

# LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe

Radzhana Buyantueva · Maryna Shevtsova  
Editors

# LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe

Resistance, Representation  
and Identity

palgrave  
macmillan

*Editors*

Radzhana Buyantueva  
Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Maryna Shevtsova  
Gainesville, FL, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-20400-6      ISBN 978-3-030-20401-3 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20401-3>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Foreword

All of us working on LGBTQ+ politics understand the importance of giving voice to scholars and activists who are local to the communities they study, yet often little effort is made to elevate those voices. Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova have done just that in this volume on the activism and experience of LGBTQ+ people in Central and Eastern Europe countries and the Baltic states. They problematize the import of Western ideals and norms into the post-socialist space and highlight the specificity of LGBTQ+ identity and experience across contexts and states. Their efforts refine existing knowledge and shed light on the sometimes overlooked dynamics of the study of contentious politics concerning LGBTQ+ movements.

The overarching goal of the volume is to chart the experience of LGBTQ+ movements in post-socialist European countries. Caught in a complex geopolitical space, including multiple poles of external influence and housing states with different histories and ideas around queer people, the countries of this region make a fascinating study of the complexity of championing queer visibility and/or LGBT rights. At the same time, they constitute a part of Europe that is often “othered” as backward to “enlightened” neighbors to their West (Chetaille 2013;

Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011). Despite these challenges, innovative activists from the region have developed protean methods of brokering the complex and interconnected world we live in, as well as securing a presence in global queer activism more generally. The authors chart this reality by giving voice to activists and scholars who often also have a local positionality in the debate on queer issues in the post-socialist space. Such voices are paramount in any debate on queer politics in the region; this volume brings several together in a productive and fruitful way.

The volume is divided into three parts that chart and problematize (1) the applicability of Western discourses on sexuality and gender identity in post-socialist and post-Soviet countries, (2) the relationship between the state and LGBTQ+ people in these countries, and (3) the emergence and struggles of LGBTQ+ movements in the region. Many of the themes span and cut across the three parts, as in any well-curated volume. The introduction provides a helpful short overview of much of the LGBTQ+ political science literature on Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic region (for an encompassing overview of such work Europe-wide, see Paternotte 2018), followed by an invitation to discuss the three thematic areas. The rest of the book reflects on the many core debates of the LGBTQ+ politics field, through the lens of countries in the post-socialist space. This helps to broaden and sometimes refine our understanding of a plethora of issues, including the positive and negative implications of visibility (and the recurring necessity and utility of invisibility), the value and over-extension of the concept of homonationalism (and the risk of applying it as universal and without specificity), and the varied underrepresentation of marginalized subgroups within the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

None of this means that the focus on Central and Eastern Europe makes the book irrelevant for scholars working outside the region. There are many synergies, not just in rectifying and/or expanding understandings developed in the West, but also speaking to scholars of other regions. Sa'ed Atshan's (forthcoming) important critique of homonationalism in occupied Palestine, for example, links well to various chapters in the book, particularly to Chapter 2. Expanding on the question of visibility and its implications (Ayoub 2016), such as in Chapter 3, connects well to critical debates in many contexts,

for example, Ashley Currier's (2012) work on (in)visibility in Africa. Many concerns addressed in the book are ones we have to keep thinking about, in the West too, where visibility is more or less available to LGBTQ+ individuals, depending on their relationship to privilege. This has much to do with the differential axes of oppression many queer people face, for example, among queer people of color and migrant communities (Adam 2017; Murib and Soss 2015; Strolovitch 2007). In sum, insights from Central and Eastern Europe also offer theoretically rich ideas for connections across contexts.

Yet, coming from a field that often gives more value in looking at patterns across many cases—and there surely is value in that—the effort to root our knowledge and refine our theories in the careful study of place is also welcome in its own right. We have contributions from scholars of the post-socialist/post-soviet space, and this book adds to that knowledge by grounding us in valuable case studies. This will help explicate the mechanisms behind the correlations that scholars comparing across many cases have and will continue to chart. We can move forward alongside each other, or within mixed-method studies. There has also been a tendency, largely attributable to the limited room for maneuver in quantitative analyses, to homogenize the post-socialist space in its relationship to LGBT rights, as well as start tracking it only in after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which many scholars have rightly critiqued (e.g., Szulc 2018). This volume further builds on that work.

The tension and difficulty in untangling the local from the external/global/international in the world in which we live (Europe, of all places, an unusually interconnected region for many reasons) is inherent in much of the volume. The complexity of the insider and the outsider is worthy of careful thought in work on contemporary queer politics. This includes acknowledging the role that activists from Central and Eastern Europe have played in shaping transnational activism and dispelling common notions of them as powerless, weak, or victimized. Their contribution to the work of transnational activism is readily apparent to those doing fieldwork on cross-border activism in Europe (Ayoub and Bauman 2018), or to anyone observing movement conferences organized by international NGOs like ILGA-Europe. Activists in some of the countries of the region are also among the most organized

and active in Europe (see O'Dwyer 2018). Queer activism from Central Eastern Europe is not new; we can look as far back as the 1860s, when the Hungarian Karoly Maria Kertbeny and the German Karl Heinrich Ulrichs coined the term "homosexuell" in the first place (Takács 2004). Cross-border interaction has much to do with the complexity of identities (ones that are national and ones around sexual orientation and/or gender identity) and that queerness has brought communities into dialogue across nations and regions for much of the history of organizing around LGBTQ+ politics.

While power and privilege shape the influence of Western LGBTQ+ ideas in many contexts, we must also caution against the portrayal of a homogenous global movement that is always out of touch with the local. We do not live in domestic vacuums and ideas can travel whether or not a movement champions them. The challenge is to identify the spaces in which the two—global and local—can interact. This allows us to recognize the agency of domestic activists, as this volume rightly argues, who are left to do the hard work of navigating LGBTQ+ ideas when they are out-of-sync and ill-informed for local contexts. Furthermore, evidence around the causal notion that international activism leads to a uniform backlash and response is mixed. While it certainly does in some cases, the evidence also suggests that domestic opportunists jump the gun by politicizing homophobia in advance of local or global demands by LGBTQ+ activists (Weiss and Bosia 2013). There are many layers to LGBTQ+ movement politics, and they are often more reciprocal and reflexive than we acknowledge.

No book has all the answers, but this volume is an important call to the work that needs to be done on understanding LGBTQ+ activism in the post-socialist and post-Soviet region. Areas that will surely preoccupy future iterations of scholarship include thinking further about intersectionality in Central and Eastern Europe (a term coined by the experience of black feminists in the US context, Crenshaw 1991), which has much applicability to the region (Ayoub 2019) yet features only in Chapter 11. The intersection between LGBTQ+ activism and other marginalized communities (such as migrants to Europe, see Chapters 2 and 6) are areas that we also need to continue to explore in the context of the region.

Growing scholarly attention has been given to LGBTQ+ activism in the post-socialist space. Outside observers, including myself, have looked at patterns across states. What this volume offers is special: It consciously takes us onto the ground and gives voices to those in the varied countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Observing patterns in global LGBTQ+ politics is not the ambition of this volume; instead, it is to celebrate the differences and specificities across localities. Buyantueva and Shevtsova, alongside their collaborators, have done us all a great service by bringing together talented and important voices in the discourse on queer liberation in the post-socialist space. The field continues to grow richer thanks to efforts such as this.

Los Angeles, USA

Phillip M. Ayoub

**Phillip M. Ayoub** is Associate Professor of Diplomacy and World Affairs at Occidental College. He is the author of *When States Come Out: Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), and his articles have appeared in *Comparative Political Studies*, *the European Journal of International Relations*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Mobilization*, *the European Political Science Review*, *the Journal of Human Rights*, *Social Politics and Social Movement Studies*, among others.

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## Notes on Contributors

**Kadri Aavik** is an Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Tallinn University, Estonia, and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research has mainly focused on understanding gender and other inequalities in the labor market and in the education system. In addition, Kadri conducts research in the fields of critical animal studies and vegan studies.

**James E. Baker** is a doctoral student in Geography at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. His present research examines the role of visual research methods in understanding the signifying power of the image in a comparative study of the everyday practices of celebrating the 100th anniversary of nationhood in post-socialist and diasporan Latvian communities. James earned a M.A. from University of Nebraska at Omaha.

**Rita Béres-Deák** has a B.A. in Cultural Anthropology and got her Ph.D. in Gender Studies at the Central European University. After teaching one term at the Gender Studies Department of CEU, she is currently an independent researcher. She is actively involved in LGBTQ and human rights activism.

**Thorsten Bonacker** is a Professor for peace and conflict studies at the Center for Conflict Studies and the Institute for Sociology at the University of Marburg. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Oldenburg. He is a board member of the research center on “dynamics of security” at the Universities of Marburg and Gießen.

**Radzhana Buyantueva** is a Teaching Assistant at Newcastle University (UK) from where she has Ph.D. in Political Science. Her publications include LGBT activism and homophobia in Russia in *Journal of Homosexuality* and a review of *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* by Dan Healey in *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*.

**Benjamin Clancy** is a doctoral student and Teaching Fellow in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has his Masters in Communication from Texas State University. His research sits at the meeting point between rhetoric and media studies.

**Kelly A. Clancy** is an Assistant Professor and Chair of Political Science at Nebraska Wesleyan University. Her previous book, *The Politics of Genetically Modified Organisms in the United States and Europe*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) studied social movements against GMOs on both sides of the Atlantic. She earned her Ph.D. from Rutgers University.

**Ramona Dima** has background in Language and Literature, Communication, and Migration studies. Since 2009, she has been actively involved in anti-discrimination, feminist, and queer projects, and since 2014, she has been working with her life partner, Simona Dumitriu, as an artist duo. In 2018, she received her Ph.D. title from University of Bucharest.

**Clinton Glenn** is a Ph.D. candidate in Communication Studies at McGill University and is currently a visiting Ph.D. student at Tallinn University in Estonia. Glenn’s work has been published in *Third Floor*, *Synoptique: An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies*, *Unmediated*, and *esse: Arts+Opinions*.

**Anna Kurowicka** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University. She received her Ph.D. in cultural studies at the University of Warsaw. She has published on the representation of asexuality in popular culture, the intersections of asexuality and disability, and Polish asexualities in Polish and international journals.

**Roman Leksikov** is currently a master's student and a teaching assistant at the University of Alberta. Currently, he is studying policing of hate crimes, cultural violence and gendered violence, its patterns and ways of justice accomplishment. He is also interested in power, violence, intimacy, and sexuality in total institutions and gender-segregated spaces.

**Masha Neufeld** holds a diploma degree in psychology and works on her Ph.D. project on the topic of alcohol consumption and health in Russia at the Institute of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy at TU Dresden and the Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto.

**Jānis Ozoliņš** is a Ph.D. student at the University of Latvia. He is also a Researcher there at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art. He co-translated Roland Barthe's *Le plaisir du texte*. He has published articles on "Theories of Narratology" and on Latvian contemporary fiction. He also co-edited *Queer Stories of Europe*.

**Ela Przybyło** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Illinois State University. Her work has appeared in *GLQ*, *Sexualities*, *Psychology & Sexuality*, *Feminism & Psychology*, and in *Asexualities*. Her forthcoming book *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* draws on Audre Lorde's conceptualization of the erotic to rethink the role of sex for feminist and queer thought and practice.

**Dafna Rachok** is a Ph.D. student in Anthropology at Indiana University Bloomington, and received her M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Alberta and M.A. in Critical Gender Studies from Central European University. Her current research examines how Ukrainian sex workers legitimize sex work as an acceptable way of earning.

**Maryna Shevtsova** is a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Florida, USA. She has Ph.D. in Political Science from Humboldt University, Germany. Her recent publications include an edited volume, with A. Guler and D. Venturi *LGBTI Asylum Seekers and Refugees from a Legal and Political Perspective: Persecution, Asylum and Integration* published in 2019 with Springer.

**Justyna Struzik** is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the project “Disentangling European HIV/AIDS Policies: Activism, Citizenship and Health.” She received her Ph.D. in sociology from the Institute of Sociology at Jagiellonian University in Krakow with the thesis *Queer Movements in Poland*. Her research interests include social movements, sexuality, health, and gender.

**Ráhel Katalin Turai** is a sociologist and gender expert. With a Ph.D. from Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, she holds courses and seminars on gender studies and qualitative methodologies. She has worked as researcher in international projects about elderly and childcare, gender inequality in school, and partnership violence.

**Kārlis Vērdiņš** is a Ph.D. student in Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis, USA, and a Researcher at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia. His publications include monographs *The Social and Political Dimensions of the Latvian Prose Poem* (2010) and *The Bastard Form* (in Latvian, 2011).

**Cai Weaver** is a Political Science Doctoral Candidate at the University of Helsinki and a researcher in the Academy of Finland project “Biopolitics and Democracy in Global Governance.” His Ph.D. explores the Biopolitical Governance of Sexuality in Contemporary Russia. He has published in the *Finnish Review of East Studies*.

**Katharina Wiedlack** is a Postdoc Research Fellow at the University of Vienna and visiting scholar at Johns Hopkins University. She has conducted research and lectured in the fields of cultural, gender, queer, and disability studies at the University of Berkley, Yale, University of Vienna, State Technical University Novosibirsk and State University of Saint Petersburg.

**Kerstin Zimmer** is a Senior Lecturer at the Center for Conflict Studies and the Institute of Sociology, Marburg University, Germany. She received her Ph.D. at Frankfurt University. Her research interests include social and political change in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, with a focus on social and ethnic identities, migration, and the politics of history.