highlighting the incoherence in the 'translation' of Western-style codes: *'Even in the community sometimes people don't understand that they have no rights, they think everything is fine.'* (Vladimir, Lt) Jokubas (Lt) described the mentality of the LGBT majority: *'Why show ourselves when we can live like ordinary people sitting in [...] the background [laughs]'*. A sense of low motivation and conscious withdrawal – *'I don't see the need, nobody is violating my rights you know and so maybe it's a safe bubble and they live in it, imagine that everything is OK.'* (Laura, Lt) – were combined with an unwillingness to engage with and challenge hate speech or *'self-victimisation'* (Vladimir, Lt).

The Belarusian participants' accounts depicted their more restricted environment and dispersed LGBT community, which lacked solidarity and competed for scarce resources (thus replicating the weak civic society at large). Natasha (B) believed that, *'in principle we do not have a single community [...] Under the LGBT movement people understand various fragmented groups, tusovki⁷, separate initiatives which emerge and then disappear. I do not even see any link to past activities. If something doesn't work, then it gets forgotten. Maybe we don't need activism at this stage, but simply spaces to socialise and talk, share our experiences'*. Nick (B) thought that *'we don't really have a community, we only have several atomised groups, they can be antagonistic, not communicating [or having a] common language'*.

The narratives exposed tensions between individualistic attitudes, self-censorship and misconstrued collective action, as respondents talk about a lack of a *'clearly defined message'*, *'fear of declaring any kind of civic stance, [...] your stance as a citizen (not necessary a LGBT one), limited experience and tradition of public campaigning, etc.'* (Tania, B). Dima described the Belarusian LGBT community as a very *'closed'* group, *'the most quiet Eastern European'* community, which is unwilling to mobilise, take part in public initiatives or educational events. Oleg (B) talked about *'widespread and ingrained fear and self-censorship'*, where people prefer to *'keep a low profile, not to attract attention to their group'*⁸ and *'scared ... to openly talk or take part in (educational) events [as they might lose their jobs, etc.] if the groups' leaders say that, what should we expect from their members?'* (Nick, B).

Overall, in both countries internal disagreements, rivalries and clashes between various groups in the LGBT community are common (in Lithuania mostly due to the competition for leadership, in Belarus – for resources).⁹ The respondents also spoke of a consumerist attitude ‘corroding’ civic activism, as people just wanting to enjoy partying (Natasha, B) and ‘*have a very good life*’, ignoring the fact that their ‘*rights and [...] abilities are being taken away.*’ (Andreas, Lt) This attitude towards LGBT activism shed light on the uneven and multidirectional process of ‘domestication’ of Western norms.

Geopolitical markers of sexual identification

The Lithuanian respondents often drew comparisons between their country and various European nations, saying that they aspired to adopt a ‘*modern Western Scandinavian model*’ (Vladimir). However, there is a narrative of stagnation and lack of freedom: ‘[In the] *West you feel more free [...] and you don’t see [it] in Eastern Europe.*’ (Jokubas) Lukas noted that: ‘*Trying to survive in Lithuania [...] those who return back to Lithuania are more pro-human rights [...] If they start living in Lithuania, usually the routine starts to get to them again*’. This view was shared by Vladimir: ‘*People are so happy until they are on the plane [...] Everybody understands that they are coming back to reality in Vilnius. [It is] already 2014, but we still don’t have any openly gay cafés.*’ In contrast, the Belarusians seemed more isolated and self-referential (e.g. less frequently referring to Western Europe). Having said that, one respondent (who had been exiled to Western Europe because of personal LGBT stance) feels nostalgic and patriotic towards Belarus, planning to return there eventually.

The Lithuanian respondents spoke at length, with pessimism and frustration, about EU membership, admitting that they had harboured unrealistic expectations: ‘*[I thought that] the European Union was like a lottery ticket, everything would be totally fine. [I] believed that this was a kind of guarantee that human rights would be automatically aligned with European Union.*’ (Vladimir) Andreas described a lack of equality and growing intolerance: ‘*It scares me to see how easy it is to manipulate people nowadays, because we’ve been in the EU for ten years now so you’d think society would be tolerant, but ...*’. Edita agreed that ‘*homophobic rhetoric [had] intensified*’ and that EU membership was linked to reduced freedom and control, as people realised ‘*[that they] agreed to all those legal changes, anti-discrimination [...] and now Brussels is gonna dictate us how to live, let’s protest against that*’.

There is a general sense of disillusionment, ‘*as [the EU] Commission and everybody [are] quite passive on this issue*’ (Vladimir). Jokubas and Vladimir agreed that Lithuania had been active in the preparatory stage but then ‘*[people] started to be more relaxed and they are not so into the fighting for gay rights because they think that somebody else will do that for them*’ (Jokubas). Andreas thought that ‘*some politicians [...] want to roll everything back to how it was like 15 years ago*’. Only Laura had an optimistic outlook: ‘*I’m happy being in the European Union because [...] I’ve seen that there has been a huge amount of help from the, you know, all the international organisations [on] homophobic or transphobic law [...]. I wouldn’t have imagined three years ago that there would be the concept of an LGBT family or that a homosexual family would be acceptable as something in Lithuania [...] hate speech legislation*’.

Belarusians, on the contrary, consider the EU membership to be a positive (yet unattainable) goal. However, the EU was at the periphery of their discussions. Belarus was mostly seen as the buffer zone between the EU and Russia lacking *'anti-discriminatory legislation [which is] obligatory for EU accession'* (Oleg). At the same time, the 'distance' from Western Europe (due to the country's isolationist policy and cultural resistance in the society) made some of the narratives more nuanced. For instance, Tania's thinks that *'a pro-Western display of publicness [...] this visibility is not very applicable to our context, it's not going to work [...] might escalate violence'*.

At the same time, both communities expressed relatively positive attitudes towards the (diasporic) LGBT communities abroad. However, the links to other communities in different European states (even between Lithuania and Belarus) are frequently limited by language and mobility constraints. Comments about Russia were more complex due to its proximity and the accessibility of Russian language. Several Lithuanian respondents (Lukas, Andreas and Jokubas) made numerous (unprompted) comments about how the Russian (media) influenced societal attitudes towards LGBT issues, and Vladimir said: *'Homophobia [...] in Russia, [...] really easily spreading to Lithuania, [...] via cable TV [...] I understand it's a kind of freedom of speech, [...] but at least people should be given some positive information about LGBT and our state doesn't have this [...] a lot of negative disinformation coming.'* The Belarusian participants framed their accounts slightly differently. Some (Oleg, Natasha and Dima) reflected on Russia's role, which they saw as negative: *'Mixing paedophilia and homophobia... middle ages... dark ages... coming from Russia.'* (Nick) There was anxiety and pessimism that similar anti-gay legislation might be adopted in Belarus (Dima), making Russia a significant 'Other'.

Although the accounts from both countries covered similar themes, the emphasis was different. Belarusian respondents focused more on the significant societal pressures and dramatic fragmentation of the LGBT community, tainted by rivalry and personal clashes within the non-institutionalised LGBT groups. The Lithuanian respondents revealed a higher degree of appropriation of public spaces, interconnectedness with the European public, and readiness to engage in various (subversive) initiatives. The difference in narratives was linked to EU membership, the ability of respondents to travel (and compare) as well as the existence of different reference groups (Russia and its immediate neighbours for Belarusians, Western Europe and Scandinavia for Lithuanians).

Multidimensionality of identity

The interviews revealed that the process of sexual identity re-construction is ongoing, with females generally being more reflexive. Laura (Lt): *'I don't know, maybe I would say queer but now politically I'm lesbian, because it's important to be [a] lesbian.'* Tania (B) also considered the term 'queer' best defined her current stance. Natasha (B) did not want to be stereotyped, to label herself or impose clichés on others (e.g. what a lesbian or a gay man should look like). Edita (Lt) also wanted to avoid categorisation but, when probed, mentioned the Western European context where lesbians are *'absolutely mainstream women rarely [with]*

short hair or anything'. Many respondents found it difficult to define themselves (i.e. what it meant to be lesbian, gay or bisexual), considering it a philosophical question. Of course, the very act of asking them to define their sexuality led to essentialism, suggesting certain parameters and structuring their perceptions in a particular way.

This unwillingness to 'categorise' themselves might have been because they wanted to get away from binaries and normativities (Natasha, B), with some advocating polygamy (Tania and Nick, B). Next, their sexual identification was only one of multiple roles and identities: *'I didn't come out as a lesbian, I'm coming out as educator [...] I think I never had this clear-cut line (on sexual identity), because for me it was not so important.'* (Laura, Lt). In some cases, the interviewees were evidently weaving their own histories and mulling over key aspects of their sexual identification as they spoke. It was an emotionally-charged journey for most of them.

Thus, the interview data established the importance of recognising the multi-dimensionality of identity, evoking other dimensions of participants' identity including national, professional and other types of identification, such as group and role (individual) identity of, for example, a single parent. In most cases, the narrative was conducted from the individual's position, although some respondents employed a group identity by referring to the LGBT community using the pronoun 'we'. It became obvious that the outlined identity positions cannot in most cases be occupied simultaneously, as individuals tend to interpret a variety of situations in a way that invokes one identity rather than another. Therefore, it is possible to talk about a trans-situational identity which can be applied to multiple contexts. This can be related to something like a *'readiness'* to function (Stryker and Serpe, 1994) and defined as a central identity schema for interpreting experience. It was also observed that the identities tend to be manifested both consciously and subconsciously in particular circumstances.

Finally, this analysis should not be interpreted as providing evidence of a *stable* identity. As Barker (2000) noted, identity is a temporary stabilisation of meanings, which is constructed through a 'stitching together of the discursive "outside" with the "internal" process of subjectivity'. The data demonstrated that identity is susceptible to change. For instance, there were changes of identity content as the respondents became more aware of their own stance *during their interaction* with the interviewer. Usually comments were related to the new elements of their identification, which appeared to be central to their identity, but tacit in their everyday routines. Another issue is of a *more prolonged change*, i.e. the influence of the Soviet heritage on the interviewees' central schema for interpreting their experience. It is undoubtedly significant, but it is not clear how profound and long-lasting this effect is (or going to be). This raises the issue of the stability of post-Soviet identity across time, even in its contradictions.

Conclusion

Elaborating on the phenomenon of cultural identity (which serves as a schema for interpreting social reality), this study questioned the linear bias of existing theories of socio-cultural change in the post-Soviet region. LGBT narratives in both states combined contradictory reinterpretations of the past (the Soviet, 'transitional' and contemporary periods), with shifting attitudes towards hybridising 'foreign' and regional cultures. The findings challenge

conventional views of these two post-Soviet states located at the opposite ends of a spectrum running from backwardness to globalised ‘progressiveness’, causing us to question the labels of ‘Sovietised’ Belarus and ‘modernised’ Lithuania.

In many ways narratives of the LGBT communities were similar. Respondents in both states re-interpreted the Soviet past constructing (a more or less) *homogenised* image of it and omitting any references to the pre-revolutionary past. They narrated some of the persistent features of Soviet mentality, homophobia and the Soviet legacy of considering non-heteronormative sexuality as deviance, which complicated participants’ identification. The Soviet legacy has, for Lithuanians, become a largely historical matter, allowing deeper analysis and meaningful comparisons. In turn, Belarusian LGBT community was more cautious and less self-reflective in their narratives.

The more pronounced normativity of the Belarusian context combined with the exposure to Western education and global information flows resulted in an uneasy amalgamation of pro-Western, cosmopolitan (sexual) citizenship and national belonging, which was visible in their self-identification strategies (e.g. above discussion about being a lesbian or queer). The interviews also revealed that Belarusian LGBT activists faced marginalisation, being not only alienated from Belarusian society but also within local LGBT groups, which were dispersed and lacked solidarity in competing for scarce resources (thus replicating the weak civic society at large). Interestingly, in this highly-regulated Belarusian context, where alienation and vulnerability go hand in hand, participants displayed a keen patriotism, despite being forced to consider (temporary) immigration.

Respondents in both countries shared post-Soviet misconceptions about the principles of democracy (e.g. the role of civic society, activism, freedom, minority rights), which also contributed to LGBT members’ disengagement. Their discussion of LGBT activism revealed a post-Soviet paradox of the incongruity between the collectivistic past and the evolving individualisation. This was embodied in LGBT groups’ expectations of collective action in both states. Most interviewees aspired towards unified LGBT collective campaigning for their rights and complained about community members’ individualistic attitudes and/or struggles for formal leadership. Lithuanian accounts showed a peculiar dualism – where a person combined indignation at the individualism of LGBT members who were unwilling to engage in collective initiatives, whilst, simultaneously, exploiting new media for their own individualistic campaigning (e.g. ‘coming out’). Above all, it signifies that the ‘translation’ of Western-style codes and their re-working within local cultures is an uneven process. It is clear that the direction of change is necessarily, or unproblematically, to/from and beyond.

In both states participants talked about a pronounced division between the gay and lesbian communities. The almost unanimous agreement about the divergence of their activities and invisibility of (especially) lesbianism is in line with previous research on Eastern Europe (Imre, 2013) and Russia (Stella, 2015). Paradoxically, these groups’ priorities are formulated within a traditional (binary) division, where women are expected to retain closer links with the private sphere and children. This, together with a contradictory perception of feminism and the role of women in the USSR, exposed the incoherent re-interpretation of the Soviet pasts.

Geopolitical markers of identity mainly came from the EU (for Lithuanians) and immediate neighbours (for Belarusians). Drawing comparisons with Western Europe, Scandinavia and the other Baltic States, the Lithuanian participants mentioned stagnation, expressing higher levels of dissatisfaction with the slow rate of change. Paradoxically, their aspiration for 'modernity' led to sometimes uncritical demands of 'wholesale' compliance with Western norms, the demonstration of unrealistic expectations of the linearity of changes and their society's receptivity to the flow of ideas. Belarusians, who had fewer opportunities for mobility, constructed more localised narratives, referring primarily to their immediate (Western) neighbours. Instead of expressing their desire for change, they shared a sense of pre-determination, ambivalence, passivity and conformity to existing circumstances. Overall, the identified complex combinations of narratives in both states reflect a situation where native (Soviet) and imported (Western) phenomena undergo mutual restructuring, blending into one another and co-existing simultaneously in different combinations within one culture at a particular point of time.

Thus, an important contribution of this work is its recognition of the multi-angled nature of the process of socio-cultural change. However, the uneven process of transformation of the attitudes, the fragmented contexts of social-political changes and the instability of post-Soviet societies make it premature to offer definitive descriptions of the long-term directions of these changes. My conclusions will need to be confirmed by further research before they can be considered decisive, but clearly the factors that they bring to light have specific implications for post-Soviet studies.

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- ¹ Existing scholarship is predominantly Russia-centric (Baer, 2013; Healey, 2017; Stella, 2015).
 - ² During the Soviet era, non-heteronormative sexuality was considered to be a deviance and a mental illness.
 - ³ Although in this paper I use the abbreviation LGBT, none of my respondents represented the transgender minority.
 - ⁴ The Lithuanian Parliament attempted to adopt legislation similar to Russia's 2013 'gay propaganda' law (Kropaite, 2015), with a view to ban any materials identifying same-sex relations as a societal norm. However, it is now stalled as the European Court of Human Rights ruled it illegal (Rankin, 2017).
 - ⁵ There is a subtle distinction between constructionist and constructivist inquiry with the latter allegedly accounting for a wider social context. However, this discussion goes beyond the focus of this study.
 - ⁶ In both instances, bisexual and transgender groups in particular were under-represented, with people from LGBT groups themselves not fully comprehending the problems faced by transgender people.
 - ⁷ The term denotes informal groups unified by common interests.
 - ⁸ In other words, fears such as triggering a debate similar to the one in Russia on anti-gay propaganda legislation.
 - ⁹ Andreas (Lt) said that the two organisations fighting for leadership were '*not cooperating and it seems that they're working on different topics*', while Tania (B) commented: '*It is unclear what they [an LGBT-related NGO] are doing and how they contribute.*'