

Genderphobia in Eastern Europe: Myths and Realities

Article by Judit Takács, Kata Benedek

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Viktor Orbán's anti-LGBT referendum on election day and Andrzej Duda's strikingly similar campaign in the 2020 Polish election appear as the latest episodes in a long-standing history of homophobia in Eastern and Central Europe. But does this framing help us understand social attitudes in the region or does it reinforce the divisive narratives of populists? Kata Benedek spoke to social scientist Judit Takács about how the supposed line between East and West on LGBTQI+ emancipation was drawn over time.

Kata Benedek: You have spent two and a half decades researching Hungarian LGBTQI+ historical and contemporary issues. What are the most obstinate misbeliefs about the Eastern European region in this area?

Judit Takács: There are so many, and it's not easy to capture them. I suppose by Eastern Europe you mean the post-socialist bloc, where we share a history of Soviet occupation. In that case, there are a number of areas where history and contemporary politics play a role. When many academics or politicians talk about Eastern Europe, their mental maps do not separate nations in political or even cultural terms; they treat the region as a homogenous bloc. This also applies when it comes to sexual minorities. On the one hand, in the state-socialist era, there is the image that beyond politically motivated legal oppression, there is no LGBT history to talk about. This is consistent with the perception that contemporary Eastern European societies are more homophobic than those in the West - which isn't unfounded given the success of neo-populist anti-LGBT propaganda in Poland, Hungary, Russia, and elsewhere.

Public discourse in media and politics obscure LGBT legal history in both Western and Eastern Europe. At the European Council last June, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán claimed he was fighting for the rights of sexual minorities during the state-socialist era, implying that they were criminalised. Both Hungarian and international media covered it without correcting his statement despite the fact that homosexuality was decriminalised years before Orbán was born.

Public or even political discourse holds that in all state-socialist countries, homosexuality was a crime. As surprising as it may be, the state-socialist authorities in Czechoslovakia and Hungary decriminalised homosexuality as early as 1961. Bulgaria followed in 1968. The same thing happened in a few other state-socialist countries well before adopting capitalist democracies from 1989 to 1990. Some of the "socialist republics" of Yugoslavia took similar autonomous decisions: in 1977, Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro decriminalised homosexuality. In Poland, the legislation was abolished in 1932, before the state-socialist takeover, and was not reintroduced under state socialism.

On the Global North's timeline of statutory reforms, these dates put these countries on the historically progressive side. So why do the misunderstandings persist?

We accept emancipatory movements follow a linear path in which they apply pressure on governments in the United States or Western Europe which then leads to the decriminalisation and emancipation of LGBTQI+ communities. However soviet regimes stifled the forming of not only LGBT movements but others too, which meant that the emancipation of communities never followed this linear path. The decriminalisation of homosexuality was at the behest of the regime's leadership. Even when the legal threat was removed, sexual minorities remained hidden at both a personal and collective level. This systemic silencing meant that there were no Western-style subcultures to create a continuous living memory of these movements while homophobia persisted in society.

In some state-socialist states, LGBT organisations emerged in the last years of state socialism but the regime change gave them more visibility. This tends to give the impression that Eastern and Central European LGBT history started with the regime change. Of course, I am only talking about some of the satellite states. The situation was different in the Soviet Union and researchers are working to understand the Soviet LGBT past.

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In recent years, populist right-wing extremism has been on the rise across the European Union, typically in post-state-socialist countries operating with anti-LGBT messages.

I call them "genderphobic" rhetoric, where homophobia can be seen as a subcategory of genderphobia. It is an old truism that homophobia is "cheap" and can be effectively used for political interests. It is not worth much investigation; it is neither ideological nor cultural. You don't need a lot of financial or creative investment for scapegoating, but it's an excellent tool for diverting public attention from actual problems. These panels are flexible and temporary; they can be used and thrown out, then recycled and reinvented. The actual content doesn't really matter. It is more about political communication and marketing, and they have experts who can sell these ideas and train the masses to follow them. The central feature of this politics is that they develop a vision of crisis. It doesn't mean that there is no underlying crisis, but by presenting a crisis from a specific angle governments can pose as the only ones who can solve them.

Could you give an example?

For example, the 2015 migration situation was clearly a very real crisis, but it was presented differently in Hungary than in other parts of Europe. Fidesz linked it to the century-old topic of Hungarian politics: demographic crisis - the fear of Hungarians

disappearing due to the low birth rates. The same symbolic moral dilemma can be detected in current homophobic and genderphobic propaganda. Rather than citing, for example, economic reasons for the decline in birth rates, they find rhetorical ammunition in the control and discipline of gender roles and the demonisation of rainbow families. While these fears cannot be scientifically substantiated, they fit well in the right-wing worldview on maintaining an autonomous and homogeneous nation.

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You implied that the rising homophobic rhetoric in politics is not necessarily representative of the dynamics of social homophobia. A Polish colleague argued that while for instance, Polish politics is more homophobic than ever, Polish society is more progressive than ever. Furthermore, the Polish electorate is voting for the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in spite of their homophobia, not because of it. What do you think about this argument?

I am not sure how to measure the “progressivity” of society. This is a complex issue. For example, in light of the [recent Hungarian elections](#), the bad news is that the genderphobic rhetoric of Fidesz obviously worked as they have a supermajority again. The good news is that the genderphobic referendum failed due to the lack of interest and the 1.5 million invalid votes. So does this make Hungarian society progressive or not so progressive?

That they can construct this type of narrative so successfully is related to the fact that no collective LGBT memory can organically regulate this rhetoric. If the historical research that we are doing is integrated into the mainstream, can it put a stop to unbridled populism?

In theory, perhaps. But living memory cannot simply be replaced through reconstructive tactics. Reconstruction efforts are essentially based on pragmatic archival work. This archival work allows us to partially reveal very complex systemic phenomena in society and research. Just to name one: access to the documents of state-socialist secret services is not always guaranteed. In the meantime, technical developments, mainly through digitalisation, have enabled us to tell more people about Eastern and Central European LGBT history than we could 25 to 30 years ago. However, these histories are often close to impossible to integrate into national history.

These are ambivalent and complicated details and only footnotes to history. Ordinary people facing the various problems of the 21st century simply don't care nor should they be expected to delve into 20th-century queer history. Of course, it is easier and cheaper to tell them that Brussels is at fault for the presence of LGBT people than talk about, for example, the historical continuity of sexual minorities coexisting with mainstream society under previous political systems. Nevertheless, a balanced media and cultural landscape and some political support would help the cause.

A crisis of LGBT rights has become a polarising issue for the European Union,

both within and outside its borders. And the line is clearly drawn between East and West.

It is a similar performative politics that deploys psychological dynamics: if we want to strengthen our group, we must define the others threatening us. In Eastern Central European right-wing populist discourse, “Brussels” has long been presented as the strange emperor who wants to “colonise us”; Our national boundaries, autonomy, and cultural traditions constructed to suit the occasion, are under threat. For these political leaders, it pays to confront the European Union standard on moral and ethical issues on migrant or LGBT rights. These symbolic crises legitimise and underpin each other.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that there are historically determined epistemological differences that have contributed to the crystallised hierarchy between centre and periphery, West and East. LGBT issues are precisely where a kind of colonial attitude, that neoliberal capitalist democracy is the only working strategy to liberate sexual minorities, is felt. Are Western nations benefiting from this value hierarchy?

I’m a social scientist, and I like to base my arguments on empirical findings. However, I see that a lot of Eastern and Central European sources and research findings are not appreciated, and they are overlooked in international academia. And as unpleasant as it is to those working on these issues, I wouldn’t say it is a conscious strategy. It’s more just the West’s reality, a kind of self-assertive statement that “we are the most civilised, the best”, which of course implies that others are not. You know the saying about the West and the rest.

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continuous living memory of LGBT movements.*

We have seen more symbolic gestures than effective action from the Western side of the European Union who might be more talking to their base rather than those they claim to support. And sexual minorities and their supporters in Eastern Europe have a right to expect EU representatives to take practical actions to protect them instead of the virtue-signalling in Brussels.

I am less critical about the EU-level regulations; they are quite alright. But there is a problem with their implementation. We increasingly hear that the EU is a community of values, but until now, we have assumed it was more of a gentle(wo)men’s agreement. Increasingly, however, this is being subverted for national or political reasons, both from the West and the East. This is not specific to sexual minorities.

How can we directly support or show solidarity with Eastern European LGBTQI+ communities?

I can’t talk on behalf of the communities. Still, when people ask me how they could support the Hungarian or more generally Eastern and Central European LGBTQI+ communities, I

always say they should try getting in touch with the groups and organisations representing the interests of LGBTQI+ communities and ask them what is needed. Solidarity of course is always welcome, but there are many other ways to support political actions or artistic projects that also have the potential to influence the social and political landscape in the long run.



Judit Takács is a research professor at the Centre for Social Sciences – Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence. Her main research interests cover family practices, childlessness, the social history of homosexuality, homophobia and genderphobia. Her most recent publications include an edited volume on the Paradoxical Right-Wing Sexual Politics in Europe, a book chapter on How to Conserve Kertbeny's Grave? A Case of Post-Communist Queer Necrophilia, and articles on Liberating Pathologization? The Historical Background of the 1961 Decriminalization of Homosexuality in Hungary (with T. PTóth) and Democracy deficit and homophobic divergence in 21st century Europe (with I. Szalma).



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