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Table of Contents

ARTICLES

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Can gender studies be in exile? An introduction

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According to Albert O. Hirschman's classic study *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970), exile can be interpreted as an exit of individuals from their (political) community: they leave a 'system – a family, an organization, a nation-state – that is experienced as declining, disappointing or dysfunctional beyond repair' (Heins, 2020, p. 44). Faced with such deteriorating circumstances, one can either voice discontent and attempt to change the situation by 'various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion' (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30), or one can decide to leave. Emigration might become preferable when feelings of loyalty and belonging are eroded by states that continuously betray and silence their own citizens (Heins, 2020). It can become a matter of survival, if oppression turns into persecution or worse. Hirschman's analytical approach remains useful for exile and diaspora studies, but it does not address other exit options such as inner emigration and internal exile. The latter can be described 'as a form of social limitation and immobility – from short term to life – within [...] not only sites of official dislocations [such as a prison camp or asylum, but] supposedly benign institutions such as the familial home, and social conditions such as enforced or prolonged unemployment, may also function as sites of exile' (Allatson & McCormack, 2008, p. 11).

Across the globe, a substantial number of gender studies scholars left their country of origin not because of promising career options in a globalized academic job market, but because different levels of dysfunctionality in their home country pushed them towards emigration, caused by political conflicts or war, academic restructuring, precariousness, or lack of resources. Others were driven into internal exile, especially in 'totalitarian, dictatorial or simply ideologically unpalatable regimes' (Allatson & McCormack, 2008, p. 11). This thematic issue focuses on gender studies scholars and the field of gender studies more generally in the context of broader struggles against the rise of right-wing authoritarian nationalist movements and democratic backsliding across the globe (see, e.g., Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Bermeo, 2019). What are the prospects for gender studies under such circumstances? The time seems ripe for assessing how notions of exile rhyme with gender studies.

Right-wing populist movements feed on popular resentment of the effects of neoliberal globalization, while at the same time empowering authoritarian rulers who enact similar

sets of economic policies (privatization of infrastructure, deregulation of markets, low taxes etc.). Numerous scholars refer to conceptual and structural links, rather than a conflictual and dichotomous relationship, between neoliberalism and authoritarianism (e.g., Konings, 2012; Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Biebricher, 2020; Lendvai-Bainton & Szelewa, 2021; Scheiring, 2021; Szombati, 2021). Part of the allure of authoritarian right-wing populisms is a culture war rhetoric that vilifies 'globalist elites' for their alleged agenda of destroying remaining vestiges of 'communitas' like the family, the religious community, the nation, and cultural values associated with them (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020; Stewart, 2020; Schäfer, 2022). Concerning the academic sphere, right-wing culture warriors zoom in on those fields that have originally emerged as critical inquiries of racialized and gendered hierarchies in society and politics, most notably the fields of critical whiteness studies (Hunter & van der Westhuizen, 2022) and gender studies (Zaborskis, 2018).[1] This creates additional challenges for academic disciplines that are generally characterized by a relatively low degree of institutionalization and funding, as compared to ones with a long history of institutionalization.[2] Is gender studies as a field of inquiry therefore at risk of being pushed into exile, and if so, in what sense?

In neoliberal academia, the logic of marketization and competition results in contradictory patterns of inclusion, visibility and promotion on the one hand, and exclusion and marginalization on the other. Neoliberal politics of knowledge production and circulation are complicit in reproducing entrenched power relations and inequalities in academia, and this becomes evident when considered through a gender and sexuality lens in their intersection with other categories such as class, age, ethnic background and physical/mental abilities. However, in order to develop effective counter strategies, it is important to avoid obscuring the differences between neoliberalism and right-wing authoritarianism: while gender studies as an academic discipline is promoted or at least tolerated as part of a more or less inclusive liberal agenda, it has come under attack by right-wing populist forces resenting this agenda. Attacks on gender studies can be seen as part of a wider backlash against hard fought advances in the sphere of women's rights, including abortion and reproductive rights as well as LGBTIQ rights (Graff, 2014; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Rohde et al., 2018; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Möser et al., 2022; Santos, 2022).

In the context of post-truth populism, Raewyn Connell describes recuperative masculinity politics as a key element of re-imagined authoritarian nationalism, often cloaked in a rhetoric of family protection, where 'the right-wing leader becomes a symbolic protector for those who are fearful of further change, whether towards gender justice, ethnic pluralism or economic equality' (Connell, 2022, pp. 70–71). Connell calls for a broader engagement with feminist knowledge production, the central achievement of which 'over centuries and continents, has been to contest Big Lies', i.e., 'the core stories of patriarchal ideology that defined

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[1] See also Kóczé's (2022) compelling observations on the 'abnormalization' of social justice in the context of anti-woke culture wars.

[2] See, for example, Engeli's account on the institutionalization of gender and sexuality research in the context of political science: 'One tale of gender and sexuality research is clearly about the way it has become institutionalized, both within the discipline and within the contemporary university. Yet, a second tale has also emerged, which is the story by which gender and sexuality research has become contested, attacked and elevated to the status of the *bête noire* of the populist and radical right' (Engeli, 2020, p. 227).

women as deficient in intelligence, morality, creativity, loyalty, public-spiritedness or any other capacity that defined human worth' (Connell, 2022, p. 71). This is especially urgent as authoritarian nationalist movements are in the process of building new patriarchies, leading to 'more insecurity and a pervasive corruption of culture' (Connell, 2022, p. 75). Even though authoritarian nationalist leaders often pledge to restore and protect tradition (the family, the nation, etc.), their rhetoric hides the broader and more far-reaching implications of these new patriarchal arrangements. Thus, attacks on gender studies, as David Paternotte observes,

> should not be understood primarily as a form of backlash against gender equality and sexual freedom, the return of patriarchy, or the result of toxic masculinity. While they are undoubtedly gendered, these assaults are embedded in wider campaigns against democracy in Europe today. Gender studies serve therefore as a proxy, and these attacks should be seen as a key step in the dismantling of critical knowledge more broadly. (Paternotte, 2019)

Indeed, attacks on gender studies by right-wing populist movements and/or regimes form part and parcel of a sustained attack on academic freedom and critical scholarship. Writing about recent science policy developments in Hungary and elsewhere, Andrea Pető explains how key features of illiberal polypore states – such as the establishment of parallel institutions, the ideology of familism, and the securitization discourse (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018) – contribute to masking political authority as academic authority. This process leaves no space for independent and free thinking and eventually leaves 'only hollow copies of academic institutions' (Pető, 2022, p. 40). Stirring genderphobia, defined as 'an ideology about the fearfulness of gender as well as the action of fear-mongering for political effect,' is a tool to whip up 'aversion to disrupting dominant gender and sexual hierarchies, by addressing and critically interrogating gendered differences and gender as a social construct' (Takács et al., 2022, p. 38). Key elements in the process of institutionalizing genderphobia in Hungary included stripping LGBTIQ individuals and families of their rights, the implementation of restrictive 'child protection' policies aimed at framing LGBTIQ people as sexual predators, and the banning of gender studies.[3]

It is therefore no coincidence that we publish this thematic issue on 'Gender Studies in Exile' in a Hungarian journal, in a country that offers a showcase scenario for right-wing authoritarian identity politics. Hungary arguably evolved in recent years from a form of 'illiberal democracy' to an 'elected dictatorship', after having 'neutered the courts, taken over much of the media, and mounted a sustained attack on free speech' (Mounk, 2020, p. 31, see also Bogaards, 2018). Indeed, the call for submissions to this thematic issue has drawn some unwanted attention from Hungarian media outlets that can be described as having close ties

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[3] In 2018 the Hungarian government led by Viktor Orbán withdrew the academic accreditation of gender studies programmes in universities (funding for gender studies has been withdrawn only at the Eötvös Loránd University, since the Central European University, the other university affected by this policy change is a private institution, receiving no funding from the government), and instead set up family studies programmes at other universities that seem more closely aligned with the Orbán-regime's ideological premises. According to their explanation, the 'government's standpoint is that people are born either male or female, and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially constructed genders rather than biological sexes' (Oppenheim, 2018 – for more media reports see, for example, Redden, 2018; Verseck, 2018; Apperly, 2019; Gimson, 2019). For more details see also an interview conducted in 2018 with Anikó Gregor, the key faculty member in charge of the Gender Studies master programme at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest: https://lefteast.org/gender-studies-in-hungary/ (accessed 18 November 2022); in 2019 Gregor received an Academy in Exile scholarship and spent a year as a visiting scholar at the Freie Universität Berlin.

to the governing Fidesz party, denouncing the endeavour as radical left-wing propaganda lacking academic merit.[4] We are therefore proud to be able to present a selection of well-researched original studies in this issue of *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* despite the prevailing political climate in Hungary, and we salute the editors of the journal for their steadfastness in defending academic freedom.

The guest editors of this thematic issue have been affiliated with *Academy in Exile*, a consortium of academic institutions in Germany that operates a fellowship programme for scholars at risk from across the world.[5] This academic community includes colleagues whose career and/or personal wellbeing are manifestly threatened as well as those who represent fields of knowledge-production that are being delegitimized and/or marginalized in their home countries, like gender studies in Hungary and elsewhere (Özbek, 2021). In presenting six excellent articles that address related questions in some of these countries, authored mostly by younger gender studies scholars and/or by researchers who write from a position of exile, this thematic issue sends a message of solidarity to colleagues in these fields who continue their work even under adverse circumstances, in their home country or in exile.

Several articles in this thematic issue are valuable contributions to the buzzing field of diaspora studies (Cohen & Fischer, 2019). Some seem to echo *Exilforschung*, an interdisciplinary field of study focusing on Germans and Austrians forced into exile following the rise of Nazism and the effects of this mass emigration until today. As the contributions to this thematic issue and other works amply testify, experiences of exile and diaspora formations are not devoid of gender dimensions (see, for example, Campt & Thomas, 2008; Brinson & Hammel, 2016; Brinson et al., 2017; Féron, 2021). The notion of exile is central to our collective endeavour in several ways. In the literal sense, the experience of exile is addressed and/or has inspired the contributions dealing with Belarus/the United States, Finland, Mongolia and Turkey/Germany. Articles focussing on gender studies scholars working under challenging conditions in Austria and Slovakia address the notion of inner exile. In presenting an array of studies addressing marginalized and under-researched topics, in part discussing developments in countries of the global (semi-)periphery, this thematic issue opens a door for their metaphorical return from exile.

The articles demonstrate numerous entanglements also between scholarship and politics, and all of them discuss cases in which intersectionality of gender, class, and ethnicity is a crucial factor. Some authors address specific experiences and coping strategies of individuals/groups embodying marginal and/or non-normative gendered and sexual positionalities, either within their home country or in exile. Gender is not always in the centre of the re-

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[4] For the call for submissions, see https://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/announcement/view/33. See also the articles on 'Publicly funded gender propaganda is carried out in a journal connected to the Eötvös Loránd Research Network' published on 2 October 2021 in *Magyar Nemzet*, the biggest self-proclaimed pro-government national daily newspaper (https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2021/10/az-eotvos-lorand-kutatasi-halozathoz-kotheto-folyoiratban-kozpenzbol-folytatnak-genderpropagandat), and 'Publicly funded gender propaganda is carried out in a journal connected to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences', published on 29 September 2021 in *Origo*, one of the biggest pro-government online news portals (https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20210929-kozpenzen-folytatnak-genderpropagandat-az-mta-hoz-kapcsolodo-folyoiratban.html (accessed 18 November 2022).

[5] *Academy in Exile* (AiE) was founded in 2017 as a joint initiative of the Institute for Turkish Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen, the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) Essen and the Forum Transregionale Studien Berlin. In 2018 the Freie Universität Berlin also joined the AiE. For more details, see, https://www.academy-in-exile.eu/

search question, but always plays a crucial role in the analysis. Others inquire into the state of the art and working conditions in the field of gender studies in selected countries. Several articles explicitly address emotions like anxieties and shame. These are negative feelings that reflect partly traumatic experiences of authors and/or the social groups introduced in the texts. In discussing individual coping strategies with or responses to difficult experiences, several contributions point to silence and withdrawal into inner exile. In order to transform such emotions and experiences into a source of self-empowerment, it is important to break silences surrounding such issues by turning them into a topic for research. As a consequence, the studies assembled in this thematic issue differ from more emotionally and personally detached scholarship, which is sometimes mistaken as evidence for 'objectivity', obscuring the fact that all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988). In terms of methodology and disciplinary orientation, they fall into the categories of qualitative social sciences, social anthropology and cultural studies research, and often constitute examples of politically engaged auto-ethnography (Anderson, 2006; Denshire, 2014).

Ali Ali's article on 'Warming up narratives of community: Queer kinship and emotional exile,' based on ethnographic fieldwork in gender-political communities in Helsinki, tackles questions of queer belonging. Rather than focusing on specific national backgrounds, the article conceptualizes the ongoing collective living and communality at work in constructing and deconstructing narratives of belonging. The author argues that the precarity of queer racialized exiles entails a strategic and at times complacent investment in norms of racialized othering. At the same time, Ali also shows how the realm of (queer) precarity simultaneously enables a (re)consideration and contestation of the terms of belonging in a European society.

Tatsiana Shchurko's piece, 'From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking protests in Belarus through a transnational feminist perspective' draws on the author's experience of exile in the United States to engage in a comparative discussion of the Black Lives Matter protests and the anti-authoritarian uprising in Belarus in 2020. Seeking to explore the potential for practices of transnational feminist solidarity, Shchurko argues that building global feminist alliances must start by critically interrogating these networks to see how power operates in asymmetrical and multidirectional ways, and sometimes inhibits effective alliances and meaningful communication.

Refiye Nevra Akdemir's article on 'Making distance from our displacement: A cross-section of the academic life of displaced scholars from Turkey working on displacement in Germany' combines critical inquiries of both authoritarian and neoliberal regimes and their marginalizing effects on the sizable community of Turkish exiled scholars in Germany. By interrogating the different ways in which exiled researchers who have migrated from the field of uncertainty, created by a national authoritarian regime, to the field of precariousness, created by extensive marketization, the author addresses the issue of interpreting displacement in these two different fields of uncertainty.

Otgonbaatar Tsedendemberel's article on 'Shamed citizens: Exilic lived experiences of queer Mongolians abroad' discusses the gap between Mongolia's progressive LGBTQ related laws and their lack of implementation in a conservative homophobic society. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews, the author explores the lived experiences of repressed Mongolian queers and their exilic experiences abroad. Tsedendemberel shows that feelings of shame often motivate their forced and self-imposed retreat into exile. The article

argues that despite the hardships of exilic existence, it can enable a transformation of the feelings of shame into self-acceptance and self-esteem.

Veronika Valkovičová and Zuzana Maďarová in their article on 'Care as symbolic exile: The diversity work of Slovak gender studies scholars' examine gender studies as an epistemic community and aim to enrich the existing body of scholarship in this field by focusing on Slovakia, a country with a weak level of institutionalization of gender studies. The presented qualitative study draws on focus group discussions and interviews with PhD students and early career scholars of social sciences in Slovakia. The authors argue that a combination of the fragmented gender-oriented epistemic communities, and the neoliberalized academia pushing for competitiveness often lead junior gender studies scholars to either self-imposed or forced inner exile within their institutions.

In their article 'Feminist activism in Austria – and its way to escape a spiral of silencing and inner exile' Regine Bendl, Maria Clar, and Angelika Schmidt discuss ways in which right-wing culture war rhetoric has influenced scholarly work and teaching of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) topics in Austria. Their study, presenting findings from a participatory action research project, demonstrates that safe spaces can enable reflections on ways to overcome the loss of previous EDI supporters and a newly inflamed gender equality opposition, and they can also help to escape the spiral of silence and inner exile.

Rita Béres-Deák's book review of the recent edited volume, *Paradoxical right-wing sexual politics in Europe* (Möser et al., 2022), complements this collection of articles.

Finally, we should return to the initial question that motivated us to produce this thematic issue: Can gender studies as an academic field be pushed into exile, and if so, in what sense? On the one hand, in view of the banning of gender studies programmes in Hungary since 2018, we can perhaps answer with agreement. On the other hand, we can refer to unsuccessful attempts at closing gender studies programmes in other countries, as happened in Romania in 2020 (see, for example, Barberá, 2020). We should also note the resilience of the field, at least for the time being. While it is true that students have not been able to enrol in gender studies programmes at Hungarian universities since 2018, gender studies as a field of academic inquiry has resisted being silenced in Hungary, and this thematic issue is meant to contribute to its continued vitality.

At the same time, there is no ignoring the fact that there are powerful political attempts to challenge the social and policy relevance of gender and to reinstate unreconstructed notions of biological sex and/or the supposed natural character of the heteronormative family (Butler, 2021). Attempts to denounce gender as a relevant analytical category and to placate gender activism as infringement of the freedom of expression can be observed also within academia.[6]

We can argue that at least in certain parts of the world, it is gender itself that is increasingly denied a place in social reality and in the analytical toolkit of social sciences. In this sense, we can state that gender as an analytical tool and thus gender studies as an academic discipline can be, indeed, in exile.

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[6] For a critical account of recent Hungarian developments, see, for example, Barát (2022). In Germany, denunciations of gender activism as authoritarian practices are voiced by anti-woke scholars affiliated, for instance, with the *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit,* https://www.netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.de/.

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Warming up narratives of community: Queer kinship and emotional exile

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Abstract

This text tackles questions of what makes a community and belonging possible and sensible. Rather than focusing on a specific community, it centers the ongoing collective living and communality at work in constructing and deconstructing narratives of belonging. The text is based on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork in gender-political communities in Helsinki, among people whose state-authorized residence in Finland is (sought to be) recognized based on the need for protection from sexuality- and gender-based violence in communities of origin/departure.[1] I begin with narratives that participants mobilize to make sense of belonging to a given community or collective (queer, multicultural, Finnish/European) and non-belonging to another (community of origin). Then, I discuss possibilities of affinity, alliance and politics that rethink normative/restrictive structures of identification and othering/exclusion. I foreground queerhood for 1) its praxis of problematizing normative boundaries of communities, 2) its juxtaposition of the intimate and the communal to mobilize vulnerability as transformative to violent structures. I argue that the precarity of queer racialized exiles might entail strategic, but possibly complacent, investment in racializing norms. This precludes consideration of unjust structures in the desired society of settlement. However, the realm of precarity opens to (re)consideration and contestations of the norms and terms of belonging to the idealized desired (Finnish/European/multicultural) community. Scholars have highlighted that experiencing racializing queer-political milieus induces shifts in racialized queers' narratives of belonging and affinity. My ethnography on mundane narratives in the uncertainty and unmooring of exile traces how abstracted and dichotomous/factionalist narratives of community open and warm up to a queerer sense of kinship that is more attuned to considerations of the lived-experience violence to difference (and the different) within and without these boundaries of belonging.

Keywords: alienation; exile and migration; narratives of community and belonging; queer kinship

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[1] I place a slash between the words 'origin' and 'departure' to problematize the meaning of 'origin.' It is paradoxical to assign the subject to a 'community of origin' as origin evokes essentialist assumptions of belonging. 'Departure' reflects a choice of departing both in the geographically conventional sense of departure, as well as the departure in consciousness that arguably happens much before the territorial displacement.

> Intending to make kin while not seeing both past and ongoing colonial and other policies for extermination and/or assimilation augurs for very dysfunctional 'families'. (Haraway, 2016, p. 207)

1 Introduction: Bad luck or politics?

Azzam is an asylum seeker who arrived in Helsinki in 2015. He was ostracized and threatened by kin/family in his country of departure/origin Iraq due to his sexuality (divorcing the woman he was married to and pursuing same-sex relations). Azzam's claim for protection was rejected repeatedly by Finnish authorities, who said that he could live safely in Iraq if he kept discreet about his sexuality and avoided his kin/family. He disagreed with that argument and his recurrent appeals did not materialize in a much-desired residence permit that would mean settlement, safety and the possibility to study and work in Finland. Rather than assessing the viability of Azzam's claims and desires, I focus on the narratives he mobilized to make sense of his persistent desire for belonging in Finland. 'How distant is Finland from Iraq?' Azzam intrigued me with a question, and continued, 'For me, the borders between Finland and Iraq are as thin as those between the Netherlands and Belgium. And I live my life at these borders,' i.e. in almost no space, in limbo. Between a desired life in the image of Finland and a nightmare in the image of Iraq. 'At any moment, I could end up in Iraq,' he added. Azzam who condemned the 'backwardness/barbarity of Arabs,' did not find refuge from that in the desired collective/community. His stories were rife with resentment of how the desired refuge, 'The Finns,' rejected him. He felt 'like an intruder, who did not belong.' Azzam wished to 'have Finnish friends' but 'Finns are too distant/cold, they do not open up easily.' But he hoped that a legalized residence would help bridge that distance and warm up his circumstance. 'Everything in modern democracies is available, even study can be done online,' he said. But, for him, the only problem is that he did not get that residence permit, *bad luck*: 'My papers fell into the wrong hands,' he said. Another one of his many poetically resentful metaphors was that '50 people go to a bar. At the door of the bar, it was written: "Everybody gets a beer." Forty-nine people get the beer and Azzam does not.' 'Who decides?' He asked. 'Bad luck,' he answered.

  More elaboration on the hazy concept of 'bad luck' suggested that having been born in Iraq *was* bad luck. 'My own country abandoned me. Whatever can I expect from Finland?' he would say bitterly, on different occasions. Azzam admired what he called, 'the Finnish mentality.' I could not reach a comprehensive or unitary conceptualization of what 'Finnish mentality' was like, but the fragments I could gather of his conceptualization of Finnishness came at different moments on different occasions. In a festive ambience, he would appreciate how 'the *Finnish nation* knows how to savor life,' and when he would be charmed by technological installments or sophisticated architecture we happened to walk by, he would praise 'how Finns are constructive/builders.' None of these conceptualizations involved the resentment of his exclusion, which had more to do with Azzam's 'bad luck/origin/belonging' than with 'Finnish mentality.' In fact, his celebration of the Finnish/European mentality was strictly/permanently set against the contrast to a lurking specter of Arabs and *their mentality*: 'In Arab countries, presidency is misunderstood as being tyrannical to the nation, unlike in Europe, where presidency means being at the service of the nation,' he asserted. 'To you?' I teased. 'To their people. I wish I belonged to their people,' he answered with a confused frown, implying that my comment was unnecessary or out of place. Azzam saw that he

'arrived at the wrong time' (bad luck) coinciding with 'much talk about terrorism, and high number of refugees arriving from Muslim countries,' which made him the one out of fifty who did not get the *beer*. As Sara Ahmed suggests in matters of unrequited love: 'The failure of return is "explained" by the presence of others, whose presence is required for the investment to be sustained' (Ahmed, 2004 [2014], p. 131). The other(ed) Arab was accountable for that failure to return.

This text is about the sense of belonging and affinity that is at stake in the quest for survival and thriving in exile, in alienation from what used to be home as well as what is becoming or desired as such. I focus on the desire for livability, survivability and thriving that is premised on the plea for admittance and/or belonging to a desired community that stops short of questioning the very injurious terms of that plea, belonging and admittance. I do not limit 'exile' to a state of acute precarity and limbo of being undocumented, like in Azzam's case. Asli Vatasever sees exile as a state of 'everlasting mode of nomadic discontent [when] even after years in the receiving country, one may never really feel "settled in"' (2020, p. 7). I see exile as a state of discontent with the thwarted sense of settlement and belonging. Even with legal settlement and admittance, the sense of belonging is unsettled due to violent and injurious political and community narratives, what Miranda Joseph calls 'oppressive communal discourses' (Joseph, 2002, p. xxi).

My focus is not on any homogeneous and unitary identity, or internal politics of a specific community. Following Joseph (2002), I look into the discourse of communit[ies] 'in the social processes in which they are constituted and that they help to constitute' (p. viii). Politics of belonging risk making the quest for communal life more tenuous and sometimes impossible when they subscribe to oppressive and parochial community narratives. This is especially urgent and emergent in queer politics. The term *queer* for Judith Butler is 'never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, [i]n the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes' without domesticating it (1993, p. 19).

In their analysis of the movie *A Touch of Pink*, DasGupta and Dasgupta redeploy the term *queer* to challenge not only domestic kinship but also the domestication of kinship/community. Alim, the self-identifying homosexual sees his mother as a Muslim/Third-World woman who 'will not understand homosexuality' (2018, p. 33). By mobilizing racializing norms, Alim's ideas of relatability reinstate constricting understandings of kinship and affinity. Alim is unattuned to the queer circumstance of his mother who struggles under the norms of Muslim/Third-World womanhood, an identity premised on a heteronormative family life of her child (ibid.).

Donna Haraway sees that kin is a wild category that is always at risk of being domesticated (2016, p. 2), but queer kin(ship) minds the pitfalls of domestication in the way of its mobilization. My ethnography in queer political gatherings and meetings traces narratives of community to show how queer affects warm up community politics to alternative political persuasions and imagination of sociality and social life.

I juxtapose the affectual/emotional, embodied/lived-experience and the rational(ized), to trace the co-constitutive relation between these. Following Lauren Berlant's claim that '[w]hat we call "political persuasion" must entail shaping political affections' (2011, p. 243), I see that questions of affinity, belonging and allegiance/alliance entail political/communal narratives that are charged with and propelled by emotions. Ahmed suggests that emotions like fear, love and hate are constitutive to narratives of belonging. 'How we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically "takes shape" only as an effect of

such alignments' (2004 [2014], p. 54). One structures one's relations to the world to create a sustaining imagination of where one belongs (the loved), and where one does not (the feared, the hated and the shameful). In that sense, as Butler puts it, '[I]t may be that certain identifications and affiliations are made [i]n order to institute a *dis*identification with a position that seems too saturated with injury[, that is] occupiable only through imagining the loss of viable identity altogether' (1993 [2011], p. 64).

That brings a more urgent question: how, rather than to whom one belongs; how one is exiled from norms of not only belonging but also recognizability. Here, it is timely to borrow from Butler's 'body' and her recurring problematization of body boundaries, along with boundaries between the material and the discursive. This is to foreground a main argument in this text: how a seemingly reflective factor, namely an emotion, turns out to be constitutive to the very understanding of where the self belongs, where it ends and begins, its demarcation.

> The body in the mirror does not represent a body that is, as it were, before the mirror: the mirror, even as it is instigated by that unrepresentable body 'before' the mirror, produces that body as its delirious effect—a delirium [w]hich we are compelled to live. (Butler, 1993 [2011], p. 57)

Emotion, like the mirror, delineates body boundaries. In the ethnographic mundane, narratives of the self and belonging unfold. And like in mirrors, the subject reflects (or constitutes) oneself in affect-charged political narratives of the ideal and the othered, to resonate/reiterate and/or shift matters of community and deservingness. Here Butler's 'delirium' does justice to the political narrative. Delirium is not necessarily untruth, but rather a situated narrative of matters of concern (politics) and the collective endeavor to uphold what matters in the tenuous work of livability in exile.

I tune into stories/narratives of livability, survivability and/through collectivity (solidarity) within *intimate publics,* spheres of intersubjectivity that 'work in proximity to normative modes of love and the law' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3). Berlant's 'intimate public' refers to how intimacy is publicized in the media. I see this text, and ethnographic writing in general, as making public of the intimate. This is in two entangled senses: 1) by mediatizing the mundanity of the participants' lives by publishing/publicizing their lived stories and intimate feelings, and 2) by making the private political. The contingency between 'love'/affect and 'law'/collectivity/community in an intimate public is what makes it a significant sphere of political happenings. It is the place where one 'circulate[s] scenarios of economic and intimate contingency and trade[s] paradigms for how best to live on' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3).

2 Contextualizing the intimate publics of my ethnography

Azzam's story reduces the violent narratives of community into an instance of *bad luck* that is equivalent to an abjection of being an Arab/Iraqi. The exclusion that is encountered in the social and governmental milieus figures as bad luck in an otherwise desirable/idealized community and communality. Azzam's narrative reflects a norm of queer communality in Finland. As Salla Peltonen and Katarina Jungar (2018) show, queer and asylum activism in Finland is rife with a *politics of difference* that reduces the issue of queer exile into an injurious/homophobic country/community of departure/origin (or even fellow exiles) versus a liberational West/Finland. This politics of reductive difference frames queer precarity as a matter of a

constitutive outside/other to Europe. What seems to be direly missing is a questioning of the terms in which the community or country of desire makes it (im)possible for the exile to belong, and therefore escape the violent outside. The terms of belonging to the desired country and community is as alarming as the situation of the violent outside of that belonging. In the context of Sweden, Maja Sager sees that the othered figure of the asylum seeker is at the heart of constituting citizenship norms through the seekers' ongoing negotiations for recognition within the sociopolitical realm. Sager sees that looking into the case of asylum seekers holds knowledge on the state of things of the Swedish welfare state (2011). I see that the experience of queer exiles in Finland holds knowledge about the state of queer politics in Finland.

My question is: how can the precarity of exile challenge the reduction of the queer trauma to dichotomous and sterile notions of West versus the rest? How can the experience of queer exile be mobilized politically in the host-country and in global queer politics? Sarah Singer suggests that queer exile's loss of connection with kin in countries of departure induces feelings of alienation, that in the case of the limbo of being undocumented in the destination country, spiral into acute feelings of alienation and guilt that justify discrimination as punishment (2021). Asli Vatansever tackles the same issue in the case of Turkish academic exiles to show a reverse aspect. Political engagement with fellow exiles who shared the same experience entailed mooring and solace in the state of exile and limbo (Vatansever, 2020).

Juxtaposing the two cases gives hints on what makes alliances with fellow exiles more perilous and fragile in queer politics. Queerhood and sexual non-normativity are assumed to be Western tenets. This makes the dichotomy between a liberating West versus a dehumanizing rest a trope to trump all other considerations. For example, as McNeal and French Brennan argue 'The Muslim Other – [is pitted] against the ostensibly progressive values of European civilization that now equate women's and gay rights with democracy and freedom' (2021, p. 164). This paradoxically leaves the queer subject tackling terms of 'family,' 'kin' and 'belonging' that are saturated with racialized and racist conceptualizations of kin. That does not only reduce narratives of kin and community into nationalist celebrations and xenophobic repudiations, but also trumps identities and subjectivities that might challenge these dichotomies.

In the Norwegian context, Akin and Bang Svendsen (2017) show how the possibility of queer kin(ning) is burdened with the domestics and domestication, the heritage of heteronormative kinship. Queer asylum in Norway is conditioned on 'assimilability into, the local gay and lesbian community' (p. 45), which entails 'conforming to particular styles of queerness' (p. 46). That style of queerness resonates with feminized subjects of migration, that is witnessed in marriage laws. Racialized male spouses are seen as threatening to the values and integrity of the Norwegian nation, while female spouses are imagined as dependent on that admission for protection from that racialized masculinity. In that sense, the queer subject admission into the country is conditioned on static domestic(ation of) values of kinship.

However, the experience of queer exile challenges domestication and the narratives of dichotomous differentiation between West and the rest. The racialization experienced induces reconsideration of narratives of queer exiles and a new narrativity of (non)belonging takes shape. DasGupta and Dasgupta (2018) highlight the shift in sensibilities to affiliations that were unexpected in exile. The racialized find issues of race more alienating than issues of sexuality: The gay-identifying Usman, mentioned in DasGupta and Dasgupta (2018), 'found a sense of safe place with his [orthodox Muslim] room-mates and felt that his body was out of

place in the gay bars of Central London [and among] gay men who he had thought of as his natural ally' (p. 35). In a parallel sense, Alessandro Boussalem's ethnography challenges the rigid narratives of dichotomous racialized homo/queerphobic zones in Brussels and calls for the 'deconstruction of rigid discourses of difference and division at work in the city' (2021, p. 1).

While Boussalem and DasGupta and Dasgupta tackle the more-or-less urban geographic sense of belonging and safety, I map the affective registers and narratives at work in the politics of belonging and difference. For Lauren Berlant belonging is 'a specific genre of affect' that 'cannot be presumed[,] a relation whose evidence and terms are always being contested' (2016, p. 395). This, for Berlant, calls for 'the study of sociality as proximity quite distinct from the possessive attachment languages of belonging' (ibid.). In my ethnographic proximity among queer exiles, I trace alternative narratives and embodiment that challenge injurious aspects of community politics. I show how affinity can form proximity of shared embodiments and experiences an attunement to vulnerability to others rather than (only) by abstracted notions of belonging. By that, I foreground what I do in my ethnography: look into how narratives and valuations of community and belonging shift from homogenous and abstracted community narratives into ones more tuned into a situated, embodied and in touch with the violence inflicted on the excluded and the different.

3   A note on research methodology in the intimate public of Organization A (and beyond).

Organization A (pseudonymized for privacy) is in Helsinki. It takes initiatives in support of queer asylum seekers through their process of asylum-seeking, appeal and legal settlement. Among its activities are free legal counseling, dinners and gatherings, art workshops and recreational activities like yoga and meditation. In the Autumn of 2018, I started my field work at A, which took the form of participant observation and as a volunteer. In the introduction round, at the beginning of the meetings, I introduced my name and 'roles, as a researcher and a volunteer' (interpreting between Arabic, French and English). After the introduction round, we would start the scheduled activities, where I would participate in the activities and interrupt for interpretation when needed. The multiplicity of 'roles' resonated the distance between the 'subjects' and the 'researcher' and the 'translator/interpreter.' However, ethnographic writing is in itself a process of transcribing and interpreting the mundane of the subject into the registers of academic knowledge. Interpretation and translation of words, feelings and narratives is inherent to ethnography and its desire for accessibility to the intimate/personal/mundane of the subject. The *subject* here expands in two senses: *subject* as a research participant and *subject* as a matter of concern. Sharing, interpreting and translating the daily lives reflects the dissolution of formalized encounter into shared intimacy that opens up a shared sense of subjectivity and matters of concern.

Moreover, the field(work) extends beyond the established meetings and events in the Helsinki-based gender-political group at Organization A in a second sense: The relation with the participants went beyond the premises of the fieldwork organization and the coded settings of a fieldwork. Soon after the start of the fieldwork at A, the field branched into the mundane lives of the participants elsewhere in various events and places around the city. I write from differently situated scenarios from lecture rooms and semi-official gatherings and in leisure time. The statements/acts that triggered my story-telling came at sporadic times, and in different situations.

My aim is to locate different narratives in the web of meaning of the collective, a web of meaning that (re)creates the collective itself. It seemed ironic to write of nuance and particularity when the narratives in the field drew on essentialized categories, *the Finns*, *the Europeans*, *the Arabs*, *the Iraqis*, *the gays*, *the straights*, *the asylum-seekers* (to name the most voiced ones). My strategy is not to freeze subjectivity in a totalizing identity, but to tune into the subject's investment in this very imagination of identity in the quest for bearable survival and thriving. Joseph (2002) sees that ethnographic materials in their 'particularity' mobilize 'resistances and contradictions to the totalizing tendencies' (p. xxxvi). In line with that, I highlight instances of contradictions between the very totalizing narratives as well as drives to reimagining (challenging) these narratives.

4 The overwhelming density of identity

My experience in the queer/gender-political milieus I associated with was heavy with static categorization that seemed stubborn to alternative socio-political imaginations and possibilities. I first met Basheer on the day of the Helsinki Pride Parade 2019. I went there with a group of participants from Organization A. One of those participants (who met him long before at the organization) introduced me to Basheer at Kaivopuisto south of Helsinki. The pride march ended there and the parade marchers spread around the sunny park having a picnic-like day. Basheer came from Syria in his mid-twenties and had lived in Helsinki for over four years. He said in our first conversation 'Iraqis are overtly dramatic.' I told him that 'drama queen' was stereotypical to Syrians. 'Yeah, Syrians are indeed *drama queens* but Iraqis are drama queens with a twist of dishonesty,' he explained. Then he added with a twist of advising solemnity, 'Take my word and keep away from both.' The ease in which Basheer threw these injurious comments reflected how commonsensical these have become in the milieus where he and I socialized. Apparently, Basheer himself managed to keep away from neither. He was speaking to a 'Syrian' me at that moment, and I met him through Iraqi friends. In any case, he managed not to be that close or intimate with *us*. He was 'in a relation with a Finn.' Finns, according to Basheer, were cold/distant and they did not 'take initiatives.' His partner, argued Basheer, 'changed' through his long stay in Mexico when he was younger. I got curious about how Basheer's partner changed through his migration experience, while Syrians and Iraqis do not seem to enjoy that mobility in Basheer's view.

Exceptionally to other 'Finns,' his partner, 'took initiative.' I told Basheer that I would also take initiative, and playfully touched his shoulder. He reacted apologetically confused and said that he was not interested. He then added, 'you need someone from the country, someone who knows his way around the country.' By 'you' Basheer seemed to have meant *us – Iraqis and Syrians*. I could not tell if that was Basheer's polite way of turning me down. But the sense of certainty in his argument cut across aspects of moralization and rationalization, affect and strategy. All of these aspects in the case of many participants in my study were mainly shaped by one aspect: the fear and stigma of one's origin or country of departure.

Although many participants lamented the lack of 'social warmth' in Helsinki, Finnish coldness figured as a static and essential characteristic of a 'Finn' rather than a social and political aspect that could reflect xenophobia or racism. More paradoxically, for the participant I mention next, Karol, 'coldness' seemed like a valued aspect if it comes in the package of becoming 'a Finn.' Karol also seemed to call upon disidentification to secure distance from

the homophobia he experienced in his small home town in Russia. I met him two months after his arrival in Finland. He said back then he wanted to be 'as far from [fellow] Russians as possible.' For Karol, 'Russians' were 'narrow-minded' and 'Finns' were 'weird.' But he elaborated, 'the Russian friends I have met here are not homophobic' though it was only in Finland that they became so, Karol was convinced. 'Did they say that?' I asked. 'No, but I know it. I do not know how to explain it to you,' he replied. But he was less sure about why Finns were weird. He had heard before from 'a friend' that a specific kind of rocks in Finland humidify the atmosphere allowing certain mold to grow and produce gasses that affect the brain. These gasses 'change the way one thinks,' said Karol with a laugh. It was unclear how seriously Karol took that story, but his tone grew serious when he confided his wish to become like the Finns, *weird and cold.* 'Maybe then, I could understand them better and not find them weird anymore,' he added. Karol's narratives were more generous than Basheer's. If the latter's narratives did not validate that *Iraqis* and *Syrians* could break with the stigma of being deceitful and undesirably dramatic, Karol saw a possibility of fellow-Russians becoming *non-homophobic* (less Russian), or himself becoming outright *Finnish*, which is disregarding the *cold weirdness* of it, was desired/positively-framed.

Daria Krivonos (2018) sees that people racialized as white Russians mobilize whiteness 'through the use of transnational racialising discourses' (p. 1150) to 'generate alternative value as deserving citizens' (p. 1145). Karol appreciated that he is thought to be Finnish, but what he desired was to become a Finnish citizen. He once said that he had dreamt that he died. This for him happily predicted a new identity: 'the death of a Russian, the birth of a Finn.' I asked whether that could have meant a self whose desire and rebirth does not only/predominantly mean 'becoming a Finn.' But Karol and I understand how unimaginable that birth might be when our selves have pinned their sense of safety and mooring on security endowed or deferred by the state.

In this text, I discuss the rebirth of affiliations and affective mooring that is not coterminous with fixed identities and identifications. Disagreeing with Azzam, Basheer, and Karol, I am optimistic about the birth of selfhood that is not reduced to morphing into politically complacent *cold weirdness,* facilitated by proximity in skin color or paper documents.

5 Stuck between coldness and bad luck

With his protracted paperless status, Azzam, mentioned in the beginning, did not have the convenience of imagining a community that was available to others who secured the authorities' recognition, or still expected that. When we exchanged phone numbers, and in a gesture characteristic of his daily lamentation of this situation, he suggested that I save his name in my phone under Azzam, 'the cornered.' He was cornered in the meager life-space between a community of origin (in Iraq) that othered and abandoned him and another (in Finland) that denied him recognition (a residence permit). If 'the passing by of the feared object also involves moving towards the loved object' (Ahmed, 2004 [2014], p. 68), Azzam's move towards the loved object (Finland) only kept him cornered/trapped at the border of both objects. And if shame, his apparent sociopolitical strategy, entails a strategy to 'expel' oneself from oneself (Ahmed, 2004 [2014] p. 104), his imagination of the desired reduced his political trauma to his belonging and himself. That happens and recurs as discussed above, when the narratives of injurious non-West are pitted against a salvific West condition the queer

subject's admission to the territory and communities of the country itself. But this falls back on a depoliticized subject that also falls back on parallel violence of silencing they experienced in their countries of departure/escape.

Fadi Saleh (2020) sees how in the case of exiled Syrian queers:

> Syrian queer and trans people become intelligible only [...] through the *suffering Syrian gay refugee figure*, whose very naming evokes very specific and now hegemonic narratives of suffering and death. (p. 51)

Of particular interest in Saleh's argument is how in countries of departure the lived discrimination to queerhood was 'less defined by sexuality than by the silence about politics.' In other words, queerphobia was most lived in the disenfranchisement in the public sphere. As Joseph Massad argues, discrete sexuality does not usually invoke the discriminatory experience, but 'legal and police persecution as well as heightened social denigration [arise when] sexual practice becomes a topic of public discourse that transforms it from a practice into an identity' (Massad, 2007, p. 198). This is akin to the pressure to live one's intimacy in one's privacy, the privatization of one's injury. That makes political disenfranchisement of one's intimate subjectivity into a common denominator of the experience of asylum-seekers in countries of escape and in the country of refuge as well.

How to work through that silence towards a political subjectivity that corresponds to community politics that is more aware of the injurious disenfranchisement and trivialization of one's injury and discrimination? This invokes notions of how 'queer' and queerhood as political notions are contestations of the terms of viability and legitimacy. At the same time, queerness reminds that for some the term 'present[s] an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics' (Butler, 1993, p. 19).

Narratives of exclusion or othering (racism) encountered in Finland are not comparable to 'violence we encountered, or may still encounter in Arab communities,' Haifa, one of the participants, once said in a hostile manner. She said that as a dismissive remark towards my research's attempt to tackle the fragility of queer exiles' situation. I do not try to dispute that. In fact, I might not be able to. Indeed, some forms of violence that one might encounter in 'our countries' are incomparable. However, this does not have to cool down or freeze our political imagination and rethinking of the values that made the communities desired (or even incomparable) vis-à-vis the places they escaped in the first place. Rather than resting on a *cold* but less violent understanding of community, my research nudges for recognition of the violence in the desired community, and mobilizes that recognition in (global/multicultural) politics.

6 Enthralled to abandonment

What resonated and echoed in the narratives I have cited so far was the idea that admittance into the desired community or its denial was *the* matter of concern. The state of affairs within the desired community, and the potentiality for reordering the norms to mind othered and silenced vulnerabilities, was subordinated or submerged by the monstrosity of the place the person escaped from.

> Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the 'unrecognizable,' but when a vulnerability *is* recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself. (Butler, 2004, p. 43)

But one does not always afford that change. Change might herald collapse, collapse into irreversible loss or (re)flourishing. Berlant points out the dilemma of how the 'life-organizing status [of an optimistic attachment] can trump interfering with the damage it provokes' (Berlant, 2011, p. 227). Optimism, even when cruel, and enthrallment, even to a violence, could sustain the subject's world and sense of mooring. But cruelty of optimism in an object of desire, for Berlant, is not a matter of mere attachment to, and the hope in that object. Instead, optimistic relations 'become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially' (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). If the aim that draws exiles to the desired community of refuge is safety, as in the sense of community and cherishing belonging that heeds one's vulnerability, is there cruelty in a community that is oblivious to that very vulnerability? I see cruelty in reiterating the 'cold' normative notions of how to survive through morphing into a multicultural or queer(-friendly) Finnish/European body that is hoped to be refuge from the place of origin *but* paradoxically stopping short of minding the myriad of vulnerabilities of a life in exile.

Totalitarian normativity (as in essentialized categorizations and structuring assumptions) can curtail the possibility for alternative, or even parallel, genres or instances of affiliation and alliance; possibilities that do not reiterate the stigma of the stigmatized and invest in the precarity of belonging in hope for redemption. In what follows, I reflect on narratives that challenge the binding imagination of an ideal(ized) form of life that, at best, works strategically to find a sustaining sense of belonging and community while precluding reconsiderations of alternative/fairer norms of recognition and, at worst, keeps charm only in contrast to disastrous alternatives. Haraway (2016) sees that imaginations and embodiments of 'kin' arise from an ongoing and rethinking and considerations of how to live, survive and thrive in ongoing trouble:

> *Kin* is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters (p. 2).

If making oddkin entails 'unexpected collaborations and combinations' (Haraway, 2016, p. 4), I understand making Godkin as the institutionally sanctioned (expected) alliances to which survival has historically or normatively been connected (nation-state, family, and their hegemonic laws). *Oddkin* opens wilder potentialities and requires a rethinking of the ambience, gleaning for new genres of affiliation and recognition/recognizability, and not least, matters of concern. Within precarity, one may come into intense grips with how norms of recognition feel when

> [t]o be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders (Butler, 2004, p. XII).

Perhaps, from reflections on 'the dislocation from [p]rivilege [one is more likely] to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized' (Butler, 2004, p. XII) as well as affinities with whom else recognized by that minimization.

As DasGupta and Dasgupta's and Boussalem's ethnographies show, experiences of violence and racialization in exile nudges the narratives of queer racialized exile into reconsiderations and problematization of normative narratives of safety, belonging and community. These experiences agitate urgent questioning and questions to injurious terms of

queer belonging. In that sense, exile is not departure from a punitive territory to a salvific one, but a departure from the politically barren notion of the *West versus the rest*. In my fieldwork, I too came across such departures.

I met Alba at Organization A a few weeks after she had arrived in Finland. She had left her home in Cameroon after increasing stigmatization because of her sexuality. I kept meeting Alba at organization A. She seemed to grow pensive and silent during her process of application for asylum. In Finland, where she took refuge because she resented the infringement on her intimate life, she found herself in long and recurrent interrogations by state authorities to assess her claim for asylum. This entailed both intrusion on her intimacy and evocation of traumatic memories. What she fled from (intrusion and trauma) revisited in a different guise where she chose to take refuge.

For Alba, going through an interview with representatives of state authorities to assess her claim of asylum was a trauma, both anticipated and in retrospect. That showed in both her presence at and absence from the meetings at A. Alba's anxiety of each encounter with the authorities kept her at guard for a few weeks ahead, and resentful for weeks to follow. She started to be more absent from the meetings and the excuse was 'the asylum interview.' The interviews started to interfere with Alba's readability and enthusiasm for her mundane life. One of the administrators in the organization found it weird that Alba would be absent although the dates of the asylum interview did not clash with the dates of our meetings. He also found it weird that Alba's absence had been too long that it, for him, could not have been explained by the asylum interviews. The others, all of whom had to go through these encounters (including myself), found it strange that the administrator, who was quite updated about the members' lives, would underestimate the burden that these encounters with authorities constitute for queer asylum seekers: encounters where one is questioned about a traumatic past, in fragile hope and anticipation of a meaningful present and future.

'It is hard, I have to go through memories I can neither accurately remember, nor want to remember in the first place,' Alba said. 'Do Finnish LGBT people have to go through such interrogations?' she asked several times, resenting the demoralizing and alienating appeals for protection and community. The question implied that, for her, the issue transcends notions of sexuality into issues of race/nationality/citizenship. What she resented was that the right to protection from violence took different shapes for people according to their national/ country of origin.

This is a traumatic aspect mentioned by Perego (2021) where one of her research participants described it as

> It is like opening a trunk [*como abrir un baúl*] and leaving everything there: your life, your traumas, your privacy. ... Everything at the mercy of those who pass by. (W., Brazilian transgender woman quoted in Perego, 2021, p. 149)

What matters in Alba's statement, as well as in the participants' in Perego's study, was not only the mere questioning of norms of recognition in a desired refuge.

That desire did not make them acquiesce to the state of affairs in the ideal(ized) and desired community, not even to the inconceivability of comparison between a violent and repudiated origin and a less violent Europe/Finland. In other words, they brought the violence in alienating norms of citizenship into view, and question. Out of her sense of alienation, Alba referred to potentialities and/of affinities with others in similar precariousness

and fragility. 'I feel home here, among the others who understand my situation and know how it feels to be at my place (meetings at organization A) – I feel understood and related to – it is like a family.'

Like Alba, Billie, another participant, seemed to grow more appreciative of conceptions of kinship that were more attuned to the affective resonance among community members. Billie, who also frequented the meetings, grew disenchanted with the protracted process of asylum seeking. Meanwhile, he had to keep his balance among agonizing memories and stressful imaginations of the future: the uncertainty of his life in Finland and his worries about his family and friends in Cameroon in political unrest. 'I relate to Alba,' he said at our Christmas-preparation meeting. 'My mind is in different places. I see Christmas around, but I do not feel it inside. I am out of place.' Billie's place of mooring was among the people who were in touch with his experience, 'I can smile here, because I feel like myself. Here, I am among people who walked and are walking the same path and having the same thoughts.'

Viola took a similar path as Billie's and Alba's a few years before they did. She frequented the group meetings years after securing state recognition. She seemed to remember what sustainability and survival in situations of precarity could take. Viola seemed to be of help to the fellow members who missed and desired the settlement she secured. When Viola would see Alba withdrawn and pensive about her visits in the migration office, Viola would make a parody of the situation drawing on her immediate familiarity with the trouble of recurrent, prolonged and unsettling encounters with alienating state bureaucracies.

Viola's parody of the recurrence and protraction of interpellation and the dispiriting proceeding of the asylum bureaucracies was a tragicomedy that empowered and animated Alba from fears and tears to laughs and relief. This seemed to be what Alba needed more than (or as necessarily as) a reassurance in the security endowed by the Godkin. At the same time, Viola's parody seemed to 'revitalize political action, [not] by mapping out the better good life but by valuing political action as the action of not being worn out by politics' (Berlant, 2011, p. 262). Alba's sense of life as suspended and anticipation of hurt seemed to have paralyzed her socio-political subjectivity in grief (of ditched safety) and unexpectedly protracted pain and alienation. Viola seemed to nudge Alba's subjectivity back to animation and make possible, or even instantiate, what Alba was most desirous of, a sense of community to fall back on. For Federici (2020), a 'joyful politics is constructive already in the present' (p. 125), while 'sadness comes when we continually postpone what is to be achieved to a future that we never see coming, and as a result we are blind to what is possible in the present' (p. 126).

I see that Viola brought Alba to reclaim her present and recover, as a more-or-less mobilized social and political subject. Moreover, I see the significance of joy not only in the life sustaining (inter)corporeality, and not only as cited above by Berlant as 'not being worn out by politics' but also in recasting resistance and the momentum of non violence. That is non-violence that is not acquiescent or necessarily emerging from 'a pacific or calm part of the soul' (p. 21) but 'militant pacifism' (p. 203), 'radical persistence' (p. 204) and affirmation of 'lives as valuable' (p. 28), and in this case livable despite their constriction (Butler, 2020).

Lisa Bhungalia (2020) shows how laughter and humor, especially in cases of subjugation, become a 'popular vehicle for social commentary and critique' (p. 392), as well as a 'refusal to normalize conditions of subjugation' (p. 389), where the subjugated refuse to recognize the repressive power's '*ultimate* authority over them' (p. 390). It was necessary to see such political commentary in the sphere of Organization A, taking into consideration the

ubiquity of subjugating narratives that drill hegemonic narratives to the point of jeopardizing any other narratives. This affective connection also met the emergent need for warming up narratives of belonging and community to questioning what it means to belong and what community is about.

7 Concluding remarks

In this text, I do not equate warmth with pure 'joy' or positivity. To the disagreement with Azzam, Basheer and Karol, I do not see that coldness and weirdness of Finnish people, if true at all, is *the* matter of concern. Rather, I see that narratives that ossify difference and justify and equate injurious politics and xenophobia with essentialized identity as the issue and the trouble. Warmth, as I see it, is the attunement to the troubling and troubled effects of community building and communal relations. In other words, I foreground notions of warming up our political sensorium to reconsider the injurious aspects of politics of belonging, and to mobilize that in the recreation rather than ossification of community boundaries.

That is collectivity and pluralism that rather than evades the 'negativity' of the social field, favors 'an affectively ambivalent engagement with the inherent politics of critique in a plural and uneven world' (Ruez & Cockayne, 2021, p. 88). Ruez and Cockayne (2021) argue for affirmation not as positivity but as 'a mode of thinking otherwise[,] accounting for difference in its myriad forms, and insisting that transformation is possible' (ibid, p. 94).

In the mundane of my ethnography, I foregrounded how hope in Godkin (institutionalized, normative and state-sanctioned forms for admittance and belonging) has become an instance of cruel optimism. But that is when striking the deal with Godkin can trump alternatives and potentialities of making oddkin. In this sense, *oddkin* keeps open to possibilities and potentiality of community that provides instantaneous and urgent belonging and affective resonance. Oddkin does not only see the political subject through fragile times but also holds (less cruel) promises of (less cruel) alternative political visions. It animates community matters from static narratives of liminality (narratives that often numb the excluded with a deferred promise of inclusion) to an instantaneous, ongoing and embodied work of community and kin.

Acknowledgments

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TATSIANA SHCHURKO*

From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking protests in Belarus through a transnational feminist perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the lack of solidarity between the Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. and the anti-authoritarian uprising in Belarus in 2020. Specifically, I explore how distant geographies and feminist communities can relate to each other and thus challenge the rise of right-wing conservatism, white supremacy, and neoliberal authoritarianism. This article relies on auto-ethnography and the exploration of public media, political essays, and scholarly contributions discussing the meanings of the BLM and Belarusian protests. Through critical self-reflection and by deploying the concepts of 'exile' and 'transnational feminist solidarity,' this article suggests a possibility for alternative transnational feminist connections attentive to the complexities of global power relations and uneven east/west interconnections. Rethinking the current possibilities for solidarities may lead to seeing how the uprising in Belarus and the BLM protests have points of connection on the grounds of state-sanctioned violence, neoliberal enclosures, suppression of political dissent, and their racialized/colonial roots. However, forging transnational solidarities also requires a certain work of reflection on how political protests may uphold global racial/colonial logic and overshadow racial violence. Therefore, in this article, I foreground how post-Soviet vulnerability may help disrupt the status quo or the privilege of whiteness instead of reinforcing it.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; Belarus; transnational feminist solidarity; exile; racial logics

1 Introduction

During the Summer of 2020, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 public health and economic crises, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the U.S. and anti-authoritarian uprisings in post-Soviet Belarus erupted. These moments of political dissent are, in many *foundational* ways, incomparable. However, as a Belarusian citizen who happened to be in the U.S. at that time, I witnessed and experienced these public outcries simultaneously. To me, both these protests made apparent urgent transnational connections and the need for radical care and feminist solidarity. Yet, there were no tangible signs of solidarity between these protests.

In fact, many in Eastern Europe, including Belarus, expressed hostility and disdain toward the BLM protests. In the U.S., public commentaries often positively portrayed the Belarusian uprisings as peaceful and democratic making them distinct from the 'unruly' BLM protests. Both these reactions rely on the logic rooted in anti-Blackness and its transnational circuits in pro-democracy mobilizations.

This disjuncture between political dissent in the U.S. and Belarus is a problem this article aims to understand. I examine how distant geographies and communities can relate to each other and thus challenge the rise of right-wing conservatism, white supremacy, and neoliberal authoritarianism. Looking at the current examples of political dissent in the U.S. and Belarus, I inquire how (if at all) transnational feminists in the U.S. can forge the connection between them, and how or if feminists in Eastern Europe also can articulate the solidarity link. Drawing on my experience of queer feminist activism in Belarus, this article also relies on the exploration of public media, political essays, and scholarly contributions discussing the meanings of the BLM and Belarusian protests. While I participated in the BLM protests in person thus also grounding my analysis in participant observation, I could not take part in the protests in Belarus. However, a significant role in my critical reflection also belongs to activists from Belarus and other post-Soviet spaces whom I contacted online to discuss the questions of political dissent and feminist solidarity. By analyzing diverse sources and foregrounding critical (self-)reflection, this article intends to suggest a possibility for alternative transnational feminist solidarities attentive to the complexities of global power relations and uneven east/west interconnections.

This article approaches solidarity as a praxis that refers to experiences of coming together, staying close, longing, caring, and making collective claims on the future that offer other possibilities for organizing and political protest against racism, imperialism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal authoritarianism. I begin this article with a discussion of the analytical potential that the concept of 'exile' may have for understanding and approaching political dissent in Belarus and its possible solidarities. The sections that follow zoom in on the protests and how they relate to each other. First, I analyze the BLM protests and situate them within the context of Eastern Europe and specifically Belarus. Second, I explore the Belarusian protests and the meanings that diverse actors ascribe to them. Finally, I develop the connections of possible solidarity between the two moments of political dissent, discussing the limits of such solidarity and the disjuncture between the protests. This discussion leads me to inquire about the grounds and ethics of transnational feminist solidarity.

2 Thinking from exile

I approach the BLM and Belarusian protests from the perspective of someone who is part of a post-socialist queer feminist political diaspora. This perspective is informed by the conditions of authoritarianism, heteropatriarchal politics, and the attendant anti-LGBTQ politics in Belarus that have created different forms of political suppression and prompted exile across national and sexual boundaries. Since the second half of the 1990s, the constant suppression of political dissent in Belarus, as well as growing economic challenges, has driven more and more people to flee the country, searching for safer spaces or better possibilities to study and work. For me, moving from the east to the west became a way to access knowledge while struggling with the consequences of activist burnout. However, exile means not

only the crossing of the physical borders but also making exilic spaces within the country in an attempt to find communities and areas free from state surveillance and control (if that is possible at all). Thus, exile refers not only to the experiences of the forced border crossing but a persistent condition of non-belonging, political dispossession, mental isolation, and psychological distress. In this sense, exile encompasses social and cultural dislocation when daily life-worlds are greatly disturbed, regulated, and suppressed.

Yet, while exile emerges as a painful condition entailing loss of ground and communal belonging, the experience of physical and mental border-crossing, uprooting, and displacement has the potential to develop solidarity ethics attentive to difference and global power relations. For example, my mobility as a queer feminist activist and scholar from post-Soviet Eastern Europe spurred me to question how power, privilege, oppression, and knowledge production are distributed in the region and globally. Growing up in Belarus, I understand the stigma of othering that many Eastern Europeans experience and how it affects knowledge production and forging solidarities. At the same time, in addition to the authoritarian push, the gravitational pull of the West and U.S. empires draws diasporas into the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. I consider it essential to reflect on how Eastern Europe and its populations are implicated (though in uneven ways) in the hegemonic systems, namely the projects of whiteness and liberal capitalist heteropatriarchy (Koobak et al., 2021; Pagulich, 2020). Therefore, my transnational path, pertaining to different forms of exile, the feelings of burnout, and self-reflection of multiple complicities, opened up the possibility to connect my story as a queer feminist scholar and activist from the post-Soviet space to radical feminist struggles in the U.S. to suggest a possibility for alternative east/west bridges. Acknowledging the vulnerabilities that I have as a queer person from Belarus, along with white privileges I hold in the U.S., I suggest such solidarity that opposes whiteness and challenges racial/sexual order. As 'for Eastern European immigrants, the issue is less about whether, how, or at what point we become categorized as white Americans and more about how we relate to whiteness, and what it takes to recognize whiteness as an identity based on the systematic discrimination of others' (Nachescu, 2019, p. 197).

Participating in the BLM protests as a witness and ally, as well as following the protests in Belarus from a distance while engaging with activists, taught me about the necessity to center marginalized struggles and forge transnational connections that are important for communal survival against global geopolitics. Perceiving these protests through the lens of an anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist East European queer feminist, I sensed the necessity to see how global injustices unevenly interconnect the regions while overshadowing the possibility for radical solidarities. Overburdened with Cold War dichotomies, we are pushed not to see the differences internal to either the west or the east. Many post-Soviet anti-colonial gestures to disrupt Russian and western dominance often disregard radical movements that resist and challenge global coloniality while coming from the geographic west. Yet, for many post-Soviet subjects, these movements are often overshadowed by the operations of a hegemonic imperial totality, within which the subaltern struggles are a part but not a critique of this totality. Similarly, many radical struggles in the west or the global south neglect difference within the former Soviet spaces and the complexity of intra-imperial formations. The former Soviet spaces are often seen as predominantly white, striving for democracy or enchanting nationalist aspirations. Multiple Soviet and post-Soviet experiences remain invisible. Trying to overcome this binary, I imagine the connection between the mutually overlooked communities to inquire if there is any possibility for a relationship.

I suggest that thinking relationally against comparison or analogy, as well as romanticization or nostalgia attached to either the Soviet project or western liberal democracy, has potential for community engagement based on a shared understanding of collective survival under conditions of global coloniality. I approach solidarity not as a structure but as a praxis that contains relational ethos.

Scholars writing about exile from the point of view of diverse migrant communities emphasize its role in forming flexible identities and subjectivities and seeing the broader implications of regional issues for the global configuration of power. Thus, for instance, Ball notes that despite the uprooting and dislocations experienced by many Palestinians, 'diasporic space has also emerged as a site of creative energy from which many authors and filmmakers have sought both to affirm structures of belonging, and to engender new, imaginative forms of community' (Ball, 2012, p. 131). This vision follows Ahmed's idea that exile may facilitate the emergence of the 'community of strangers' that, drawing on the experience of loss and displacement, does not aim to replace the lost home but mobilize communities to forge connections. Specifically, Ahmed notes, 'Alliances then are not guaranteed by the pre-existing form of a social group or community, whether that form is understood as commonality (a community of friends) or un-commonality (a community of strangers). Collectivities are formed through the *very work that has to be done* in order to get closer to other others' (Ahmed, 2000, p. 17).

Thus, the experience of exile encompasses the movement across physical and cultural borders in order to forge connections by sharing political commitments and caring for one another. This vision not only challenges such solidified categories as a home, nation, belonging but also reflects the complexity of the movement itself. To move or travel/cross the boundaries does not necessarily entail only movement across the physical borders. In her book *Frictions*, Tsing focuses on two entangled meanings of the word 'to move': as a movement across physical borders and a move 'to open one's heart' for a 'commitment of love' (Tsing, 2005, p. 213). The scholar offers to think about movement as mobility when '[w]e see the landscapes we know in relation to other places' and as mobilization when 'we are moved to change how we think at both local and global scales' (Tsing, 2005, pp. 213–214). Specifically, Tsing sees political activists' travels as moments of mobility against the constraints of global power and as moments of mobilization interconnected with forging relations and transforming ways of thinking and being. Similarly, I suggest that the experience of exile may lay the ground for developing compassion, care, and radical openness to other struggles for social justice while securing the connection to local place-based claims. Notably, against those movements that 'glorified movement in the spread of liberalism,' Tsing foregrounds transnational collaborations inspired by communal survival and social justice against the violence of global capitalism.

Importantly, following Tsing, I also consider that alternative forms of solidarity should not rely on the language of liberal modernity or secure homogeneity but use the difference as 'a pre-established frame for connection and an unexpected medium in which connection must find local purchase' (Tsing, 2005, p. 246). My focus on forging solidarities across differences also relies on how Mohanty defines solidarity as a process of 'mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests' in which '[d]iversity and difference are central values' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). The scholar notes, 'Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). As such, transnational feminist

solidarity becomes 'the most principled way to cross borders—to decolonize knowledge and practice anticapitalist critique' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). Mohanty also emphasizes that solidarity should resist 'the Eurocentric assumptions of Western feminist practice and its too easy claiming of sisterhood across national, cultural, and racial differences' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 12). Instead, Mohanty suggests 'antiracist feminist engagement with the multiple effects of globalization and on building solidarities' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 12). Likewise, I suggest that thinking from exile and employing own fragilities may entail transnational feminist solidarity against right-wing conservatism, white supremacy, and neoliberal authoritarianism.

The feelings of vulnerability, precarity, and estrangement that many in Belarus experience may open up new political leeway to engage with the transnational geographies of injustice to overcome epistemic and political limits imposed by the post-Cold War east/west dichotomy. Thus, for example, Antonina Stebur, a curator and researcher from Belarus, writes: 'When fragile bodies are excluded not only from political life but from life in general are endangered, and beaten, made to worry about loved ones, forced to illegally cross borders – then networks of support and solidarity built on mutual recognition of our fragility become an important instrument of resistance. This, I believe, can lay the foundation and provide the potential for a new understanding of power -– not as privilege and violence, but as a function of care for the weak and the excluded' (Stebur, 2021, para 19; see also Kavaleuskaya, 2021; Shparaga, 2021). Similarly, I foreground how the reflection of one's own vulnerability and insecurity may prompt seeing the process of healing, not in terms of repairing, fixing, or returning but through forging new forms of belonging, political kinship, and accountable interrelation.

This take on fragility and estrangement also allows us to challenge macro-narratives about the political protest that focus solely on leaders and political institutions and occlude embodied experiences and multiple forms of dissent that emerge in response to state violence. The shift to other arenas of political protest, namely daily life-worlds of communities and micro-practices of relation, crafts new understandings of dissent and thus has the potential to reconfigure the relationship between different geographies and subaltern struggles. In this sense, I share Mohanty's commitment to 'make clear that cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 223). Mohanty emphasizes the need 'to return to the radical feminist politics of the contextual as both local and structural and to the collectivity that is being defined out of existence by privatization projects' and 'to recommit to insurgent knowledges and the complex politics of antiracist, anti-imperialist feminisms' (Mohanty, 2013, p. 987).

Therefore, I suggest that the rise and persistence of nationalist ideologies, state-sanctioned injustices, and post-Soviet vulnerabilities, affected by operations of western and Russian imperialisms and global capitalism historically and now, could have laid the ground for solidarity between the Belarusian uprising and the BLM protests. Rethinking the current possibilities for solidarities between distant geographies anew or otherwise may lead to seeing how the uprising in Belarus and the BLM protests have points of connection on the grounds of state-sanctioned violence, neoliberal enclosures, suppression of political dissent, and their racialized/colonial roots. While pointing to different productive convergences, I also suggest that these 'new' solidarities require a certain work of reflection on how, for instance, the Belarusian uprising upholds global racial/colonial logic or solidarity with the BLM movement overshadows racial violence in the local context. For example, as some admit, it was easier for many European politicians and media to express solidarity with the

BLM protests in the U.S. than to address the persistence of racial violence in Europe (Rorke, 2020). Thus, forging such solidarity links could have helped cross the east/west binary and thus tackle the Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism that contribute to the othering of Eastern Europe and the negation of racialized lives in the post-Soviet region. Specifically, the east/west binary precludes seeing how the predominant ethno-nationalist projects in Eastern Europe cultivated by far-right conservative groups and authoritarian governments while fashioning themselves against the liberated west, in fact, find a lot in common with similar groups in the U.S. (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). Within this context, I see white supremacy as a planetary project with its regional and local manifestations, interconnected with the structures of white supremacy while the political imaginaries stay limited (Böröcz, 2021; Mills, 2015). The solidification of far-right politics and authoritarian governments across Eastern Europe has fueled racist anxieties and coincided with the rise of incarceration and criminalization of non-white communities, while neoliberal-right governments endorse politics that leave many in dire situations on the outskirts of survival. This trend is similar to neoliberal politics and white supremacist police violence in the U.S.

Within this context, to forge the solidarity link between the Belarusian uprising and the BLM protests requires seeing the complexity of post-socialist times-spaces and acknowledging the multiplicity of political practices in the former Soviet region and beyond. This effort involves a feminist positionality that challenges the othering by the west, as well as the desire of Eastern Europe to fit in, that forecloses the possibilities for transformative east/west solidarities. Body fragility and precarities which many in Belarus experience daily could have been the point to think about the state violence, not as a manifestation of the local but a part of a global. Suppression of dissent in Belarus with the usage of technologies of torture and surveillance is nothing new to many parts of the world, including the U.S. Authoritarianism as a part of neoliberal transformations shares many similarities across geographies. Experiences of violence, control, and forced exile produce avenues for relations. I suggest that focusing on the multilayered nature of the political struggle, as informed by continuing violence, lays the ground for forging radical connections, and generates genuine care about injustice (rather than simply the desire to be normalized).

In other words, solidarity as care for the other may emerge only based on the robust reflection of global power dynamics and transnational operations of racial/sexual difference. Seeing one's own vulnerabilities along with complicities in power relations is not an easy task. For instance, Roediger suggests that the concept of solidarity implies a certain 'uneasiness' as it requires a reflection on 'what and whom solidarity leaves out and how it is premised on those leavings out, [...] how solidarity works across differences in kinds and degrees of oppression, and [...] if the presence of solidarity is the logic of things or if for long periods it may be a treasured exception' (Roediger, 2016, p. 224). Therefore, in this article, I foreground how post-Soviet vulnerability may help disrupt the status quo or the privilege of whiteness instead of reinforcing it while also attempting to comprehend why the solidarity link between the BLM and Belarusian protests could not have happened.

3 Black Lives Matter

Throughout the Summer of 2020, the Black Livers Matter (BLM) protests unfolded in the U.S. following the police murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and many other Black people.

However, the severe police violence is a part of long-lasting histories of criminalization, incarceration, and disenfranchisement of Black communities. The 2020 protests were the most recent mobilizations of the Black Lives Matter movement, a global movement launched in 2013 by three Black women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. By addressing the anti-Black violence caused by white supremacy, racial capitalism, and state authorities in the local context, they connected local concerns to global ones pointing out the necessity of transnational visions of freedom. Despite the severe weakening of the left and the disillusionment in state socialism since the 1970s, escalated by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the BLM movement builds on liberation struggles of the past, exemplified in Black Internationalism, the Black Power movement, anti-apartheid struggles, and the Tricontinental movement, all of which fought against state violence, global capitalism, imperialism, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy (Blain, 2020; Mahler, 2018). By drawing on the legacies of these struggles, the BLM movement sparked a global response and forged diverse networks of solidarity within the U.S. and abroad. While some participants of the BLM may not be in exile, the lingering afterlives of historical colonialism and slavery bring an echo of exile and diasporic consciousness into the movement, thus producing different instances of non-belonging as a ground for effective connections and solidarities. Specifically, during Summer 2020, the BLM protests reignited conversations on how systemic racism, colonial violence, economic injustice, state-sanctioned police brutality, and disregard for racialized women and queer people operate not only in the U.S. but worldwide.

Yet the BLM protesters confronted a lot of violence, suppression, and backlash from white supremacist law enforcement, far-right militant groups, and conservative media in the U.S. Many opponents of the protestors employed Cold War-era rhetoric, fueling fears about communist infiltration and thus continuing the long-lasting practice of associating Black struggles with communism and 'un-Americanism' to suppress dissent and evacuate radicalism from political movements (Heideman, 2020; Onion, 2019). In addition, many public and official commentaries in the U.S. positively portrayed the Belarusian uprising as peaceful and democratic compared to the 'unruly' and 'anti-social' BLM protests. While expressing support for democratic activism in Belarus, U.S. officials also authorized the surveillance and suppression of BLM protesters who opposed police brutality and racial and sexual oppressions.

This differential attitude reflects the antinomy of liberal humanism that 'translates the world through an economy of affirmation and forgetting within a regime of desiring freedom' (Lowe, 2015, p. 39). Privileging the Belarusian uprising in favor of the BLM protests contributes to the racialization of freedom when claims for freedom are supported due to the protesters' alleged proximity to Europeanness/whiteness (Hooker, 2009). This asymmetrical attitude also builds on the homogeneous perception of Eastern Europe as predominantly white with a trajectory more akin to the first world. Such perception somewhat contributes to why U.S. transnational feminists and feminists of color also do not see points of connection. Consequently, it demonstrates how the post-Soviet region can be homogenized and employed to support the status quo of white supremacy and racial capitalism. We can see similar processes in the recent U.S. leftist commentaries on the Russian war against Ukraine that reproduce the monolithic and homogeneous perceptions of whiteness and imperialism. These perceptions prevent many U.S. activists from grasping not only authoritarian repression within Belarus but also multiple entangled imperialisms and the power relationship between Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (Artiukh, 2022a; Artiukh, 2022b; Bilous, 2022; Brom, 2022; Dutchak, 2022; Shchurko, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, many in Russian-speaking communities both in the U.S. and post-Soviet Eastern Europe and Eurasia also expressed hostility and disdain toward the BLM protests. Their negative commentaries seem to support the status quo as the U.S. has maintained it, while the BLM movement challenges the foundations of global capitalism, white supremacy, and the suppression of dissent. The BLM movement strives to center women, Black immigrants, queer folks, incarcerated people, transgender, and the disabled (Garza, 2014; Issar, 2021; Ransby, 2018). The negative commentaries may also reflect the dissatisfaction with how the BLM protests challenge the post-Soviet subjects' long-lasting idealization of Euro-American liberal democracy and the market economy. The levels of hostility expressed by many post-Soviet subjects sparked various public discussions amongst U.S.-based scholars about racism and colonialism within the former Soviet region. Yet, these topics did not provoke substantial public debates within the region itself due to a wide-held assurance that structural racism does not exist in the former Soviet area and that all post-Soviet subjects have equally experienced both the violence of the Soviet state and the emancipatory power of state socialism. Unsurprisingly, we can see the continuations of racist comments in other instances as well.

For instance, in November 2021, Belarusian authorities facilitated the flying in of migrants to threaten the west with refugees. While denouncing the authoritarian regime and police violence, many in Belarus also expressed hostility toward migrants from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Cameroon and even suggested that police violence should be directed not toward peaceful Belarusian protestors but toward migrants. While the authorities manipulated the EU's racial anxieties and fashioned Belarus as a protector of Europe from migration influx, Poland and Lithuania increased border patrols to prevent the migrants from crossing into the EU. Allegedly, the abuse of migrants by Belarusian authorities could have become a point of solidarity. Yet, in fact, it revealed the convergences between racial anxieties expressed by the protestors, the authorities, and the EU. Complex geopolitics and global capitalism link distant geographies while violent logics travel across borders finding sympathy among communities aiming to construct not the communities of care but structures of entitlement.

The revival of the east/west dichotomy with its progressive narratives after the collapse of the Soviet Union influenced the trajectories of transnational solidarities. This revival allowed the U.S. to posit itself as a beacon of freedom and democracy in comparison to totalitarian state socialism, thus occluding how 'the systematic oppressions [have been] built constitutionally into the creed of American freedom, and at the root of its democracy' (Baldwin, 2016, p. 178). Within this context, the BLM protests disrupt the displacement of systemic oppression and anti-Black racism, confronting white supremacist violence and problematizing the erasures of radicalism from the political protest. In Eastern Europe, the east/west binary feeds 'return to Europe' sentiments that perpetuate the centrality of Eurocentrism, fuel the rise of nationalist and right-wing groups, and solidify capitalism and liberal modernity as the only viable options (Atanasoski, 2013). For example, the BLM protests sparked discussions in Europe, including in Eastern Europe, of why racial mobs, hate crimes, and police violence resulting in Romani deaths are mostly absent from mainstream media and agendas of civil rights organizations (Baltzar, 2021). Eastern Europe often claims its ethnic homogeneity and 'racelessness,' thus disregarding the operations of racial logics within the region and rejecting the necessity for solidarity with the BLM movement (Warsza & Sowa, 2022).

These post-Cold War geopolitics offer a limited repertoire for the post-Soviet region to be in relation to the world. Even anti-imperialist and anti-colonial feminist narratives in Eastern Europe, while holding a largely negative political view of western and Russian

dominance, still do not see reasons to support those who dissent from the U.S. government, thus disputing the very possibility of transnational solidarity with radical movements in the geographic west as well as the global south, or in non-European parts of the former Soviet region. To this point, I may recollect Tlostanova's apt note that the juxtaposition of the post-colonial and the post-socialist 'is too often done not for the sake of solidarity with the global south, but for negotiating a better place in the modern/colonial human hierarchy and in order to not be seen as post-colonial others' (Tlostanova, 2018, p. 23). While illuminating the violent histories of different imperialist formations that operated over Eastern European territories, including the Soviet Union, many post-Soviet Eastern European feminists adopt post-colonial rhetoric along with 'a rather jealous attitude to anyone who attempts to take their place as the main 20th century victims of communism' (Tlostanova, 2018, pp. 23–24). In other words, Eastern European feminist activists may articulate an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist agenda to claim subaltern status while neglecting the geographies of race and the global power dynamics that are instrumental to post-Soviet nationalisms. Focusing primarily on the othering of Eastern European/Slavic subjects and unequal relations vis-à-vis the west negates any robust engagement with the question of who speaks for the post-Soviet subject and displaces non-Eurocentric socialist practices and racialized hierarchies within the post-Soviet region. Therefore, Tlostanova underlines that true solidarity may happen only along with 'refusing to compete for a higher place in modernity, or for a tag of a victim' (Tlostanova, 2018, p. 23).

The negligence toward the BLM protests also contributes to the erasure of past moments of radical interconnectedness between Eastern Europe and Black struggles (Böröcz & Paraszka, 2020). One can think about Eastern Europe's active participation in the worldwide solidarity campaign 'Free Angela Davis, and All Political Prisoners!' in the 1970s (Roman, 2018). Or about Black activists' involvement in the Communist International and their travels to the Soviet Union in the 1920–30s (Baldwin, 2002). Furthermore, some scholars elucidate feminist solidarity links during the Cold War between East European women from state socialist countries and women in the Global South (Gradskova, 2021). However, while these past links can become reference points for creating radical solidarities today, I contend that the revival of these solidarities also requires new kinds of work and reflection. Drawing on the past legacies of transnational solidarities, Todorova proposes that to develop 'successful transnational feminist collaborations, collectives, and political alliances between post-socialist women in central and southeastern Europe and Black women and other women of color in the Global North and South will require critical conversations about how race and racial globality have constituted socialist and post-socialist women and subjects' (Todorova, 2018, p. 136). While sharing this idea and considering how many post-Soviet subjects have put proximity to whiteness over solidarity with Black people, I also aim to foreground how the Belarusian uprising produces alternative formulations of political dissent.

4 Belarusian protests

During the Summer of 2020, there was a surge in protests in Belarus against the authoritarian government that has been in power for 26 years since 1994. This uprising, triggered by the falsified presidential election of 9 August 2020, has unfolded as a continuation of a long-lasting public outcry against falsified elections, oppressive and unjust laws, economic

crises, and numerous acts of repression. Importantly, these protests were also sparked by the inability of the current government to handle the COVID-19 public health crisis. While the government refused to recognize the existence of the pandemic, there were grassroots organizations and community initiatives that consolidated material and human resources to support health workers. The 2020 protests faced an unprecedented level of state and police violence.

Demanding the complete overthrow of the paternalistic authoritarian regime, new and fair elections, the release of all political prisoners, and accountability of the state actors for the perpetrated violence, protesters also called for solidarity from the international community. What interests me is how this call for solidarity gets situated within transnational discussions about the post-socialist condition. From the one side, the context of the 2020 protests encompasses the desires of many in Belarus to be accepted into western liberal and capitalist modernity. The violence perpetrated by the state is seen as incongruous to European democratic values and thus as a remnant of some old Soviet-style regime. However, from the other side, there were alternative practices of political dissent that the dominant post-Cold War narratives had overshadowed.

The east/west dichotomy developed initially by the European Enlightenment (Wolff, 1994) and then reworked by the Cold War through the opposition between communism and capitalism contributes to the vision of the post-Soviet as a standstill time-space, contaminated by the socialist past but striving to 'return to' or 'catch-up with' western colonial temporality. Within this narrative Belarus becomes 'the last dictatorship in Europe' (Ackermann et al., 2017). This discourse creates some myths about Belarus as an aberration to liberal democracy, some still 'living [Soviet] dead' in the present, notwithstanding the purposes for which this discourse is employed. Blagojević and Timotijević note that the discourse of return to Europe grows not only 'from the inside, recreating the position of the one that failed, one that is lost in translation, one that strayed in its evolution' but also from 'the outside, performing its colonial gaze into the East' (Blagojević & Timotijević, 2018, p. 73). The post-Cold War geopolitical imaginary produces the former Soviet spaces as amorphous and homogeneous semi-alterities ascending to whiteness through the promise of liberal modernity and racial capitalism. This leads many transnational experts, even on the left, to conclude that Belarus's political dissent is only a linear movement along the infamous binary from communism to capitalism.

For instance, Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian-born Marxist philosopher and cultural critic, argues that the protests in Belarus aim 'to align the country with Western liberal-capitalist values' (Žižek, 2020, para 3). Žižek does not consider any other possibility beyond the infamous post-Cold War 'transit' narrative, according to which Belarusian protests are nothing else but an effort of 'freedom-loving masses' to overthrow 'the last dictator in Europe' following the 'joyful enthusiasm for democracy' (Žižek, 2020, paras 3–4). Furthermore, he states that although it is crucial to support the protests against 'an eccentric authoritarian leader,' it is also necessary to recognize that Lukashenko achieved 'economic stability, safety and order, with a per capita income much higher than that in the "free" Ukraine, and distributed in a much more egalitarian way' (Žižek, 2020, para 4). Therefore, Žižek suggests that while the protestors try to 'catch-up' and align with 'Western liberal-capitalist values,' it has been Lukashenko who has 'offered a safe haven against the ravages of wild liberal capitalism (corruption, economic and social uncertainty)' (Žižek, 2020, para 5). Pointing to the rise of nationalism in Ukraine and Hungary, Žižek reinstates, though critically, only one unfortunate post-state socialist path to a future characterized by the rise of nationalism and neoliberal restructuring.

Even though variations of the 'return to Europe' narrative may predominate the public discussions about the Belarusian protests, Žižek's statements ignore the diversity of local experiences and overshadow how authoritarianism is an outcome of neoliberalism. Seeing Belarus as an exceptional case of authoritarianism within the liberal west, Žižek also misconstrues the situation in the country and misreads how the current form of authoritarian governance, distinctly neoliberal and capitalistic, masks its practices through empty declarations and falsified statistics (Vozyanov, 2021). Populist Lukashenko formally declares continuity between the Soviet command economy and his economic policy but, in fact, allows for many neoliberal transformations to happen in the country and facilitates the accumulation of wealth and capital in the hands of a few individuals that lead to state privatization, precarization of the labor force, and the devastation of the social services as state support for education and health care wither (Artiukh, 2020; Shchurko, 2018).

In this thinking, I share Zhang and Ong's vision of neoliberalism as 'as a set of malleable technologies and practices that can be adopted and reconfigured by different political regimes in an effort to suit their specific social conditions without radically altering the overall political apparatus' (Zhang, 2012, p. 660). Scholars explain that 'rather than asking whether China or Vietnam is becoming neoliberal or not, we might be better served by asking how Chinese or Vietnamese political and social actors make use of neoliberal ideas and techniques for their own ends' (Zhang, 2012, p. 660). Specifically, they show how 'privatizing norms and practices proliferate in symbiosis with the maintenance of authoritarian rule' (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 4). The fact that the Soviet command economy was not detached from the capitalist accumulation and contributed to global capitalism complicates this picture even more (James et al., 1986). Specifically, many features familiar to capitalism, such as centrism, state control, intense industrialization, progressivism, heteropatriarchy, and the politics of ethnic difference, riddled the state socialist project (Tlostanova, 2010).

Those post-Soviet transformations that have taken place in Belarus, where imperial subjection, state socialist legacies, and global capitalism traverse, give rise to multiple experiences and practices that do not neatly fit the ultimate antagonism between capitalism and socialism, often understood as homogeneous clear-cut singularities attached to specific geographies. The negligence that Žižek demonstrates in relation to the post-Soviet transformations in Belarus correlates with the post-Cold War progressive temporality, where the only desire that the post-Soviet dissent can have is a return to European liberal democracy. By contradicting mass political protests as inevitably liberal with Lukashenko's model of governance as the anti-capitalist project, Žižek narrows down socialist imaginaries and possibilities for political protest. Žižek also envisions dissent through the prism of macro politics, focusing on institutions and political leaders and denying the agency of local communities struggling for a livable future against state violence. This approach also relegates all local life-worlds solely to the question of political apparatus while ignoring the transnational operations of post-socialist capitalism. As Olia Sosnovskaya, an artist and researcher from Belarus, notes, 'the notion of a "catch-up revolution" – one which catches up to capitalism – [...] is commonly used to patronize and devalue political uprisings outside the West [...]' (Sosnovskaya, 2020, para 8).

The protests in Belarus included grassroots organizing that promptly developed new practices of political dissent and networks of mutual aid and solidarity to support local communities. As many scholars, activists, and artists from Belarus underline, the current protests, drawing inspiration from local histories of resistance against fascism, imperialism,

and authoritarianism, are decentered, horizontal, localized, spontaneous, and agile. Protesters generate new forms and structures of organizing and cultivate mutual aid, community care, and networks of solidarity (Koziura & Bystryk, 2020). Focusing on these features of the current protests, local actors attempt to challenge habitual modes of thinking about post-Soviet Belarus and privilege the open-ended temporality of these protests. Similarly, as the art curator and researcher Antonina Stebur and the artist and writer Alexei Tolstov emphasize, 'in the situation of the proposed choice 'between two evils' – the implementation of authoritarianism and the establishment of neoliberalism – we want to articulate the very possibility of an alternative model, which is now being born from a technical basis and new alternative infrastructures. It is about the realization of a utopian, but possible future horizon' (Stebur & Tolstov, 2020, para 8).

This approach strives not to diagnose the possible 'failures' of the movement but see the important differences within that allow for new visions of the politics to emerge and develop. Alas, one can notice the investments of many protesters into a liberal democracy, the desire of conservative groups to restore a patriarchal, national, and Christian community pertaining to 'proper' Europeanness, and/or a 'weaknesses' or 'side-lining' of unions and leftist groups in the protests (Shmidt & Solomatina, 2021; Zaika, 2021). However, there are also important legacies and practices that speak to the heterogeneity of the protests. For example, the roots of the Belarusian uprising, among other things, lie in post-Soviet histories of grassroots organizing where women and gender non-conforming people played a pivotal role. Under conditions of severe economic, health, and political crises, women's and queer people's long-lasting experience in grassroots organizing and mutual aid in ecological, human rights, LGBTQ, women's, and feminist organizations mobilized people for political protest and facilitated the creation of multiple grassroots initiatives (Fürst et al., 2020). Nowadays, under conditions of severe oppression, activists create underground networks and spaces of support and mutual aid that strive to escape state surveillance.

I suggest that focusing on the multilayered nature of the political struggle, informed by the violent histories that continue into the present, apparently generates sensibilities to really care about injustice (than just the desire to be normalized) and lays the ground for forging radical connections. Thus, several events and publications attempted to put the Belarusian uprising in relation to the past and current insurgencies in Serbia, Turkey, Rojava, Mexico, Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Thailand, Nigeria, Armenia, Catalonia, Chile, France, India, Iraq, Lebanon, and the United States. One can also think about the exhibition 'Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance' (2021) organized in Kyiv by Belarusian artists and devoted to the quotidian temporality of the struggle, vulnerability, and networks of solidarity. These different attempts foreground micro-practices of resistance, inquire about the power of vulnerability, and strive to connect diverse experiences of anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist dissent occluded by the expansion of the western episteme and the rise of ethno-nationalist projects.

5 Conclusions: Forging solidarities

In this article, I reveal how thinking and writing from exile, caused by physical and/or epistemic crossings, open up avenues for forging ethical transnational relations, attentive to multiple operations of power relations both locally and globally. In my exploration of

solidarity practices, I rely on transnational feminist approaches that challenge global hegemonies through solidarity practices while also placing alliances and 'networks under critical scrutiny to diagnose how power operates in asymmetrical and multidirectional ways' (Tambe & Thayer, 2021, p. 13). Transnational solidarity as a praxis involves 'the active linking together of hitherto geographically and/or socially distant and disparate place-based struggles through the construction of connections between actors, places, and mobilizations' (Masson & Paulos, 2021, pp. 61–62). Yet, importantly, this active linking across geographies necessitates the reflection of the global structures of capitalism, imperialism, and racism. Furthermore, transnational feminist solidarities do not assume that differences between communities are non-existent or equitable; conversely, differences and multiple asymmetries in power relations are the ground of forging solidarity.

The predominance of western liberal feminist epistemologies, together with unattended imperial relations within the region, affect why post-Soviet feminist scholarship and activism often ignores how the complex interplay of ethnicity, racialization, class, and gender operates in the former second world, thus perpetuating Eurocentrism, Russo-centrism, or ethnocentrism and neglecting experiences of non-white, non-Slavic, non-European women and queer people in the region (Shchurko & Suchland, 2021). Furthermore, in the U.S., 'zombie McCarthyism,' keeping alive the memory of anti-communist purges at the beginning of the twentieth and mid-century, pushed many scholars and activists to break ties with Eastern European or Eurasian genealogies. The 'post' Cold War momentum has marked a continuation of Eurocentric racial logics akin to liberal capitalist modernity on a global scale, with its Anglo-American epistemic authority and fear of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements (Atanasoski, 2013). By bringing in the diverse contexts within which the Belarusian uprising and the BLM protests unfolded, I address why the solidarity between these struggles have not developed. However, following post-socialist feminist interventions into transnational feminist inquiry, I also challenge this post-Cold War binary that prevents us from seeing transnational interconnections and entanglements between distant communities (Tlostanova et al., 2019). I address the complex factors that impede possibilities for connection to articulate that solidarity between uneven and distant communities can and should develop. However, this premise requires radical questioning of the operations of the post-Cold War binary that sustains global geopolitics.

I privilege place-based struggles that strive to connect across differences and asymmetries not to erase difference but to resist global power relations. This vision grounds not only on recognizing how the difference functions within the post-Soviet region but also how the difference is entangled with global racial/sexual logics that reproduce practices of dehumanization and violence worldwide. Looking specifically at Belarus, I foreground such an analytical perspective that utilizes the experience of multiple forms of exile to develop transnational feminist sensibilities attentive to global interrelations and interdependences. I suggest solidarities that spread beyond immediate communities to connect beyond prescriptions of national belonging or state borders. At the same time, I do not claim vulnerability as the ground of solidarity to articulate any 'commonness' in diverse struggles. Instead, following the visions of many activists and artists in Belarus, I suggest that experiences of vulnerability may spur the political rejection to reinforce the domination and engage with deep asymmetries of power and connections across differences.

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Refiye Nevra Akdemir*

Making distance from our displacement: A cross-section of the academic life of displaced scholars from Turkey working on displacement in Germany

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Abstract

The article interrogates the different ways in which exiled researchers, who have migrated from the field of uncertainty created by the authoritarian regime to the field of precariousness created by extensive marketization, address the issue of displacement in these two different fields of uncertainty. The first part of the article will elucidate how displacement turns into a transformative experience of loss, which is the starting point and direction of movement. In the second part, the tensions in the processes of exiled researchers seeking scholarship and writing in order to continue their careers through problematising the displacement that they themselves now experience. Following section aims thematising by an insider's look at their efforts to overcome marginalising or exclusionary attitudes that emerge through internalized patterns about the experience of being exiled and displacement, and to resettle. In short, how exiled academics' own experiences are reflected in their academic production and professions on the axes of gender and precarity can be summarized as the problematic on which the article proceeds.

Keywords: loss; creative destruction; uncertainty; exiled scholar; displacement; gender

1 An uncanny introduction: 'De te fabula narratur'

The last university I worked at in Turkey was in one of the big cities on the Syrian border. When we started working with our Syrian colleagues, I tried to be on the solidarity side of the displacement. Today, I realize how inadequate those efforts were, and why they made them feel good despite the inadequacy. As the academy in Turkey operates with more permanent employment and long-term contracts, the way displaced academics participate in the Turkish academy also pointed to the risk of precarity that awaits *us* as residents. However, precarity is not only a part of work, however, also an inseparable part of the regimes of insecurity and oppression caused by political conditions. The wind that zapped me and other colleagues I interviewed in Germany is just one way of illustrating the political climate and forms of violence with which displaced people are familiar.

My experience of displacement did not start when I crammed the things from my house in Turkey into a small basement and arrived in Germany with three suitcases. When I

feel it from today's standpoint, it certainly had no beginning. It appears that this experience occurs in many moments, slowly penetrating into all concepts. In long waiting lines, in those crowded halls where I got the impression that I was waiting in *the corridors of Germany* when I was inside Germany, I wrote about everything I experienced and encountered, one by one, including all my feelings. What I see in these notes is a confrontation that I did not notice when I was in Turkey.

Realizing on the 7th of June that it lost the elections and the majority in the parliament, the authoritarian government put Turkey under extraordinary conditions. Between the General Elections on the 7th of June and its repetition on the 1st of November 2015, Turkey was the scene of numerous horrific massacres. To put it mildly, it allowed massacres to take place on a very large scale (Pope & Göksel, 2016; Mandıracı, 2017). With a series of brutal 'security operations' in the Kurdish provinces, the government officially announced its withdrawal from the dialogue of peace building. In subsequent days, a declaration (in short, the Peace Petition) written and signed by academics who had openly objected to this process became a target for many in the academy. The declaration was in fact a criticism of the suspension of the peace process at the end of 2015. Indeed, these people, who in following process called themselves Peace Academics, did not turn a blind eye to the government's role in the massacre. Then, the authoritarian regime in Turkey abolished the independence of the judiciary and the legislature and turned these two independent powers into parts of its own executive power (Kaygusuz, 2018). Moreover, day after day, the government curtailed democratic rights and freedom while using the cudgel of unlawful prosecutions against the political opposition. At the end of this process, we witnessed a coup attempt on July 15, 2016, claimed to relate to a religious sect which had flourished in the police, military, and various branches of the state under the wings of its alliance with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), when their alliance was broken. Many dissidents or people who did not openly obey the government were deprived of their jobs and freedom (Akça et al., 2018). The academy and many other spaces including NGOs, newspapers and other cultural activities were affected by this period of uncertainty and oppression. Many pro-peace academics, artists, journalists, political figures and peace activists, especially the signatory academics, were dismissed from their jobs and left alone to face judicial troubles. Thus, some of *us* travelled abroad, some of *us* continued to stay in Turkey by renouncing academia. This article is about academics who experienced this process in Turkey with losses and continued their lives and work in Germany. Especially displaced academics whose life experiences intersect with their subject of study.

There are two interconnected key reasons for writing this article. The first is the desire to discuss the distance between the research field and the researcher as an exiled scholar in racialized and gendered academic system. My intention is to discuss the insider and outsider as the position of the researcher, in terms of exile and displacement, and to comprehend the influence of the researcher's experience on their own research. I would note that the definition and writing of research topics have a structural framework that transcends the researcher.

The bizarre and ordinary experiences we have remind me of the feeling of fragility and being out of place for the same reasons. The way that forced migration is discussed in the literature seems to suggest a world exactly unlike our own, despite the given that being exiled is an integral part of intellectual history. In today's world, where paper borders create greater barriers than geographical distances and borders, the experience of immigration not only defines our lives with inescapable labels, but also confines it to legal borders and statuses.

The precarity that determines our working life deepens with uncertainty. However, we can object to labelling that homogenizes and ignores the layered nature of the experience of uncertainty and precarity. As Ettlinger points out:

> Yet despite the implications for a frenzied existence wrought of the precarity produced through shifting fields of power, it would be a mistake to pursue the academic practice of mapping a singular subjectivity onto an objectified condition [...]. Recognizing multiple subjectivities signifies that any one actor may react differently to the same objectified condition at different times, and reactions to a particular objectified condition is likely to differ among actors. This approach avoids homogenizing marginalized populations, provides space for different types of voices among the marginalized, and explains variation among the marginalized regarding expressions of agency as well as effects of exclusion and subjection (Ettlinger, 2020, p. 405).

The second reason is more introspective, moreover, connected my personnel experience to Ettlinger's quote: to understand the reality I am exposed to while waiting and standing in limbo; to position myself in spaces of rethinking driven away from privileges wounded by loss; and to politicize it with shared and divergent experiences, away from the misleading rewriting of feelings. This confrontation will be very familiar to those who are exposed to precarious working conditions. Adding a layer of forcibly displaced people to the precariousness some are familiar with will be included in the article, in contrast to the experience of transnational migration. In other words, I combine the two losses. The first is the loss that became visible due to the repression under the authoritarian regime and caused the migration. I conceptualize this loss as cumulative. Secondly, there is the loss resulting from the tension inherent in the capability to remain in neoliberal academia and seek a fresh path.

Even though uncertainty and precarity are experienced differently across subjects, its most significant common characteristic is its unpredictable nature. In this way, uncertainty makes visible its nature, affecting every aspect of home, work, or everyday life. Hierarchies can therefore become destructive in the face of the unpredictability and spontaneity of exceptionality and behaviour. The fact that academia is an institutional structure based on hierarchy and acceptance makes it possible to see the destructive nature of that precarity. This feature of academia is instantly the cornerstone of an eliminationist system of success. According to Ettlinger, the demarcation of a state of exception establishes the rule that breaking both formal and tacit rules is legitimate (Ettlinger, 2020, p. 403). In this respect, I identify multiple subjectivities as a key concept for a group of academics, including myself, to rethink and problematize the experience of displacement and their distance from the subject of study.

As a methodological summary, I interviewed eleven female and one male (Rasim) displaced academics within members of the Academics for Peace Germany[1] (AfP Germany) group, who have an academic interest in migration and/or displacement between December 2021 and January 2022. I conducted nine of the interviews online because of the circumstances of the pandemic. As a method I carried out field research, which included in-depth

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[1] 'Academics for Peace Germany is a non-profit association that was founded in Germany in October 2017 by the academics who signed the now well-known "Peace Petition" in Turkey in January 2016, as well as their colleagues who supported the values of academic freedom and freedom of speech' (https://www.academicsforpeace-germany.org).

interviews, participant observations and conversations in Berlin. Throughout the article, I used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of all interviewees. The interviewees were all exiled academics who were displaced from Turkey in the period of 2016–2017 and lived in Germany. All the interviewees held a doctorate and worked as postdoctoral fellows, and their academic work centres on, or touches upon displacement/migration. Interviewees were in the 35–55 years group. Five of them (Seher, Leman, Aygül, Cansel, Demet) immigrated with their spouse and child, and one (Zahide) is as a single parent; the rest of the interviewees (Rasim, Lale, Banu, Özüm, İrem, Nida) migrated and resettled without parental duties. I conducted semi-structured interviews with all participants. With their verbal consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. This research basically focuses on comparing the academic work process before and after displacement. I also participated in various activities of the newly displaced academics, activists and artists.

The question the article focuses on is how displaced researchers who have migrated from the area of uncertainty created by the authoritarian regime to the area of precarity shaped by intense marketization approach the displacement phenomenon in between experiencing two different areas of uncertainty. In this way, the first part of the article will elucidate how displacement turns into a transformative experience of loss, which is the starting point and direction of movement. In the second part, the tensions in the processes of exiled researchers seeking scholarship and writing in order to continue their careers through problematising the displacement that they themselves now experience. The following section aims to thematize an insider's look at their efforts to overcome marginalising or exclusionary attitudes that emerge through internalized patterns about the experience of being exiled and displaced, and to resettle. In short, how exiled academics' own experiences are reflected in their academic production and professions on the axes of gender and precarity can be summarized as the problematic on which the article proceeds.

2 Losses as creative destruction

Uncertainty and losses are the most recurring concepts of displacement. These concepts are filled with intermediate layers such as gender, status, and occupation. During our migration to Germany (not to say settling down yet), we encountered *another* academy. An academy that is surprisingly more male-dominated, Eurocentric and conducted via interwoven projects, thus easily enwrapping exiled academics, but normalizing job insecurity and life uncertainty (Bădoi, 2021; Gallas, 2018; Ohm, 2016; Telli, 2022; Sertdemir Özdemir et al., 2019; Ullrich, 2019; Vatansever, 2018; Vatansever, 2022). Moreover, as I plan to show in more detail below, there are many challenging experiences for exiled academics who want to continue their profession in Germany (Mutluer, 2017; Sertdemir Özdemir et al, 2019; Telli, 2022; Vatansever, 2018). Because of the displacement, the relationship with the bureaucracy can turn into an impasse, especially regarding resident permits and the requirements of everyday life (Vatansever, 2018). According to Auyero, the bureaucracy is the construction of temporality and temporal processes in and through which political subordination is reproduced (Auyero, 2012, p. 15). Academic job insecurity is designed to reproduce the political obedience that particularly challenges the fragile life of exiles (Sertdemir Özdemir et al., 2019). Combining with the precarity of academia and uncertainty of bureaucracy might directly demarcate the resilience of displaced scholars.

Academic positions that are highly competitive are usually open for six months to three years. Women and people of colour are typically underrepresented in these positions and tend to participate in niche academic fields, considering they are implicitly discouraged from male-dominated mainstream academic fields (Bozzon et al., 2019). Performance is a crucial criterion for receiving these scholarships. In the case of scholars from war zones who cannot prove their qualifications or work, the process to remain in the profession is mostly knottier; *waiting time* posed by asylum applications to get work/residential permits can cause the scholars to become stuck in underqualified work (von Hausen, 2010; Weiß, 2010). Additionally, high screening criteria can be devastating for the researcher who is still trying to overcome the trauma of displacement. You are as likely to encounter an immigrant who runs a restaurant as a doctor who is a taxi driver, as well as an officer who works at a job at an employment office with the title of doctor. We might also observe some exiled academics move to careers outside of academia. This transition is also a struggle for them, as it is a group that has obtained a residence permit for just academic work. Therefore, the transition can turn the feeling of loss into trap that reinforces loss of professionally self-worth (Akdemir, forthcoming) and the sense of infantilization (Vatansever, 2022, p. 8).

However, the concept of loss should not only refer to trauma in a negative sense and in a continuous manner. For the concept of loss has a transformative power (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003, p. 3), whether it refers to the stages of forced migration as Freudian psychology points out or to the destruction in Benjamin's famous passage, the *Angel of History* (Benjamin, 2009). The literature that relates the concept of loss to psychology comprehended psychological states such as grief, rejection, coping with a break with the past, and recovery (Akhtar, 2007; Butler, 2003; Oakes, 2003). As Butler reminds us, there can be a way to think about loss as transformative feeling embedded with constituting social, political, and aesthetic relations:

> The presumptions that the future follows the past, that mourning might follow melancholia, that mourning might be completed are all poignantly called into question in these pages as we realize a series of paradoxes: the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past; loss must be marked and it cannot be represented; loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression (Butler, 2003, p. 467).

The destruction implied by the concept of loss gains a dialectical perspective in the footsteps of Benjamin and is found with reference to the possibility of a revolutionary recreation of the subject in the face of destruction (Benjamin, 2009, p. 42). While 'creative destruction' is a concept developed by Schumpeter (1994) within the Marxist movement in 1942 to explain the dynamics of capital accumulation in relation to technological innovation, it is used by Berman (1988) to explain urban development and by Harvey (2007) to refer to capital's restructuring of the built environment to accelerate the cycle of capital accumulation. From the other perspective, the concept of creative destruction bears enormous similarities to the well-known expression of Said out of place, namely the loss of the home and everything familiar and the praxis of reconstructing it within political struggles. The creation promised by the destruction is quite painful and inspiring, as we read from the pens of the displaced writers. When I remember that Edward Said, who said that criticism allows to start, to start again, to experience it over and over again (Said, 1985, p. xiv), made these pains a part of his own methodology in the writing process, I will always wonder how privileged I was to encounter this tender process, as someone who lived through displacement and uncertainty.

Certainly, like every newcomer, the exiled scholar settles in a new structural order which they did not have to know before. It means learning everything again, like a child. Sometimes it can be traumatic to see their experience and skills become dysfunctional or valueless. Considering that migration, which is mostly caused by the experience of displacement, is a traumatic process and can create spatial and temporal interruptions in the continuity of life (Akhtar, 2007; Varvin, 2016). According to Hannson (2006, p. 90), 'Exile, then, is a three-tiered concept that involves the experience of dwelling in a place perceived as alien in some respect; the idea that home is located elsewhere, and the prospect or futile hope of a return to this lost home-place.'

We have engaged in the project-based work regime of the German academy by displacing ourselves from the insecurities created by authoritarianism and from the threats created directly by legal prosecution directed against us. *We* migrated from the risks created by authoritarian state pressure to the uncertainty created by the over marketization. If comparing the migration process from an occupational perspective, it is probably not a repeating that we find ourselves in more precarious positions than in our previous work experiences (we were privileged as those working at state universities). Although I use the category of 'we', *we* have been part of the same experience of oppression and displacement with many of *our differences.* However, differences in gender, professional experience, social status, political engagement, and the way of managing everyday life have differentiated the way of coping with the experience of displacement and the way of making this experience the subject of writing and academic work. This point now makes it possible to expand the analysis with an intersectional perspective and to revive the encounters under the trace of the concept of loss.

3 Writing losses in uncertainty

I define the concept of loss as the temporary/uncertain position in the professional and daily life experience and losing the ability to intervene to change one's life. Manifestly, loss is the key concept of the article. The loss that interrupted the ordinary flow of life before migration is also grounds for the migration; in conjunction with the situation of not being able to continue the normal flow of life after displacement/asylum/resettlement defines the feeling of loss. On the other hand, contrary to the negative emphasis on loss, it also contains the power of change and new possibilities. In this respect, defining loss is closely related to class, gender as well as politicized or non-politicized identities. Moreover, the face of the process related to displacement is also stratified with gender inequality, racialized practices, and class position. This stratification is also reflected methodologically in academic studies.

Giving an anecdotal case in point, Aygül's methodological emphasis on the distinction between the researcher and the subject of the research in academic studies is remarkable. By referring to the transformative power of loss when comparing her academic research before and after her displacement experience; her position, which enabled her to find solutions for the people she interviewed on some of their difficulties or to build networks for them, has disappeared after migration and has turned into a more equal frame: 'I am very useless to them now', she says, while continuing with the loss in the field of research. She explains to define her relationship with her losses as 'a transition from empathic learning to politicization in an effort to making new life'. Experiences of displacement offer a researcher the opportunity to equate with the object of the study, which differs from displacement studies in that they are concerned with *others*. According to Özüm:

> I always wanted to produce knowledge about a situation I found myself in. Now I have this opportunity. But I understand better how important distance is. Now I find it easier to conduct interviews, but I am unsure what is important and what is interesting scientifically. Sometimes I can't calm down enough to write a describe what I observed after the interviews.

I have been in a similar situation. For some time now, my academic field of study has been determined by the field research in which I am an insider. As such, I see clearly that it is possible to generate questions and analyses that derive from a wealth of experience. However, I also find this situation emotionally challenging for writing. The motivation for focusing on displacement was described by some interviewees not only as scientific curiosity, but also as political responsibility. By following Gramscian perspectives, *political responsibility* means both the establishment of solidarity relationships and a political stance expressed in a sense of responsibility towards those who remained invisible. For the interviewees, this position shapes not only the relationship they have built with academia in the post-displacement period, but also how they describe their losses. According to Aygül, the experience of displacement, which she always viewed and tried to understand from a distance, was not just a matter of method. The process was one that led her to question what her presence in academia was for.

> I was trying to support people who somehow trusted me enough to take the time to give me the most intimate information. At least I could support them by meeting with some networks. I was someone they could ask questions of. Here I am learning from them, furthermore I have nothing more to give them.

In the debate concerning whether academia have a political responsibility, there is also an implied question about migrant academics' scientific capabilities. In a question to Özüm at a conference on her presentation about migration and affect, we can see an extreme example of exactly this negative connection:

After she finished her presentation, a member of the audience asked her, 'Okay, you had a lot of problems, but now it's over. Why you do not forget all that, isn't it time to work on a normal subject like a normal academic?' Özüm had tried to keep calm herself, although she was annoyed by the insinuation that she was obsessed with focusing on her own pain, and began her sentence with 'I would like to talk about the sources of my academic curiosity first,' explaining that she had studied migration before her displacement and that she also would continue these fields after her displacement. She completed the answer with:

> Everyone looks at their field of study with their own personal history, that it is a methodological discussion that took place many years ago, and that it is not possible to work as a *normal* academic on *normal* topics, whether they migrate or not.

The connection of knowledge and meaning production to power relations and hegemony is more palpable today than ever before. Today, working on normal and meaningful issues can mean being confined to certain agendas in order to be accepted in male-dominated, hierarchical and project-based neoliberal universities and to maintain one's profession. While the political articulation of the experiences of loss, displacement and resettlement lived by Said, Adorno and Arendt, and many displaced writers, and their place in the social sciences is beyond doubt, today it is presented as the only infallible truth that the only way to integrate into the European academy is to adapt to the neoliberal university system. The themes stating that the definitions of *normal* discussed at length in Gülbenkian commission report

(Wallerstein et al., 1996) entitled O*pening up the Social Sciences* are male, and Eurocentric are still with us nearly 30 years later. As Haraway (1988) points out, objectivity embodies a very specific position (male, white, heterosexual, human) hidden behind neutrality or nowhere (but embracing all) and making this position universal. Haraway also refers to this manoeuvre as the 'god trick' (Haraway, 1988, p. 587), which has deep ethical and political implications: It invalidates all other positions by eroding subjectivity, voice, and presence. As Alvares argued that knowledge of the local did not become universal enough to influence theory, but the history of the local, categorized as Europe and the West, is accepted as *normal* for the entire science system; adding that 'imperialism has thus remained an intrinsic feature of the World knowledge system' (Alvares, 2011, p. 75). In addition Churchill stresses how the system works:

> The system of Eurosupremacist domination depends for its continued maintenance and expansion, even its survival, upon the reproduction of its own intellectual paradigm – its approved way of thinking, seeing, understanding, and being – to the ultimate exclusion of all others. (Churchill, 2002, p. 25)

A significant part of the displaced people has to start their lives again in order to compensate for the loss, and sometimes they should gain new professions in which their experiences were ignored. Although the situation of displaced academics may seem a little more advantageous, it actually allows us to follow a similar process. In order to maintain academic jobs, it is important to write articles, carry out projects, prepare new job application proposals and give lectures. Ironically, both a sense of security and *time/space of their own* are essential for the experience of writing on losses and uncertainties. More generally, the fact that the contribution that displaced researchers should also make to the European academic framework (Telli, 2022, p. 191) is defined here also and turns this situation into a trap. It creates the hesitation that displaced researchers, instead of moving into multi-layered academic citizenship (Rossi, 2008) like other academic nomads, may be trapped in the double absence (Sayad, 2004). It even prevents migrants from reflecting the abundance of the academic environment in which they grew up to and they are resettled, thus weakening the way of academic knowledge production. Of course, displaced researchers' challenges (Telli, 2022, p. 191) in terms of fluency in the academic language, networking, accessing the knowledge of the academic system and establishing social relations are also important in this regard.

The question of what is important and what is worth investigating methodically provokes reflection on the problem of distance. According to Aygün, the loss caused by migration changed her view of the profession, and at the same time the role she had defined as a responsibility of solidarity melted into a mere source of income. Seher expressed that, as an academic working on displacement in the dimension of internal migration, she was surprised that she could not keep distance from her research field for the first time after migration. As she characterized that had done her professional work with political motivation and 'the possibility of making a difference together', she stated to feel purposeless, and her biggest loss is a lack of gravitates of academic works in everyday life. By making the subject of academic works her own life, she has lost her enthusiasm and motivation in science, as her academic studies have lost the power to influence life. Lale also describes the same situation as Seher:

> When your voice is not echoed on the street, every sentence you write is just left on the shelf. I just did the profession with an intellectual responsibility and now, uncertainty of my profession became a source of anxiety, when I think about the future. It's very hard to bear.

As the research fields have become their own lives, the emotional cost of displacement has made some topics unspeakable. Irem summarized, 'we get scholarship with our work that we put on top of our political injuries, and we worry about the value of our work,' but her refusal to answer questions about the intersection of her work and life also shows enough the emotional difficulty.

The loss also describes a situation in which many migrants, especially displaced people and refugees, develop coping strategies on many issues, such as their qualifications, work experience, and how much of their networks they can or cannot take with them as well as the usability of knowledge in daily life (Vouyioukas & Liapi, 2013). However, unlike an immigrant, the asylum procedure and the integration process in terms of social and economic participation are a kind of exclusion criterion for a refugee (von Hausen, 2010). Although some scholarships specifically for refugees and at-risk academics aim to mitigate the impact of this situation to some extent, it should also be noted that the exclusion criterion continues based on numerous dimensions.

In summary, the losses we have experienced nourish our academic work as academics in exile. However, it is also quite clear that the ways of experiencing and coping with losses vary depending on the subjectivities of the interviewees. Rasim, describes his condition as being in limbo. Although he knows from his own academic works that this exceptional state can last for years without being motivated to do anything, he states that the uncertainty is structurally interconnected between unreliable residency and precarious academic work. He embodies the loss by saying that 'where one cannot find any security about how to live, of course, one constantly experiences hesitation and lack of motivation, and this is a vicious circle.' Similarly, Zahide argues that the suspended life never provides a suitable working regime in such an academy, so the more the experienced insecurity becoming normal, the more the political manifestation of the process will emerge. From her panorama, in the struggle of life, either a more solidarist academic production will be made politically or it will withdraw into its own shell and observe the research field in disconnect from the political intervention. According to Cansel, who stands in a completely opposite position, the contemporary academy never offered permanent jobs in Western universities. So, living with one's imagined *secureness past* in a world where precariousness is the norm is a melancholic reaction. Where I stand, the cost of moving to other jobs and starting over still seems to outweigh the cost of continuing academic work, despite all its precariousness.

In conclusion, arguing that the losing economic status of the displaced academics is also intertwined with the loss of their social and political status, that is, their transforming capacity to shape their daily lives. The effort to integrate into social/political life through localization or into academia through transnationalization can be observed as a gruelling, contextual way of tolerating this loss. Naturally, this struggle sets the stage for the movement of academics who are displaced within the gendered and racially constituted labour market and personal characteristics.

4 Out of the categories

Displaced academics who work on refugees, migration, and displacement have a difficult relationship with status and other categories. The transformation of various forms of migration into a label (Zetter, 1991) rather than a legal framework that governs life after immigration,

and the role of this framework in the accumulation of disadvantage (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003, p. 4) is not only a primary reading of the migration literature, but also a roadmap for us as exiled scholar. During the period I mentioned in the introduction of this article, more than two thousand academics were prosecuted, dismissed from their jobs, had their passports cancelled and were restricted from travelling abroad because they objected to the government's low-intensity conflict policies in Turkey. This has brought about many challenging experiences for displaced researchers. For example, as their passports expired, they experienced a kind of paperless experience, and had difficulty in carrying out some of the basic necessities of daily life, such as paying bills, enrolling their children in school, and opening a bank account. In the face of these difficulties, the solution offered by the German authorities was to apply for asylum. However, this was not a solution, but another legal restriction.

Zahide's experience shows that residential status is also political. She often has to explain what her rights are to the authorities who want to classify her as a refugee, in spite of many academics in a similar situation benefitting from a legal exception. Zahide could translate her experience defined by *undocumented* into her academic studies:

> While I explained border regimes in human rights to my students, I told them I was also undocumented. That was true, and I already follow a feminist methodology in all courses. This made it easier for the students to talk about their migration experiences and changed the language used in class. However, a few participants reacted to this. I think they rejected such an encounter with undocumented people who are equal or higher than them. The situation was similar for some of my colleagues. People believe that undocumented people are always in need of help; correspondingly, exiled academics must be victims, not politically or individually equal to them.

Every displaced person, considered hypothetically as a refugee, is likewise assumed a victim. As the entire legal framework was established with this idea, this labelling also determines the framework in social relations. Banu's experience, who worked for a non-governmental organization focused on refugees when she first came to Germany, is quite interesting:

> Because they really see you in one place, they think that if you flee the authoritarian regime there, you must seek asylum. Although they theoretically know that there can be other ways and that rights are actually won through struggles, their reaction is not like that when they encounter it. My colleagues avoided talking to me, asking questions, and working together because they didn't know how to relate. Suddenly, the relationship with the people with whom one worked in the same status just six months ago turned different. It was assumed that you are a refugee, even if you are still working with the same status. I felt lonely and devalued. This is mirrored in academic positions as well.

It is a fascinating paradox to see how the state-centred perspective determines solidaristic social relations and some of the daily mindsets of those who follow critical knowledge.

My experience contrasts with that of the other interviewees, since I applied for asylum from the first moment. My struggle with unreasonable procedures, which I later found out was only due to the initiative of the staff at the Foreigners' Registration Office, pushed me to think about all processes what I faced in the waiting period. The place where this acquaintance led me was Aretxaga's article 'Maddining State' (2003): She draws attention to the subjects who work on behalf of the state to establish the power of the state and order, saying: 'The state cannot exist without this subjective component, which links its form to

the dynamics of people and movements. A major part of this essay is therefore devoted to this problem' (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 395). Again, she explains the states' clarification of their status by placing immigrants in certain categories as follows:

> The official gaze constantly scans these bodies for signs (of the criminal, the terrorist, the immigrant, the undocumented), in an attempt to render them transparent, to extricate the secret opacity of its uncanny familiarity. Practices of legibility are not detached but invested with affect. (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 404)

Indeed, the circumstance that it is not positioned within the usual practices of the authorities also reveals a bargaining power. The fact that AfP Germany corresponds to a place within the established diasporic political relations has made it possible to establish other ways than the asylum process provided by the authorities in this context. For me and some colleagues in a similar situation, the process entailed struggles within the given categories from the beginning.

Legal frameworks fix exiled people in categories by embodying paper borders. The experience of being in limbo makes their residency status vital. Especially, a residence permit that depends on the duration of the employment contract and employment contracts that depend on the residence permit can lead to an impasse. Often, these challenges cannot be resolved without the intervention of the relevant offices in the academic institutions. For those not in refugee status, the periodic cycles of residence and work permits, the confluence of the labour market with project-based contracts for academic work, and the lack of return options are inevitably unsettling. In this sense, it is obvious that displaced academics are in a more precarious condition than academics who are still citizens or have a permanent residence permit.

Time works differently, as the strata of *otherization* overlap. According to Auyero, 'Time, its veiling and its manipulation, was and still is a key symbolic dimension in the workings of this seemingly perennial political arrangement' (Auyero, 2012, p. 2). The experiences on female respondents with childcare responsibilities particularly highlight the time inequality. The emphasis on female respondents with childcare responsibilities particularly highlights the time inequality: the constancy demanded by family and care responsibilities contrasts with the temporality of academic work and the permanence of displacement. In this context, gender roles intricately complicate academic life in limbo.

Gender-based inequalities affect displaced women in a layered way in connection with the social relations in which women are involved. As Freedmans points out that refugee women's experiences vary by class, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, and social capital and cannot be generalized is also significant here (Freedman, 2015, p. 31). The theoretical ground on which the various experiences are built becomes visible at the intersection of work precariousness, being in exile, and being a woman.

As Seher describes how the experience of being a woman in exile impacted her studies, she explains that the system that places the burden of care only on women has caused women to be eliminated from economic life for their care responsibilities for the domestic sphere:

> It was my social connections that I knit around me in the place I call home that determined my opportunities in academia the most, I understood this when I first came here, because I was alone. Even I put my child in kindergarten, I could work for a period depends on their agenda. The institutional care system in Germany requires you to plan life according to the child. It redisciplines you but makes you a parental figure instead of someone who can work efficiently. These conditions

are hard for me because I am making a start from scratch here, and I must work all the time, as if I didn't have such obligations. I do not know if I can compensate for the loss due to displacement. But I am so exhausted.

Additionally, Cansel and Demet indicate that while their care responsibilities have limited mobility and working time for their research, they are also able to build more solidarity networks through the bonds they form over the children. Aygül says that her children's need for stability limits the scope of potential job applications and of her research, but she still feels committed to continue despite the difficulties. Zahide's experience also shows that it was only through these ties of solidarity that she could leave her child and work in teaching in other cities. Leman states that she could not apply for jobs that were very suitable for her because she did not want to change her child's school.

In almost all interviews, it was highlighted that the crisis of care in the home had deepened during the pandemic period, however the work climate itself can also be difficult or facilitating in this sense. Simply put, many issues reveal the implicit gender structure of the academy (Bozzon et al., 2019), from organizing meeting times during work hours with the possibility of someone else caring for children to be cared for by someone else, to performance expectation based on article publication, and to whether academic communication within the department is afforded.

İrem comments that very few women academics work in her field, that her work is easily ignored and devalued, and that some fields are completely unofficially configured to exclude women: 'There is a network of mutual references in academic matters, and if you have a closer look, you realize that it is an all-male club.' Additionally, Banu expresses her surprise that the condescending attitude and innuendos she faced are mainly related to the fact that she is an exiled woman in academia and that she experiences such things even in Turkey, which is less common.

5 A familiar conclusion

Being in exile amidst the uncertainty and precariousness of academia complicates and hides *our* experiences. The effort to politicize the losses and resilience that we greet with multiple subjectivities in this invisibility involves us resuming our lives in many situations that seem inevitably contradictory, such as solidarity, competitive opportunities, competition with a hierarchy of privileges and losses.

The most significant consequence of displacement in the academic context for those whose academic background and focus is on Turkey is the fact that they cannot work and continue their research in Turkey. It means not only losing one's home, but also breaking one's connections to the locality and social space. Another concern is our profession, which we engage in with a political intellectual responsibility and as a political effort, might become purely an otiose job. We learn from the story of exile that it takes time to restore broken ties to place and to reassume political responsibility. Returning to the question of how scholarly work can be done while dealing with all these losses, my answer is methodological. I did not conduct the research in a way that could only remain as a writer and researcher and look from the outside. A motivation to understand where the loss in the process of forced migration and displacement comes from, how the disadvantages accumulate, and how women

cope with it began with seeking answers to the process I witnessed myself. It was inevitable that my own experiences became the field and that the field transformed my experiences. Therefore, I made use of critical autoethnography in this method of research. I'm quoting Alexander's gorgeous statement, in which I find my position:

> critical autoethnography captures a moment in that borderless frame and holds it a particular scrutiny-of-the-self with hermeneutics of theorising the self. Yet in the process of such an engagement, there is always a feeling of risk: a risk of bleeding, in which the presumed categorical containment of your identity threatens to exceed its borders, revealing the ways in which we are always messy. (Alexander, 2014, p. 110)

As Bektaş-Ata emphasized, autoethnographic studies revealing the value of the personal does not mean that it is stuck in it, on the contrary, it makes it possible to deal with the individual in its social context with its political aspect (Bektaş-Ata, 2020). Works, which I did during the period of silence of my academic migration, also build up my academic self-worthiness and show how to politicize the new conditions in which I was placed. In this sense, in our work we do not only take the position of an insider or outsider, we define the place where we will stand, we also strengthen our academic background and ideological stance.

Exile's trauma may not continue, and it may overcome, or it may persist, but the transformation of its destructive potential into a creative force depends on the strength of solidarity; especially for women. In this respect, I think it is appropriate to find myself in a limbo situation where the insider/outsider knowledge production dilemma becomes unclear. The same is true for the dilemma of temporality/permanence. In academic studies of post-displacement experiences, the combination of this experience not only determines the location, but also makes *me*, the designer of the research and an interviewee of the research at the same time. Moreover, the fields are not only intertwined with my experience, but also guides my mapping of possibilities and risks within my life experience. After the research is over, *I* will continue to be in the field as it is. Defining academic motivation is the ability to differentiate a common experience such as uncertainty, inherent in the social structure, across many contexts and enrich the scientific field while transforming intersections, collaborations, and differences into social words through academic studies.

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Shamed citizens:
Exilic lived experiences of queer Mongolians

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Abstract

Mongolia has seemingly progressive national laws on sexuality, but their enforcement is poor. Criminalizing hate crime and speech against the country's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTIQ+) in the 2017 Criminal Code appears to make Mongolia 'a humane, civil, and democratic society,' as envisioned by its constitution. However, an increasing number of Mongolian queers fleeing the homeland seeking acceptance and freedom shows the magnitude of discrimination, hatred and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). This paper explores the lived experiences of repressed Mongolian queers and their exilic experiences. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews based on snowball sampling with 16 queers and allies reveal that shame, as a crucial identity construct of Mongolian queers, serves as a trigger for their forced and self-imposed exile. I argue that embraced and resolved shame of queer Mongolians in 'exile,' afforded to them by being exposed to somewhat better environment abroad, ease their exilic experiences, and transform shame into self-acceptance and self-esteem. This paper is original with its nuanced academic debates on the lived experiences of queer Mongolian diasporas in terms of shame, sexuality, and exile.

Keywords: shame, exile, queer, Mongolia, LGBTIQ+

1 Introduction

On the public attitude towards LGBTIQ+ Mongolians and shame attached to it, Anaraa Nyamdorj, a queer trans* man and LGBT Center's co-founder, states that, 'Because when you are yourself, when you don't hide and aren't ashamed, and aren't scared, people's attitude is: "You gotta be scared, you must hide, and you must be ashamed of yourself." And that's really difficult, that's very hard. I can't breathe' (LGBT Center, 2010). On the other hand, a gay man shares, 'Nothing is more heartbreaking than being told by your parents that they regret giving birth to you. It was many times that I have heard them saying that it is better for me to die than live in such shame. There were several times I felt so terrible like committing suicide' (LGBT Center, 2012).

Shame felt by the contemporary Mongolian queers comes from the conflict between their self-identification and public perception of sexual and gender identity. For LGBTIQ+ Mongolians, it is painfully obvious that these shaming acts and behaviors even originate from those who are supposed to love them – their own family. Furthermore, the notion of shame questions one's compliance with fixed norms of masculinity or femininity, decent citizenship, and even existence as a human being. It is evidenced by this testimony of a gay man who was targeted in a night club by heterosexual men, 'He said he wanted them to kick the asses of the gays since gays are a shame to the prestige of manhood...' (Lai et al., 2013). These testimonies represent the deep-seated issues of how queer Mongolians cope with state, media, and institutional pressures and stigmatization based on SOGIESC. Shame is deeply felt, internalized, acknowledged, unnoticed, resisted, rejected, and named and unnamed, both individually and collectively, and discursively and symbolically.

A Mongolian saying goes, 'Suffer with your own rule, rather than frolic under someone else's rule.' As historians explain,[1] this saying originates from the time when Mongolia was a Manchurian colony, which lasted for over 200 years. It implies the pain and sufferings our ancestors experienced during the colonial time, longing for liberty at their own will. The very phrase, 'someone else's rule' in Mongolian language literally means 'human rights,' highlighting how one's right is restricted by some other's rule. Although now 'Mongolia is an independent, sovereign republic' striving to build 'a humane, civil, and democratic society,' as stipulated in the Preamble and Article 1 of the Constitution of Mongolia, a social group of this country, namely the country's sexual and gender minorities, still suffers 'someone else's rule,' forcing them to seek safer and freer lives abroad.

This paper is about queer Mongolians living abroad, who escaped shame for being sexual and gender minorities and thus lead exilic lives as queer refugees, asylum seekers, or educational and economic migrants. The term 'queer' here is an umbrella term describing any SOGIESC that is not heterosexual or cisgender. On the other hand, the term and concept of 'sexual and gender minorities' refer to 'people whose biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and/or gender expression depart from majority norms,' and include 'considerable diversity as well as a multiplicity of identities and behaviors' (O'Malley et al., 2018, p. 10). Lastly, 'trans*' is used in the same meaning as Halberstam intends, as it 'holds open the meaning of the term "trans" and refuses to deliver certainty through the act of naming' (Halberstam, 2017, p. 3). At times 'LGBTIQ+' is used interchangeably with 'sexual and gender minorities,' whereas 'queer' has its subversive role to question and transgress heteronormativity.

A case of physical and sexual assault on three trans* women in 2009 by an ultra-nationalist group was well-documented by the LGBT Center of Mongolia (UNDP & USAID, 2014, p. 23), which eventually led to the two victims seeking asylum abroad. LGBTIQ+ citizens of Mongolia have been fleeing the country ever since. However, the above case is not the first of its kind. As one of the interviewees revealed, a gay man was granted refugee status in the United States in 1980. This study is to explore how queer citizens of Mongolia negotiate their sexual and gender identity through the lens of shame and exile.

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[1] Professors of History Dr. Batsaikhan Ookhnoi, Dr. Lonjid Zorigt, and Dr. Baatar Sovd discuss history in a series called 'A History that Should not be Forgotten and Repeated.'

'Homosexuality in Mongolia is a taboo and largely unknown subject' (Bille, 2010, p. 192). Despite being practiced among the clergy in the pre-socialist period and among individuals during the socialist era, homosexuality was taboo and criminalized during socialism, but was decriminalized later following the Soviet Union (Nyamdorj, 2012; Terbish, 2013). Even though the Mongolian Constitution (1992) protects human rights in generic terms and criminalizes hate crime and speech against LGBTIQ+ individuals by its recent Criminal Code (2015; 2017), laws are excellent on paper, but hardly find proper enforcement (United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, pp. 18–19). In general, the media still portray homosexuality as a 'Western import,' 'un-Mongolian,' 'shame to family honor,' 'failure as a citizen,' and 'unnatural and perverse.'

To make matters worse, most government officials and the general population do not fully grasp the concept of gender, often confusing it with sex due to lack of knowledge and courses in educational establishments, reports a German development agency (GIZ). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), experts and activists working on and from feminist, LGBTIQ+, queer, and/or intersectional perspectives have been complementing to address the concept of gender and other areas of gender studies, such as queer theory, change theory, intersectionality, etc. In this sense, the state, social norms and even family members do not support queer Mongolians to be the way they are, and some transgender and transsexual individuals have sought asylum; some are now refugees in destination countries. In this context, fleeing one's homeland due to these precarious political situations and restrictive social norms makes one feel almost in exile. 'Shame is a wound of not belonging,' leaving one feeling like in an exile, and comes from feeling different or misunderstood in one's family' (Schwartz, 2018).

The queer community of Mongolia is not a single entity; it is diverse and idiosyncratic in terms of national and ethnic background, socio-economic status, age, sex, gender and sexual identity, race, class, religion, education, upbringing, and other factors. In this sense, intersectional analysis which brings multiple sources of oppression disadvantaging the marginalized groups to light will be crucial to explore the notion of shame among queers. In this context, the main question is: How does the notion of shame characterize the lived experiences of Mongolian queers in terms of their identity, citizenship, and 'exilic' experience? To answer the question, I interviewed 16 participants based on sampling method in this qualitative research.

2 Theoretical framework

Being a powerful political emotion and negative affect, shame is 'the reaction to not being recognized,' having a strong link between shame and identity, and producing social hierarchies (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 116). The word shame originates from the Indo-European verb 'to cover,' implying its association with 'hiding,' in terms of intimate relation of self to itself and to others (Ahmed, 2005). Feeling shame at the individual level leads to reflection, or may produce a new self, whereas the act of shaming occurs when someone or some institution imposes it on people, 'telling you that you ought to be ashamed' (Probyn et al., 2019). When it comes to shame and homosexuality, 'shame is foundational to the creation of modern gay identity'; while unacknowledged shame brings anger and resentment, resolved shame has transformative potential (Munt, 2018).

Whereas shame is addressed in terms of individualized contexts in the fields of psychoanalysis and psychology, sociology brings social dimensions of shame. According to Scheff (2000), shame is decreasing in modern societies, but at the same time awareness of shame is increasing and a sociology of emotions should explore the dynamics of racial, gender, ethnic, and class relationships when it comes to the study of shame. Taking it further, to challenge the binarism of pride and shame toward a queer psychology of shame, Liu (2017) claims that breaking away from the binary can bring shame back to the public as a politically charged and productive affect for queer theorizing.

Drawing on the work of Tomkins, Sedgwick argues that early experiences of shame do not derive from refusal of a parental injunction against what one is doing or wants to do; instead 'shame "floods" one when a desired circuit of communication with another is disrupted by nonrecognition on the part of either person' (Gould, 2009, p. 222). When this happens, one feels 'naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking in dignity or worth' (Tomkins, 1995, p. 133). This sense and/or experience of social nonrecognition is common for marginalized groups, and those who identify as lesbian or gay tend to be subjected to nonrecognition in their relations with heterosexual parents, siblings, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and others with whom they desire interaction (Gould, 2009, p. 223). Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining, demeaning, or contemptible picture of themselves. 'Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (Taylor, 1994, p. 25).

Dominant groups in any society use 'the rhetorical move of silence' to suppress marginalized groups by rendering their experiences invisible (Glenn, 2004). Dominant discourses judge and frame the lived experiences of queers within heteronormativity and usually state and public discourses are biased to the extent that they silence and erase the actual and lived experiences of the queer community. Particularly, certain sub-groups among the queer community become subject to this invisibility. On the other hand, the silencing of LGBTIQ+ elders in queer and gerontological theories due to age and sexuality excludes them from the creation of a cultural form (Brown, 2009, p. 67). This historical invisibility and silencing 'have left LGBTIQ+ elders without adequate social or material supports and has isolated them from both the LGBTIQ+ and the older-adult communities, as well as the agencies serving those communities' (Brown, 2009, p. 65).

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol allows LGBTIQ+ refugees to be protected based on them belonging to 'a particular social group,' but these wordings invite controversies and contradictions because of its both narrow and expansive interpretations (Buscher, 2011, pp. 93–94). It has implications on how queer refugees would have limited or adequate access in legal terms. Shame, along with homophobia and repressive laws, is a reason why many asylum seekers do not necessarily mention actual causes of fleeing their homeland (Buscher, 2011, pp. 95–96) and being a refugee and a member of LGBTIQ+ groups would subject one to 'double marginality' (Buscher, 2011, pp. 97–98), putting them in extremely precarious and vulnerable circumstances. Unlike most people, who fled their countries due to armed conflicts and for political reasons, queer people are 'banished, exiled, evicted, rejected, and betrayed for being an unworthy citizen' (Dixson, 2017).

3 Methodology

I use the notion of 'lived experiences' in the title deliberately to emphasize the complex intertwining of the discursive (as in talked about) and phenomenal (as in lived) experiences (Earl, 2014) of this marginalized population. By problematizing 'experience' through historicizing it, Joan W. Scott explores various definitions of experience as 'the most authentic kind of truth,' 'the prior existence of individuals,' and 'the process by which subjectivity is constructed' (Scott, 1991, p. 782). What is appealing to me is the notion of experience articulated as 'the lived realities of social life,' (Scott, 1991, p. 784) which reveals the agency, authenticity and reality of lives led by LGBTIQ+ community members through interviews.

Feminist research methods, such as qualitative research, semi-structured online interviews, and intersectionality as an analytical tool guided the methodology of this study. I conducted individual interviews using the snowball sampling method. As a co-founder (2009) and former Advocacy Program Manager (2009–2011) and Executive Director (2011–2014) of the LGBT Center of Mongolia, I am in touch with a network of LGBTIQ+ community leaders and members. Thus, the starting point of the snowball sampling method was me, Enkhmaa Enkhbold, Executive Director of LGBT Center, and Nyampurev Galsanjamts, also known as Nyamka, project manager at the Youth for Health Center. In this sense, interviews were based on snowball sampling as a respondent-driven sampling method (Neuman, 2014, p. 275). Nyamka and Enkhmaa recommended LGBTIQ+ individuals who are in foreign countries and those who contacted the NGOs for support to seek asylum. The selection criteria were queer individuals from Mongolia, who have an experience of living abroad or who escaped the homeland because of being a member of sexual and gender minorities. Therefore, interviewees include queer Mongolians, who are living in different countries as refugees, asylum seekers, educational or economic migrants, and in another capacity; additionally, there is a non-queer, heterosexual ally, who is close with the community and could provide insights on the subject matter.

Contacting potential interviewees and actual interviews occurred between November 2021 and August 2022. Given geographical locations and COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted on online platforms. During each interview, I took notes, transcribed it afterwards, and analyzed it by using the Critical Discourse Analysis. Recurrent themes were topically classified and discursively analyzed which were detailed in the reflections and discussion sections below. Average duration of interview was about 90 minutes.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews included demographic questions on age, SOGIESC, country of residence, and duration of living abroad. Open-ended questions mainly focused on life histories, addressing the process of asylum seeking, refugee identification, status, relocation and other processes, the notion of shame, how they viewed and experienced it both in Mongolia and abroad, and other relevant questions. Challenges included arranging interviews due to time differences, especially with those living in Northern American and Asian countries. Most interviewees were open and flexible to be interviewed with their cameras turned on, allowing the researcher to observe their facial expressions, gestures, and other body language.

Over 20 queers and allies were contacted for interview. Some rejected to be interviewed after hearing about the topic and questions of the study, claiming that they would not want to discuss their experiences as LGBTIQ+ people in Mongolia, because it might

invoke painful memories. Unfortunately, it was impossible to find out the contact details of two trans* women, who sought asylum and became refugees in 2009–2010. They live in the Netherlands. On the other hand, Anaraa Nyamdorj, a queer trans* man, co-founder, and former Executive Director of LGBT Center of Mongolia, who was an asylum seeker in the Netherlands, who has lived in an Asylum seekers' centers (AZCs) for 3 years and 8 months, agreed to use his name and Facebook posts for the paper and answered interview questions briefly.

Among 16 individuals interviewed and contacted briefly online, two were community leaders, representing the LGBT Center and Youth for Health non-governmental organizations working on LGBTIQ+ rights, and HIV, AIDS, STIs and sexual and mental health of LGBTQ+ community members, respectively. Out of 16 interviewees, there are 6 gay men, one heterosexual woman, three trans* women, two lesbians, two non-binary queers, and two trans* men. They were interviewed from countries in the Americas, Europe, and Asia, namely, the United States, Switzerland, Germany, Mongolia, and Thailand. The duration of those living in their host countries for 12 queers, who sought asylum, both unsuccessfully and successfully, ranges from 2 to 8 years. (See Table 1 for more details on the list of interviewees and relevant information.)

When contacting potential interviewees and before starting actual interviews, the researcher informed individuals about the research topic, and its ethical concerns, confidentiality, and privacy implications. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of individuals, I gave interviewees pseudonym initials. Due to the time constraint, the number of interviewees is limited, which not only shows the shortcomings of the study, but also of the urgent necessity of a further research on the topics of Mongolian queer diasporas and queer migration.

There are several ethical considerations I need to elaborate at the end of this section. Upon request of anonymity by some interviewees and for the sake of consistency, I anonymized or pseudonymized the interviewees to protect their personally identifiable and sensitive information. Informed consent of the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 has been the ethical compass of the research (franzke et al., 2020, p. 10), which was obtained on Facebook before or during the interview. As for an anonymized source on YouTube, who is a queer refugee living in Europe, a written informed consent was gained via e-mail from its content creators to quote from the podcast.

4 Shame of sexuality

In Mongolia, it is relatively common that people confuse sexual acts and behaviors with sexual and gender identity, as often reflected in media. The public, especially conservatives and ultra-nationalists, are disgusted by their imagined same-sex sexual acts between men. The majority in society is still incapable of thinking beyond explicit pornographic images of gay men when it comes to differences between sexual acts and sexuality, making them unable to accept sexual and sensual attractions of sexual and gender minorities, inborn gender identities and expressions, and the nature of gender and sexual diversity.

In this context, gay men and lesbians are unable to sustain same-sex relationships without hatred and intimidation, while trans* people often face physical and sexual violence, let alone proper healthcare services. As J.Z., a gay man, who attempted to seek asylum, assures, it is impossible to live with his partner in Mongolia openly; that was the reason why

he wanted to go to Turkey and then to enter Hungary via Serbia, but he was stopped, returned, and detained in Turkey. As an anonymous lesbian observes, 'Mongolian newspapers depict trans* individuals as sex workers, while TVs and ultra-nationalists raid hotels to expose and shame them.'

The case of M.S., a refugee, trans* woman in Thailand waiting for her destination country determination, reveals cruel police brutality and torture. On November 26, 2017, she was arrested and taken to a sobering-up cell by the police due to a false accusation of public nuisance. These cells are usually located in the cellar of police stations. Then she was beaten up and abused by 4 police officers, who held her limbs and took off her pants to determine her sex. When the police officers exposed her genitalia in front of everyone, including those in the cells, M.S. said that she felt shame like she never had in her life. For a trans* person who is ashamed of the only body part she never wanted it to be there in the first place, forcing it to be seen in public is the 'worst nightmare' one can see. This further traumatized and left her with an eternal scar, both mentally and emotionally.

Contemplating many questions of 'Why me as a subject of shaming?', 'Who am I for the queer community?', and 'Who am I for a "certain category" of community?' helps them to identify and reidentify the self in this ever-temporal state of mind and being. Knowing and understanding their own identity truly and profoundly help them to ease the pain of shame, especially for those who stayed abroad for a long time. They understood that some Mongolians do not want to accept differences and diversity, given that Mongolia itself is mainly homogenous.

More than a decade later since the 2010 documentary by the LGBT Center, Anaraa still feels the same about what he reflected on shame, sexuality, and public perception thereof. He reiterates, 'I am still the one who is not hiding, for whom it is no longer possible even to hide, neither am I ashamed of myself or my life. Shaming was imposed from external parties, and that is still the case.'

It is most hurtful and heartbreaking when shaming attacks come from friends, fellow queers, family members, and loved ones. As G.T., a queer, non-binary individual residing in Berlin, shared, his elementary school classmates even composed a 4-line poem to ridicule him, which goes: 'G.T. the Sissy / You are a human shit / Together with other [queer] people / You are a dog poo.' His classmates, who are six or seven-year-olds living in the countryside, recited it every time they see him on the way to and from school. This shows how sophisticated the shaming strategies could be from an early age, regardless of one's experience or location of both shamers and the shamed.

Many interviewees referred to metaphors of 'dog' when describing how they were treated at the sub- or non-human level. Although dog is a domesticated pet widely known universally, referring to as 'living like a dog' in Mongolian language means being treated as an animal or non-human. The police would threaten M.S. that she would die 'a dog's death,' implying no one would know how or why she died, or that her death would be miserable. As for G.T., the poem those who bully them composed also included 'dog poo,' which is an insult equating human being with an object. B.Z. explains that his condition in a refugee camp was awful as if he 'lived like a dog.' This kind of sub-human, inhumane, and degrading treatment of queers made them think, 'I do not want to be a citizen of Mongolia if they treat me like this,' in the words of M.S.

Intersectionality plays a major role in how shame manifests for Mongolian queers living abroad. If you are single, queer, living with HIV or AIDS, coming from socio-economically

lower status and class, and a refugee, you are double and triple marginalized and vulnerable. In the case of E.G., a trans* woman and refugee, her HIV status and being trans* alienated her from both biological and chosen families, constantly shaming, and putting her at risk of physical and sexual violence. A gay man living with HIV, who is an economic migrant in Europe, feels lonely and 'broken,' as he also hides his sexuality because he works with many heterosexual Mongolians.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality complicate one's marginalization and vulnerability. T.N., a single mother living with AIDS with an African-Asian daughter, is seeking asylum in Germany after some failed attempts in Canada and Germany. Despite being a heterosexual woman, T.N. claims that she feels queer kinship with queer Mongolians due to shared experiences of shame, discrimination, and marginalization with LGBTIQ+ peers. Personal is political, and one's SOGIESC, intersected with varying degrees of socio-economic background, physical appearance, HIV status, sexual positions in same-sex sexual relations, and other signifiers intensity the queer lived experiences of shame, with its complexity and trauma shifting from the individual level to the inter-personal and community levels.

5 Shame of family and sexual citizenship

As community leader Nyamka, who is a manager at the Youth for Health Center, working on HIV, AIDS, sexual and mental health of GBTQ+ community members, confirmed, the current understanding and acceptance of the public and family members of queer Mongolians are extremely superficial. They acknowledge and claim to accept the members of sexual minorities, but they show tendencies and attitudes of stigma and discrimination. In a closed session involving high-ranking politicians and government officials, he heard that LGBTIQ+ issues should remain a taboo topic. It is eerily resonant with how the topic was silenced and suppressed during socialism.

When coming out to family members, the most common reactions are: 'go abroad and never come back!' Interviewees often cite 'family honor,' 'shame of family,' and reasons of family members being ashamed of their relatives who have LGBTIQ+ sons or daughters. Mothers and sisters usually cry and plead them to leave the country, while fathers and brothers are often mute about the whole coming out process. Apart from the exilic experiences following the asylum-seeking process, it is common for Mongolian queers to pursue self-imposed exile; whether it is for educational or employment reasons; they affirm that they would not want to return to Mongolia due to hatred, discrimination, and violence based on SOGIESC.

It is also difficult to report and take your family member to the police or to court for hate crimes and domestic violence. Because of family honor and shame felt from neighbors, M.S.'s brother beat her up, and threatened to kill her. When her case went to a trial, a state prosecutor shamed her for putting her family in that situation during the closed trial session. In these narratives, the interviewees preferred their chosen or constructed family, i.e., LGBTIQ+ family, rather than their biological one. It is usually their brothers, uncles, and other men threaten to kill them for ruining family reputation in the eyes of the public, showing the social and collective dimensions of shame felt by the loved ones. This kind of shame turns loved ones into enemies or villains against queer individuals.

The sacrifice T.B., a 35-year-old gay man, made at home is separation from his partner of 10 years and leaving behind their adopted son whom they raised together. As an only son

of his family, he lived an almost unbearable life of pressure to produce offspring for his family so that there would be a continuation of his family line. At work, he suffered playing stereotypical gender roles by pretending to be a macho man and wearing a mask to hide his true sexuality. The fate is similar for another gay man and the only child, T.K., aged 30, who is ashamed of coming out to his relatives in Mongolia. Nevertheless, he married a man in the United States in 2016.

As a gay male refugee, who has lived in Europe for the past 20 years, puts it, he still hides from his family members and does not dare to contact them even on Facebook. Wishing to be reunited with his family, he is still fearful that they would not accept his sexuality. He used to blame himself for being born as a gay man, but now has come to terms with his sexuality, and longs for family reunion. However, his family members did not let him know when his parents died, and it was most hurtful that he was not given a chance to say goodbye to his beloved ones.

To qualify as a decent, proper citizen, one must fulfill one's reproductive duties for the nation, interviewees claim. A lesbian interviewee reveals that people act as if she was going to end the next generation of the country by being lesbian and not giving birth in a heteronormative manner. Regular questions, such as 'When will you get married?' and 'Will you have a baby?' target lesbian, bisexual, and queer women to challenge, provoke, and annoy them. Gay men are disqualified because they cannot marry women and have children; lesbians are blamed and shamed that they make their reproductive capacities go to waste; trans* men and women mutilate their bodies making it impossible to procreate. The female-identified interviewees state that their families and even taxi drivers demand that they give birth to support population growth of the nation. As a foreign queer refugee in Australia put it, a queer life and body is valued for the nation only when she or he fulfills duties of 'submission, reproduction, subjugation, and conformism' (Dixson, 2017).

6 'Exilic' lived experiences

Exilic experiences of queer Mongolians start from the point they depart Mongolia, continuing into their journey of seeking asylum and a refugee status, to resettling in the destination country. Some interviewees acknowledge that they feel like in an exile even after they become refugees, or educational and economic migrants, feeling loneliness and struggling with survival as aliens in a foreign land.

When in exile, most queer Mongolians think hard about the notions of home, citizenship, and belonging. While home is supposed to signify safety and belonging, they could not enjoy it like other heterosexual, reproductive citizens. In May 2020, Anaraa's asylum appeal was rejected by the Zwolle court, in which the regional court decided that the Government of Mongolia is 'sufficiently equipped to deal with SOGIESC-based violence cases, not taking into account of the weak rule of law.' He was there for almost four years with ongoing harassment and death threats by fellow asylum seekers. B.Z., a trans* man and a refugee in Switzerland, spent about 5 years to obtain his refugee status. Since February 2016, after his identification determination, he stayed in a bunker-like facility with 77 men in conditions closest to those of a prison. He was beaten up with constant threats to cut him with a knife and rape him, with a fellow cellmate threatening to kill him. It was 5 years of pain, tears, and suffering. B.Z. claims that 'once you cried for all those years, you would not be able to

feel joy in the end.' It was a matter of life and death. Compared to that, he reflects, 'the pain of transitioning and relevant surgeries was minimal.' Trauma and emotional turbulence caused him insomnia; he sleeps about a couple of hours a night. He hallucinates sometimes imagining that someone is coming to kill him. He feels lonely most of the time. He expresses his exilic experience as if he is 'imprisoned inside his heart.' Although he is free in the most developed country in the world, he feels trapped and imprisoned.

Once in a country where they apply for asylum, LGBTIQ+ people face further harassment and gender-based violence (GBV). For example, in April–June 2020, M.S. experienced multiple sexual harassment, sexual, and GBV, perpetrated by male neighbors of her accommodation, and fellow refugees. J.Z. was detained in an immigration detention center in Turkey for 12 days in prison-like conditions, in a cramped room with 6–7 people without any window. With his mobile phone confiscated, he could tell time by meals he received. 'Hungry people would grab each other's food and sexual harassment and rape attempts would occur inside the toilet, which is the only place in the cell without a surveillance camera,' he recalls. Whether it is a Western country or a highly developed nation, interviewees unanimously agree that the conditions of these facilities were all similar and like those in a prison.

Ashamed of this experience, J.Z. hardly talks about it to other people, but only to his queer friends when he is brave enough to talk about it. While he had never been in a sobering-up cell in Mongolia, his experience of being in the detention center was 'beyond shame.' He was handcuffed to get tested for drugs while in the detention center, and it was a 'highlight' of his shameful experience. Others describe this kind of exilic experience of living as a refugee as 'a prison with better conditions.' M.S. also says that 'even if you are free, your freedom is limited.'

Queer bodies, especially those in queer shelters, camps, and in-between facilities, are often subject to sexual abuse and harassment, sexual and gender-based violence, and all kinds of exploitation. Men feel free to abuse them at will, scarring and damaging queer bodies and souls irretrievably. Physical harms include rape, sexual assault, beating, and other forms of violence, whereas milder symptoms would be rashes and pimples appearing on the skin due to the stress of routine shaming. Asylum seekers and refugees still seek psychological and mental counseling to take back their bodily and mental control and to solve the issues related to anger, despair, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty.

As refugees, some claim that, 'it is neither your homeland nor a foreign land,' begging the question of 'where is home?' When it comes to citizenship, failing to be 'model citizens' by not fitting into heteronormative narratives comes as a great ordeal for the sexual and gender minorities. Most interviewees profess their love for the homeland, but the authorities make them less of a citizen and non-human due to their sexuality. They view their exilic experience as a journey to the future away from the past filled with shame. As T.N., said, 'I will never go back to Mongolia;' it is a motto of most queers and in the modern time of technological advance and social media, they could easily contact their loved ones. One of the negative aspects of life as a refugee, or life of those in exile, is often loneliness. There is no social life and there are no friends to talk to in real life. It appears that they unlearn and undo the way they used to identify themselves in terms sexuality and shame by leaving the past behind in the best way they can. As queer refugee and human rights activist Tina put it, 'I am learning how to be at home, in exile' (Dixson, 2017).

The whole experience takes a toll on their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, isolating them from their homeland and loved ones, deepening their soul-searching on sexual

and national identification, belonging, citizenship, and ideas of home and community. While in detention, J.Z. had many things on his mind, thinking about his homeland, a better life imagined, and how one would live only once. He still wants to live abroad and is ready to take action when the time is right. Refugee rights are restricted as well. 'If someone from my family dies and I need to visit Mongolia, I will need to get a permission from the government of my host country,' says the anonymous lesbian who has lived for 7 years in North America. As Nyamka informs us, there are some families who meet their LGBTIQ+ children at the Mongolia–China border city by staying in a hotel and meeting each other as a family.

As Anaraa aptly describes his mission on Facebook, he is 'on a life-long journey to my true Self/Other.'[2] 'Refugee' in the Mongolian language refers to something related to war, explains T.N. In a sense, it is a war-like situation for refugees who struggle to survive on a journey to the future despite many challenges one after another. As Anaraa reminds us, 'Everyone is born into this world to fulfill their karma. But for most people, the biggest lesson in karma is love. All our lives we learn to love people.'

7 Conclusion

As a queer educational migrant, who has been living abroad since 2015, I feel emphatic with the exilic experiences of fellow Mongolian queers. Whether Mongolian queers are educational or economic migrants, or refugees or asylum seekers due to SOGIESC, we go through varying degrees of shame and exilic experiences. Having studied with scholarships and living in somewhat better socio-economic circumstances, I feel the sense of privilege and entitlement, but I am aware of it so that I would not be biased in my analyses and judgment.

Reasons why Mongolian queers and allies migrate abroad as refugees, or educational and economic migrants are multifold: sexual, gender, and racial discrimination, SOGIESC-based violence and hate crimes, poverty, as well as family rejection and death threats. These are deeply engrained in the patriarchal and stereotypical social norms and practices regarding sexual and gender minorities, unwillingness and inability of the police and authorities to take actions, hostile social environment against the minorities to be and to live as they are, which eventually make them feel as if they are disqualified, secondary, and failed citizens. Nationalism is not only a gendered and sexist practice, but also strongly heteronormative (Bille, 2010).

Shame and shaming are major factors, triggers, and causes of Mongolian queers to seek asylum. Restrictive social and cultural norms, both conventional and social media, cruelty by the police and authorities, and even close circles of families, friends, and classmates deploy shame as a strategy to discriminate, alienate, and violate queer Mongolians. These dominant discourses attempt to silence queer Mongolians and erase their lived experiences (Glenn, 2004). More seriously, police brutality is rampant in Mongolia. Police departments and stations, prosecutor's offices, and courts are reluctant to investigate, prosecute, and resolve hate crimes perpetrated by the police and authorities, whereas police officers on the ground brutally commit hate crimes and offenses.

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[2] Anaraa Nyamdorj's Facebook account: https://www.facebook.com/anaraanyamdorj.

While Mongolia professes to be a tolerant nation accepting LGBTIQ+ individuals with its recent amendments to the Criminal Code, Offense Code, and other laws with SOGIESC-related provisions, its implementation is often weak or non-existent; thus, the number of queer Mongolians who flee Mongolia has been increasing. Sexual and gendered shame, derived from patriarchal and heteronormative social norms in Mongolia, are the underlying reasons of why queers are rejected, alienated, and stigmatized both in family settings and country contexts. Queer identities partially shaped by their un-, or misrecognition in social hierarchies (Gould, 2009) and inevitable oppression intensified by the notion of shame reduce and exclude Mongolian queers as human beings (Taylor, 1994).

It is evident that most LGBTIQ+ people tend not to report hate and bias crimes and offenses to the police for fear of further shaming, insult, and ridicule. In fact, cases get stranded, even after exhausting all domestic procedures with Mongolian queers failing to see justice at home. Cases would also take a long time with the police and authorities, who tend to slow down the process, and attorneys asking victims for high fees, often harming community members, financially and mentally. As Enkhmaa Enkhbold, the LGBT Center's Executive Director, informed us, only one case went through the judicial procedure during the past four years since the amended Criminal Code took effect on July 1, 2017.[3] This is a very low number of cases for a country with over 3 million people.

Mongolian queers and allies, who participated in this study, appear to be going through experiences on the spectrum of embraced, rejected or unresolved shame, and that the feeling of shame does not seem to go away completely. An increasing level of education, knowledge and exposure to foreign cultures and ways of living may ease the intensity and frequency of feeling shame, but it is often triggered by discriminatory, cruel attitudes and behaviors they experience abroad. When you are in exile, or in self-imposed exile, you feel shame for leaving your country behind, and you feel shame for surviving multiple challenges. Ultimately, learning how to live with your true self has been a main factor in genuinely overcoming and embracing shame. It is indeed the process of producing a new self for Mongolian queers as a reaction to, and through the experience of shame (Probyn et al., 2019).

For trans* refugees and asylum seekers, the journey in exile has mostly to do with finding the true authentic self in their own body, skin, and soul by fulfilling their life-long dreams of transitioning. Both trans* men and women have undergone various operations and surgeries, affecting their physical, mental, psychological, and emotional health. On the other hand, for gay men, lesbians, and other queer individuals, finding a same-sex, like-minded partner, husband, or wife and living in a safe, queer-friendly environment with job security and social welfare is the priority.

In terms of identity negotiations, self-expression, and rediscovering one's sexuality, queer Mongolians abroad question the gender and sexual normativity and stereotypes they lived through back home, further inventing their names, identities, and expressions in foreign languages and terminologies. When reclaiming, re-identifying and redefining their sexual and gender identities in foreign lands, one of the most powerful memories that queers do not want to invoke or revoke is denial and rejection of their loved ones, especially fathers and mothers. They are the ones who told them, 'There was no one like you in this family line

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[3] Enkhmaa shared this information both via video calls and during The Late Night with Miko. Please see the references for detailed information.

ever!' when they needed their help most, either when they came out to them, or if it was an 'accident.' It seems that this kind of strong message is always stuck in the minds and souls of queers, who are triggered to feel shame throughout their lives.

Often contemplating concepts of citizenship, patriotism, motherland, family, and belonging, queer Mongolians mostly prioritize the notion of survival, while feeling shame that they have left their homeland behind and will never return. It is all about surviving hardships as a queer member in any society they are assigned to, trying to forget about bitter, past experiences at home. On the other hand, exile equals never returning and in the words of the most interviewees, 'I will never go back to Mongolia!' is the parting farewell to their homeland. Yet, it will never be a genuine home like the motherland, and this temporality in time and space would keep visiting and revisiting the ever-multiplying marginalized queer Mongolians in 'exile,' as a queer, as a refugee, and as Other in many ways.

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TABLES

Table 1 List of Interviewees/Participants

№	Name / Birth year	SOGIESC	Status abroad	Years (abroad)	Country of residence	Reason of emigration
1	Anaraa Nyamdorj, 1976	Trans* man	Asylum seeker, later deported	2018–2022	Netherlands and Mongolia	Police, violence
2	T.N., 1976	Heterosexual cis woman	Asylum seeker (past attempts (-))	4 years (15 yrs.)	Germany (Canada)	Racial and AIDS disc.
3	J.Z., 1980	Gay man / drag queen	Failed to live abroad / asylum	In 2018 (6 months)	Mongolia (Turkey)	Economic / SOGIESC
4	M.S., 1988	Trans* woman transitioned	Refugee status gained already	2+ years	Thailand (+destination)	Police torture and brutality
5	T.B., 1987	Gay man, divorced	Green card winner (?)	4 months	USA	Economic after divorce
6	T.K., 1992	Gay man, married	Work and travel visa	6 years	USA	Work and marriage
7	B.Z., 1984	Trans* man transitioned	Refugee status gained already	8 years	Switzerland	Violence against trans*
8	E.G., 1990	Trans* woman	Refugee status gained already	2+ years	Thailand (+destination)	HIV status, family viol.
9	Anonymous, 1980s	Gay man, HIV+	Contracted worker	3 years	N.A.	Economic migration
10	A.Z., 1991	Lesbian, queer	Contracted worker	6 years	USA	Studies and then work

Table 1 *(Continued)*

№	Name / Birth year	SOGIESC	Status abroad	Years (abroad)	Country of residence	Reason of emigration
11	Anonymous, 1980s	Lesbian, queer	Refugee status gained already	7 years	N.A.	Family violence
12	N.G., 1988	Gay man, Com. leader	Youth for Health NGO	N/A	Mongolia	N/A
13	E.E.	Queer, Com. leader	LGBT Center NGO	N/A	Mongolia	N/A
14	Anonymous, 1980s	Gay man, married	Migrant worker	5 years	N.A.	Studies and Work
15	G.T., 1990	Queer, gay, non-binary	Educational migrant	3 years	Germany	Studies
16	M.D., 1978	Trans* woman	Community leader	N/A	Mongolia	N/A
Participants whose stories were analyzed from media, Facebook posts, and YouTube content:						
1	Trans* woman	Trans* woman	Refugee	Since 2009	Netherlands	Ultra-nationalists
2	Trans* woman	Trans* woman	Refugee	Since 2009	Netherlands	Ultra-nationalists
3	Anonymous	Gay man	Refugee	Since 1999	France	Family violence

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Care as symbolic exile: The diversity work
of Slovak gender studies scholars

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Abstract

In recent years, science has become a battlefield where the lines of the gendered world order are being negotiated. This negotiation cannot be understood without examining the epistemic communities of gender studies – their members, practices, conditions, and the power relations within which they operate. This study aims to enrich the research on gender and feminist scholarship from the perspective of a country with a weak degree of institutionalisation of gender studies. It focuses on the experiences of PhD candidates and early career scholars of social sciences in Slovakia, as narrated in two focus group discussions. We argue that the combination of fragmentation in gender-oriented epistemic communities and the competitiveness of neoliberalised academia pushes junior gender studies scholars to experience isolation, a self-imposed or forced symbolic exile within their institutions and academic communities. However, while the symbolic exile is a space of exclusion, it also is a space of care – for and about oneself, for and about others, for and about one's institution. The study conceptualises these practices of care as 'diversity work' and examines them as both initiatives of individual scholars and invisible everyday labour that maintains the presence of gender-oriented scholarship in an academic environment marked by limited institutionalisation of gender studies.

Keywords: gender studies; diversity work; care; PhD studies; early career researchers

1 Introduction

A decade-long process of translating political and social conflicts in terms of morality (Vargovčíková, 2021) has been manifested in Slovakia mostly as the anti-gender opposition to the National Strategy for Human Rights Protection and Promotion in 2014; the referendum against non-heterosexual families in 2015; mass mobilisation against the Istanbul Convention; and efforts to limit access to abortion (Maďarová & Valkovičová, 2021). Unlike in neighbouring countries, gender studies (GS) scholars and scholarship in Slovakia have been scarcely targeted by anti-gender politics, which to a certain extent can be explained by the weak institutionalisation of GS and the few scholars' limited public visibility. As elsewhere, GS institutionalisation in Slovak academic epistemic communities has been primarily forged

as individualised institutionalisation (Pereira, 2017), prompted by the endeavours of individual academics in their departments. Moreover, gender knowledge in academia is often produced and shared by non-academics primarily working in civil society and public administration. With just one BA program in gender studies in the country, this all means a rather fleeting presence of GS in Slovak social sciences or humanities, leaving those who wish to study this particular field or train to become a GS scholar with many uncertainties.

If we understand epistemic communities as the key subjects of knowledge production (Szapuová, 2009), then fragmentation of gender epistemic communities, limited cooperation and knowledge-sharing between their members, and individualisation of research and teaching practices posit a serious challenge for the production and development of gender and feminist knowledge in times when anti-gender discourse is taking root in academic institutions. Science has become a battlefield where the lines of the gendered world order are being negotiated (Pető, 2021). The process of this negotiation cannot be understood without getting to know the academic epistemic communities – their members, practices, conditions, and the power relations within which they operate.

In this study, we aim to add to the existing research on gender and feminist scholarship from the perspective of a country with a weak degree of institutionalisation of GS and where individualised carriers of gender knowledge operate from a place of – self-imposed or times forced – symbolic exile. This experience is characterised by deliberate expulsion and self-isolation from academic cooperation and mistrust towards/from the academic community, leading scholars to seek support systems elsewhere and causing lack of continuity in knowledge production. Besides working at 'the periphery of the established order' (Barbour, 2007, p. 295), the GS scholars often experience a nomadic academic life, as they are constantly moving between short-term contracts in academia or between jobs in academia and other spheres. In parallel to political exile, this symbolic exile in academia is marked by the experience of decentralisation, constant moving, and being at the margins, which leads to a need for creating one's own structures of meaning (Barbour, 2007). So while we do not mean to downplay the political threat and material suffering of those who have been displaced and exiled, we find it meaningful and analytically useful to understand economic precarisation and political oppression as 'two sides of the same coin, although their proportions vary depending on the coordinates of a given region within the world-economy' (Vatansever & Kolemen, 2020, p. 2). In focus group discussions with junior GS scholars, feelings of isolation and mistrust emerged in relation to their efforts to navigate the structures of a neoliberalising academia and their interactions with colleagues who either lack interest in or are openly hostile towards gender studies. We also found synergies with a recent study among GS PhD candidates across Europe (Boulila, Cheung & Lehotai, 2019) that highlights their struggles, which primarily concern the issue of epistemic challenges experienced by GS scholars, as well as concerns over financial stability and job opportunities. It seems that while encountering an uneven distribution of epistemic authority toward GS (Pereira, 2014), these scholars also struggle with shrinking institutional budgets, precarious working contracts, and attempts at academic (performative) excellence (Verdera, 2019) while still in training.

Against this background, the emerging scholars in our research – PhD candidates (PhDCs) and early career researchers (ECRs) in social sciences – described their academic praxis in terms of care. Therefore, we approach these scholars as engaged in, and bound by relations of care in academic institutions (Verdera, 2019; Jesenková, 2021): they care for and about themselves; they are (potentially) being cared about; they care for and about social

justice; for and about students; as well as for and about their academic institutions. The present study looks at the experiences of these scholars as diversity workers and 'killjoys' (Ahmed, 2012; 2016), while it reinforces the observation that institutional diversity work is complex, contextual and ambivalent (Ahmed & Swan, 2006).

It has been argued that, to have truly 'caring universities', caring must be equally distributed within the institution (Noddings, 2002). However, what our communication partners mostly spoke about were individualised instances of 'working on an institution' (Ahmed, 2017), while the support of that institution is missing. Resisting the current imperatives of academic productivity (Pereira, 2020) is inherently connected with the experience of solitude. Thus, we argue that the practices of care in academia reinforce the double character of symbolic exile: they can offer flight from the competitiveness of neoliberal academia (Taylor & Lahad, 2018); however, such temporary freedom comes at the cost of exclusion from the academic community, and for junior scholars also at the potential cost of career growth.

2 Faces of neoliberalism in Central and Eastern European higher education

This study is informed by two sets of literature – the one dealing with institutionalisation of gender studies and another one on neoliberalisation of academia. Here we understand neoliberalisation as a process leading to the introduction and acceptance of the logic and practices of the market regime expansion, focus on outputs and emphasis on individualism and competitiveness (Kahlert, 2018, p. 1). In this process, knowledge is being transformed 'into an engine of economy, where researchers figure as individualised units of production. The idea that research output must be under the constant surveillance of assessment procedures in order to ensure stable and continued productivity emerged within this framework' (Linková & Vohlídalová, 2017, p. 13).

In post-state socialist countries, the neoliberalisation of higher education or the turn to academic capitalism has been part of broader socioeconomic transformations after the 1990s. The focus on thin state and individualism seemed like a clear alternative to the state socialist past and a means to 'catch up' with the West (Aavik & Marling, 2018; Kobová, 2009). The climate of transformation – including educational transformation – after the 1990s significantly benefited gender studies in post-state socialist countries (Zimmermann, 2007). Substantial part of the financial resources coming from abroad to support democratisation went to the field of gender studies, partly due to the efforts of individuals at academia and civil society who aimed to open a space for gender research and teaching in conservative institutions and societies (Cerwonka, 2009). 'In many countries of the former Soviet Union, the institutionalisation of gender studies has been trapped in a not always happy alliance with the often contested westernisation of the education system and its simultaneous reform in the direction of the 'entrepreneurial university.' The same is true, in other ways, for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which are increasingly bound up in the process of EU-ization of higher education policy.' (Zimmermann, 2007, p. 160). As Zimmermann (2007, p. 160) concludes, this contributes to geographical inequality in and beyond Europe but also has a potential of 'combining gender critique and social critique of the past and present of Central and Eastern Europe and the post–Soviet space in the larger world.' This link between westernisation (and neoliberalisation) and development of gender studies in post-state

socialist countries have been feeding the 'anti-gender movements' or 'gender ideology discourse' in Central and Eastern Europe (Gregor, 2022) in the last decade, with the most visible attacks on gender studies and academic freedom observed in Hungary and Romania (Kállay & Valkovičová, 2020). However, gender studies scholars also experience the implications of continuously neoliberalised academic environment and look for different ways to resist not only new forms of governance in universities and research institutions but also their conservative and sometimes even hostile environments. It is the experience of GS scholars what is at the focus of this paper which seeks to contribute to what is known as critical university studies (e.g. Kahlert, 2018) and enrich the perspective coming from Central and Eastern Europe, especially from a country with weak institutionalisation of gender studies.

3 Individualised institutionalisation of gender studies in Slovakia

Slovakia counts among the countries where 'gender ideology' rhetoric has been mainstreamed by political elites and has played a significant role in various forms of opposition to gender equality and LGBTI rights policies, or in practices of dismantling participatory mechanisms of policy making (Maďarová & Valkovičová, 2021). However, anti-gender politics have been rarely used to attack GS scholars, as we have seen elsewhere. While scholars in other countries have been targeted by attacks upon 'dangerous and elitist academics' in various processes of contestation (Taylor & Lahad, 2018), Slovak scholars were primarily threatened by political elites and activists in the period from 2014 to 2015. The first instance was in June 2014, in the context of celebrating International Children's Day, when a group of medical practitioners led by a psychiatrist and former member of parliament, Alojz Rakús, initiated an open letter 'against gender-sensitive education', calling for the government 'to adopt particular measures which will prevent the entry of gender ideology into the educational process' (Klub kresťanských lekárov…, 2014). The second instance was during the 2015 campaign for the referendum against non-heterosexual families, during which many activists and some scholars publicly spoke against the referendum (Valkovičová & Hardoš, 2018). As Sekerák (2020) emphasises, the practice of directly attacking GS scholarship has been observed in Slovakia mainly among a few neo-conservative actors and religious leaders, while 'gender ideology' rhetoric has also been present within some higher education institutions of primarily Catholic devotion over the past half a decade.

The choice of different targets by anti-gender actors can be partially explained by the way gender studies has struggled to root itself in the education system and research. As Allaine Cerwonka (2009, p. 86) writes,

> [G]ender studies in CEE developed in ways similar to other regions and countries. Certain scholars took on additional work to train themselves. They created a community for gender studies with other interested scholars and students in the form of reading groups, conferences and other activities. They battled university administrators and state governments to introduce gender to the existing curriculum.

It was within this regional movement, and with the significant support of civil society (Wöhrer, 2016), that the first and only Centre for Gender Studies was established in 2001 in the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava. However, the development of GS in CEE countries differed, and even though the process of institutionalisation of GS is complex

and stripped of any notion of linearity (Pereira, 2017), it is fair to say that, compared to neighbouring countries, Slovak scholars have had limited success with creating GS centres and study modules. So far, the only study module for bachelor's degree students, *Gender Studies and Culture*, was established in 2013 in humanities at the University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice. This means that GS studies scholarship is mostly reproduced and shared in the form of individual courses, or topics within different courses. While the question of autonomy vs. integration (Hemmings, 2005) of GS in academia has been ongoing, both globally and in Slovakia, the pragmatic reasons have led mostly to mainstreaming gender knowledge into existing Slovak disciplinary structures. This is generally the result of what Pereira (2017) terms individualised institutionalisation, whereby it is usually an assertive individual who campaigns and dedicates their time (often merely in the form of an elective course) in order to teach or supervise a GS thesis. The concept of individualised institutionalisation thus prompts us to pay attention to the current conditions regulating work and life in academia, which is particularly salient with regards to aspiring scholars – PhD candidates and early career researchers.

4 The Slovakian version of doing gender studies at entrepreneurial universities

Besides the character of GS institutionalisation, the process of neoliberalisation of academia is another significant factor that has been shaping the 'ongoing struggles over the definition of, and the power to define, what can count as "proper" knowledge, and should therefore be accepted, funded or certified as such' (Pereira, 2017, p. 2).

Discussion in 2021–22 centres around the proposed higher education reform, as well as de/centralisation and politicisation of universities. On the one hand, university authorities warn against measures that would allow political loyalists to take over higher education institutions; on the other hand, those supporting reforms call for better quality education and levelling up to the 'Western standards'. Previously, Slovak media uncovered cases of academic plagiarism among political elites and some high-ranking scholars, or instances of whole departments publishing in predatory journals. While the need for change and better quality is difficult to oppose, the same arguments are often used to cut institutional budgets and introduce precarious working conditions. According to Kobová (2009), the early 2000s witnessed significant changes in higher education in Slovakia: an increase in the number of students along with cuts in the state budget for universities. These changes were prompted by the growing pressure to improve 'competitiveness' and based on the logic of 'catching up with the West'. The developments highlighted by Kobová can be understood as part of the neoliberalisation of Slovak higher education, as they aim to build up a knowledge society, which requires change in priorities and standards in academia (Nyklová & Fárová, 2018).

Kobová (2009) subsumes these changes into a broader term of 'academic capitalism', which signifies the transformation of universities into complex economic and political institutions – she also claims that these institutions must self-govern based on criteria of autonomy, efficacy and competitiveness. Other scholars also speak of the introduction of auditing within various aspects of public life (Ahmed, 2012), including higher education, whereby managerial tools, ranking and evaluations, measurements of scientific excellence, and tools of marketing are introduced (Kahlert 2018). As Pereira (2020, p. 502) argues, in view of the COVID-19

pandemic, such rationality of productivity in academia has been known to emphasise publications in indexed journals as measurements of excellence but have been deliberately oblivious to other dimensions of academic work, such as teaching and supervision, mentoring, event organisation, trade union work, or equality and diversity work, as well as other forms of collegial work.

In the sense of the 'culture of performativity', the importance of citations and impact factors grows, as well as the emphasis on an atomised, competitive individual (Verdera, 2019). Universities and individuals have to become competitive, and so too must GS scholars prove that they are profitable (Pereira, 2017). Academic structures based on these principles happen to be precarious to some more than others. This in particular pertains to junior scholars who navigate their teaching and research at universities, striving for every student and competing for grants in order to fill their basic needs. In terms of PhD studies, countries such as Slovakia or Czechia do not have stable rules on how much work and what kind of work they should be doing. For many, this means not only teaching and researching, but also admin work, although these demands can differ by department (Cidlinská & Vohlídalová, 2015). After graduating, junior scholars often find themselves in situations where they are employed on short-term post-doc contracts with salaries that provide significantly less money than they received with their PhD scholarships (Vohlídalová, 2021).

Similar claims were made by Boulila, Cheung and Lehotai (2019), who collected accounts of GS PhD candidates and early career researchers across Europe. While the major concern expressed was the epistemic challenge of being a GS scholar, half of them worried about employment and financial issues. The latter, however, is not experienced only in the field of GS. In the same vein, former scholars of various fields in neighbouring Czechia claimed that the most common reasons for them leaving academia were existential uncertainty, the fact that work was time consuming and stressful, burnout, the employer ending their contract, or bad relationships in their department (Cidlinská & Vohlídalová, 2015). Such conditions are known to many PhD candidates and ECRs in Slovakia, where the recently announced plan of governmental budget cuts for universities threatens the institutions' ability to pay their growing electricity bills (TASR, 2022). What seems specific to GS junior scholars is the experience of neoliberal precarisation reinforced by a fragmented and individualised gender-oriented epistemic community.

5   Studying emerging gender studies scholars: Diversity work as care

The present study was conducted within a research project framework dedicated to the institutionalisation of GS in Slovak social sciences. Our initial objective was, among others, to enquire about early career scholars' reflections on the field's epistemic legitimacy, their experiences with 'gender ideology' rhetoric, and their working and studying conditions within academia.

Since there are no established study modules for GS within social sciences, we set out to contact senior scholars and ask them to identify potential research participants; we also approached our extended GS networks and used the snowball method to gain contacts. We sought three types of communication partners: PhD candidates; individuals who obtained their PhD degree in the past three years; and individuals who abandoned PhD studies within

the same timeframe. All three groups should have been dealing with gender perspectives in their thesis, research, or lecturing. We managed to draw up a list of fourteen possible communication partners fitting these three profiles, and we contacted them all with a call for remunerated participation in group sessions for current and past PhD candidates in GS. By emphasising the label of a GS scholar, we also aimed for self-selection of individuals who subscribe to this label. Eventually, seven of the fourteen agreed to online group sessions, all of whom were either students at the time or had successfully finished within the past three years. These communication partners were then invited to two online focus groups organised in September and October of 2021. The recordings of the sessions added up to 4 hours and 10 minutes and were then transcribed verbatim.

In the course of two focus group discussions, we soon realised that discussions turned to topics and reflections that we did not originally foresee. Their narration seemed to steer away from broader discussions of academic working conditions and focused rather on institutional culture and their personal struggles and successes as GS scholars in their departments. Our communication partners spoke extensively about their experiences, from finding a thesis supervisor, to managing expectations, teaching GS, and struggling with change within their own academic institutions.

The stories we heard became an invitation for us to apply a feminist ear as a research method (Ahmed, 2021, p. 8). We tried to listen to the experiences as well as the silences, and to take seriously what often can be dismissed as an unreasonable complaint made by those who are too demanding and too inexperienced. In order to make sense of the reflections of our communication partners, we approach the work of GS scholars as diversity work (Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Ahmed, 2017). We further recognise that it is common for GS scholars to identify as feminist scholars, which means adhering to feminist ethics in teaching and researching. This means: 'being critical of social and political life, or drawing on injustices created by norms or practices' (Ackerly & True, 2010, p. 1), thus being reflexive about unequal power relations and social injustices, including in one's own work (Mackay, 2020). GS scholars or feminist scholars can thus engage in institutional diversity work, which Ahmed (2017, p. 91) describes as '[the] work we do when we are attempting to transform institutions (open them up for those who have been excluded), and second, the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution'. While Ahmed develops her concept from the experience of employees charged with equality and diversity policies at universities, she further explains that GS scholars can also engage in attempts at rebuilding institutions – making them more accessible to those who are marginalised and excluded (Ahmed, 2017, p. 109). They may experience situations where they do not inhabit the norms of an institution; even their 'bodies can become a question mark' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 115). A diversity worker can find themselves in a position of a 'killjoy', a person who interrupts the scripts of happiness and progress in one's own institution – and pointing to a problem can mean becoming one (Ahmed, 2017; Murray, 2018). That is why diversity workers find themselves engaging in image or body management, as well as emotional labour, that is, 'labour that requires to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 2012, p. 7).

In this manner, diversity work can also be understood as a set of caring practices in the sense of a feminist ethics of care. From this perspective, care is an essential activity present in public life, including in the educational process (Kittay, 1999; Noddings, 2002). As Verdera (2019, p. 86) claims in relation to higher education: 'teaching [is a] fundamentally relational

form of work, [and it] includes a deeply implicit care dimension that can surface through the learning-teaching relationship'. According to Verdera, what goes hand-in-hand with teaching as a care practice is the reconsideration of epistemologies and methodologies of researching, teaching, and evaluating (Verdera, 2019). In the same vein, Jesenková speaks of universities, which 'can be seen from the perspective of care ethics as one means of taking care of us and our environment, our world, so that we can live happy and productive lives within it' (Jesenková, 2021, p. 63). For Jesenková, caring for a university means caring for its community in a broader perspective.

In the following study, we aim to present the experience of GS early career scholars in an environment marked by weak institutionalisation of the field, a fragmented and individualised gender-oriented epistemic community, and pressure to achieve 'academic excellence'. The described analytical framework allows us to place these scholars within a map of care in academia: by engaging in diversity work, PhDCs and ECRs enact caring practices within their own institutions, but as they are in the position of employees and students, they are also on the receiving end of care. This complex care map is outlined by five types of caring practices as identified in the focus group discussion: being cared for; caring for oneself; caring for social justice; caring for students, and caring for (one's academic) institution. While in the following sections we dedicate separate attention to each of these practices, it is evident that the discussed themes overlap.

The results of the focus group sessions of 2021 map onto our thematic analysis conducted using MaxQDA software. The analysis was conducted based on the approach of inductive 'data-driven coding' advocated by Boyatzis (1998). Our approach consisted of three stages: 1) sampling, which focused on the two transcribed discussions; 2) development of (primarily descriptive) codes, which consisted of the reduction of raw data, identifying themes among speakers of both groups, and comparing them; this second stage led us to establishing a coding scheme with nine coding families and altogether forty-nine codes; 3) validation of codes and their application to the whole sample. The thematic analysis was possible thanks to the approach of 'clustering themes' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 136) with the aid of MaxQDA code queries and code matrix tools (i.e., code co-occurrence and code co-presence). This allowed us to establish five above-mentioned meta-themes of caring practices of our communication partners. All quotes were anonymised, not only in terms of speakers' names, but also in terms of details that would allow the speakers to be identified.

5.1 Being cared for

We set out to ask our communication partners about their experience of establishing a thesis topic and finding or being assigned a thesis supervisor. Supervisors were discussed continuously throughout the debates as key figures – 'door openers' – and often as the main support system. However, these aspects were also brought out as something that PhDCs and ECRs lacked. Most of them spoke about the initial struggle of finding someone who would be knowledgeable on their chosen thesis topic. Some were initially assigned a supervisor who lacked interest in GS, was openly ignorant towards GS, or was even biased towards women and feminists. Therefore, besides already working on their PhD research, participants needed to deal with the process of changing this potentially key figure of their study. While Daniela, Petra, and Natália succeeded in changing their supervisors, Barbora (PhDC) was not so

successful and blamed the inflexibility of the institutional structures and the lack of institutional resources: 'Actually, I have been trying to change my supervisor for two years, but nobody has listened to me and nobody has given me that option'.

In the case of a positive experience, the supervisor is a person who cares about and cares for their students. While some, such as Emma, relied heavily on their supervisor's GS expertise and even friendship, it was also very common for our communication partners to associate positive cooperation with 'lack of interference' with one's work (see Figure 1): 'On the one hand, that was the downside, that nobody helped me; on the other hand, that was the upside, that I was my own boss, and I did not have to quarrel with anyone' (Natália, ECR).
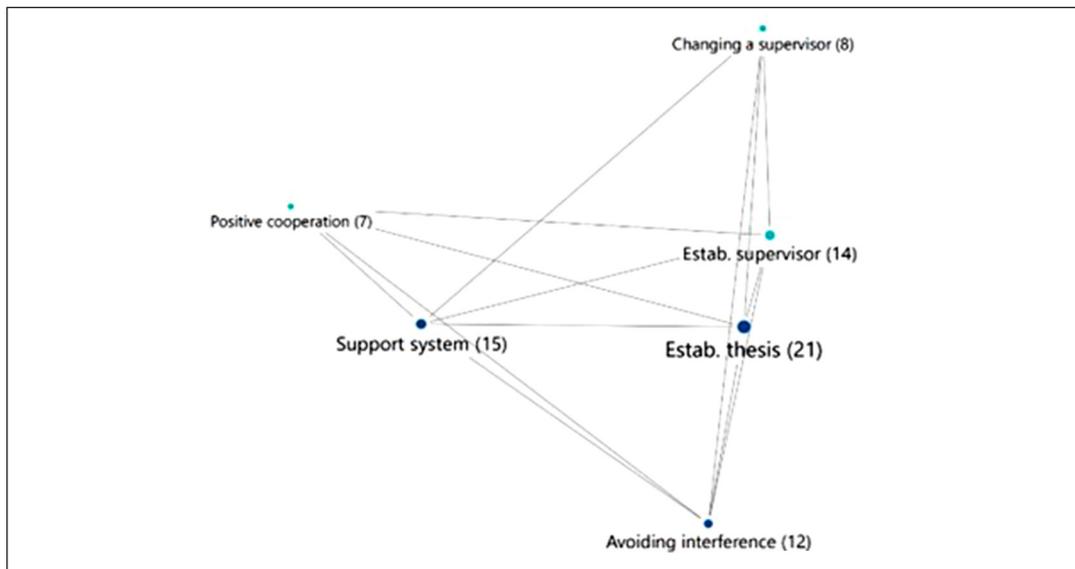
Figure 1 Experience with supervisors – avoiding interference (code co-occurrence)

The small number of GS scholars nation-wide is reflected in their limited presence at Slovak higher education institutions. In this sense, many PhDCs and ECRs consider themselves lucky not just when they have a supervisor who is a GS expert, but also when the supervisor does not simply negatively interfere with their academic work. This implication of the limited institutionalisation of GS adds to more general problems related to the overall situation in Slovak academia discussed by our communication partners, such as limited provision of training in their PhD programs (e.g. training on how to do research or publish), or even lack of material resources (e.g. computers).

5.2 Caring for oneself

Our communication partners discussed many instances in which they experienced bias or hostility towards them as women and feminists, or ignorance towards GS within their epistemic communities. For example, after raising an issue with a plagiarised student assignment, Daniela's senior female colleague accused her of being biased towards the student, since he was a man. Within their own departments, many experienced visibility as GS

scholars, which was not always welcome. Erika (ECR) is a person who tends to deliberately engage in 'educating her colleagues' on issues of gender or sexuality, but she also experiences unwelcome confrontation: 'I do not consider this to be a downside, I rather consider this to be strenuous – sometimes I just want to have potatoes and salad [in the school's canteen] and not deal with women in the Israeli army, but this also happens to me in my private life, so I am used to it'. Barbora, Laura and Emma even spoke about instances where they assessed the situation and chose not to be a killjoy, or to 'tone it down', in order to succeed in institutional passing (Ahmed, 2017): '[W]hen it comes to the management, they would not accept any other opinion. So there, I did not push for it, neither did I consider it to be necessary' (Emma, ECR).

As Murray (2018, p. 173) writes on this issue: 'There are moments when the feminist can decide not to be a killjoy, and instead to go along with things, to keep the peace. However, some killjoys cannot choose their moments because their very existence is a challenge in that space or they have challenged so much already that their reputation precedes them'. Thus, many happen to be robbed of their possibility to self-care and avoid engaging in discussions that can be personal and hurtful. Barbora (PhDC) had a similar experience: 'I felt the discrimination at the faculty, whether it was me not fulfilling some norms of femininity, or hints at the topic of sexuality, which I focus on [...]. Which I consider completely inadequate to ask such questions, because when someone researches a topic, that does not mean they have any inner connection to [it]'.

What is more, they also described extensively the struggles of teaching GS. When talking about their teaching experience, they mostly spoke about this practice as 'having discussions with students' or as 'challenging norms and attitudes' of their students. Teaching for many entailed discussions on marginalised identities or oppression, which makes their work especially personal. Being GS lecturers also seems to go hand-in-hand with encountering the sexism and racism of students, which results in feelings of anger and frustration (see Table 1). As Scharrón-Del Río (2020, p. 299) confirms, educators who deal with topics of systemic oppression can face student resistance and engage in 'draining' conversations, 'as students often target the educator to discharge their discomfort through privileged resistance [...] for the educator with multiple marginalised identities, the emotional intensity of teaching an anti-oppressive curriculum is exponentially increased. The personal is political'. Early career scholars are already aware of these risks and the need to manage their emotions or emotional displays. As Petra (PhDC) admits, 'I learned to create such gender safety continuously, since I am sensitive to this topic and I know the boundary, which when crossed, it can be uncomfortable to some'.

The emotional burden of diversity work leads our communication partners to resort to their supportive systems, or even to a 'bubble', where they feel safe as GS scholars or when discussing related issues. In terms of caring for oneself, the creation of a support system throughout one's PhD studies was flagged as essential. These support systems can consist of networks of fellow PhD candidates (Barbora, PhDC), one's supervisor (Daniela, PhDC; Erika, ECR; Emma, ECR), GS scholars as thesis reviewers (Natália, ECR), supportive members of the department (usually women or other GS scholars) (Petra, PhDC; Erika, ECR), or GS academic associations/conferences (Erika, ECR; Barbora, PhDC). While choosing to retreat into one's safety 'bubble' can feel like a matter of survival, it also means isolating oneself from an academic community and creating a self-imposed exile. Thus, the early career GS scholars take on the additional emotional work of balancing individual safety and academic collectivity.

Table 1 Experiences of teaching and supervising students (code co-occurrence)

Code System	Toning it down	Managing own emotions	Facing sexism or racism	Carrying an issue	Dealing with identity or inequality	Discussions with students
Toning it down		7	9	2	2	14
Managing own emotions			6	8	20	15
Facing sexism or racism				0	7	11
Carrying an issue					11	8
Dealing with identity or inequality						23
Discussions with students						

5.3 Caring for social justice

When talking about the process of establishing a thesis topic, one commonly repeated position was that the primary driver was the PhDCs' and ECRs' values and interest in social justice issues. Petra worked at a human-rights-focused NGO before joining a PhD program, while Barbora currently works at an NGO, and Emma worked in one during and after her PhD studies. The values and attitudes of our communication partners thus also accompanied them into academia. While, according to Stromquist (2001), gender studies cannot avoid being political for having power analysis at its core, our communication partners' aims to confront inequality via academic work is a continuation of their life projects.

Teaching gender studies seems crucial to many; our communication partners often spoke about how they tend to 'stuff' these topics, perspectives, and examples into other courses deliberately, with the objective of mainstreaming gender scholarship. Furthermore, there were other practices mentioned that signify their engagement in social issues, such as doing political work in the form of research project press releases concerning gender inequalities and stereotypes (Natália, ECR).

Some practices of caring for social issues can be understood as institutional diversity work, whereby scholars challenge the norms and attitudes of others (Ahmed, 2012). PhDCs and ECRs spoke about 'educating' colleagues on gender and sexuality issues in their institutions or having arduous conversations about equality with their students. Barbora and Petra even spoke about the experience of being 'carriers of particular social issues', as individuals who embody social struggles and signify symbolic focal points with whom students share their experiences of oppression and harm: 'They freely out themselves in their student assignments, which they know will be read only by me. Or when I was supervising a BA thesis, a student came out to me; she was fearful of how I would react, and she was surprised that I did not react in any exceptional way or anything' (Barbora, PhDC). What is intriguing is the fact that PhDCs and ECRs tend to engage in these activities whether they feel support from their colleagues/management or not.

On the upside, some of our communication partners have had a fairly positive experience of being 'the gender person' (Ferguson, 2015) at their departments, thus continuing the practice of individualised institutionalisation (Pereira, 2017). Along with arduous experiences of diversity work come instances when dealing with a niche area of research, such as GS, can be a career benefit and a window of opportunity within a research project, as also discussed by Pereira (2017): 'So when they need someone [for the project], who understands feminist topics, they ask one of us, and it also brought me two job opportunities' (Erika, ECR). Some of our communication partners also find solace and a source of empowerment in the position of being a GS pioneer within their department or area of study among Slovak researchers. However, there is also a certain notion of exclusion and forced self-reliance attached to these experiences: 'At my [department], there are two colleagues of mine, they are both less than forty years old. They were trailblazers when it comes to this topic, but they have always been considered weirdos, so now I am with them in this weirdo club' (Erika, ECR).

5.4 Caring for students

As already discussed in the previous sections, PhDCs and ECRs address issues of marginalised identities and oppression within their teaching. This is work that can be highly personal – not only for the lecturer, but also for the students, who may feel personally involved. Our communication partners claimed that they generally receive very positive feedback on their teaching and courses. What is more, they notice among students a growing interest in GS or queer studies, which can be associated with the politicisation of these issues and their constant presence in the form of moral politics (Vargovčíková, 2021).

Students also reach out to their lecturers in order to speak about their personal experiences with inequality and marginalisation (predominantly in relation to their queer identities), whereby PhDCs and ECRs are addressed as institutional 'symbolic focal points' or 'carriers of social issues': '[W]hat happens to me on my courses is that [every] year, I have one or two people coming out to me in a way. I sense their frustration that LGBT people are discussed a lot, but it tends to happen without the participation of the LGBT community members' (Barbora, PhDC). What seems important to some who teach is the creation of temporal spaces of inclusion, establishing a sensitive language or addressing discrimination or bullying in their institutions when they come across them. These practices were often spoken about in a very positive manner, as a source of pride, or a badge of honour for winning the trust of students. Barbora, Erika, and Laura even claimed that it was especially teaching that they valued about their PhD experience.

While the communication partners talk about caring for students, a lack of care on the part of academic institutions becomes more obvious. For example, Erika and Petra have experience with addressing injustice towards students within the institution (e.g. bullying), but they are missing the institutional support – such as a university ombudsperson or a counselling centre – that would engage in care for said students. In this sense, institutions appear to be inflexible, while individual scholars function as emotional support (or institutional wadding): 'I sense their frustration, that they need to do something about it, but there is no place to do so, and so they hold onto people like us, because they know that they can come to us, or they can speak with us in their own language, and we will understand them and will be there for them. That is in regard to the protection, which I spoke about, which will not be provided by the institution' (Barbora, PhDC). It is not only institutions that rely on individual

scholars to (re)produce gender knowledge and serve as the 'gender person' whenever needed (e.g. in international or local projects); they also rely on individuals to provide continual support for students who are enrolled in large numbers to secure financial income for universities.

5.5 Caring for (one's academic) institution

Sara Ahmed claims that 'diversity practitioners do not simply work at institutions, they also work on them' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 22), encountering resistance and countering resistance. If we approach diversity work as attempts to make institutions more inclusive, this care for institutions is present also within the practices of educating colleagues or addressing inequalities.

While attempting institutional change, our communication partners had limited power at their disposal. When their individual work led to a certain success, it was very much appreciated, such as in the case described by Petra (PhDC): 'What I viewed as positive was the appreciation of one of my ideas – when I suggested that our [official] documents should be gender-sensitive, or at least gender-neutral. It enraged me that I have been a student [masc. gender] over the past five years [in the official documents]. So when I got to my PhD studies, I started changing that in our folders'. However, institutions were mostly seen as inflexible – starting with choice of supervisor and thesis topic, continuing with deficient flows of information or social dynamics in departments where lack of cooperation was common, as well as when it came to change in organisational culture (e.g. attempting de-hierarchisation) (see Figure 2). Moreover, when talking about 'educating colleagues' or 'educating students' and 'challenging their norms and attitudes', our communication partners often reproduced the hierarchical culture and the hierarchical mode of teaching in which one person explains the world to others. Gender knowledge provides them with limited and ambiguous power; it makes them feel they know more than the rest of their colleagues, but it also makes them feel responsible and eager to fill the institutional gaps with their individual work.
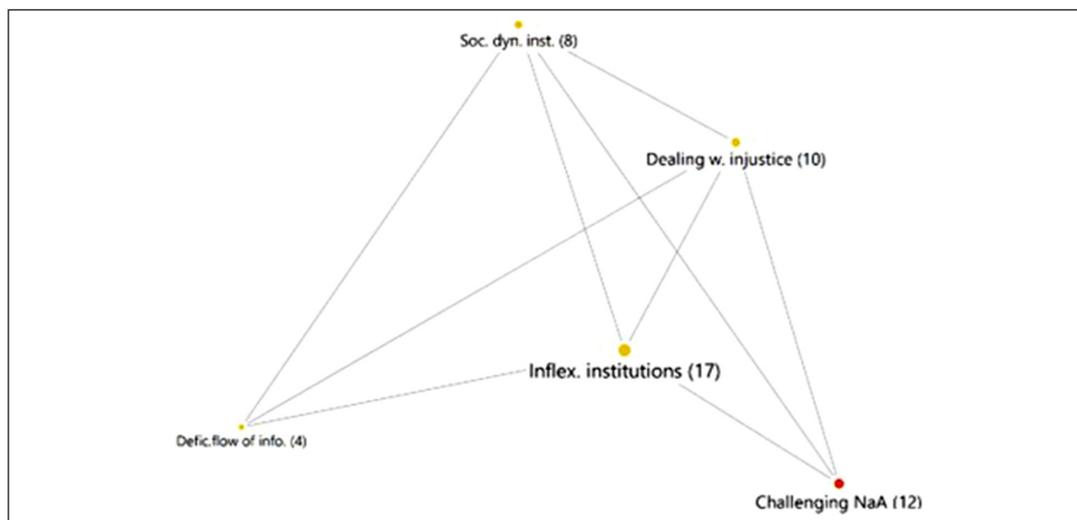

Figure 2 Experience with academic institutions – inflexible institutions
(code co-occurrence)

6 Discussion and conclusions

The institutionalisation of GS in Slovakian academic epistemic communities has been rather limited over the past three decades, while some departments of social sciences benefit from individualised institutionalisation (Pereira, 2017). Notwithstanding, the presence of GS scholars in these environments is clearly scarce, which is reflected in the experiences of PhDCs and ECRs, many of whom lacked expert supervision at the beginning of their studies. Dependence on seniors is essential for these junior scholars (Boulila, Cheung & Lehotai 2019), as they constitute the support system, open up academic opportunities, and also figure as role models. Szapuová (2009, p. 157) also claims that a considerable amount of scientific skills happen to be based on implicit knowledge, such as knowing 'what constitutes a good academic article (in GS)', 'what is considered a legitimate (GS) research question', or 'what is a relevant critique (within GS)'. The PhDCs and ECRs we have spoken to shared various experiences of open hostility or lack of interest in their work in their own departments or at academic conferences. These are communities where PhDCs and ECRs do not find answers to the above questions, but these dilemmas can be overcome by cooperation elsewhere and with others, usually senior GS researchers (Jones, Martinez Dy & Vershinina, 2017). Not being able to access one's epistemic community is not only a result of lack of care in a higher education institution, but also threatens the students' academic identity, and becomes a significant source of institutional exclusion (Szapuová, 2009).

Throughout the discussions, PhDCs and ECRs spoke about various experiences of being or feeling isolated from one's academic community. For example, Natalia's public speaking in mainstream media about her research topic resulted in hostility from departmental colleagues, and her being threatened with a hearing at an ethics committee. But experiences such as not being invited to after-work drinks or to participate in research projects also surfaced. Being part of these communities also signifies how much an individual is an outsider to an institution, or how much one experiences a symbolic exile from academic epistemic communities. But challenging institutions and their members with regard to their norms and attitudes towards gender or race belongs to everyday deliberate practices for some. Since the PhDCs and ECRs do not work at feminist centres or attend feminist programs, they are prone to create temporal feminist communities and spaces of inclusion. By seeking contacts, teaching, and researching within the conditions they have (Ahmed, 2017), they engage in creating their own support systems as counter strategies. However, in their positions of PhDCs and ECRs, they often lack the necessary power or institutional positioning to push for significant institutional change, which brings feelings of frustration and, for some, also extra work (e.g. academic housework).

Teaching and working with students were named by many as the primary sources of joy and worth within their academic careers. When talking about discussions with students, for GS scholars, this means debating (gender) inequalities, which can be particularly emotionally demanding. But it is the positive feedback and the growing interest in these courses (not necessarily reflected by their academic institutions) that provide them with pride and satisfaction. Lovin (2018, p. 139) warns against such enjoyable and stimulating activities, as it 'constitutes an end in itself for many graduate students and fresh PhDCs who work as adjuncts, and it justifies living precariously at least for a period of time'. What is more, within the current academic structures, teaching and other above-mentioned practices of caring happen to be less valued than individual practices of 'academic excellence', such as working

in international research projects or writing papers for indexed journals (Pereira, 2020). While Taylor and Lahad (2018, p. 1) optimistically write that the practices of caring can 'offer freedom or flight from the corporatised and commercialised neoliberal university', such freedom is fragile and temporary for junior scholars, who experience multiple instances of stepping into academic exile while still training to become academics who need to prove they can succeed.

We further need to recognise that resource allocation and ideals of self-sufficient and competitive universities can signify a heavy burden for PhD candidates. Some GS PhDCs and ECRs succeed in filling a niche in Slovak social sciences, which opened up new opportunities for them. In this sense, Erika's statement about her department is rather telling of the co-optation of gender issues into the rationality of academic production (as described by Ferguson, 2014): 'The way I see it is that everyone knows that these topics have to be addressed [in research], but they do not understand why and they are glad that they do not have to' (Erika, ECR). For others, being the only GS scholar in a junior position at a department hostile to GS means being severely 'precarious', in the original meaning of the word: 'to be held at the whim of others / to be dependent upon others' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 129).

The weak institutionalisation of GS in Slovakia, the consequently fragmented gender-oriented epistemic community, and the neoliberalised academia pushing for competitiveness lead junior scholars to a sometimes self-imposed, other times forced symbolic exile within their institutions. While the exile is a space of exclusion and solitude, it also might be a space of care – for oneself, for others, for one's institution. Practices of caring then tie the scholars to others, knitting them into academic communities, which are also necessary for their careers. Such balancing between individualism and collectivity is part of the everyday invisible labour that keeps the presence of gender-oriented scholarship in an academic environment marked by limited institutionalisation of gender studies. This case study thus examines the agency of scholars who are more than victims of neoliberalising academic environments; it explores their subjectivation, resistance, and constant negotiation of power relations. It thus contributes to the critical university studies coming from the post-state socialist countries (Aavik, Riegraf & Nyklová, 2017; Kahlert, 2018), enriching the scholarship that has been mostly focused on Western context.

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Feminist activism in Austria – and its way to escape a spiral of silencing and inner exile

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Abstract

Recent political developments in European countries indicate a shift to the political right and an increase in attacks on gender equality. This political change has also started to influence scholarly work and teaching of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) topics in Austria and has led to its re-contextualization by pinpointing the rising counter forces to EDI issues. This text fills a knowledge gap on the EDI counter forces and the experiences of EDI experts and researchers by exploring their increasing silence in these times of change to the right. Based on a participatory action research project, the paper shows that a (self-)reflection on silence opens a demand for recollecting in 'safe spaces.' The paper demonstrates that these spaces do not only allow a reflection on how to overcome a *double fault line* triggered by losing previous EDI supporters and a newly invigorated gender equality opposition. These spaces also give support in escaping the spiral of silence and inner exile. The text discusses strategies addressed in these safe spaces to counter a retraction of existing gender equality policies.

Keywords: inner exile; gender equality; participatory action research; self-reflexive; silence; feminism

1 Introduction

In 2018, Verloo & Paternotte (2018) posed the question 'Is the feminist project under threat in Europe' and focused on the 'various ways in which feminist politics are opposed and why, on what the impact of such opposition is, and how to improve the theoretical understanding of these particular manifestations of gender and politics' (Verloo & Paternotte, 2018, p. 1). Almost at the same time, Austria's Government changed from a centrist government (2007–2017) between Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ, Social Democratic Party) and Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP, People's Party, a conservative party) to a right-wing government (2017–2019) consisting of ÖVP and Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ, Freedom Party, a right-wing party). Based on this political change, we feared that this threat voiced by Verloo & Paternotte (2018) could become true in the Austrian context. The signs of change were numerous.

First, the party programs of ÖVP and FPÖ and the new official government program showed a backlash in EDI issues and did not correspond with the gender equality politics of the centrist government of the last decades (see also Stögner, 2022). These formerly centrist gender equality politics should serve to overcome discrimination and essentialist as well as heteronormative perspectives on gender issues in the private and public spheres of life. In this new government, the ÖVP preferred a traditional family model with the mother as the main caretaker in a heterosexual family and the FPÖ supported a sex model based on biologist traits in terms of gender identities (Gebhart, 2019). Also, the monetary funding for crucial gender equality projects declined or even stopped altogether (Gebhart, 2019). Pernegger (2018; 2019) also noticed an increasing absence of EDI issues in the media even though the coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ had more female ministers than ever in the history of Austrian governments. Second, we noticed a beginning of silence concerning EDI issues spreading across Austria (see Lang & Fritzsche, 2018). We perceived increasing insecurity among EDI experts who pondered how to deal with the political change and how to resist the conservative EDI perspectives of the governing parties. Third, SPÖ and Austrian Social Partnership Organizations (e.g., Austrian Chamber of Labor, Union) as established drivers for gender equality and diversity disappeared from the public scene. Fourth and finally, we realized that this political change also started to influence our scholarly work, which resulted in a re-contextualization of our teaching and research activities by pinpointing more on the political context and the rising counter forces to gender equality and diversity issues.

Based on these perceptions, as feminist scholars committed to EDI issues (Bendl & Schmidt, 2012; Bendl et al., 2009; 2014), we wanted to understand these developments and, especially, explore the increasing silence of the EDI experts by comparing it with our simultaneous articulation of political danger and the increased pondering silence. Therefore, in 2019 we set up a participatory action-based research project (e.g., Kemmis & Mc Taggert, 2005) with EDI experts to analyze the development of gender equality politics of the Austrian government from 2017–2019 (see Bendl et al., 2019; 2020; 2021). In this paper, we focus on the notion of 'silence', which became central to the project. Thus, we will shed light on silence by linking our auto-ethnographic reflection of the project (see Hibbert et al., 2021) to findings from focus groups and workshops, which we co-created with the EDI experts. We intend to answer the following questions: What do we learn from these merged data on silence for solidarity, cooperation, collective activism, and inner exile for those working on EDI topics in the context of increasing right-wing politics? What spaces are required to counter a political gender equality opposition? What influences the creation of these spaces?

With this text, we fill a knowledge gap on the notion of silence at the intersection of antifeminist policies introduced by a shift to the political right based on the perceptions of EDI experts and feminist researchers. Our reflection shows that in this situation feminist activism is working on a double fault line. On the one hand, antifeminist policies bolster the everlasting opponents of feminism and gender equality and, thus, widen the gap between proponents and opponents of EDI issues. The voices against gender equality have a tailwind and are becoming louder as well as more visible, while the voices of the proponents are increasingly disappearing. On the other hand, these policies help long-standing EDI supporters to break away – especially those supporters for whom the feminist claim has gone too far (e.g., third gender, too much inclusion of different diversity dimensions, too queer as well as too inclusive) and does not represent ('traditional' binary) gender equality mainstream

anymore. To escape this double fault line, which seems to trigger a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993) and inner exile (Hibbert et al., 2019), this text discusses strategies addressing these notions.

To do so, first, we are situating silence in equality work based on existing literature. Second, we introduce our participatory action-based research design as collective action can help breaking the silence and disrupting the 'spiral of silence'. Third, we present our findings and discussion in two sections: first, the creation of silence, and second, the disruption of the silence through collective action. Fourth and final, we conclude by connecting our findings to the research questions and by summarizing our main outcomes.

2 Situating silence

The Oxford Dictionary of English (2001, p. 838) defines the term 'silence' as 'a state of not speaking or writing or making a noise.' However, silence can manifest itself in different forms: on the one hand, from a more passive stance, either one is silenced based on power relations and is not able to speak, write or make a noise at all or can only have a silent voice. Here, silence represents the triumph of a system built on conformity pressures, suppression of the self, and moral apathy (Jackall, 1988). On the other hand, silence may also refer to an active part, and the possibility of resistance animates silence. That means to choose not to speak, write or make a noise (e.g., someone does not speak, write and talk very much or does not provide information or refuses to speak, write and make noise about something).

Concerning the former, the more passive form of silence, Noelle-Neumann (1974; 1993) introduces the 'spiral of silence'. The spiral of silence posits that 'when a given political position comes to be seen the majority opinion, perceivers holding alternative view will feel pressured to become silent, thereby contributing to the growing public decline of the minority camp' (Thurre et al., 2020, p. 547). This 'spiral of silence' refers to a positive relationship between opinion climate perceptions and political opinion expression (Matthes et al., 2018) experienced as a fear of being isolated when expressing a possible minority position (Moy et al., 2001). Furthermore, the spiral of silence approach postulates the existence of a vicious circle (Clemente & Roulet, 2015): the longer members of a group fail to express their views or, in other words, remain silent, the more unstoppable the spiral of silence becomes. This idea relies on a micro-level psychological phenomenon where social actors avoid expressing views they consider marginalized. Nonetheless, voice and the format of raising it is a key variable in stopping this spiral of silence. Voice and its verbal expression on the one hand, and the role of interpersonal relationships on the other are important factors to gauge public opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1993) warns of the effect that people exert isolation pressure by frowning or turning away when somebody says or does something that a broader public reject.

Concerning the latter, the more resistant mode of silence, Bell et al. (2003) re-read the term 'silence' and posit expressions on a continuum from silence to voice in their auto-ethnographic text of resistance of black and white women. For them, within silencing, an 'open door' to resistance exists, as silence and secrecy that anchor power and authority 'can loosen its holds' (Bell et al., 2003, p. 407) and make it possible to thwart it. Bell et al. (2003, pp. 407ff) reveal different 'voices of silence'. First, silence can be a 'cloaking device for action'. This perspective indicates that silence is a rhetorical mask for quiet forms of action. It is an active accomplishment, a veneer over more ambitious and radical actions. From this angle,

silence gives women a place to do their work quietly. Second, silence can work as political savvy in situations where the voice might be reckless. Third, silence as a boycott is a conscious strategy for resisting. Fourth, it is relevant to know if one freely chooses silence or if it is the outcome of oppression. Hence, silence as a chosen strategy is more compelling and believable if there is any explicit statement. Typically, emotionally and morally laden issues ignite different opinions. The field of EDI represents such controversial topics, which may render advocates for or against gender equality silent dependent on where the tailwinds come.

Meyerson and Scully (1995, p. 585) consider white women 'who identify with and are committed to their organizations and also to a cause, community or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organizations' as 'tempered radicals'. These agents of change are activists who are organizational members (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016) seeking to bridge 'inside' and 'outside' perspectives and find ways to shatter the experienced walls within and outside the organization. For Resurrección and Elmhirst (2020), experts in the EDI field are positioned either as 'trojan horses' for feminism within organizations or as 'femocrats', complicit in bureaucratizing feminism and the loss of its transformative edge. Ahmed (2017) describes the willfulness ascribed to feminists and the killjoys, and the walls as well as silences these advocates for gender equality are facing. But what happens to these change agents who seek to rock the boat just hard enough to make change while keeping their job (and thereby keeping both their professional commitment and their future capacity to make change) in times of foreseeable and already given antifeminism, backlash, and antigenderism (see Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). Are they exposed to a spiral of silence? Or do they act as active members who try to keep their voice in this silencing process?

Together with the experts, we intended to author and co-create perspectives on what happened in this time of change. We were eager to discuss practices that prevent practitioners and scholars from being silenced in the minority camp and/or sent to political exile and/or self-imposed inner exile.[1] It dawned on us that the political change will not only have consequences for EDI issues, EDI experts, and our work but for gender equality politics in general. Next, we present the design of our participatory action research project.

3 Design participatory action-based research project

To closely explore this change in politics and increasing atmospheric silence, we started our feminist participatory action-based research project (see Bendl et al., 2019; 2020; 2021). Action research considers knowledge to be socially constructed, recognizes the embeddedness of research within a system, and promotes a model of human interaction (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Thus, it produces knowledge contingent on the particular situation and develops the capacity of members to solve their problems. Action research is future-oriented, collaborative, implies system development, generates theory grounded in action, and is agnostic and

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[1] We refer to inner and not to internal exile. For us, the term 'inner' signifies more what decisions activists have to take in their psychological inner rooms, doors, sanctums, or what different voices are working inside. Internal would only refer to the fact that something is happening inside but is not connected to the most inner motivation of engaging in feminist action.

situational (Susman & Evered, 1978). The focus on socially engaging action research is a collaborative approach in which those typically 'studied' are involved as co-researchers in some stages of the research. Participatory action-based research supports circumstances where people want to make changes thoughtfully after critical reflection (see Arieli et al., 2009). Lived experience is the starting point for such an investigation, and the participants and researchers produce knowledge through collaboration and action (Corlett, 2012). These notions of action research enabled us to seize what triggers the silence of EDI experts in this time of change and to highlight a dialectic political and participatory approach (see also Katila & Merläinen, 2002).

In the first step in June 2019, we organized three focus groups with 16 white female EDI experts being representatives of 14 Austrian public organizations. Most of the experts are publicly well-known advocates for gender equality in their institutions and equipped with institutional and political power for creating change toward more gender equality in their relevant fields. In these focus groups, we discussed the current status of gender equality achievements in Austria. In October 2019 after we analyzed the focus group data, we focused on community building with the EDI experts by presenting the results. We documented this workshop with a written protocol. In this workshop, the idea popped up to bring in additional generational perspectives and link to younger EDI experts. We achieved this in the third step, at a second workshop in January 2020 where each expert invited a younger colleague. Supported by these additional participants, we collected possible actions to envision future activities for breaking the silence and re-gaining visibility. Retrospectively, silence as a topic was part of the action research project all the time but became more visible at every step. In the fourth step in May 2021, we reflected on our own experiences in the project. The trigger point for the auto-ethnographic analysis was the various impressions that came up while preparing the participatory action-based research project. We felt that our experiences in the project make an additional contribution to the data of the EDI experts concerning the silence and the reflections on solidarity, cooperation, and collective activism of EDI experts. In an auto-ethnographic approach (see Hibbert et al., 2021) by using the critical incident technique (CIT, cf. Strauss, 1993), each of us reflected in written form on the following themes: motivation and aims for the project; experiences in terms of the social, content and method of the project; our roles and resources; two key experiences within the project.

Considering all these steps of the project, we have two data sets, which allow us to reflect on the increasing silence: the first comprehensive data set consists of the transcripts of the focus groups and written workshop protocols. For analyzing the focus group transcripts, we applied a qualitative content analysis (QCA) based on Mayring (2014), a systematic procedure in which a text is searched for relevant information with a constructed analysis grid. Additionally, we have data based on the written protocols of the two workshops with the EDI experts and pictures of the flip charts produced by them. The second data set is our written protocols from our systematic auto-ethnographic process of reflection. All three of us reflected on the themes presented above.

The following presentation of the data brings together these two different data sets, first, by presenting the results, which we co-created with the EDI experts (T1–T3 transcripts of the focus groups, T4 and T5 protocol of workshops) and, second, by describing the results of our reflection (written and collected in T6). The combination of these two data sets allows us to give insight into the silence, which has crept slowly over all of us as EDI experts in the different fields during the political change to the right.

4 The facets of silence and activism

Our findings show, first in Section 4.1, the creation of silence through (hostile) political changes away from the progressive interaction with EDI issues. Here we present data from the focus groups, which give insights into why the silence among the EDI experts has increased. Moreover, we explore emotional experiences, fault lines, and ambivalences tightening the spiral of silence. Second, in Section 4.2, our findings show how collective action can counteract this felt silence with the help of safe spaces, feminist reflection, and encounters as a refuge, also by exploring modes of practices and drivers for collective action. Our auto-ethnographic data bring in drivers for collective action, emotional experiences, modes of practice, fault lines, and ambivalences. Additionally, we present the data of the focus groups on the targets of change, which give insight into why the silence among the EDI experts has increased. Altogether, the results of the two data sets allow a first comprehension of how to oppose the feminist experts' and activists' silence in a change to the political right.

4.1 Creation of silence

The creation of silence, resignation, and distancing of EDI experts and researchers is a response to the rise of antifeminist politics and of the right. Therefore, first, we concentrate on the narratives of the expert rounds and on the outcomes of our self-reflection that demonstrate the spiral of silence. Then, we present emotional experiences and fault lines as well as ambivalences found in the auto-ethnographic data, which evolved in the process of the action research project.

Targets of change: Narratives of the expert rounds

Concerning their organizations, some experts expressed worries about generally reduced support for gender equality issues. In this regard, they perceive a decline in awareness, especially among managers at the middle functional level (T2, lines 973f). At the same time, resistance to gender equality is increasing internally among colleagues and externally among customers. Overall, the experts locate fatigue in gender equality policies due to a restlessness between being an advocate for gender equality, external circumstances, and internal organizational balancing acts. To be aware of the complexity, few participants, however, diagnose contrary tendencies (the further development regarding a third option for gender entry, events, and studies with the aim of promoting gender equality, and the implementation of gender equality as a criterion in teacher training).

   Probably the most strongly formulated aspect against the ÖVP/FPÖ government by EDI experts is the fact that ÖVP/FPÖ politics promote unpaid reproductive work. The experts consider this as the basis for returning and cementing hierarchical and dual gender roles and strengthening the single-earner family model (with the man as the sole breadwinner). One expert traces this to the fact that financial measures, such as the family bonus, are mostly paid to the higher income earner in the family, more often men, while there are no investments for expanding childcare (T3, lines 373f). The experts unanimously note a refer-

ence back to the ideal of the heteronormative nuclear family with a re-focus on the role of women in care work, which is particularly evident in labor market policy. In general, they report in this context a shift in interests from employees to employers (T1, lines 340f).

Regarding social norms, the EDI experts unanimously perceive regression and give the following example. No one raised their voice when a local Student Union called for abolishing mandatory gender studies courses on the grounds of free education and freedom of expression in their journal. This lack of objection from students and academics is cited by one expert as a worrying change of attitude concerning gender equality triggered by the political framework of the ÖVP/FPÖ government (T1, lines 1173f). Likewise, experts point to a burgeoning of public discussions on the abolition of existing rights about the 'Fristenlösung' (right of abortion until the third month of pregnancy). These discussions oppose the self-determination of women about their bodies and their lives regulated by Austrian law.

The experts also show an ethnification of gender-based violence and ethnosexism. They speak of a culturalization of gender that discriminates against ethnically marked people (e.g., refugees in 2015) because of their supposedly special, 'backward' attitude toward gender roles in their countries of origin.

Another target raised in the expert focus groups is that digitalization goes together with a noticeable increase in misogynist hatred on the internet. The experts brought in the role of social media and 'shitstorms,' which lead to an increasing need for organizational resources for internetwork to be able to set counterpoints. In this respect, the consideration of not producing a 'shitstorm' for the organization plays a role in the implementation of gender equality, which results in content-related cuts in one's work, e.g., concerning the third option for gender entry. The experts also point out that it would make sense to raise the awareness of gender equality actors about the advantages of digitalization and to expand individual digital skills for better networking and feminist campaigns.

Exploring paralyzing emotional experiences

Connected to the creation of silence is an emotional component. It is a mixture of emotions oscillating between paralysis, fear, anger, and empowerment – in both the participants and the researchers. Next, we present the first three emotional experiences. In the second part of the findings section on the disruption of silence, we talk more about empowerment.

Paralysis was the most striking feeling, which seems to prevent progress and action. It comes in different forms: 'I was very dissatisfied with the paralysis that I felt again and again among the actors' (T6, lines 75f). The perceived paralysis of EDI experts is not only based on the political situation. The cultural boundaries of feminist approaches and the substantive personal boundaries connected to these theoretical boundaries (T6, lines 290f) also create a kind of paralysis in the EDI experts.

The researchers also voice their feelings of paralysis and attribute them to different notions. For example, a self-challenging of the researchers' positions in their feminist doing in terms of 'is it always appropriate?' has the potential to weaken their position. One researcher put the paralysis in the context of the political situation:

> For a long time, I felt a paralysis in the diversity discourse, which has been appropriated by the ÖVP. This paralysis changed for the worse with the shift to the right in the Austrian political

landscape. That is why it was particularly important for me to remember where I come from in terms of interest in politics and science. I come from a feminist background and the political landscape indicated that this topic should be brought up again.' (T6, lines 116f)

She also connects this feeling of paralysis to her status as a researcher and tries to get to the bottom of her 'feminist duties'.

Additionally, anger and fears based on a lack or even loss of perspectives led repeatedly to a discussion about withdrawal. It is experienced as a weakness, especially when associated with personal connections. Difficult personal situations also represent factors causing the slowdown shown in the following quote: 'I experience a very hesitant behavior in myself, rather foaming, as never before in my scholarly life' (T6, lines 174f). The scholars experienced different intensities, especially concerning temporal and energetic limits (T6, lines 211f).

Exploring fault lines and ambivalences

The central ambivalence articulated is the simultaneous decline of collective political claims on the one hand, and a claim for 'new' gender issues based on developments in feminist theory (e.g., on the third gender) on the other hand. 'I had the feeling that we could point out different forms of contradictions and yet did not leave the participants with their personal impressions' (T6, lines 9–13).

Another topic is the emphasis on expansion of cooperation inside own organizations and the unnecessarily ambivalent call for more solidarity outside or beyond one's organizations. In the same vein, there is also the demand to expand collaboration. 'The women are individually connected and networking, but official cooperation across the official committees is very difficult. Protection and belonging to one's own institution are then in the focus or above the common interest' (T6, lines 214f).

Biographical and emotional notions paired with different modes of practice and fault lines can create silence but can also work as a trigger for looking for aspects of opposition. All this should be considered vis-à-vis work overload, which makes the experts run out of steam. These changes toward less gender equality are embedded in an energy-sapping context for the experts. Moreover, to be no longer inquired and heard as an expert not only reduces influence and power but also costs energy. A resulting discomfort may lead to a dis-identification and distancing from the troublesome gender equality work. Hence, we want to focus now on the disruption of silence through collective action.

4.2 Disruption of silence through collective action

To build up new frames for disrupting silence, some of the EDI experts advocate new spaces: 'There is a little missing… a space where you say, you sit down there, you can discuss it without everyone bothering each other and saying, yeah, something might happen. […] I think this is a bundling of forces… and also of topics' (T2, lines 1220f). What is striking about the possibilities for action is the importance of solidarity and the collective. The experts position themselves against existing tendencies toward individualization and call for counter-

strategies. However, to come up with these strategies to escape a spiral of silence and inner exile, more space for reflection is needed. A reflection on escaping silence will be presented later. Next, we refer to drivers for collective action, empowering emotional processes, and changing roles.

Exploring drivers for collective action

Our drivers for collective action in this time of change are manifold: The first and foremost drivers are our feminist biographies. Sharing biographical experiences is enriching, as the following quote shows: 'The return to where I come from, both, politically and scientifically, was particularly important. Coming from the feminist movement and the advancement of women, the political landscape suggested that this issue should become an issue again' (T6, lines 206ff). In this context, the explicit wish is to pass on experiences and knowledge to improve the situation of women and counteract the political situation (T6, lines 133f) – all informed by former feminist activism.

The second driver for collective action refers to the dissatisfaction with the infiltration of achievements in gender equality politics and a re-consolidation of heteronormativity. 'Even if there were many ideas for action, we see that personal branding (*Marke Ich*) of politicians seems to be more important than women's equality politics and a decline in political support for women's issues at all levels' (T6, lines 188ff).

Another strong driver claims sharing experiences and wishes to maintain solidarity. One of the researchers articulates the desire to make strong actors visible and to strive for solidarity: 'I sense that one of my wishes is to re-gain and revive a kind of common ground' (T6, lines 129f). Hence, feminist biographies, dissatisfaction with certain political developments, and seeking solidarity represent potential drivers for collective action.

Exploring empowering emotional experiences

The project had a strengthening effect on EDI experts and researchers and showed that the differences in positions, experiences, and approaches to gender equality are part of the feminist discourse. 'It was not only nice to see familiar faces, but also empowering to see that similar topics are being dealt with in different ways' (T6, lines 168f).

There are many indications for respectful and appreciative interaction and perceived empowerment during the project. Although several passages in the introspections point out that the scholars and experts are discouraged, other sections emphasize positive reinforcement and indicate strength for new activities (T6, lines 18f).

Collective feminist goals and actions developed during the workshops can be considered an interplay of the familiar and the new. 'It was good to experience that we, as two old colleagues and the representatives of the next generation and newcomers, were able to develop a kind of collective feeling, which seems for us important for reaching feminist goals' (T6, lines 154f). In particular, this shared experience evolved through the respectful, appreciative interaction among the scholars (T6, lines 167f).

Exploring mode of roles

In the course of the events that followed the focus group discussions, the roles of the scholars changed. 'We could have made our approaches, for example, with regard to our content-related passive role in the group discussions, more transparent for the participants' (T6, lines 202f). After the focus groups, the workshop format enabled the scholars to be more present and to participate more in terms of content: 'From phase to phase, the roles loosened up, and in the phase that was originally planned, when it was more about activism, they might have been completely dissolved – actually a nice implementation of the goal of the project' (T6, lines 259f).

As the process progressed, the role of the researchers changed into positioning as participants and part of the group. Hence, the scholars adopted other roles, such as moderators, experts, and persons affected by political change. 'In the three focus groups, I had the feeling that I was left out. That has changed with the workshops. We were part of the group' (T6, lines 13f). In this context, the term 'participatory' in the action research project got its meaning and justification: the roles of the researchers blurred and faded out.

In line with this blurring of boundaries and interweaving aspect, the relationships between the researchers have also developed. The role allocation of the researchers based on their different backgrounds, histories, statuses, and individual development of feminist positions (T6, lines 103f) blurred. For example, the senior-junior role allocation that existed at the beginning of the project (T6, line 250f) changed. Additionally, relationships between the experts and researchers have changed (T6, lines 206f).

Last, the importance of 'safe spaces' was emphasized repeatedly. One important practice in our internal discussions was to provide a setting for reflection where the participants could experience a protected space for their assessments. This role of process responsibility in the project was particularly relevant for the focus groups. One researcher experienced the pure moderator role as a special feature: 'I found it particularly interesting to simply let the experts talk in the different group compositions' (T6, lines 38f).

A withdrawal to a 'safe space' was seen by one researcher as protection and, thus, also a possibility to activate new forces. 'The feelings that I have associated with withdrawal strategy: I had previously associated withdrawal very strongly with resignation and defeat, but now I also associate it as an opportunity to generate strength' (T6, lines 22f). Next to a search for, and curiosity about exchange beyond individual networks, the experts were also longing for a safe space (T6, lines 161f).

To sum up, roles, relationships, and spaces changed throughout the practices toward more familiarity and integration, which helps in disrupting silence and forming collective action.

Creation of spaces for disrupting silence

To resist possible disengagement processes and to go on striving for gender equality, the EDI experts need more inspiring and active alliances for gender equality. The creation of these alliances also needs safe spaces. In this context, it makes sense to speak of safe spaces as a process of becoming that serves the kinds of EDI-experts' activities that their critics hold to be all-important. Safe spaces allow the relational work of sharing and recognizing to re-occupy official spaces again (Hill, 2020).

Old and new alliances can strengthen the EDI experts' position by seeking common ground, opening up to other positions, and integrating them. In addition, introducing new publicity based on digitalization and reconnecting again to existing networks nationally and internationally represents a way of supporting collective feminist endeavors for counteracting increasing gender-inequality forces.

For such a reflection, Hibbert et al. (2019) offer *two reflexive practices*, which embrace or avoid taking over responsibility – namely critical- and self-reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2016). In the context of the EDI experts, *critical reflexivity* focuses on the external environment and its constitutive role and positioning for gender equality. *Self-reflexivity* centers on the surfacing and questioning of the values and assumptions taken for granted by the EDI experts while working for gender equality and that are at stake now.

To avoid becoming stuck in regressive gender equality developments, it helps to discuss this critical and self-reflexivity along with Hibbert et al.'s (2019) framework, which addresses the intersection of the target of change (here gender equality) and modes of reflexive practices. According to this framework, a call to change may lead to transformative action either in the *avoidance* or *engagement* mode, both requiring action. In the former, the avoidance mode, the EDI experts may choose between *resigning* (to go on as before) and *relocating* (to place oneself at some physical or mental distance from the equality politics issues that create discomfort). In the latter, in the engagement mode, the EDI experts may reflect on *reconfiguring* (seeking to deliberately transform oneself to fit in with a desired picture or role) and *resisting* (as a way of responding through direct action to challenge organizational authority or dominant ideologies). Such reflections help to situate oneself in the double fault line.

It needs enough space for discussing the implementation of more open concepts of gender as it is a challenge for the experts in this time of antifeminist politics, as they lose old fellow campaigners for gender equality. For these comrades-in-arms, the implementation of the third gender goes too far. To reflect on this problem, Hemmings (2012) proposed the concept of affective solidarity for moving away from rooting feminist transformation in the politics of identity and toward modes of engagement that start from an affective dissonance experience. Being aware of the physiological, emotional, or cognitive sense of being 'struck' and 'stuck' is key to critical self-reflexivity and learning. A focus on dissonance experiences opens the door for questioning ways of understanding and being. Working with EDI issues is a rational process, cognitive work, and emotional involvement. Reflexive thought and practices require a deeper understanding of the entangled role of emotions. Emotions involve the self in the social context, and emotional engagement with others offers a better understanding of the insights provided (Hibbert et al., 2019). Thus, differences in motivation toward reflexive actions may be associated with an emotional tone, for example, positive and stimulating or negative and resigning. For a better understanding of these tones, one needs space and time for setting up compassion (e.g., Davis, 2017) that makes it possible to listen to and understand the suffering of the other to set up new collective actions.

Finally, space is needed for reflecting on observations in other fields of social transformation. For example, 'prefigurative partaking' (Skoglund & Böhm, 2020) as practice in environmental activism is based on a collective movement that is boundaryless insofar as it is transgressing traditional forms of organized politics. To stretch the overused individual strength and boundaries of the EDI experts, a transformative process to overcome regressive gender equality politics may furthermore not be considered as 'a situated struggle against sovereign power and authority, but as a transformative force that is distributed across spaces and times' (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017, p. 1304). Such a kind of activism can be horizontal,

from which an uncharted alternative form of organizing unfolds, which may be incremental but based on a 'pro' agenda that alters rather than counters. Such prefigurative partaking may open new doors for the EDI experts and allow for coming up with new narratives.

5 Conclusion

To improve the theoretical understanding of manifestations of politics and gender equality during a shift to the right, this paper contributes to gaining more knowledge on the situation of experts working in the EDI field. Our participatory action research project unveils that the EDI experts experience a double fault line, which has the power to lead to inner exile and create silence. On the one hand, they lose former allies and supporters. On the other hand, the EDI experts face a revival of conservative forces, who have been in hibernation and see their chance dawning on the horizon based on the re-encouragement of antifeminist politics.

The EDI experts are exposed to a beginning spiral of silence, which is induced by several points: First, antifeminist and antigender equality positions have become the political majority. In other words, the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition was able to install a positive relationship between antifeminist climate perceptions and antifeminist political opinion expression. This 'new' dominant culture based on the political re-introduction of androcentrism and essentialist notions of gender links directly to the 'old' dominant culture of androcentrism, which EDI experts have opposed with their progressive gender equality politics as tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Second, the silencing pressure also depends on the open/hidden public and intra-organizational hostility. EDI activists and experts may perceive this pressure differently depending on their insider/outsider status (Brisco & Gupta, 2016). Third, personal and organizational ambivalences concerning the decline of gender equality, anger, and fear as well as a questioning of the own positioning and feminist action nurture the spiral of silence. Finally, this lack of voice based on self-selection and/or forced absence and silencing pressure can lead to inner exile and gives way to even more silence.

To escape the progress of silence, EDI experts should focus more on their part as active members who keep their voice in this silencing process. This means embracing the powerful active-oriented notions of silence. To do so, our participatory action research data ask for a re-collection of EDI experts and advocates in safe spaces. Even if those who need or desire safe spaces are treated as the problem – 'feminist killjoys' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 74), for example – rather than holding a mirror to the institutional space in which they might feel unsafe.

These safe spaces allow reflections on their personal positioning and considerations on questions for whom and for what experts and feminist activists are fighting to create new prefigurative narratives that may stretch out for new allies beyond known feminist territories.

The collection of the data in the focus groups would not have sufficed to unveil the notion of silence and coming up with the double fault line and the suggestions needed to work against the grain of upcoming gender equality opposition. Only the participatory aspect of the project – our work with the experts over almost a year in the workshops and our auto-ethnographic data – made it possible to unveil biographical, emotional, and positioning aspects, which EDI experts face in this time of political change to the right. We have been in a process in which we – the EDI experts and researchers – came together to draw on each other's knowledge to reflect on the complex phenomenon of the influence of right-wing poli-

tics on EDI issues (see Arieli et al., 2009) and to generate mutual learning. By creating this 'community of inquiry' (Friedman, 2001), we contributed to building knowledge on different notions of silence, which would have resulted in taking concrete action against the reverse of gender politics – if COVID-19 had not interrupted our collective feminist engagement.

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All different but all misogynists

Möser, C., Ramme, J. & Takács, J. (Eds.) (2022). Paradoxical Right-Wing Sexual Politics in Europe. Palgrave Macmillan

In recent years, with the strengthening of the populist right and its increased focus on gender and sexuality, there has been growing interest in studying this issue among researchers of social sciences, leading to the publication of several edited volumes (e.g., Kuhar & Paternotte, eds., 2017; Krizsán & Roggeband, eds., 2019, or Kováts & Põim, eds., 2015). Yet another volume on this topic, therefore, needs to promise something extra beyond the general description of right-wing anti-gender strategies most of us in the field are already familiar with. This collection of essays promises such an extra addition (a focus on paradoxes), and while it does not consistently keep this perspective, it does offer some exciting new additions to the literature of right-wing populism and gender. It grew out of a research project that would have compared right-wing discursive strategies regarding gender and sexuality in Europe, and which, though never completed, provided enough inspiration to a number of renowned researchers to explore these issues in their local context. This original background also accounts for the fact that most articles focus on analyzing discourses (of parties, organizations like the World Congress of Families, or even of researchers), and (with one exception) less attention is paid to the experiences of ordinary people.

The original idea of the project was to pair certain countries with very different contexts, where nevertheless the same traveling concepts and paradoxes can be observed with regard to right-wing activities. Though eventually only two such comparisons were realized, these constitute the perhaps most intriguing chapters of the book. Monica Cornejo-Valle and Jennifer Ramme compare Poland and Spain, with special attention to the role of the Catholic Church in these countries. These two countries are often seen as polar opposites in terms of gender and LGBTQ+ rights, with Spain having same-sex marriage and Poland restricting abortion and designating certain municipalities as 'LGBT-free zones'. Nevertheless, the chapter reveals that the Catholic Church functions very similarly in both, at least in terms of supporting right-wing ideologies. At the end of the article, one cannot help but wonder how come we see huge differences between these countries in terms of policies and public opinion. While one may have some guesses (e.g., a strong feminist tradition in Spain in contrast to a conflicted attitude to feminism in Poland), the authors could have paid more attention to these factors as well. While the Catholic Church is certainly an important factor in the

spread of right-wing ideologies, its local manifestations may be quite diverse, and (as the article on Italy, to be discussed later, also testifies) its influence on politics strongly depends on the local environment.

The other country-to-country comparison, Cornelia Möser's and Eva Reimers' piece on France and Sweden, uses the different interpretations of citizenship as the foundation of analysis, and makes an important point when emphasizing that right-wing sexual politics may be inclusive of (certain types of) women's and LGBTQ+ rights and yet constrain the sexual self-determination of other groups, such as migrants. What they call 'classical racism in homotolerant and feminist guise' (p. 100) has indeed popped up its head not only in the US (the 'homonationalism' described by Jasbir Puar) but even in countries where the leadership otherwise ignores or even curtails women's and LGBTQ+ people's rights – unless they can be instrumentalized to oppress other groups. With the recent election of the extreme right-wing party into the Swedish parliament, it has now become increasingly important to be aware of such ideologies.

Portugal seems to be an exception to the general advancement of the extreme right in the EU. Ana Cristina Santos gives a good overview on the present political situation, but what I consider her article's most valuable part is the excerpts from interviews conducted with members of the LGBTQ+ community. All too often, political analyses of right-wing populism focus on parties and social movements and ignore the effect these have on the population. Santos' chapter reflects that though the influence of the extreme right is still insignificant in their country at the parliamentary level, LGBTQ+ people already feel it in their everyday lives. More research would be needed on how right-wing rhetoric, though perhaps marginal in terms of policymaking, nevertheless exercises an effect on experiences and fears of homophobia.

Meloni's recent victory at the Italian elections makes it especially important to study the path that led to this unfortunate turn. Luca Trappolin's chapter gives a thorough overview of the various right-wing actors on the political and NGO scene. It maps the development of various groups and events, with special focus on the World Congress of Families – an important organization connecting right-wing groups within and outside Europe, which has played an important political role, therefore, its influences should also be examined in countries where it is less visible. Of the case studies, this is the first one in the book that explicitly deals with paradoxes, including the conflictual relationship between the Vatican and various right-wing political and civil society actors. Another point of interest is how certain right-wing actors try to avoid explicitly homophobic language in order to appear palatable, but this does not make their ideas any less 'anti-gender'. This is again a phenomenon also present in other countries of Western Europe and would be worth a study of its own. Another topic worth researching could be the relationship of such right-wing actors to those in countries (e.g., Poland or Hungary) where homophobia is an accepted part of public discourse and is frequently utilized by right-wing parties and other groups. Whereas the explicit nationalism of extreme right-wing parties and political groupings makes it unlikely that they would ally with their counterparts abroad, this is exactly what is happening within the context of the World Congress of Families.

Moving on to Austria, Karin Stögner uses antisemitism as the silver thread to examine the politics and rhetoric of the FPÖ (Freedom Party). After a (perhaps unnecessarily lengthy and too psychological) introduction, she analyzes not only what the party's leaders have said but also printed – visual and written – materials; the analysis of images is especially fruitful

in detecting hidden nationalistic messages. This is a strength of the chapter, but unfortunately the focus on antisemitism is its weakness. While it is certainly important to call attention to lingering hidden (or in some instances, not-so-hidden) antisemitism in right-wing circles, some of Stögner's examples seem somewhat contrived; instead of illustrating antisemitism, they rather highlight a general mistrust of difference of any kind (especially within the ethnically perceived nation, something she calls 'mixophobia'). At the same time, underlining that antisemitism is indeed still present, however hidden (or not) in extreme right-wing discourses is important, as too often it is obscured by focusing on other, more explicitly scapegoated minorities.

Hungary has been widely discussed as a prime example of a country where the government itself represents extreme right-wing anti-genderist and homophobic views. While Erzsébet Barát's discourse analysis does start with the banning of gender studies by the FIDESZ government, a more interesting issue she raises is how trans* people and queerfeminism have become scapegoated by certain sections of the women's movement. While her analysis is limited to a single publication, without exploring the verbal and at times even physical violence exhibited by certain transphobic Hungarian feminists, her chapter is an important reminder that even allegedly progressive social movements may become allies of the extreme right. More research would be needed, however, to explore how these two groups (right-wing groups and trans-exclusionary feminists) perceive each other and whether there are any connections between the two in terms of borrowed concepts and rhetoric or even, possibly, informal ties.

Russia is an important actor in far-right networks, not only as the largest European country with a populist right-wing government, but also because it has close connections with right-wing parties and organizations elsewhere (including the World Congress of Families). Erin Katherine Krafft's chapter examines the Russian anti-gender backlash from a historical and political perspective, putting it into the context of the state's constant construction of enemies within and outside its borders – something that has led to sad results since the book's publication. A minor but especially interesting element in the article is the description of how gender studies centers were not banned, like in Hungary, but transformed in a way that they reinforce rather than question 'traditional' gender norms. Similarly to Erzsébet Barát's chapter on Hungary, this warns that socially critical disciplines may be appropriated and misused by forces aiming to curtail the rights of certain groups.

Finally, Ulrike M. Vieten's chapter on Northern Ireland introduces yet another perspective. Here the group allegedly representing the threat to traditional values is not defined on the basis of sexual orientation, ethnic background or refugee status but religion ('sectarianism'). Consequently, right-wing sexual politics is more focused on abortion rights than other forms of sexual self-determination. While somewhat different in topic, this chapter contributes importantly to the overall picture, showing that depending on the cultural and political context, the populist right selects various groups as 'enemies', but in all cases, control over sexuality is central to their politics.

Eva Reimers and Olaf Stuve's conclusion makes explicit some of the paradoxes explored (sometimes only implicitly) in the previous papers. What is more interesting, though, is the part called 'Missing Links', where they call attention to largely unexplored factors in the functioning of the extreme right – the importance of hegemonic masculinity, the strategies of populism and the fact that movements against LGBTQ people and sexual self-determination often connect very different forces. While there is ample literature on

how homophobia is rooted in 'traditional' gender norms, and the articles of this volume, as well as some others, have analyzed how right-wing populism restricts women's and LGBTQ+ people's rights, its connection with heterosexual masculinity is rarely studied in depth. Considering the fact that a large percentage of right-wing voters come from the lower classes, the visual and verbal images of hegemonic masculinity by some right-wing populist parties probably give a partial explanation of their popularity. The third 'missing link', that of alliances between very different forces, may have practical significance for political and civil society actors working for human rights. Exposing the contradictions of right-wing populism and emphasizing the differences between its actors may help break up these unholy alliances. Möser, Ramme and Takács's volume is an important contribution to this effort.

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Lídia Balogh* & Tímea Drinóczi**

The missing arc of a backlash? Thirty years of constitutional debate on 'women's equality' in Hungary

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Abstract

The argumentation in this paper is based on the proposition that constitutions play a key role in defining the approach to women's social status, not just by determining ordinary legislation and public policy, but also through constitutional review. The focus is on Hungary, a country that is not famous in Europe for a high level of equality between men and women, surrounded by a (liberal) international political discourse which asserts a backlash and claims that women's equal rights are being curtailed *even more* during the era of Orbán's illiberal government. Against this discursive backdrop, the paper highlights a counterintuitive phenomenon: since the democratic transition (1989–1990) all the key constitutional disputes related to equality between the sexes have been initiated by men claiming instances of discrimination *against men*, as if women were *too privileged* in Hungary. A relevant contextual feature is that while equal legal standing for the sexes is guaranteed (due partly to the heritage of state socialism, then to efforts related to EU integration), affirmative measures for women are also constitutionally ensured. The Constitutional Court has deployed surprisingly poor-quality reasoning in these disputes, suggesting that it never considered equality between the sexes to be an important issue. This leads us to claim that certain persistent features have characterized this field since the 1990s, not the dynamics of reversal since the 2010s. With our empirical findings, we aim to contribute to the academic discourse in a way that challenges the backlash narrative regarding developments in Hungary from a specific perspective.

Keywords: Hungary; constitution; gender; equal treatment; backlash; constitutional review

1 Introduction

1.1 Our thematic focus

We address an understudied topic – namely, the jurisprudence of the Hungarian Constitutional Court (hereinafter: CC) concerning equality between women and men from the 1990s until the 2020s. Our thematic choice reflects our conviction that legal research may benefit from a gender perspective and marks our ambition to contribute to the broader scholarship on gender and transition in the Central-East European region.

To provide a glimpse into the topic of the paper, we recall here a high-profile anti-discrimination case (Sipos, 2018) about a seemingly petty issue which concluded in a CC decision in 2016.[1] Many features of the context are concentrated in this case, like the 'ocean in a drop'. The story started in 2013 when a young man – an activist from a progressive student organization – turned to the Equal Treatment Authority (hereinafter: ETA) to complain that a bar in Budapest had discriminated against him based on his sex. At the time, men had to pay a moderate price for a drink voucher to be admitted to this bar, while women were offered free entrance. The complainant clarified that he saw the issue as a two-fold problem: on the surface, the policy obviously discriminated against men, but it also sent the controversial message 'that men are supposed to pay in order to get access to those women who have been collected by the bar for them'.[2] The defendant used a dubious defence by claiming that the policy was a positive measure aimed at saving women from the inconvenience of standing in the queue outside the entrance, and from suffering due to the misbehaviour of male guests who were liable to stampede and verbally harass women. The ETA rejected this argumentation and established discrimination based on sex,[3] referring to the Equal Treatment Act and the Fundamental Law (Hungary's constitution from 2011, hereinafter: FL). In a media interview, the complainant explained that although he had argued from the position of a man who had experienced discrimination, his goal was to raise awareness regarding the degrading treatment of women in bars and clubs in Budapest, and more generally, in Hungarian society (Magyarkúti, 2013). While the defendant had suggested that the policy was a positive measure for women, the complainant claimed that it was ultimately rather harmful to them. Indeed, while the CC's decision established discrimination against men, it is far from obvious whether the policy harmed either women or men. As for the CC's role in this case, it virtually repeated the ETA's decision and did not bother to elaborate on its own reasoning.

Through the analysis contained below, we will demonstrate that the features of this case are symptomatic.

1.2 The Hungarian Constitutional Court

The CC in Hungary was established within the framework of the democratic transition: it was formed in November 1989 and started to operate in January 1990. From 2012, under the regime of the FL, the governing Fidesz coalition managed to change both the competence of the CC (by shifting from abstract constitutional reviews of laws to constitutional control

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[1] 3001/2016. (I. 15.).

[2] EBH/579/2013.

[3] EBH/545/13/2013. In the same year, another man filed a similar complaint with the ETA against a bar that offered free entrance for women until midnight, while men had to pay a small entrance fee. The bar argued, first, that the policy was a positive measure aimed at counteracting the gender pay gap; second, that it represented a gesture to both sexes considering the societal expectation that men pay for women's drinks in bars; third, that it was a 'business necessity' since women would not come in sufficient numbers if they had to pay an entrance fee, which would demotivate men from visiting the bar. The ETA dismissed this defence and established direct discrimination against men (EBH/579/2013).

of court decisions) and its composition (by increasing the number of seats and filling them with loyal judges). The new judges in this 'packed court' (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2022) have supported the government's political aims (Szente, 2016).

We may also mention the permanent feature of male dominance during the CC's three-decade-long history. The first female judge was elected only in 1999, ten years after the establishment of the CC; in 2022 there are four women among the fifteen judges. However, we will restrain from making any conclusive remarks regarding this situation: first, we cannot assume that women judges would *per se* be more sensitive to questions related to inequalities; second, it would be misleading to consider the sex ratio among CC judges as a relevant factor in the context of the packing of the court.

1.3 Theoretical framework

Our endeavour of longitudinally analysing Hungarian constitutional jurisprudence concerning the equality of sexes is a timely task since there is an emerging (liberal) international academic and political discourse about the alleged backlash against women's rights in Hungary, which includes the assertion that the legal equality of women has been curtailed since 2010 when the Orbán government started to build a regime of illiberalism. Notably, the term 'backlash' was coined decades earlier and in a different context: in Susan Faludi's book (1991) about antifeminism in the US. Currently, there is a broader backlash narrative that has become prevalent since the 2010s (Grabowska, 2015; Juhász & Pap, 2018) based on the claim that women's hard-won rights are being challenged or restricted in several EU Member States. The European-level backlash narrative became 'official' when the European Parliament issued a resolution 'on experiencing a backlash in women's rights and gender equality in the EU';[4] and this conceptualisation started to appear in the publications of the CoE and the UN (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). Importantly, the backlash narrative is part of a broader narrative about an alleged political tendency termed 'anti-genderism' (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). Key scholars in the field have already suggested moving beyond the backlash narrative (Grzebalska & Kováts, 2018) or have claimed that the latter is misleading due to its conceptual shortcomings and empirical weaknesses (Paternotte, 2020). However, Western promoters of the related academic discourse still often make allegations such as that transnational 'anti-gender activism' opposes 'protection against gender violence' (Johnson, Fábián & Lazda, 2022, p. 349). Indeed, while rejection of the CoE Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) is growing in some countries (Krizsán & Roggebrand, 2021), the 'gender backlash' narrative seems unhelpful for explaining it. Obviously, controversy surrounds the Convention's concept of 'gender', but it is questionable what 'gender' encompasses for the 'anti-gender' movement in different contexts: is it a term used to address issues related to equality between women and men, together with sexual orientation and gender identity issues, or is it 'an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order' (Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető, 2017), including the global economy and

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[4] 018/2684(RSP).

supranational institutions? Notably, the word 'gender' has come to be used in many senses even in mainstream discourse: for social roles, for stereotypes about the sexes, for gender identity, and as a (polite) synonym for sex (Stock, 2019).

We acknowledge that the backlash narrative is sometimes formulated in a comprehensive and nuanced way, taking into account diverse phenomena related to 'gender' and 'anti-gender' issues. Some scholars focus on transnational movements (Goetz, 2020) or political rhetoric (Lewin, 2021) instead of legal or policy developments; others consider not just reactive but pre-emptive initiatives (Rubio-Marín, 2021). Being aware of these accounts, we seek to contribute to the scholarship that challenges the empirical validity of the backlash narrative from a specific perspective. We deliberately focus on a single issue related to the alleged backlash: equality between women and men, understood as legal equality or equal treatment. We have chosen this issue because, for a diachronic analysis, we need to examine a 'classic' issue which has explicitly been on the agenda for several decades. We discuss here just one layer of legal material – namely, constitutional jurisprudence, since we presume that constitutions, which are meant to guarantee some continuity and coherence, play a key role in defining the approach to the social status of men and women, not just by determining ordinary legislation and public policy, but also through constitutional review. We are intrigued by the question of whether there is an identifiable arc of backlash regarding the equality of sexes, to the disadvantage of women. We assume that what the mainstream international literature tends to see as an accelerated reversal – a 'backlash' – will be revealed instead as a long-existing feature of the legal culture in Hungary, at least on the level of constitutional jurisprudence, with similar patterns in the liberal and illiberal era.

1.4 Methodology

We take a closer look at the constitutional adjudication in cases that addressed the issue of equality between or equal treatment of women and men since 1990, when Hungary's CC started to operate, by re-reading and re-assessing the relevant decisions.

Case selection was based on a review of the Hungarian academic literature: we discuss the CC decisions that are considered the most important (of the not-so-many relevant decisions) related to equality between women and men. The relevance of our endeavour is underlined by the revelation that the scholarship on this specific topic is limited to a few publications (Kovács 2008; 2012; Sipos, 2018), and the related case law has never been challenged from a systemic critical, gender-sensitive perspective by paying attention to the system and hierarchy of women's and men's expected social roles. However, we assess the decisions within their own conceptual and logical context, and we do not seek to re-write them, unlike contributors to 'feminist judgement projects' (Rackley, 2012).

Brief insight into the context is provided below, including developments related to the issue of equality between women and men (understood as legal equality or equal treatment) in constitutional legislation, ordinary legislation, and public policies. Then, a summary and analyses of the most relevant decisions of the CC are presented, before a discussion of the findings, drawing of conclusions, and evaluation of the significance of our contribution to the scholarship.

2 The Context

2.1 International norms and EU expectations

We start the assessment of the relevant legal framework by considering Hungary's compliance with external standards.

The principle of legal equality between men and women is virtually fully provided for at higher levels of legislation in Hungary, including the constitutional level. This is partly rooted in the heritage of state socialism (the Marxist conceptualization of equality and women's emancipation), and partly in efforts to meet Western European standards to enable Hungary's integration into the EU.

Hungary ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1982. After the political transition, joining the CoE (1990) and the EU (2004) entailed lots of human rights and equal treatment obligations, which Hungary usually observed. However, the non-ratification of CoE's Istanbul Convention by Hungary is considered high-profile defiance in this field (Drinóczi & Balogh, 2021). Moreover, according to the index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), an autonomous body of the EU, Hungary has progressed the least among the Member States since 2005 in terms of equality between the sexes; in 2020, Hungary's scores in all domains were lower than the EU average.[5] We provide contextual information below about the relevant aspects while not losing our focus on constitutional jurisprudence.

2.2 The social context in Hungary

There is a vast international scholarship on gender issues in post-socialist societies, to which we offer our contribution. However, we will not assess the general situation of women from 1989-1990, nor consider whether things have changed for better or worse for women since the political transition. With the aim of delineating the background for our focal topic, we address below only one apparently relevant question concerning the social context – namely, the lack of continuity in the development of domestic women's movements.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Hungarian first-wave feminists (Acsády, 1999) had similar demands and achieved similar successes to their counterparts in Western countries related to women's secondary and tertiary education, the right to have a profession, and voting rights. Even when Hungary found itself among the losers of the Second World War, the country did not lag behind Europe in terms of women's legal situation. Hungarian women were able to participate for the first time in a general election under conditions of full suffrage in November 1945 – only a couple of months after French women and a couple of months before Italian women had the same opportunity. Hungary's communist constitution (1949) provided that women should enjoy equal rights with men, and during the post-war years significant changes happened to enhance women's legal position in various fields of life, including education, employment, and family matters (Schadt, 2005). However,

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[5] *Gender Equality Index 2020: Hungary,* https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-hungary.

economic changes shaped even more powerfully the lives of women. When more workforce was needed for the emerging socialist economy, women were pushed into certain segments of the labour market. Several decades later, when there was a need to reduce the workforce supply, women were provided with the option to take longer periods of maternity leave. While the life of the average woman in state-socialist Hungary was rather unenviable (due to the double burden of work outside and inside the home and insufficient childcare services, etc.), many of the objectives of Western feminists, like the recognition of women as workers or for maternity leave, were irrelevant in this context (Neményi, 1994). According to the official rhetoric, women's emancipation was realized through the implementation of Marxism, and feminism was a decadent bourgeois ideology (Haney, 1994). Nor should we forget that Hungary was under Soviet military occupation between 1945–1991, which dramatically limited space for social movements. Moreover, among the internal dynamics of the underground political opposition movement in Hungary, like in some other state-socialist countries (Snitow, 2020), feminist agendas would have been considered disruptive.

After the democratic change, the establishment of a massive feminist movement in Hungary was prevented, in among other ways, by neo-conservative tendencies in society (Pető, 2010). The post-socialist era involved the phenomenon of 'NGO-isation' typical of the region: a narrow understanding of civil society became prevalent, basically reduced to professionalised advocacy organisations with no ability to engage citizens (Císař, 2020). As for the post-2010 era, a report (Szikra et al., 2020) presents Hungarian civil society as polarized: some organisations that work on women's issues enjoy the generous support of the state, while others experience a rather discouraging environment. The assessment of these developments is outside of the scope of the paper: we aim here only to provide a sketch to contextualise our focal question.

2.3 Constitutional legislation

Since the democratic change, Hungary has employed two different constitutions, a liberal and an illiberal one.

The political system transformed into a democratic one in 1989–1990; during this process, the communist constitution from 1949 was dismembered to create a liberal one (hereinafter: Constitution) that focused on the protection of the individual vis-à-vis the more powerful and was committed to state neutrality in certain significant fields; for example, in private life.

In the 2010 elections, the Fidesz party, together with the Christian Democrats as a junior coalition partner, achieved a two-thirds majority and adopted, in a non-inclusive process, a partisan, paternalistic constitution: the FL, with a value orientation (increasingly entrenched through subsequent amendments) focused on Christianity and traditional gender and family roles, including heteronormativity (Pap, 2015).

The Constitution included equality, non-discrimination, and affirmative action clauses referring explicitly to equality between the sexes and the prohibition of sex-based discrimination and specified distinct obligations for men and women if the country should need to be defended. The FL implies all these features; while the wording of these provisions is slightly different at some points, it does not impact the content. However, the FL deviates considerably from the Constitution, with the potential to bring about changes in ordinary legislation

and public policy. For instance, the Constitution included the principle of equal pay, the mandate to punish discrimination, and the state obligation to protect mothers before and after childbirth, while the FL does not include any of these provisions.

As for affirmative action, the Constitution provided that separate regulations 'shall establish the responsibilities of the State regarding the situation and protection of the family and youth,'[6] while the FL provides that 'Hungary shall protect families, children, women, the elderly and those living with disabilities' by means of separate measures.[7] Both conceptualisations are based on a Dworkinian understanding of the 'equality of resources' (Kovács, 2012), in accordance with EU standards. In the context of employment, the Constitution provided for separate regulations to protect 'women and youth'[8] while the FL provides that 'young people and parents' shall be protected by special measures.[9]

With regard to social rights, while the Constitution prescribed that citizens 'of old age, living with sickness or disability, widows, orphans and those who are unemployed through no fault of their own' are entitled to support,[10] the FL stipulates that citizens are entitled to social assistance 'in the event of maternity, illness, invalidity, disability, widowhood, orphanage and unemployment for reasons outside of their control'.[11] Moreover, while the Constitution used to provide the 'right to social security', in this context the FL determines only that the state 'strives to provide social security'. Notably, the right to social security was conceptualized by the CC in a decision from 1998[12] such that citizens should be provided with a certain degree of minimum subsistence. However, the CC was able to exploit the potential of this approach in practice until 2011 when the FL adopted a new approach. It returned to the CC jurisprudence of the early 1990s (Drinóczi & Juhász, 2016) when the constitutional provision on social rights was interpreted as a form of goal-setting for the state, rather than as establishing a subjective right.

The Constitution facilitated the establishment of a legislative framework and a system of public policies that furthered Hungary's compliance with EU standards with regard to equality. Then came the FL with a general equality clause, which is derived from the CC's jurisprudence and is formulated adequately, but narrows the scope of application (with regard to affirmative action) and reduces the (potential) level of protection in the field of social rights. Obviously, the constitutional provisions related to equality and women's rights should be operationalized by adequate legislation, which should be implemented by administrative authorities and applied by the judicial branch (including the CC, during constitutional review). The actual impact of these constitutional arrangements thus depends on the interpretation of the relevant actors. Considering this, we review below how ordinary legislation and public policy have been affected by the systemic changes in Hungary since 2010 and which developments have been labelled in the academic literature with various terms such as the 'creation of illiberal constitutionalism' (Drinóczi & Bień Kacała, 2022) and the 'emergence of populist constitutionalism' (Gárdos-Orosz, 2020).

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[6] Article 67(3).
[7] Article XV(5).
[8] Article 66(3).
[9] Article XVIII (2).
[10] Article 70/E (1).
[11] Article XIX(1).
[12] 32/1998. (VI. 25.).

2.4 Ordinary legislation and public policies

With regard to the legal and policy developments related to the issue of equality between women and men, the key role of the EU is obvious. The country's EU membership has entailed lots of equal treatment obligations, which Hungary has by and large observed, just like other CEE countries which also acceded (Spehar, 2021). Hungary's accession to the EU (2004) was preceded by the adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation,[13] with a much wider spectrum of prohibited grounds than required by the EU acquis communautaire. However, according to critics, specific gender equality legislation could have paid more focus and attention to the issue of equality between women and men (Krizsán & Pap, 2005, p. 13). In 2005, the ETA, a specialized equal treatment body was launched, responsible for dealing with sex-based discrimination complaints, among others. The ETA represented a low-threshold forum for discrimination victims; and while its measures were not always effective and dissuasive, it at least imposed severe fines when pregnant women were dismissed from employment during their probation period, for example (the latter is a stubborn practice of many employers). From 2021, the ETA's tasks and competences were transferred to the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, which, for many, indicates the low level of importance accorded by the government to equality issues and indicates the phenomenon of the centralization of state power; a robust endeavour of the Orbán regime (Kornai, 2012).

The other key pieces of the (ordinary-level) legislation on equality between the sexes are the Civil Code, which addresses the issue of discrimination in the context of the 'protection of rights relating to personality',[14] and the Labour Code, which includes a provision on equal pay.[15]

In the field of maternity/parental leave and family allowance, Hungary has a very complex system of legislation and policies that is rooted in state-socialist times. Notably, among the current Visegrád countries, Hungary had the most generous support system for working mothers before the fall of state socialism, and this tradition influenced later developments (Szelewa, 2021). The Hungarian childcare system has become highly diversified over the last decade. Most types of leave and allowances are available for parents of both sexes (although fathers are not 'pressured' by special measures to take their share of childcare). With regard to the duration of maternity/parental leave, national legislation significantly exceeds EU standards. In 2019, the government announced a robust 'Family Protection Action Plan' that includes diverse measures: preferential housing loans, housing benefits, mortgage loan relief, and a car purchase program for families; childcare allowance for working grandparents; improvement of the day-care system for young children, and a lifelong personal income tax exemption for mothers of four or more (biological or adopted) children. A remarkable policy development from 2021 is that the allowance provided to women during maternity leave (for 24 weeks) is significantly higher than the previous take-home salary due to tax relief.[16]

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[13] Act CXXV of 2003.
[14] Act V of 2013, Section 2:42(1).
[15] Act I of 2012, Article 12(1).
[16] Act LXXXIII of 1997, Article 42.

Within the current framework of ordinary legislation and public policies, which has obvious flaws but seemingly ambitious features as well, women still suffer disadvantages in numerous fields of life. Women's participation in political decision-making is notoriously low (Ilonszki & Vajda, 2019). The gender pay gap persists, mainly for structural reasons, including the phenomenon of the glass ceiling (Adamecz-Völgyi, 2019), which stubbornly remains at the national level. According to estimations, at the current pace the gender pay gap will not be closed until 2102 (Simonovits & Szeitl, 2018, p. 171). Policies aimed at countering demographic decline put women at the 'crossroads of employment and family policies' (Hungler & Kende, 2019) and mothers of young children are especially vulnerable to rights violations by their employers.[17] Care work in the family is mainly undertaken by women, and state policies tend to maintain this *status quo* (Fodor, 2022). The gender gap grew, at least temporarily, during the national lockdown due to COVID-19 in 2020; highly educated urban women were most strongly hit by this phenomenon (Fodor et al., 2021).

In this paper we will not provide a more detailed assessment of the relevant legal and policy framework; with the overview above we only aim to give a glimpse into the latter to make the issues at the centre of constitutional disputes more tangible.

3 Equality between men and women

There is a vast and fast-growing literature on the jurisprudence of the Hungarian CC from different perspectives, including studies that appraise the general characteristics of constitutional reasoning in the pre- and post-2010 periods (Jakab & Fröhlich, 2017), focusing on the landmark cases of the past thirty years (Gárdos-Orosz & Zakariás, eds. 2021; 2022), or discussing changes detrimental to the CC (Halmai, 2019, Drinóczi & Bień Kacała, 2021). However, few authors have addressed the issue of equality between women and men as part of the broader framework of equality-related CC jurisprudence (for an exception, see Kovács 2008; 2012) or subjected the relevant decisions to a critical gender-sensitive analysis.

3.1 Constitutional jurisprudence

Landmark decisions concerning the issue of equality between women and men include cases related to pensions (widows' pension, 1990; retirement age, 1997, 1998, 2000; early retirement option, 2015), the duty to defend the country (1994), the rights of military personnel (2000, 2004), and marital names (2001). These cases will be discussed below chronologically, followed by an analysis.

The first relevant decision was issued in April 1990.[18] The petitioner, a man, challenged certain provisions of the Social Security Act (1975),[19] amended by the Pension Reform Act

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[17] Amnesty International (2020). *No Working Around It: Gender-Based Discrimination in Hungarian Workplaces*, https://www.amnesty.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Amnesty-International_Hungary_No-working-around-it.pdf

[18] 10/1990 (IV. 27.).

[19] Act II of 1975.

(1984).[20] According to the Explanatory Memorandum of the latter, the new provisions were intended to adjust the position of men to that of women regarding the provision of a widowhood pension, but the eligibility criteria were narrower: for instance, the role of raising a dependent child was recognized differently in cases of surviving husbands and wives). The male petitioner claimed that women were thus unfairly privileged. The CC agreed that the challenged provisions were unconstitutional based on provisions concerning the equal legal standing of men and women, non-discrimination, and social security.[21] The CC used rights-based arguments and insisted on formal equality. The representative of the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health who was invited to submit an *amicus brief* noted that the social security position of men and women is viewed differently in Hungary, just like in foreign countries, due to the differences in the 'life functions' of women and men; however, providing equal access to a widowhood pension in this context could be still justified. In this case, by stipulating equal protection for groups in unequal situations, the CC disregarded the social reality of women and men.

In 1994,[22] the CC rejected a petition that challenged the constitutionality of the National Defence Act,[23] which required compulsory military service only from those women who pursue certain professions and for a shorter period (between the ages of 18 and 45) than for men in general (from 17 to 50 years old). The CC held that the differentiation was constitutional based on the provisions on non-discrimination and home defence.[24] The Explanatory Memorandum attached to the challenged act did not explain the difference in treatment; it only asserted that military service by women was to be considered exceptional. The CC argued that military service is only one of the defence-related duties; all other duties were to be undertaken by both sexes, if necessary. Therefore, the lack of military service duty for females was not to be considered *per se* unconstitutional sex-based discrimination: when deciding on the distribution of obligations the legislative body was permitted to 'consider the characteristics of the female sex' and the tradition that warfare was for the 'representatives of the male sex'. The CC reiterated that women were not exempt from homeland defence duty in general; the special provision on military service was to be considered an affirmative measure in line with the constitutional rule concerning the equal legal standing of men and women. In this decision, the CC used a biology-based argument and affirmed pre-existing gender roles in society.

A decision of the CC from 1997[25] addressed two elements of the Pension Reform Act:[26] the lower retirement age defined for women with regard to the provision of the standard old age pension and the favourable conditions for women with regard to the option of early retirement. As for the rationale of these provisions, the Explanatory Memorandum attached to the challenged piece of legislation did not mention the role of women and men in society or the family but claimed that the amendments were necessary because Hungarian society is ageing, and with regard to the ongoing equalisation of the retirement age for women and

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[20] Act XLVII of 1989.
[21] Articles 66(1), 70/A, 70/E (1).
[22] 46/1994 (X. 21.).
[23] Act I of 1976.
[24] Article 70/H.
[25] 32/1997 (V. 16.).
[26] Act LIX of 1996.

men. The CC gave due consideration to the reasoning that society's aging created a burdensome situation that should be addressed by reform attentive to labour market conditions. The CC found that the lower retirement age defined for women was not unconstitutional, considering the anti-discrimination clause, the provision on the equal legal standing of women and men, and the affirmative action provision, because this arrangement was related to the 'characteristics of the female sex' (here the CC cited its decision from 1994 on compulsory military service). The CC concluded that the gradual equalisation of the retirement age would in any case abolish the advantaged position of women and that it was legitimate to provide women with some temporary privileges in this regard. However, the CC held it unconstitutional that men were eligible to retire earlier only if they had been single parents. According to the CC's reasoning, 'when it comes to raising children, men and women enjoy equal rights and are burdened by equal duties', thus rights and duties connected to parenthood 'cannot be regulated in a way that is discriminatory towards men.' Accordingly, with regard to the early retirement option the CC favoured men by using the formal equality argument that provided for an unequal or even unfair redistribution of resources.

A CC decision from 1998[27] also concerned the issue of early retirement. The male petitioner, who had worked in a weaving mill, challenged the constitutionality of a government decree implementing the State Pension Act[28] because of perceived bias in the early retirement option for male and female workers who undertake hazardous jobs: women were entitled to retire earlier than men. The CC claimed that the constitutional mandate to adopt affirmative measures for women was 'obviously based on the recognition of differences between the natural, biological and physical features of men and women. Due to the biological characteristics of women, particularly the biological and psychological dimensions of motherhood, and due to less physical strength, women face sooner and on a more severe level the consequences of certain environmental harms. The same activity that does not do any damage to the health of the male can harm the health of the female'. However, the CC considered the particularity of the issue (namely, that the challenged provision concerned hazardous jobs), and concluded that 'the impacts of the increased use of the body or certain health damages affect men as well'. Consequently, the CC annulled the challenged provision as unconstitutional based on the Constitution's rule on the equal legal standing of women and men and the anti-discrimination clause. In this decision, the CC ultimately neglected its previously used biology-based argument (as employed in the military service decision) and the constitutional rule that ensured special protection for women in the workplace. Instead, the CC turned to a formal equality approach, with all the implications of this arrangement regarding the redistribution system.

In a decision from 2000,[29] the CC considered the constitutionality of various legal provisions from the perspective of equality between women and men. After reviewing Hungary's relevant international obligations and the caselaw of the ECJ, the CC held that the concept of 'discrimination has a different content and sense in the economic sphere (competition) and in the area of human rights; nevertheless, there are certain connections', and concluded that the issue at stake in the examined cases was 'whether the differentiation between women

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[27] 7/1998 (III. 18.).
[28] Governmental Decree 168/1997. (X. 6.).
[29] 28/2000 (IX. 8.).

and men on biological grounds was based on reasonable and objective reasons, or whether it amounted to discrimination based on sex. This issue arises particularly when the legislator distinguishes not within the scope of actual equality (equality of opportunities), but within the scope of formal equality on the ground of sex.'

First, the CC had to consider the constitutionality of the National Defence Act,[30] the Armed Forces Act,[31] and certain related governmental decrees. The petitioner challenged the rules differentiating between men and women with regard to compulsory military service, but the CC considered this issue as *res iudicata*, referring to its own decision from 1994. The petitioner also challenged a rule regarding civilian (non-military) service; namely, the different age limits for the sexes (from the age of 16 to 60 for males, and 18 to 55 for females). The CC rejected this claim, referring to the Constitution's affirmative action provision which is 'obviously based on the recognition of differences between the natural, biological and physical features of men and women.'

Notably, this argument had already been used by the CC in the case of early retirement (1998). However, this very argument, as we will see, was then disregarded in the same decision when the CC considered several provisions of the State Pension Act[32] and the related governmental decrees regarding the retirement conditions defined for men and women. The challenged measures provided women with more favourable retirement conditions in terms of the age threshold. The CC here referred to its previous decision from 1997 regarding pension reform and argued similarly by claiming that the equalisation of the retirement age, which was justified by social tendencies, would inevitably lead to the abolition of the advantaged position of women. Thus, it was reasonable to apply temporary measures to make this process gradual for women.

Third, the CC considered the regulation of a special type of annuity[33] that was available as a form of compensation for those persons or their relatives who were unlawfully deprived of their life or liberty for political reasons during the Holocaust or the communist/socialist era. According to the challenged rule, women would be provided for 15 years with this annuity, while men only for 12 years, although with a higher monthly payment. The CC argued that the expected lifespan of women is longer, and this was 'not just statistical probability but statistical fact'. The CC concluded that the challenged arrangement (the smaller monthly annuity provided to women) was not unconstitutional because the anti-discrimination clause allowed space for differentiation unless it violated the right to human dignity. In this decision, the CC failed to address the overall effect of the rule and did not even acknowledge that the longer lifespan of women contributes to material inequality between the sexes.

In a decision from 2001,[34] the CC addressed various questions related in some way to the issue of names. In this case, some of the petitioners challenged the Marriage and Family Law Act[35] because it did not allow a husband to take his wife's name but allowed a wife to take her husband's name. The Explanatory Memorandum attached to the challenged legislation (adopted in 1952) considered this provision as progressive (for its time) because a wife

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[30] 46/1994 (X. 21.).
[31] Act XLIII of 1996.
[32] Act LXXXI of 1997.
[33] Act XXXII of 1992.
[34] 58/2001 (III. 7.).
[35] Act IV of 1952.

was previously *obliged* to take her husband's name in marriage. The Memorandum opposed the bourgeoise concept of marriage whereby husbands have outstanding power in family matters and praised the socialist ethos which considered women and men as equal parties in marriage. The Memorandum claimed that this emancipatory approach was reflected in the provision because it abolished a privilege of men (previously, Hungarian women were required to take their husbands' full name with the affix '-*né*', equivalent to the 'Mrs John Smith' arrangement) and provided women with the option to keep their maiden name or to combine it with their husband's name (with the mentioned affix). However, almost fifty years later, the CC found that the fact that husbands were not allowed to take the name of their wife amounted to unconstitutional omission on the part of the legislative power on the basis of the rule on the equal legal standing of women and men. By this decision, the CC derived a new fundamental right, namely the 'right to name', from the concept of human dignity, based on the perspective of personal identity. The CC declared this right to be inalienable, while certain components of it, such as changing one's name or choosing one's name, might be limited.

In 2004, a decision of the CC[36] addressed the Armed Forces Act:[37] parents in the army with children under 16 years of age were entitled to extra days of vacation, but only mothers and single fathers. The Explanatory Memorandum to the Act claimed that the rationale for this rule was to provide the parent who is more involved in the upbringing of the child(ren) with more paid leave. The CC panel referred to its own decision from 1997 on retirement age regarding the role of fathers – namely, that the rights and duties connected to parenthood could not be regulated in a way that discriminated against men. Conclusively, the CC deemed the challenged provision unconstitutional and annulled it, referring to the rule on the equal legal standing of women and men and the anti-discrimination clause. Here again, the CC based its decision on its earlier practice, addressing the question on the level of formal equality without considering the social reality, thus ultimately favouring the perspective of men.

In January 2012, Hungary's new constitution, the FL, came into force and became the basis of the CC's jurisdiction.

In a decision from 2015,[38] the CC had to decide about the so-called 'Women 40' retirement program: according to this scheme, women can retire after 40 years of service if they have spent time on childcare. This early retirement option is not available for men. An initiative emerged for a plebiscite on whether this opportunity should be open to men (fathers) as well. The plebiscite question was rejected by the National Electoral Commission; then the Supreme Court decided that a plebiscite could be organized regarding the issue; this decision was challenged again; and eventually the case was brought before the CC. The CC considered the FL's non-discrimination provision,[39] the general provision on affirmative measures (for families, children, women, the elderly, and those living with disabilities),[40] and the special rule that women may be provided 'with stronger protection' in terms of the 'condi-

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[36] 8/2004 (III. 25.).
[37] Act XLIII of 1996.
[38] 28/2015 (IX. 24.).
[39] Article XV(2).
[40] Article XV(5).

tions for entitlement to state pension'.[41] The wording of the latter provision is conditional, thus (in textual terms) it is only an option for the legislator to define preferential rules for women with regard to the state pension. However, according to the CC's argumentation, if the results of a referendum supported the equalisation of the retirement conditions for women and men, this would pre-empt the affirmative action provisions of the FL, in essence. The CC eventually annulled the Supreme Court's decision: this implies that the issue of women's potential early retirement can never be addressed by referendum. In this case, unlike in its previous pension-related rulings, the CC did not apply the formal equality approach. However, the CC failed to consider that the measure was potentially harmful to women (financially and career-wise) and that it was discriminatory to men who had opted to take parental leave. As for the latter, the CC was, apparently, insensitive to the changing reality of men and women in society.

3.2 Analysis

This review of the CC's landmark cases regarding the issue of equality between women and men reveals a curiously consistent approach. We have identified four remarkable patterns associated with the decisions concerning i) the origin of the cases; ii) the main claim of the cases; iii) the contextualization; and, iv) the quality of the reasonings.

Regarding the first pattern, we observe that in every case when the identity of the petitioner was known, it involved a man claiming that certain rights were unequally distributed among the sexes to the disadvantage of men. In the early years of the CC, the published versions of the decisions included the petitioners' names. Later, due to data protection rules, personal information was no longer accessible in the publicly available documents of the CC. The Hungarian language is genderless; thus, it may be impossible to identify the petitioner's sex from the phrasing. However, in some cases, the identity or at least the sex of the petitioner was revealed in public announcements or media communications.

We identified as a second pattern the fact that the cases typically revolved around the rights of men and financial matters. This is what Kovács highlighted even in 2012 with regard to the pre-FL era: 'there were surprisingly numerous decisions brought in cases whe[n] the petitioner was concerned about certain affirmative measures benefiting women and challenged those measures by asserting equal rights for men' (Kovács, 2012, p. 78). These cases were typically aimed at challenging laws that allegedly allocated more rights and opportunities to women.

The third pattern is that the decisions featured a purely formalistic approach to equality without contextualization and lacked a palpable, concise theoretical framework, which is a concern of quality – and here we arrive at the fourth pattern. Below, we discuss these patterns jointly.

It is particularly striking that most of these cases concerned the role of men in the family and emphasized men's role as fathers, while in reality, according to the given framework of ordinary legislation and policies, men have never been incentivized to undertake a larger share of childcare (or unpaid family work in general), and only some of them would be

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[41] Article XIX(4).

willing to do so – according to statistics on the beneficiaries of childcare allowance, and according to social science research (Fodor et al., 2021). Judges recognised the importance and relevance of affirmative measures in certain situations, yet they tended to opt for formal equality to be ensured for men. An approach of formal equality was also applied in financial matters, thus cementing the weaker economic position of women compared to men.

As for the lack of contextualisation and the poor quality of reasoning, we recall relevant examples below.

The decision from 1990 about the widows' pension included a citation from the *amicus brief* of the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health referring to the practice of 'foreign countries' without even naming the countries, or at least specifying whether these were Western countries. With regard to women's labour market situation, it is important to stress that during the second half of the twentieth century there was significant divergence between Western countries and state-socialist countries: while the Western family model was rather based on the male breadwinner, and women's part-time employment was prevalent, the socialist family model was based on dual-earner couples and women often had full-time jobs. Thus, simple reference to the practice of foreign countries hardly helps with understanding the issue in the Hungarian context.

The decision from 2000 about the regulation of the annuity may also be mentioned here, in relation to which the difference in treatment between women and men was threefold: i) women were provided with the annuity for a longer period, but ii) were provided with a smaller monthly payment, and iii) the total sum of money provided throughout the years for women was slightly less (although the difference was minor). Moreover, we note an implicit (incidental) factor: the regulation provided for fixed monthly payments, thus the real value of compensation paid to women would be liable to erode more over time due to inflation. Given the phenomena of the gender pension gap and the tendency that elderly women are at increased risk of poverty, the impact of this arrangement was ultimately detrimental to women. However, the CC failed to contextualize the matter.

The CC, in its decision from 2015 regarding the 'Women 40' early retirement scheme (which was already based on the FL), failed to consider women's social situation, just like in the previous pension-related rulings (based on the Constitution). However, this decision differed somewhat from the previous ones – but not for the better. It does not promote the approach of incentivising men to take a more involved and active role as fathers, and it discriminates against men who take parental leave. At the same time, it is doubtful whether the early retirement option is beneficial for women. Although it is not mandatory for eligible women to leave the labour market after 40 years, they might be pressured by their families or by their employees/colleagues to retire earlier, and thus settle for a smaller pension than if they retired a few years later under the general pension regime.

The reasonings of the CC decisions analysed here are remarkably poorly elaborated, vague, and even blurred; they lack concrete reference to facts and analyses and are not based on clear or clarified concepts. Notably, the reasoning of the CC did not extend beyond the arguments and positions that we have presented above. Meanwhile, especially during the earlier years of its operation, the same CC delivered thorough reasonings in other decisions, such as one on the death penalty in 1990.[42]

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[42] 23/1990. (X. 31.).

4 Conclusion

We put the phrase 'women's equality' between quotation marks in the title of this paper. We did this for a reason. Although the literature sporadically indicated it, we were still surprised by what we found in the analysis of the flagship constitutional court cases related to the issue of equality between men and women (understood as legal equality or equal treatment): the fact that the CC, over many years (in many different cases), tended to advance the formal equality of men instead of the substantive equality of women.

When we chose to focus on the level of constitutional review, we were aware of the epistemological limits of the study: namely, that the CC could decide only about those cases which were brought before it. However, it was counterintuitive to see that virtually all the petitioners were men and that virtually all the cases over the last thirty years (since the establishment of the CC) involved alleged instances of discrimination against men. We may ask what the social reason for this phenomenon is: do men have more resources than women (in terms of time, energy, and assertiveness) to take their legal claims to the highest levels? Is the phenomenon more strongly related to the features of constitutional adjudication in Hungary? Or is it connected to the mere fact that the constitutions have always provided space for affirmative measures for women, thus men were more likely to turn to the CC claiming that women were actually 'too privileged' in Hungary? Also, one should note that the typical source of women's hardships is not discriminative legislation but the discriminative behaviour of certain actors (which is to be remedied by ordinary courts); either that or structural features that cannot be framed as discrimination based on sex. These are questions that we did not aim to answer in this article, but which could be the subject of future research. This could also contribute to our understanding of various obstacles to ensuring constitutional justice.

Turning back to our analysis: some of the cases, considering the complexity of the social reality, were not black and white. The petitioner in the high-profile case from 2013 (mentioned in the introductory section) explicitly claimed that he was not overly concerned about the moderate entrance fee to be paid by men; he was rather worried about the objectification of women conveyed by this policy. From this point of view, it served the best interest of women that the CC applied the formal equality approach and established discrimination against men; without, however, elaborating its own reasoning and merely repeating the arguments of the ETA. The other outstandingly controversial case concerned the 'Women 40' early retirement scheme, which may be criticised because it does not encourage men to take on a larger share of childcare obligations, but also because it contributes to the gender pension gap, to the disadvantage of women. This case remarkably displays the attitudes of an already politically packed and illiberalized constitutional court (Drinóczi, 2022) that has been eager to assist the government in politics. It transformed the possibility to legislate on a concrete issue into the establishment of the pseudo-fundamental right of women to state protection within a constitutional framework which is designed without conceptualizing the right to social security, and which applies an obviously paternalistic approach towards women.

Based on the arguments in the relevant decisions, we understand that the CC's approach towards women's status in society has always been rather traditionalist, paternalistic, or even patriarchal, instead of involving a proactive-interpretative role in the conceptualization of equality between men and women (unlike some courts in other countries – e.g. the US Supreme Court or the German Constitutional Court), and this tendency was perceivable even before the era of the Fidesz-government (Kovács, 2009, pp. 35–36). The Hungarian

CC has never considered whether certain elements of women's or men's roles were socially constructed, or whether the law perpetuated stereotypes about women and men, thus further cementing hierarchical conditions. There was an overwhelming use of arguments that referred to 'biology', which, together with the lack of contextualization, pushed the CC to adopt positions that either supported formal equality, favouring men's rights, and/or reinforced women's subordinate social position. When the cases were about advancing men's rights to achieve formal equality, the CC considered the concept of 'social roles' and equality provisions. In contrast, when the CC decided on cases from the perspective of women's rights, it prioritized affirmative action provisions but failed to use these tools to challenge the social structure and to promote a less limited set of roles for both sexes.

We also found that when the disputes reached the level of constitutional debate, the quality of reasoning was so poor that it gave us the impression that the CC has never treated gender equality seriously. Moreover, we observe that there has been little difference in this regard regardless of the presence of a liberal vs. illiberal constitutional setting (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2022).

This review and analysis of landmark decisions allowed us to draw attention to some of the underlying attitudes of the CC that have apparently prevailed during the thirty years of its existence. It leads us to conclude that the relevant case law of the Hungarian CC poses a challenge to the backlash narrative regarding the developments in Hungary in this field – suggesting that there is no meaningful baseline for a backlash. We claim that the CC has never elaborated and operationalised an advanced understanding of equality between the sexes. Looking honestly at the relevant CC decisions, we cannot identify the arc of the backlash with regard to the conceptualization and the promotion of women's equality, because women have always been sidelined by the CC.

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Institutional trust and the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed and attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed: An analysis of ESS Round 8 data

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Abstract

The topic of unemployment benefits, especially conditional ones, generates a lot of discussion and is associated with differences in attitudes among both people and countries. This paper aims to analyse the perceptions of the trustworthiness of the unemployed and institutional trust in relation to attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed who refuse to work for certain reasons. Data from the 8th Round of the European Social Survey (2016) focusing on preferences for sanctions on the unemployed who refuse work were analysed. The sample consisted of 9,620 respondents from 22 European countries who answered three selected questions. A two-level regression analysis proved that the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed, gender, age, education and subjective income were significant predictors of attitudes to sanctions for the unemployed, while institutional trust at the country level moderated this relationship. The perceived untrustworthiness of the unemployed lessened the preference for maintaining benefits in the case of refusal to work; this association is weaker in countries with a higher level of institutional trust. Accordingly, increasing trust at all levels can decrease the pressure on unemployment insurance systems.

Keywords: unemployment benefits; attitudes; perceived trustworthiness; institutional trust; European Social Survey

1 Introduction

Multiple-group factor analysis of European Social Survey data has proved that labour market regulation is one of three types of government welfare intervention in different welfare states, characterized as Conservative, Social-Democratic, Liberal, Familiaristic, former-USSR, and ex-Communist countries. Moreover, labour market regulation was found to consist of two sub-dimensions: guaranteed jobs, and unemployment benefits (Gryaznova, 2013). In public discourse, the topic of unemployment benefits generates a wide diversity of views, thus creating a reason to examine the differences between both people and countries.

Research findings support the connection between trust and attitudes to government intervention in the form of regulation and redistribution (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2017;

Daniele & Geys, 2015; Charron et al., 2021; Pitlik & Kouba, 2015). According to Charron et al. (2021), preferences for strong regulation and weak redistribution and vice versa vary among countries but are related to interpersonal (social, generalized, horizontal) trust and perceived quality of government. Those with a higher level of interpersonal trust are less willing to support regulation but more willing to support taxation. Moreover, institutional (vertical) trust also plays a role. If public institutions are perceived as impartial and trustworthy, the level of interpersonal trust appears to have a stronger effect on preferences for redistribution and regulation (Charron et al., 2021, p. 14). In contrast to this, a series of survey experiments failed to prove the effect of trust in government on support for redistribution in the United States (Peyton, 2020). According to van Oorschot and Roosma (2017), attitudes towards the legitimacy of unemployment benefits may be determined by trust in those government institutions that redistribute benefits and in the citizens who are part of this process and benefit from the system (van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017, p. 8). Moreover, when people have negative images of the unemployed, their support for unemployment benefits is less (van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2014 in van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017, p. 12). In the case of unemployment, interpersonal trust of strangers in general – frequently instrumentalized within research – may not be the best representation of trust associated with support for sanctions on the unemployed (Kumlin et al., 2017).

This paper focuses on the conditionality of unemployment benefits. The European Social Survey Round 8 (2016) includes items assessing support for sanctions on unemployed people who refuse to work for certain reasons, thus allowing us to examine the views of European citizens on this subject. Trustworthiness seems to be a quite salient factor in the approval or rejection of sanctions on those who refuse to work, as refusing work can be the main trigger of mistrust and doubt about the conduct of the unemployed. In line with prior research findings, the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed (instead of interpersonal trust) and institutional trust were included in the research described in this paper as predictors of attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed.

The article is organized as follows. The first section provides the theoretical background for the individual and country-level factors that determine support for the provision of unemployment benefit. The second section focuses specifically on interpersonal and institutional trust and trustworthiness and attitudes to unemployment benefits or their conditionality. The research hypotheses are then stated, followed by a description of the research sample, operationalization of variables, and initial data processing. The results of the preliminary analysis and the three steps of the regression analyses are presented. Last, implications are discussed in relation to the literature in a concluding section.

2 Support for unemployment benefits

Attitudes to unemployment benefits involve two different dimensions; namely, individuals' generosity (associated with the social rights that we attribute to the unemployed) and the conditionality of benefits (which is grounded on beliefs about the obligations of the unemployed) (Laenen & Meuleman, 2018). The present authors support the idea that the social obligations and social rights of the unemployed are two sides of the same coin, as these factors are correlated negatively and influenced by the same characteristics in the opposite direction. It has been proved that work-related obligations are predicted by the perception of the

deservingness of welfare groups, while for the unemployed combining social rights and social obligations is preferred. However, in the case of the unemployed who volunteer or take care of someone, respondents are less demanding about their work-related obligations (Roosma & Jeene, 2017).

Support for the conditionality of unemployment benefits contingent on the willingness of the unemployed to accept any available job is higher in wealthier countries, while a high unemployment rate in a country leads to less support, explaining some of the variability in attitudes across European countries (Buß et al., 2017). Moreover, greater social distance between people complicates the identification of the upper and middle classes with the unemployed, which leads to more negative attitudes and stricter conditionality in relation to helping them (Carriero & Filandri, 2018, p. 13).

In addition, at an individual level, self-interest, egalitarian and individualistic values, and deservingness criteria – control, attitude, and reciprocity – have proved to be important in shaping attitudes, increasing support for social obligations, and reducing support for social rights (Laenen & Meuleman, 2018). Five deservingness criteria (control, attitudes, reciprocity, identity and need) mediate the relationship between socio-structural characteristics and welfare policy preferences (Meuleman et al., 2020; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). In this respect, research studies emphasize not only the importance of the control, effort, activity, and volunteering of the unemployed (Carriero & Filandri, 2018; Schofield & Butterworth, 2018; Buß et al., 2017; Jensen & Petersen, 2017; Kootstra, 2016; Petersen, 2015; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2015) but also their reciprocity and attitude (Meuleman et al., 2020). This coincides with the fact that the European system of benefits is geared towards the activation of the unemployed, in particular the long-term unemployed, and that the right to financial support in the case of unemployment has become dependent on the fulfilment of many work-related obligations. If these conditions are not met, the unemployed may be penalized by a reduction in benefits or shorter pay-out periods.

2.1 Interpersonal and institutional trust and trustworthiness

Trust is believed to be one of the foundations of a well-functioning society. Both institutional (vertical) and interpersonal trust (horizontal) are important elements of democratic societies as they are essential for the proper functioning of relations between people and institutions.

Citizens' institutional trust is influenced by public service outcomes and processes – mainly the absence of corruption (van de Walle & Migchelbrink, 2020). Institutional trust is based on reciprocity, so if a government is corrupt and institutional processes are not transparent, people's willingness to cooperate and pay taxes may be reduced (Chan et al., 2017). Institutional trust may focus on actors such as politicians, 'partial' institutions such as parliament, or impartial institutions such as the legal system or police. This study is focused on trust in politicians, political parties, parliament, and the legal system, which represent institutional trust. Institutional trust is of particular interest because politicians and institutions are responsible for welfare policies, including labour market policies, and the legal system is a means of assessing compliance with regulations and the application of sanctions, while there is uncertainty regarding whether political decisions reflect individuals' interests and expectations. The perceived quality of institutions in a country can influence egalitarian

preferences regarding unemployment benefits, and if the government and institutions in a country are perceived positively, people are more willing to pay taxes that support the welfare state (Habibov et al., 2018). Further, Chan et al. (2017) proved that tax morale is correlated with institutional trust but not interpersonal trust.

Recent research results have emphasized that institutional trust is a more important factor in welfare attitudes as assessments of the welfare state affect political trust rather than social, but this should be seen as a temporary outcome that needs to be researched and verified (Kumlin et al., 2018). It is also possible to distinguish between the relationship between trust and support for universal benefits and services (the latter which are perceived as citizens' rights and are provided automatically) with the relationship between trust and benefits and services that are allocated selectively, only to certain groups. In the case of unemployment benefits which could be described as conditional, greater differences between beneficiaries and others are likely to undermine interpersonal trust (Larsen, 2007 in Kumlin et al., 2018). The role of institutional trust, however, seems to be less clear in the case of attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed who refuse work. We may assume that the effect of institutional trust on preferences for sanctions varies according to the perception of the unemployed and the welfare system in general. For example, (1) strong institutional trust – no sanctions (due to welfare awareness for welfare measures); (2) strong institutional trust – sanctions (free riders should be punished by fair, reliable, accountable and transparent institutions); (3) weak institutional trust – sanctions (the whole system is corrupt and irresponsible cheaters must be penalized); (4) weak institutional trust – no sanctions (institutions are untrustworthy and unreliable, unemployed people probably only get demeaning job offers so sanctions are unjustified). The empirical evidence on this matter is underdeveloped, thus we try to partially fill this gap by focusing on the effect of institutional trust on the relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed and attitudes to sanctions on the latter.

Interpersonal trust is the extent to which people believe others (mostly strangers) without expecting anything in return (Uslaner, 2002). In many surveys, interpersonal trust is measured as the belief that people can generally be trusted, are helpful and try to be fair. According to the results of cross-national studies about causal relations, interpersonal trust is shaped by institutional trust (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016). In the case of labour market policy, trust in institutions that provide support for the unemployed or politicians who adopt the respective policies may shape people's trust in the unemployed, which implies a connection between interpersonal and institutional trust in the context of welfare policy. However, there are differences between interpersonal trust and individual trustworthiness. 'Trustworthiness is a moral disposition to reciprocate, be cooperative, to act in a trustworthy way in various contexts' (Hardin, 2002, p. 32). This means trustworthiness is a person's propensity to trust or to be deserving of trust, while trust itself is the belief in or reliance on a specific person or people in general. According to Kumlin et al., interpersonal trust does not capture trust that drives support for the welfare state, so more important than interpersonal (generalized) trust is what the unemployed do, and who they are (Kumlin et al., 2017, p. 282).

Although the ESS questionnaire contains items on interpersonal trust, according to Kumlin et al. (2017) focussing on interpersonal (generalized) trust may lead to erroneous conclusions. As the paper's focal point is understanding the relationship between unemployment and attitudes to sanctions for those who refuse work, the focus shifts to perceived trustworthiness, which can be defined as the characteristic of a person who can be trusted,

framed by an environment in which trust occurs (Borum, 2010). In this paper, the trustworthiness of the unemployed is defined and measured as the belief that unemployed persons are not abusing the welfare system and are genuinely looking for jobs. However, perceptions about the trustworthiness of the unemployed are mostly based on experiences with the unemployed, or individuals' own experience with unemployment, and experiences with labour offices and the services they provide. This can lead to conclusions about the trustworthiness of beneficiaries and officials but also about our own trustworthiness (Kumlin et al., 2018). However, our beliefs about the untrustworthiness of others need not in any way be justified, as the former may be due to prejudice, bias, or misinformation, or adopting the view of a significant other or someone else. For example, a study found that the British public significantly overestimated the size of unemployment benefits and had misperceptions about the benefits system (Baumberg Geiger, 2017a). Moreover, Baumberg Geiger found that people's beliefs about the benefits system (i.e., about benefit fraud, the scale of unemployment, long-term sickness, and relative size and duration of benefit claims) but not the value of payments were related to their perceptions of claimants as undeserving (Baumberg Geiger, 2017b, p. 83), although this link varies across countries and population subgroups. These factors can lead to generalizations about whether unemployed people and institutions can be trusted. In summary, this paper is based on the assumption that people who perceive the unemployed and welfare benefit systems and institutions as trustworthy are more egalitarian in their attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed.

2.2 Research hypotheses

In light of the theoretical background described above, the main objective of the study was to analyse attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed who refuse to work. We hypothesized that the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed – following Kumlin et al. (2017) – predicts less support for sanctions on the unemployed who refuse to work (H1). Moreover, that a higher level of institutional trust predicts less support for sanctions on the unemployed who refuse to work (H2). Since it is well-known that the countries of Europe differ in their levels of trust (Charron & Rothstein, 2018), the aim was also to verify whether the effect of these predictors on attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed varies among European countries. The tested assumption is that the effect of the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed on attitudes toward sanctions on the unemployed will be moderated by the level of institutional trust at the country level. The lower the institutional trust at the country level, the stronger the effect of perceived trustworthiness on support for sanctions on the unemployed who refuse to work (H3). European Social Survey Round 8 Data (2016) includes items that are sufficient for the verification of the presented hypotheses.

3 Methodological approach

3.1 Research sample

Of the 41,822 people who participated in the eighth round of the ESS (Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithua-

nia, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom),[1] only one-quarter of respondents answered all three questions regarding sanctions on the unemployed who refused to work.

The research sample consisted of 9,620 respondents from 22 European countries. Women represented 52.3 per cent of the sample and men 47.7 per cent. The lowest age of respondents was 15, and the highest 97. In terms of the highest level of education, respondents with secondary education with a school-leaving exam (34.4 per cent) were best represented, 25.5 per cent of respondents had completed primary school, 23.6 per cent had a university education, while those least represented were people with a secondary education but without a school-leaving exam (16.6 per cent). A little over half (53 per cent) of all respondents were in paid employment, while the other 47 per cent were either unemployed, in education, retired, on disability benefits or maternity leave. Just over half (50.5 per cent) of all respondents were living with their spouse or partner, while 49.5 per cent were not in a relationship.

3.2 Operationalisation of core variables

Attitudes to sanctions on unemployed people refusing work were measured by three items using the following questions: 'Imagine someone who is unemployed and looking for work. This person was previously working but lost their job and is now receiving unemployment benefits. What do you think should happen to this person's unemployment benefit if, (1) they turn down a job because it pays a lot less than they earned previously? (2) they turn down a job because it needs a much lower level of education than the person has? (3) they refuse to regularly carry out unpaid work in the area where they live in return for unemployment benefits?' Respondents could choose one of four answers: 1 = this person should lose all of their unemployment benefit, 2 = This person should lose about half of their unemployment benefit, 3 = This person should lose a small part of their unemployment benefit, 4 = This person should be able to keep all their unemployment benefit. A dummy variable representing attitudes to sanctions was created. First, the scale was changed to 0–3 (1=0, 2=1, 3=2, 4=3), with a lower score indicating greater support for stopping benefits and a higher score indicating support for maintaining all benefits. The sum of answers for the three items was then divided by the number of items (3). Cronbach's α for the scale is 0.78.

The scale of perceived trustworthiness reflects the assessment of the behaviour of the unemployed as non-abusive of the welfare system. The scale was created from the following two items (as the sum of answers divided by the number of items): 'Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job' and 'Many people manage to obtain benefits and services to which they are not entitled'. Respondents answered on a five-point scale to what extent they agree with the statement, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. A higher score indicates the perceived untrustworthiness of the unemployed.

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[1] Israel was excluded due to cultural and other differences.

The institutional trust scale was created from four items as the sum of answers divided by the number of items: namely, 'How much do you personally trust each of these institutions in the country: Parliament, the legal system, politicians, and political parties?' The respondents answered on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 = no trust at all, to 10 = completely trust. The reliability of the scale tested using Cronbach's α is 0.91. Institutional trust at a country level was created as a dummy variable to represent the average score of institutional trust for each country.

A few sociodemographic variables – gender (man, woman), age categories (15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, >65), education (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary) and the subjective income of the household (enough, not enough) were added into the models as control variables.

3.3 Data processing and statistical procedures

Analyses were conducted in R software (R Core Team, 2020; Rstudio team, 2019). Mixed-effects models were implemented using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015).

In the first step, the conditions for linear regression were verified. The results showed that not all independent variables have a linear relationship with the dependent variable. Based on Pearson's correlation, it was confirmed that there is a statistically significant moderate and positive relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed and attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed ($r = 0.32^{**}$). The relationship between institutional trust and attitudes was statistically significant but very weak, so the significance of the relationship is probably influenced by the sample size ($r = 0.04^{**}$). However, first-level analysis continued for both variables, including control variables. Perceived trustworthiness is also slightly significantly correlated to interpersonal trust ($r = 0.18^{**}$), implying that these constructs are semantically related.

After having verified all the conditions for linear regression, the null model or no-predictors models with single- and two-levels were specified in the first step to identify whether attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed differ among countries. In the second step of the analysis, the Level 1 model was specified to examine how the effect of the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed, institutional trust, and control variables for attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed differ within and between countries. For a multilevel linear model, the coefficients – i.e., slopes and intercepts – should be normally distributed. In the third step, the Level 2 model was specified by adding the interaction effect of institutional trust at the country level and the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed at the individual level while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. A graph for the conditioned effect of institutional trust (at the country level) in the relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed and attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed was created. Since both the independent variable and the moderator were measured on a different scale, the scores were centred in order to enable interpretation of the coefficients in the data range. The interaction was put into the model as a multiplication of variables (independent variable * moderator). The program was instructed to generate data, which were then used to generate a graph showing the moderation effect when the moderator has a low and high value (±1SD around the AM).

4 Results

4.1 Preliminary analysis

To get a better picture of attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed in Europe, the mean score for countries is plotted in Figure 1.
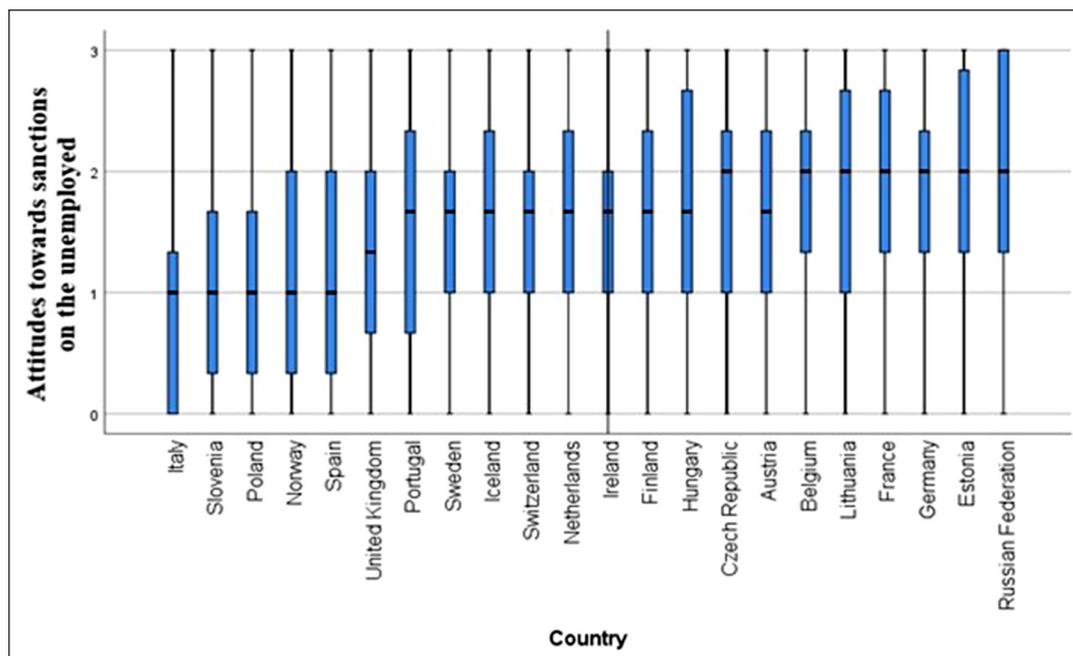
Figure 1 Mean scores of European countries regarding attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed who refuse to work

Notes: Answers to three questions were summed up and divided by the number of items (3): What do you think should happen to a person's unemployment benefit if he/she refuses to work because of (lower salary, unpaid work offered, lower education required) on a scale ranging from 0 = lose all the benefit, 3 = keep all the benefit. N = 12,710

Source: own compilation of ESS Round 8 data (2016)

Attitudes of the Europeans in our sample towards sanctions on the unemployed who refuse work vary among countries. The most generous countries are the Russian Federation, Estonia, and Germany, while stronger sanctions on the unemployed are supported by respondents in Italy, Slovenia, and Poland. However, to understand precisely how much variation exists between countries, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted.

4.2 Results of regression analyses

Step 1: The null model (no predictor model)

First, null (or no predictors) single-level and two-level models were developed. In the latter model, the dependent variable was able to vary for each country, so we were able to partition the variation in attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed into *within-* and *between-*groups components. The maximum likelihood (ML) method and t-tests using Satterthwaite's method were employed.

Results for the no predictors two-level model are presented in Table 1. The intercept for countries is 1.56, which is the average level of attitudes in 22 countries. The proportion of variation caused by the existence of multiple countries was calculated by putting our values into the formula for the intraclass correlation (ICC). A chi-square difference test between the single-level (t = 170.9, p < .001) and the two-level model (Table 1) proved that the models significantly differ (χ^2 (1) = 1056, p < .001).

Table 1 Variance components using the Null model

Fixed Effects		Estimate	95 % CI	SE	t
	Intercept	1.56	[1.43, 1.69]	.06	24.529***
Random Effects		Variance		SD	
	Residual	.739		.859	
	Country	.087		.296	

Notes: Dependent variable: Attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed, group: country (22), ***p<0.001

Source: author's compilation of ESS Round 8 data (2016)

As Table 1 suggests, significant individual-level variance exists at the country level (89.41 per cent). Similarly, the intercept varies significantly across the sample of countries. The ICC suggests that 10.59 per cent of variation comes from country-level differences, so it was considered reasonable to include the hierarchical structure in the model to identify what proportion of variation exists between subjects (individuals) and between groups (countries).

Step 2: Model with random effects and predictors (fixed effects)

The next model included two continuous predictors – perceived trustworthiness and institutional trust at the individual level, which were centred around mean and categorical control variables (gender, age categories, education, subjective income). Results (Table 2) suggest that the perceived untrustworthiness of the unemployed and low institutional trust increase support for sanctions on the unemployed. Moreover, being female (rather than male), and over 45 years old (compared to being under 25 years old) increased support for stopping benefits, while having a tertiary education with sufficient subjective income increased support for maintaining benefits compared to having a primary education and insufficient subjective income, which finding implies support for the self-interest explanation. The values in Table 1

and Table 2 suggest that adding intraclass predictors lessens residual (within-group) variance. Based on the unexplained variance within the model, the proportions of explained variance were calculated. The perceived trustworthiness of people, institutional trust, and control variables explained approximately 9.74 per cent of the within-group variation (people) and 1.93 per cent of the between-group variation (countries) in attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed.

Table 2 Model with random effects and predictors (fixed effects)

Fixed Effects		Estimate	95 % CI	SE	df	t	p
	Intercept	0.93	[.78, 1.09]	.07	49.186	12.114	<.001***
	Perceived trustworthiness	0.27	[.25, .29]	.01	8846.732	25.644	<.001***
	Institutional trust	−.009	[−.01, −.001]	.004	8850.554	−2.183	.029*
Control Variables							
Gender	Female	−.061	[−.09, −.02]	.02	8835.325	−3.436	<.001***
Education	Lower secondary	−.007	[−.06, .05]	.03	8853.872	−.223	.823
	Upper secondary	.022	[−.02, .07]	.02	8850.763	.905	.366
	Tertiary	.078	[.02, .13]	.027	8842.835	2.848	.004**
Age categories	25−34	−.061	[−.13, .01]	.036	8834.168	−1.673	.094
	35−44	−.063	[−.13, .01]	.035	8835.100	−1.783	.0747
	45−54	−.102	[−.17, .03]	.034	8834.959	−2.963	.003**
	55−64	−.111	[−.18, −.04]	.034	8834.488	−3.284	.001**
	>65	−.165	[−.22, −.11]	.032	8835.863	−5.111	<.001***
Subjective income	Enough	.130	[.08, .17]	.024	8850.289	5.531	<.001***
Random Effects		**Variance**		**SD**			
	Residual	.667		.82			
	Countries (Intercept)	.085		.29			

Notes: Dependent variable: attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed, groups: country (22), *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Source: author's compilation of ESS Round 8 data (2016)

To illustrate the variance in a country's intercepts, a graphical representation of the intersections of average perceived trustworthiness and attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed for each country is provided (Figure 2). Respondents from Norway, Sweden Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Russian Federation, and Spain perceive the unemployed as

quite trustworthy (M > 2.8 out of 5), but their attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed do not, at first sight, differ from those of respondents from the other group of countries who consider people to be less trustworthy, e.g., the Czech Republic, Hungary, France, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. However, people in Poland, Italy, and Slovenia have more negative attitudes but perceive the trustworthiness of people as the same or slightly less. Respondents in Poland and Norway have similar attitudes to sanctions but their trustworthiness perceptions of the unemployed are quite different. It seems from Figure 2 that there is also a lot of variability in the relationship between the two variables across European countries.
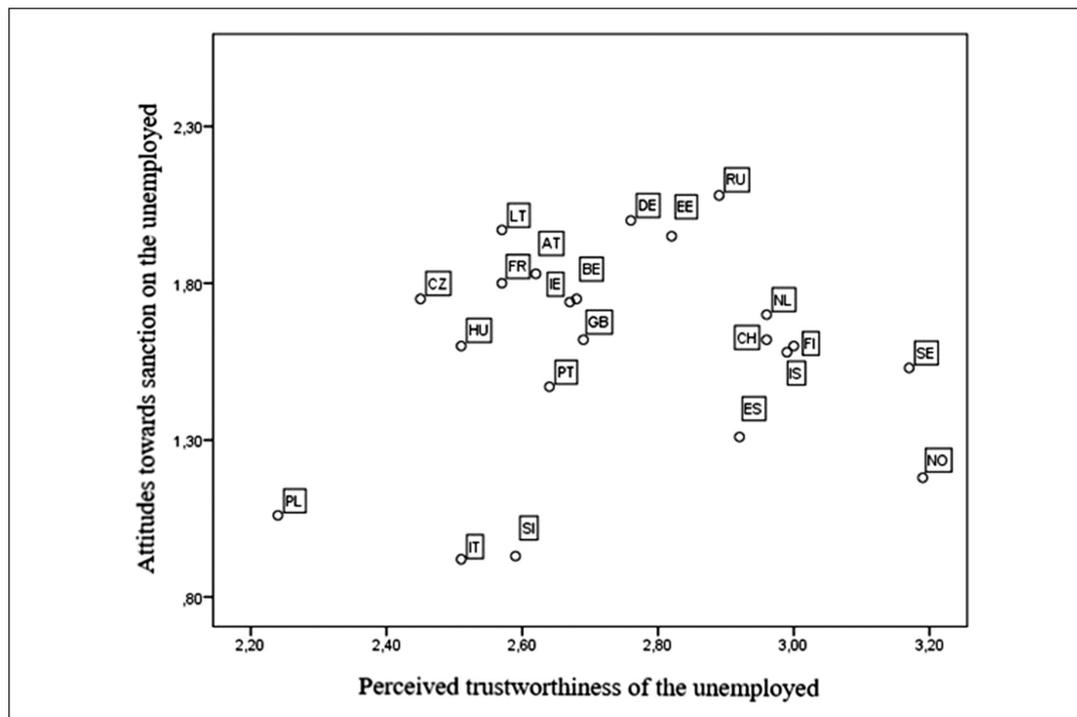
Figure 2 Position of 22 countries based on means of scales of perceived trustworthiness and attitudes to sanctions

Notes: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), the Czech Republic (CZ), Estonia(EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Hungary (HU), Iceland (IS), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Lithuania (LT), Norway (NO), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), the Russian Federation (RU), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES) Sweden (SE), Switzerland (CH) and the United Kingdom (GB). Perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed was measured on scale ranging from 1(low) – 5 (high). Attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed was measured on scale ranging from 0 (lose all) – 3 (keep all).

Source: author's compilation of ESS Round 8 data (2016)

Step 3: Model with two-levels interaction

In a previous model, institutional trust was found to be weakly related to the dependent variable so a new dummy variable was created – institutional trust at the country level (average level of trust for each country) – to explain variation between people nested within countries. In the third step, institutional trust at the country level and the interaction between perceived trustworthiness and institutional trust were included in the model.

Adding the interaction effect into the model decreased the effect of perceived trustworthiness on attitudes, indicating that the attitudes of individuals differ depending on institutional trust in a country (Table 3). The strength of this relationship varies between countries with higher and lower institutional trust. When the level of trust in a country is higher, the effect of perceived trustworthiness on support for maintaining benefits becomes more positive. There is still significant variation in attitudes, which can be explained despite the addition of interaction to the model. As with the previous model, being female, or over 45 years of age increased support for stopping benefits. On the contrary, having a tertiary education and sufficient income increased support for maintaining benefits. The proportions of explained variance were calculated based on the unexplained variance associated with the model: the selected predictors explained 9.76 per cent of the variance at the individual level and 29.8 per cent of the variance at the country level.

Table 3 Model with two-levels interaction

Fixed Effects		Estimate	95 % CI	SE	df	t	p
	Intercept	−.16	[−.48, .15]	.16	432.56	−.991	.322
	Perceived Trustworthiness	.10	[−.006, .21]	.05	3572.04	1.867	.06
	Institutional trust (country)	.69	[.51,.89]	.09	419.537	7.059	<.001***
	Perceived Trustworthiness *Institutional trust(country)	.10	[.03, .16]	.03	4283-11	2.828	.004**
Control variables							
Gender	Female	−.055	[−.08,−.02]	.0174	9015.21	−3.152	.0016**
Education	Lower secondary	.01	[−.04, .06]	.028	4037.78	.348	.728
	Upper secondary	.02	[−.02, .07]	.023	7414.26	0.846	.397
	Tertiary	.007	[.02, .12]	.027	8707.92	2.663	.007**
Age categories	25-34	−.06	[−.12, −.01]	.035	9017.55	−1.575	.115
	35-44	−.05	[−.12, −.01]	.035	8994.97	−1.565	.117
	45-54	−.09	[−.16, −.02]	.034	9006.51	−2.835	.005**
	55-64	−.111	[−.17, −.04]	.033912	9015.27	−3.329	<.001***
	>65	−.16	[−.22, −.10]	.032	8987.74	−5.048	<.001***
Subjective income	Enough	.14	[.09,.18]	.022	5288.08	6.151	<.001***
Random Effects		Variance	SD				
	Residual	0.669	0.82				
	Country (Intercept)	0.002	0.04				

Notes: Dependent variable: attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed, groups: country (22), *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Source: author's compilation of ESS Round 8 data (2016)

The results indicate that institutional trust at the country level conditioned the effect of the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed and attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed. As can be seen in Table 4, for both high (+1SD from AM) and low levels (-1SD from AM) of institutional trust the relationship remains statistically significant. If institutional trust in the country is low (-1SD from AM), perceived trustworthiness significantly increases support for the maintenance of benefits. If institutional trust is high (+ 1SD from AM), perceived trustworthiness also has a positive effect on attitudes, but this effect is weaker. To illustrate this effect, Figure 3 was created. As a reminder, the dependent variable was measured using a scale ranging from 0–3, with a higher score indicating a more positive attitude in terms of maintaining most of the benefits. To sum up, institutional trust in a country weakly determines the effect of individual-level trustworthiness in relation to attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed.

Table 4 Conditional effect of institutional trust in the country related to perceived
trustworthiness and attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed

Institutional trust	Estimate	SE	t	95 % CI	
− 1 SD	.31	.02	20.09***	.28	.34
+ 1 SD	.25	.02	16.80***	.22	.28

Notes: ***p<0.001

Source: author's compilation of ESS Round 8 data (2016)

Figure 3 Conditional effect of institutional trust in a country related to perceived
trustworthiness and attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed

Notes: Low (-1SD from Mean), High (+1SD from Mean)

Source: author's compilation of ESS 8 data (2016)

5 Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to clarify how the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed and institutional trust are connected and reflected in Europeans' attitudes to sanctions on unemployment benefits. Data were drawn from the eighth round of the European Social Survey. Even the preliminary analysis of attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed who refuse to work identified variability among European countries with the prevalence of solidarity in Europe.

The analysis confirmed that the perceived trustworthiness of the unemployed helps explain the variation in attitudes toward sanctions on the unemployed within countries and, to a lesser extent, differences between countries (H1 is thus supported). It should be noted that the perception of the unemployed as untrustworthy (in terms of abusing welfare systems and not looking for jobs) weakens the preference for maintaining benefits in the case that the unemployed person refuses to work because of the lower education requirements associated with a job, a lower salary, or unpaid work, so the criterion of activity plays a significant role in support for unemployment benefit conditionality across European countries. The results of this paper support the claim that when people have negative images of the unemployed, their support for providing unemployment benefits is lower (van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2014 in van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017, p. 12). Moreover, Algan et al. (2015) proved that the support of honest people for the welfare state is related to being surrounded of trusted people, while dishonest people support the welfare state because they can benefit from it (self-interest). Of the control variables, being female and over 45 years old increased support for stopping benefits (compared to the variables being a man and under 25 years old), while having a tertiary education and subjectively sufficient income strengthened the preference for maintaining benefits (compared to primary education and subjectively insufficient income). Controlling such characteristics supports claims of the role of self-interest in support for the unemployment benefits system, as put forward by Laenen and Meuleman (2018).

However, in addition to trust in claimants, the state and institutions responsible for deciding on the related issues also need to be trusted or perceived positively (Daniele & Geys, 2015; Habibov et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2017). This assumption was not clearly confirmed in our study, as institutional trust at the individual level was only weakly associated with attitudes to sanctions (H2 was thus rejected) but at the country level it has a moderating effect on the relationship of perceived trustworthiness and attitudes to sanctions (H3 was thus supported), in line with a study conducted by Pitlik and Kouba (2015), who confirmed the effect of institutional trust on the relationship of interpersonal trust and attitudes to government intervention. Moreover, after adding institutional trust at the country level as a moderator, the association between perceived trustworthiness and attitudes decreased. This model, which controlled for gender, age, education and subjective income, was statistically significant and supported the role of trust at the country level. If there is a lower level of institutional trust at the country level, the belief that people are untrustworthy and abusing the system may strengthen the desire to sanction or withdraw benefits. This result, however, needs to be interpreted with caution and verified in further research that employs other variables.

Similar results that explain between-country variation in attitudes to the conditionality of awarding benefits can be found in Baumberg Geiger, who reported that people's beliefs about the abuse of benefits and occurrences of fraud are related to their perception of claimants as undeserving (Baumberg Geiger, 2017, p. 83) – with this link varying across countries

and population subgroups. Moreover, in Buß et al. (2017) support for the conditionality of unemployment benefits contingent on the willingness of the unemployed to accept any available job was found to be higher in wealthier countries, and a high unemployment rate in a country to weaker support, which may explain some of the unexplained variability in attitudes across European countries. In addition to these relationships, when there is greater social distance between people, the upper and middle classes have trouble identifying with the unemployed, leading to more negative attitudes and greater conditionality in relation to helping them (Carriero & Filandri, 2018, p. 13).

To sum up, if the trustworthiness of the institutions which are in charge of labour market policy is doubted at the country level, and there is a prevailing belief in a country that cases of benefit abuse are not sufficiently investigated and detected, people will not believe even those who are the recipients of benefits, thus their attitudes to providing social benefits cannot be expected to change. Accordingly, individual-level trust in institutions, and trust at all levels can improve unemployment insurance policies and welfare systems.

This study complements research studies on the relationship between trust and attitudes to the conditionality of unemployment benefits, but has some limitations. First, cross-sectional data were collected in 2016, but the items regarding sanctions on the unemployed were not included in any of the following rounds of the ESS. Second is the self-reported character of the data and the focus only on trustworthiness and institutional trust. While not within the scope of this paper, attempting to identify other suitable predictors (not only at an individual level but also at a country level) would be helpful because there is still much unexplained variance in attitudes to sanctions on the unemployed, creating room for continued research.

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Gossip is distinct from other topics in spontaneous conversation

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Abstract

Gossip – talking about relevant others in their absence – is believed to constitute a large part of informal communication. The perception of the prevalence of gossip implies that it can be unambiguously identified and distinguished from other topics in spontaneous conversation. Its distinctiveness may be justified by multiple theoretical perspectives, including one that describes in-group gossip as an informal device for enforcing norms and punishing norm violators, and another that claims that gossip is used to release frustration and communicate envy. If the ultimate reason for gossip is to facilitate social bonding between the sender and the receiver, however, this would not differentiate gossip from other conversational topics that provide social enjoyment, such as entertainment and food. In a novel contribution, we explore the topics included in a corpus containing 550 hours of unfiltered spontaneous conversation and identify using LDA topic modeling whether some topics are unambiguously prominent in in-group gossip. The explorative approach is integrated with the manual annotation of instances of gossip across the entire corpus. We identified coherent topics of in-group gossip that are clearly different from those of small talk and storytelling. Our analysis finds that feelings, intentions, and opinions are frequently expressed in in-group gossip, more than habits, manners, and behavior. In-group gossip topics are characterized by more words associated with anger, in line with theoretical perspectives that attribute the motives of norm enhancement and punishment or frustration and envy to gossip.

Keywords: gossip; social bonding; maintenance of norms; spontaneous conversations; LDA topic model

1 Introduction

1.1 The prevalence of gossip in spontaneous conversation

Humans are empowered with exceptional and complex verbal language skills. Probably most important of all the associated benefits, spoken language helps us obtain information about events, wrong-doings, and expectations within our social group. Receiving information about others helps us relate properly to actions and behavior and to make the right decisions in a complex social world (e.g., Suls, 1977; Giardini, 2012).

Talking about others who are not present is called *gossip* (Foster, 2004; Kurland, 2011; Ellwardt, 2011; Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Beersma et al., 2012; Grosser et al., 2012; Giardini & Wittek 2019a). Gossip is prevalent in schools (Kisfalusi et al., 2019; Estévez et al., 2022), organizations (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Beersma & van Kleef, 2012) and other contexts in life (Besnier, 2009; Mangardich et al., 2019; Martinescu et al., 2019; De Backer et al., 2019). According to some accounts, two-thirds of human verbal communication falls into this category (Emler, 1994; Dunbar, 2004; Dunbar et al., 1997).

The prevalence of gossip can only be confirmed if gossip is identifiable and can be differentiated from other informal speech acts. But is gossip different in its content and semantic features from other conversation topics? This is a fundamental question that research first needs to answer. If gossip is indeed different, what are the distinct characteristics of gossip-based conversations?

While the importance of gossip has been demonstrated in previous qualitative, experimental, and survey research, knowledge is limited about whether gossip is differentiable from other conversation topics and characterizable in terms of distinct characteristics and semantic features. As a novel contribution, we explored the topics in unfiltered spontaneous conversations in the HuTongue corpus we built for this purpose using a quantitative explorative approach to identify major topics of informal communication. We labeled the topics based on their characteristic words. We explored the topics that emerged and checked whether they could be characterized as in-group gossip topics and if they stood out unambiguously from others. Based on the theoretical literature that anticipates certain substantive properties of gossip, we quantitatively and qualitatively contrasted in-group gossip topics with other topics.

1.2 Theoretical explanations for and perspectives about the motivation for gossip

The expected distinctiveness of gossip conversations can be explained by various theoretical accounts. We review these accounts in this subsection by grouping them into perspectives emphasizing *social bonding*, *the maintenance of social norms*, *social undermining*, and *emotion venting*. Some of these theoretical accounts aim at providing ultimate explanations, while others offer proximate explanations and highlight the individual sources of motivation for gossip. These theoretical views imply complementary predictions about the distinctive characteristics of gossip conversations compared to informal interactions without gossip.

First, the distinctiveness of gossip conversations is not evident if ultimate explanations for gossip are considered. One widely shared perspective is that gossip, similarly to dance, music, and other rituals, facilitates *social bonding* within the group (Dunbar, 1993; 1997; 1998; 2004; 2021). In this sense, gossip is part of 'social grooming' that is used to release stress, create close contact, and make life enjoyable (Dunbar, 1998). The fundamental characteristics of gossip conversations, such as intimacy, close distance, confidentiality between the sender and the receiver, and a high level of enjoyment and excitement (Feinberg, Willer & Schultz, 2014) provide support for this theoretical perspective and underline its relevance in human evolution. Social bonding in gossip is also clearly reflected in the public image of gossip as idle talk. Adopting this perspective, talking about third parties has a similar purpose to

small talk about weather, food, entertainment, and sex (Levin & Arluke 1985). The targets of gossip and consequences for the latter are considered less important than strengthening the relationship between the sender and receiver from the perspective of social bonding.

Second, considering information gathering and validation, gossip might transmit evaluative information about others as an efficient alternative to direct observation (Bozoyan & Vogt, 2016). Gossip that transmits reputational information might be beneficial or detrimental to the target (Wu, Balliet & van Lange, 2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2016c). Reputational information exchange could be linked to group protection and cooperation, as it may punish norm violators and free riders in a subtle way (Fine, 1977; Feinberg et al., 2012; 2014; Nowak & Sigmund, 2005; Giardini & Vilone, 2016; Jazaieri et al., 2019; Giardini & Wittek, 2019c; Számadó et al., 2021; Giardini et al., 2022). This theoretical perspective considers gossip to be an informal mechanism used to maintain group norms by decreasing the reputation of norm violators (Hess, 2006; Sommerfeld et al., 2008; Beersma & van Kleef, 2011; Giardini & Conte, 2012; Giardini et al., 2014; Feinberg et al., 2014; Giardini & Wittek, 2019b). From this perspective, the importance of gossip lies in its target-sanctioning potential. Third, due to its efficiency at altering reputations, 'senders' could be motivated to use gossip as a means of negative influence for their own benefit. For the sender, gossip could represent a form of purposeful action that harms the reputation of the target, who has a conflict of interest with the sender (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Crick et al., 1996). Such gossip behavior could be considered a form of social undermining that is designed to spoil the reputation of the target (Duffy et al., 2002; 2012; Dijkstra et al., 2014; Jeuken et al., 2015; Crick et al., 2001; Faris, 2012; Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012). Fourth, gossip could be driven by emotional motives. At the individual level, such motives could be linked to releasing stress, broadcasting emotions (Harber & Cohen, 2005; Harber et al., 2014), or coping with envy. Experimental research shows that confidential gossip discussions are often used to liberate the sender from emotional burdens and have physiological consequences such as normalizing the pulse rate or causing excitement for the recipient (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg et al., 2014). *Emotion venting* – the desire to share emotionally evocative experiences – has been found to be a relevant motive for gossip that was previously overlooked in survey research (Pauw et al., 2018; Dores Cruz et al., 2019). Organizational studies have shown that negative emotions such as anxiety, disappointment, anger, and depression are frequent consequences of negative gossip that can hinder the achievement of organizational goals as they decrease job satisfaction and increase employee fluctuation (Hobfoll, 1989; Agnew, 1992), and may also be responsible for the decay of cooperation (Giardini & Wittek, 2019c). In short, there are various reasons to support the claim that gossip is not different from small talk. Other theoretical accounts, however, highlight that in-group gossip may be clearly distinguishable from other conversation topics such as storytelling, talking about food, entertainment, or politics. The fundamental question of the distinctiveness of gossip gains importance from the prevalence of gossip in human life and should be put to the empirical test.

1.3 Research methods for studying gossip

Research on gossip has benefited from multiple methodologies. While experimental methods are straightforward to use to investigate the relationship of gossip to cooperation (Feinberg et al., 2014; Samu et al., 2020; Samu & Takács, 2021) and to reveal its physiological correlates

(Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg, 2012), survey research can tell a lot about the perceptions of and motivation for gossip (Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Lyons & Hughes, 2015; Kisfalusi et al., 2019). Research has also analyzed the presence of gossip in interviews, social media, workplace emails, and surveys (Mitra, 2012). The abstract situational context of laboratory experiments and reluctance to provide information on confidential gossip in survey research limit the external validity of research with these methods. Research on gossip in spontaneous conversations is very much needed to answer questions about its true nature. Studies on gossip in natural settings are based on anthropological observations (Gluckman, 1963; Levin & Arluke, 1985; Besnier, 2009; Emler, 1994; Dunbar et al., 1997), but there have been a few attempts to take account of gossip in transcribed conversations (Slade, 1997; Foster, 2004; Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2019; Robbins & Karan, 2020; Szabó et al., 2021).

The analysis of actual conversations helps determine whether gossip stands out from other conversation topics and may be characterized as having distinct characteristics and semantic features. In this study, we quantitatively explore the topics of unfiltered spontaneous conversations in the HuTongue corpus that we built for this purpose. We devote particular attention to phrases concerning entertainment, food, and other small talk that could be related to social bonding.

This explorative approach provides valid results about the distinctiveness of gossip, as we use it in combination with the costly manual annotation of gossip instances. The distinctiveness of topics that are labeled in-group gossip in the explorative strategy can be validated if segments of gossip topics strongly correlate with the instances of in-group gossip identified by manual annotation. Once such validation occurs, the distinctive characteristics of in-group gossip topics can be analyzed. In this way, our study tests the claim of the distinctiveness of gossip and contributes to understanding the prevalence of gossip in informal human communication.

1.4 Expectations about the characteristics of gossip topics

Although gossip may be defined in several ways (Dores Cruz et al., 2020), gossip with and about in-group members may be particularly important in specific theoretical accounts. Gossip with in-group members is expected to increase social bonding and identification with the group. Gossip about in-group members is essential for social orientation in the group about everyday encounters and informs members about the violation of group norms. In our manual annotation, we focused on in-group gossip defined as conversation between at least two group members about a third group member who was not present during the conversation. This might or might not have an evaluative element (cf. Dores Cruz et al., 2020) and excludes *out-group gossip,* which is about targets who are not members of the group, and *storytelling,* which is about past events that happened *to the speakers themselves.*

Table 1 summarizes theoretical expectations about the distinctive characteristics of gossip topics broken down by the theoretical accounts and explanations outlined in Subsection 1.2.

Table 1 Theoretical perspectives on gossip and related characteristics

social bonding, social enjoyment	correlated with small talk topics, entertainment, love, food, weather, and politics; funny storytelling
maintenance of norms and punishment of norm violators, group protection, reputational information exchange	Discussion of manners, personal habits, role performance, task interdependence, deviance, and other reputational concerns; exemplary storytelling
negative influence, undermining	bullying, moral downgrading, offense, exclusion
emotion venting, release of frustration, envy	self-defense, pain, desires, misfortune

What kind of characteristics can be expected of gossip conversations that are in line with the various theoretical accounts and motivations? Social enjoyment of gossip (first row in Table 1) would imply similarities with topics that individuals enjoy discussing, such as entertainment, love, food, weather, and politics. Storytelling could also be of this character as it is often regarded as a process that encourages talking and listening, and as a trigger for starting and continuing conversations with the aim of reflecting on experiences (Bruner, 1986; Labonté & Feather, 1996; Cheshire, 2000). Storytelling typically entertains the receiver and in exchange improves the attractiveness and the perceived status of the sender (Donahue & Green, 2016; Bietti, Tilston & Bangerter, 2018). Storytelling could be a socially collaborative activity through which people focus on sharing personal memories (Mandelbaum, 2013; Bietti et al., 2018; Bietti et al., 2019) and could be related to the concepts of episodic future thinking and episodic memory, which are based on an individual's ability to remember past personal experiences and then recall them as events that might happen in the future (Tulving, 2002; Schacter, 2017). Storytelling, however, as a description of a past series of events or future or hypothetical scenarios with moral or emotional implications, could also create and propagate group norms. Its non-routine character guides behavior in uncertain and novel situations and strengthens group norms and identity (Labov & Fanshel, 1977; Coates, 1996; Cheshire, 2000; Husnu, Mertan & Cicek, 2018; Bietti, Tilston & Bangerter, 2018). Hence, the motivation for storytelling might have similarities in terms of a desire for the maintenance of group norms (second row). As gossip transmits reputational information about other individuals, it is expected to contribute to the establishment and maintenance of social order (Beersma & van Kleef, 2011; Giardini & Conte, 2012; Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Giardini et al., 2014; Giardini & Wittek, 2019b; Feinberg et al., 2014; Hess, 2006). Hence, the emerging topics of in-group gossip are most likely to cover personal habits, manners, appearance, and the role performance of the target (Levin & Arluke, 1985; Giardini & Wittek, 2019b). From an analysis of spontaneous speech, Levin & Arluke (1985) concluded that the topics and subjects of gossip are mainly personal habits, manners, appearance, and role performance. While other parts of conversation may directly prescribe obedience to group norms and their facilitation, talking about other group members could posit role models to follow and behaviors to avoid. As the reputation of the target is directly altered through gossip, the normative content of gossip is expected to be especially relevant if the target is an in-group member. If the target is not part of the social context (e.g., a film star or a family member), gossip could still serve the function of prescribing norms, but it is less likely to alter the in-group reputational structure.

Gossip could also be driven by the individual-level motive of undermining the reputation of others (Duffy et al., 2002; Dijkstra et al., 2014). *Negative influence* (third row in Table 1) could potentially be achieved by belittling the target and questioning their goodwill, relationships, intentions, and behavior. A target can be depicted to be incompetent, immoral, or evil, be attributed a questionable action, or explicitly insulted. As a result, the speakers might question the legitimacy of the group membership of the target (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Emotional expressions and non-verbal forms of emotional communication could also occur in gossip for other reasons (fourth row in Table 1). *Emotion venting*, the desire to share emotionally evocative experiences, is one important motive for gossip (Pauw et al., 2018; Dores Cruz et al., 2019). Emotion venting may be traced in the use of language associated with strong emotions. Text analysis has been successful at social emotion detection by focusing on the sentiment associated with individual words, as these play a central role in how we describe and understand emotions (Shimanoff, 1985; Shaikh, Prendinger & Ishizuka, 2008; Kazemzadeh, Lee & Narayanan, 2013; Correa, Scherman & Arriagada, 2016). It has been shown that negative emotions are more likely to occur in indirect forms of speech (Anderson, 1998). Relying on established text analysis strategies, we use both an emotion dictionary and the annotation of non-verbal emotional expressions to examine the distinctiveness of in-group gossip topics according to these dimensions.

In line with this motivation, we explore whether the topics of in-group gossip can be characterized by different emotional, sentimental, and procedural features than other topics. In our analytical strategy, we first explored the topics of informal conversation in our unfiltered speech corpus and tested if gossip topics are clearly different from non-gossip topics. Finding that they are, we examined if the substantive features of gossip topics differ quantitatively from other topics.

2 Data and methods

2.1 Context and data

The data we use is from a Hungarian TV reality show. Participants during this time were restricted within a closed environment and had almost no possibility to interact with the outside world. Participants were competing for a final prize and left the context after one-on-one duels. Some activities were organized, but all conversations occurred naturally, and no conversations were pre-scripted. Contracts between the entertainment company and fully consenting volunteer participants included detailed information about the presence of full-time audio recording.

Uninterrupted high-quality audio recordings were made using the personal microphones of participants. Video recordings were unavailable. Only edited summaries of 30 minutes duration of daily events were broadcast on television. The entertainment company provided us with the audio data for scientific research with a non-disclosure agreement. We analyzed data covering a period of eight consecutive days following the middle of the 105-day competition. Fifteen participants started the competition, and eight were still participating during this period. We selected this period because the competition had not yet entered its final phase but participants had spent sufficient time together to get to know each other well, so their conversations could be considered natural.

We manually transcribed and annotated all conversations and built a corpus from approximately 550 hours of unfiltered spontaneous conversations (HuTongue). We partitioned the corpus into segments separated by silences lasting longer than two seconds (Galántai et al., 2018).

Although the context of the investigation implies the occurrence of certain topics such as competing and the selection of competitors, the topics and characteristics of conversations closely resembled those found in everyday talk, such as discussions about family, friends, and intimate relations. However, because of the specific context, conversations may have been more competitive and involved more acting up for outside viewers than is natural. We should note, however, that natural conversations also involve a large proportion of acting for audiences (Goffman, 1978).

Table 2 Annotations tag used for the corpus

Emotional expressions	Interpretative codes	Presence of third-person codes
coughing **(k)** sighing **(s)** laughing **(~)** crying **(*)** mocking laughter **(gn)** confused laughter **(zn)** yawning **(a)** hiss **(pi)** screaming **(sik)** elation **(u)** throat clearing **(tor)** whistling **(f)** singing **(é)**	Incomprehensible word **(?)** Unclear word **(( ))** Presence of distant speakers, but their speech is incomprehensible **(t?)** Presence in the conversation is unidentifiable. An estimate of the number of participants present is given, for example: **(4)** Speaker is not a participant **(k?)** To mark the end of sound effects and interpreting codes: **(code)))**	Speakers talking about a third person **(p)** Speakers talking about a certain person who is a participant, for example about Sean: **(p-S)** Someone present in the conversation, but remains silent or taking part in another conversation, for example, Sean **(S)** Someone talking among the participants, for example: **(Sean)**

2.2 Annotation

We used a complex manual transcription and annotation strategy using the software f4 (Dr. dresing & pehl GmbH, Marburg, Germany, https://www.audiotranskription.de/english/f4). Annotation took place during transcription. Annotators used time stamps to indicate the exact time interval of speech events and documented which participant(s) were talking and for how long. Name tags provided information about turn-taking and simultaneous speaking situations. Annotators always marked the names of speakers in the conversation (e.g., Sean). Names were anonymized after transcription. Annotators were extensively trained to use tags. The quality of the transcription and annotation was tested and ensured in several ways (for details, see Supplementary File S1).

Several non-verbal expressions were annotated (Table 2), including lowered voice, laughter, crying, sighing, coughing, and throat clearing. We asked annotators to indicate incomprehensible, unidentifiable speech, and uncertainty about the recipients of the speech act.

2.3 Tagging gossip

Annotators coded conversations about third persons who were *perceived* as not being present as gossip (right-hand column in Table 2: 'p'). Third persons were perceived as absent if they did not take part in the conversation as speakers, were not addressed during the conversa-

tion by the other speakers, and their voice was not audible in the background. The perceived presence of participants who remained silent during the conversation was also annotated (e.g., S). In-group targets of gossip were also annotated (e.g., p-S). In-group members were defined as participants and former participants of the reality show.

Annotators were asked to use gossip tags for lines of the conversation when they perceived that speakers were talking about a person who was not present. Statements about the third person's deeds, personality, and numerous other factors all fall into this category. Annotators were also instructed to use the gossip tag if the speaker made a statement about him- or herself in relation to a third person who was perceived to be absent. When the speakers mentioned multiple participants who were not present in the conversation, all of them were marked individually as gossip targets.

Conversations in which the target was not present but was not a participant or former participant (such as acquaintances, relatives known only to the sender, or celebrities) were interpreted as out-group gossip for which the target was not tagged. Table 3 provides segment examples of in-group gossip and other informal talk in the corpus. As some examples illustrate, targets are not always mentioned by their names, but with pronouns that only manual annotation could interpret properly. In the last in-group gossip example, the sender (Grace) is talking about her relation to the target (Miranda) in a way that has evaluative content.

Table 3 Differentiation of in-group gossip in the annotation of the corpus (examples)

In-group gossip	Not in-group gossip
#23:18# (**Andrew**) She cooks only once or twice a week, but after that there is such a mess that we have to wash up after her for two weeks. (**p-G**) #23:21#	#22:48# (**Victoria**) Mum cooks quite well. She cannot bake though. #22:50#
#12:44# (**Sean**) I am disappointed with Kyle. I think he has lied to us several times. He even lied to me while looking me in the eyes. He often equivocates and looks for excuses. (**p-K**) #12:47#	#09:19# (**Grace**) When my brother was younger, he always wanted mum to make him breakfast. When I prepared it for him, he did not eat it. #09:21#
#14:58# (**Grace**) Miranda told me that you revealed to her you act strategically with not getting into conflicts or quarrels. I believe her, I don't think she lied to me. (p-M) #15:02#	#11:22# (**Victoria**) Put on some more weight, that's what mum said. She said that it looks good on me, as a woman needs to be in shape. #11:26#

2.4 Text pre-processing

The analysis of texts written in agglutinative languages like Hungarian requires the lemmatization of the corpus due to the large variety of potential suffixes for the same stems. We used magyarlanc ('Hungarian chain') to pre-process and lemmatize the HuTongue corpus (Zsibrita, Vincze & Farkas, 2013). magyarlanc is a tool for linguistic analysis that was developed for the syntactic analysis of Hungarian. We implemented part of the speech tagging with magyarlanc and received morphosyntactic information about words in the corpus as an output.

We developed a 'stopword' dictionary based on the translation of the stopword dictionary from the Snowball project (Porter, 2001). Using magyarlanc for morphological analysis and part-of-speech tagging, multiple stopwords were added to the dictionary. We excluded all words from our corpus that were not categorized into a known morphological category by magyarlanc (represented by 'X' in the program output). Adverbs, apart from verbal adverbs, were also discarded along with adpositions, auxiliary verbs, interjections, particles, determiners, and coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. A manual check by researchers ensured that foreign words used as normal parts of language and slang words incorrectly categorized by magyarlanc were not discarded unnecessarily. We also added other nonsensical words during manual qualitative checks. Our final stopword dictionary contained more than 2000 lemmas.

2.5 LDA topic modeling

Topic models are ideal for analyzing large unstructured collections of text (Blei, 2012; Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013; Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidsson, 2014; Németh, Katona & Kmetty, 2020). Topic models are often used in combination with other statistical tools to estimate differences between documents (Dimaggio, Nag & Blei, 2013) and identify patterns of language usage as they can highlight what people talk about (McFarland et. al., 2013). Topic modeling is also used for the content analysis of textual data to discover hidden themes based on word co-occurrence (Hagen, 2018) – for instance, in social media (Koltai, Kmetty & Bozsonyi, 2021; Vancsó & Kmetty, 2021) or large volumes of legislative text (Quinn et al., 2010). Topic modeling can detect and measure differences in the concentration of themes in a corpus. To identify underlying patterns, the model assigns observed words to topics and for each topic allocates high probability to few words from the given vocabulary (Dimaggio, Nag & Blei, 2013).

Topic model outputs require human judgment for interpretation (Mimno et al., 2011), and topics are often manually assigned with labels (Hall et al., 2008). With topic modeling, one can classify issues that occur during speech and combine these with key semantic features to describe conversation patterns and behavior during gossip (Bak, Lin & Oh, 2014).

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Blei, Ng & Jordan, 2003; Blei & Lafferty, 2006; Levy & Franklin, 2014) is a well-known and frequently used topic model. LDA is a generative statistical model that treats documents as a mixture of topics that are multinomial distributions of words (Hong & Davison, 2010; Vogel et al., 2012). The LDA topic model identifies sets of words that tend to reflect hidden topics that characterize every segment in the corpus (Blei, Ng & Jordan, 2003; Blei & Lafferty, 2006). This is based upon a 'bag-of-words' approach, which handles individual words as interchangeable. LDA models the term-topic and topic-document probabilities in a generative way with a Dirichlet distribution as a prior, then estimates non-exclusive topic memberships for each document in the corpus (Blei, Ng & Jordan, 2003; Blei & Lafferty, 2006).

Our pre-processed data of lemmatized text without stopwords were used as input for LDA topic modeling. Even though text pre-processing left a relatively small number of unique lemmas, terms appearing in less than five documents and words present in more than 60 per cent of texts were removed to discard overly rare and overly frequent lemmas. Numbers were excluded. The final document-term matrix included 12,961 documents and 8,530 terms.

Gensim version 3.2.0, a topic modeling library for Python, and its connecting Visdom backend were used to construct the document-term matrix for LDA modeling (Rehurek & Sojka, 2010). We randomly split our corpus into train (50 per cent), test (25 per cent), and validation sets (25 per cent). Our models were configured to use an asymmetric prior learned from the data and to make 40 passes through the training data.

During the process of model building and choosing the number of topics, we relied on multiple metrics such as logarithmic perplexity (measured on the test and validation sets), Jaccard distances, and Kullback-Leibler differences between consecutive training steps, as well as the semantic coherence metric by Mimno et al. (2011). After consulting the literature and undertaking qualitative and quantitative assessments of our corpus, we decided to use 50 topics. Figure 1 displays the metrics that support our choice.

Afterward, we used a sentiment and an emotion dictionary (Szabó, 2014; Szabó & Morvay, 2015; Szabó & Vincze, 2015; Szabó, Vincze & Morvay, 2016) (see the description of dictionaries in Appendix B) to obtain basic correlations with tags, such as the gossip annotation tag in our corpus and topics obtained as a result of LDA topic modeling.
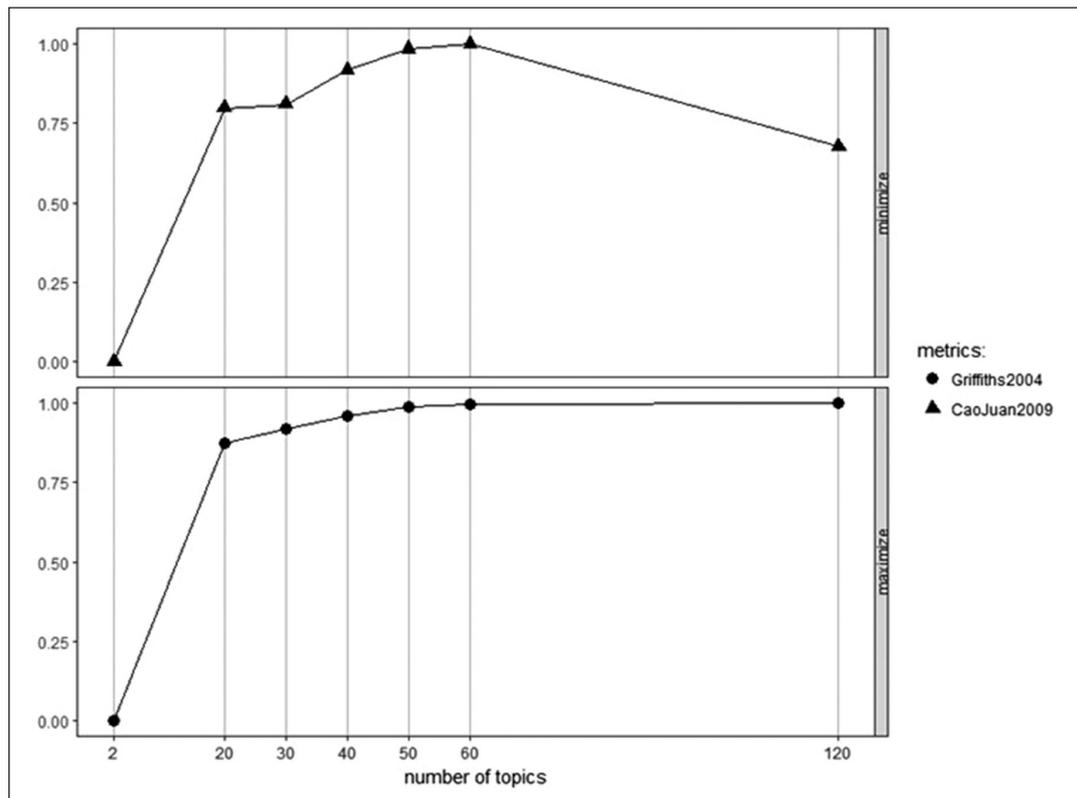
Figure 1 Index values for finding the optimal number of topics
for the LDA model based on a density-based method (Cao et al., 2009)
and a log-likelihood-based method (Griffiths & Steyvers, 2004).

Note: The density-based method (upper curve) maximizes the similarity in the intra-cluster and minimizes the similarity between clusters for adaptive LDA model selection. For the log-likelihood-based method (lower curve), the likelihood of the observed data is maximized by changing the number of topics. The log-likelihood is estimated with harmonic means using the Gibbs sampler.

Table 4 Topic summary and coherence by topic id. Average coherence is: -3.31.

Topic id	Topic coherence	Category	Topic id	Topic coherence	Category
0	−6.00	i	25	−4.55	i
1	−1.87	i	26	−3.38	s
2	−1.99	i	27	−3.13	i
3	−8.13	e	28	−2.74	i
4	−5.73	i	29	−10.08	i
5	−3.04	e	30	−1.36	i
6	−1.91	i	31	−1.60	?
7	−1.65	i	32	−1.59	g
8	−3.50	s	33	−1.63	i/e
9	−2.34	?/e	34	−1.96	e
10	−3.92	s	35	−1.80	e
11	−1.74	i	36	−2.56	i/e
12	−6.10	s	37	−6.31	s
13	−4.94	s	38	−2.40	e
14	−2.50	s	39	−2.54	i
15	−2.69	i	40	−5.97	s
16	−2.44	i	41	−1.21	g
17	−3.08	i	42	−2.18	s
18	−2.42	i	43	−1.08	i
19	−6.28	e	44	−1.76	s
20	−3.83	s	45	−1.59	i
21	−3.13	i	46	−3.50	e
22	−3.33	i	47	−8.58	s
23	−2.71	s	48	−1.90	e
24	−3.28	e	49	−1.54	s

Notes: Ex-post categorization: i = internal issues; e = entertainment; s = storytelling; g = in-group gossip.

3 Results

Table 4 summarizes the coherence of the 50 topics, and their categorization based on term weights into four main themes. Labels were assigned to the topics collaboratively by two different evaluators (Vogel et al. 2012). The rate of agreement of their labeling was 86 per cent. Consensus labeling identified four major themes of topics of spontaneous conversation: a) everyday life and 'internal issues' such as cooking and hygiene (N=21-23); b) topics about the reality show itself, including organized tasks and activities, the selection process, and duels (N=9-12); c) storytelling topics about the sender or a non-participant third person who was not present (N=14); and d), in-group gossip topics (N=2). Four topics were mixed or not coherent.

The two in-group gossip topics were distinctively about (the performance of) other group members and were most coherent. A desire for the maintenance of norms and punishment of norm violators could be traced in these topics, but feelings, intentions, and opinions appeared to be more prevalent than habits, manners, deviance, actions, and behavior. This indicates that perspective-taking is an important characteristic of in-group gossip (cf. Davis, 1983; Beersma et al., 2018; Righi & Takács, 2022).

Table 5 illustrates words characteristic of one topic about everyday issues, one storytelling topic, and two in-group gossip topics. Words associated with food are well represented in the first topic, while the second is filled with terms referencing outside parties (such as family members and celebrities), their activities, and associated feelings (e.g., love). Looking at the linguistic features of the topics, internal issues and topics related to the reality show equally involve verbs, nouns, and adjectives. Storytelling and out-group gossip topics contain more non-participant names (family, friends, and celebrities), personal pronouns, action verbs, adjectives, and nouns. In contrast, the two in-group gossip topics contain the names of participants, personal pronouns, and words that describe perceptions of others (such as feel, think, and understand) with large weights. There is evidence that participants often mention themselves while gossiping. Perception words often refer to the sender; mainly about their feelings or thoughts. The two in-group gossip topics contain nouns with lower weights.

We correlated the four main themes of the topics with some characteristics such that we could statistically associate these findings with the different theoretical expectations outlined in Table 1. The emergence of in-group gossip topics that are distinct from storytelling and out-group topics indicates that social enjoyment is not a distinctive characteristic of in-group gossip. Out-group gossip topics did not emerge independently of storytelling. They contained a total of twelve topics, characterized by larger weights for family names, celebrities, and public characters.

Table 5: Examples of topics and the most important words affiliated with them with their LDA weights

internal issues (topic 0)		storytelling (topic 20)		in-group gossip (topic 32)		in-group gossip (topic 41)	
little	0.04	mom	0.127	tell	0.065	say	0.083
know	0.034	say	0.039	Kyle	0.057	you	0.047
appetite	0.031	mommy	0.025	know	0.045	him/her*	0.044
meat	0.029	they	0.023	you	0.042	know	0.030
egg	0.026	bald	0.020	him/her*	0.038	think	0.022
ham	0.022	bull	0.017	go	0.036	thing	0.021
say	0.021	real	0.016	Tommy	0.028	Zach	0.018
depend	0.020	show	0.016	Andrew	0.024	tell	0.017
Diana	0.018	small	0.015	Miranda	0.023	man	0.014
bacon	0.017	girl	0.015	compete	0.018	Miranda	0.014
salt	0.017	open	0.014	duel	0.015	opinion	0.012
throw	0.016	door	0.013	feel	0.015	understand	0.011
Daniel	0.015	know	0.012	sign	0.014	want	0.011
thank	0.014	eight	0.012	carry	0.012	feel	0.010
sure	0.013	trace	0.011	take	0.011	speak	0.009
dress up	0.013	doctor	0.011	Zach	0.010	Grace	0.009
smooth	0.013	brother/ sister*	0.011	understand	0.009	stand	0.009
let	0.012	August	0.011	Daniel	0.008	keep	0.009
issue	0.011	ahh	0.011	put	0.008	love	0.009
bored	0.011	send	0.010	Ella	0.008	Sean	0.008
love	0.011	sure	0.009	pack	0.008	much	0.007
draw	0.010	neighbor	0.009	want	0.008	true	0.007
independent	0.010	do	0.009	Victoria	0.007	bad	0.007
him/her*	0.010	hand	0.009	call	0.007	Victoria	0.007
wait	0.010	blond	0.009	game	0.007	Daniel	0.006
fourth	0.010	pick	0.008	do	0.007	nobody	0.006
glue	0.010	which	0.008	joke	0.007	honest	0.006
happy	0.010	born	0.008	stand	0.007	word	0.006
salty	0.010	shit	0.008	thing	0.006	wait	0.006
dense	0.010	nah	0.008	two	0.006	does	0.006

Note: Words here are translated from Hungarian to English (words are lemmatized in Hungarian).

* these words have no masculine/feminine versions in Hungarian.

Table 6 Correlation coefficients (*r*) for topics and segment characteristics (segments are coherent units of conversation without silences longer than two seconds).

Segment characteristics	internal (topic 0)	storytelling (topic 44)	in-group gossip (topic 32)	in-group gossip (topic 41)
gossip ratio	−0.064 ($p<0.001$)	0.027 ($p<0.001$)	0.202 ($p<0.001$)	0.235 ($p<0.001$)
ratio of 'joyful' words	−0.015 ($p=0.011$)	−0.036 ($p<0.001$)	−0.058 ($p<0.001$)	−0.091 ($p<0.001$)
ratio of words associated with sadness	0.015 ($p=0.014$)	0.009 ($p=0.134$)	−0.010 ($p=0.090$)	−0.037 ($p<0.001$)
ratio of words associated with anger	0.007 ($p=0.234$)	−0.021 ($p<0.001$)	0.018 ($p=0.003$)	0.024 ($p<0.001$)
positive ratio	−0.023 ($p<0.001$)	−0.045 ($p<0.001$)	−0.067 ($p<0.001$)	−0.092 ($p<0.001$)
negative ratio	−0.020 ($p<0.001$)	−0.051 ($p<0.001$)	−0.058 ($p<0.001$)	−0.072 ($p<0.001$)
ratio of non-verbal annotation tags	−0.026 ($p<0.001$)	0.014 ($p=0.018$)	−0.046 ($p<0.001$)	−0.105 ($p<0.001$)
ratio of laughter annotation tags	−0.042 ($p<0.001$)	0.001 ($p=0.915$)	−0.073 ($p<0.001$)	−0.123 ($p<0.001$)
ratio of crying annotation tags	0.033 ($p<0.001$)	0.078 ($p<0.001$)	0.004 ($p=0.558$)	−0.048 ($p<0.001$)

Note: Four illustrative topics that emerged as a result of an LDA topic model based on a document-term matrix with 12,961 documents (segments) and 8,530 terms, df=12959.

We identified potential connections between different properties of individual segments and topics (Table 6). The first row of Table 6 confirms that in-group gossip topics contained text with more gossip tags. In-group gossip topics cannot be characterized by an abundance of words associated with social enjoyment; their appearance in fact is negatively correlated with in-group gossip topics. In-group gossip topics are characterized by a smaller proportion of laughter, a smaller proportion of sadness-related expressions, and fewer positive as well as negative sentiments than other topics. This indicates that in-group gossip topics are not distinct from other topics according to social enjoyment motivation. Furthermore, in-group gossip topics can be characterized by a greater frequency of words associated with anger. This is consistent with the theoretical perspectives that in-group gossip targets deviance and norm violations or aims at negative influence or is driven by emotion venting, envy, or frustration.

We analyzed all topics correlated with the variables such as the number of words in each topic (see Table 9 in the Appendix) and the number of persons present in conversations. Gossip topics seemed to involve fewer people. This maintains the idea that gossip is a confidential activity.

Appendix Table 9 displays bivariate correlations between selected topics from each theme and various quantitative segment characteristics, including the number of words, frequencies of annotations marks, and prevalence of words from sentiment and emotion dictionaries. Results in Appendix Table 9 indicate that in-group gossip segments contained significantly more words than others. The higher number of words per segment could be a sign of excitement (Rosnow, 2001). This result is also a consequence of the fact that conversations with in-group gossip are lengthier than others. Other correlations with the sentiment and emotion dictionaries and certain annotation marks indicate the relevance of emotion venting in in-group gossip and the release of frustration and envy in particular (last row in Table 1). Non-verbal emotional expressions that are indicators of social enjoyment such as laughing, sighing, and crying are associated with storytelling topics. This might indicate that storytelling and non-verbal emotions during communication are a kind of stage performance (Goffman, 1978).

4 Discussion

Gossip is a widespread activity that has been explained with reference to different sources of motivation and functions (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Farley, 2019; Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Emler, 2019). In this paper, we categorized different theoretical perspectives that define the function of gossip as *social bonding*, *maintenance of social norms*, *social undermining*, and *emotion venting*. In a very broad sense, and as an ultimate explanation, the human tendency to talk so much about others who are not present is due to the inclination for social bonding that makes our life enjoyable (Dunbar, 1998; 2004). Accordingly, social enjoyment has been identified as a key motivation for gossip in survey research (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Dores Cruz et al., 2019), but social enjoyment could also be a source of motivation for other conversations, such as about entertainment or food. Some proximate explanations of gossip and theoretical perspectives on its sources of motivation suggest that in-group gossip topics are distinct from topics of social enjoyment. In-group gossip could be used to exchange information about the reputations of others and to protect a group by helping spot norm violations and free riding (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2012; 2014; Giardini et al., 2014). Gossip may also be motivated by negative influence and a desire for undermining (Duffy et al., 2012) or could be used for emotion venting (Pauw et al., 2018; Dores Cruz et al., 2019), or to release frustration and communicate envy (cf. Liu et al., 2016). These different sources of motivation for gossip are not necessarily in competition (Ellwardt, Steglich & Wittek, 2012).

While the motivation for gossip may be revealed through survey research (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Dores Cruz et al., 2019), the place and the distinctiveness of gossip can only be explored through the analysis of spontaneous conversations. This is difficult, as large corpora of unfiltered natural conversations are rarely available, and there are none we are aware of that have been subject to the labor-intensive manual annotation of in-group gossip. Hence, the extraction of topics from a large natural language corpus of unfiltered communication and the specification of topics that feature in-group gossip could be considered a novel contribution of our study.

As we aimed at creating an objective view of in-group gossip, we did not rely on event samples, filtered discussions, or partial observations. Our data is from a closed environment in which all interactions were recorded for a relatively long period of time. Our goal was to

provide an overview of the dominant topics discussed by the participants, to identify relationships among topics, and to uncover associations between topics and important characteristics that involve gossip. We identified two topics unambiguously as in-group gossip topics. We validated this labeling by correlating the manual annotation of gossip with the topics that emerged. We found the strongest presence of in-group gossip tags in the two gossip topics that have emerged. Hence, we could clearly identify and differentiate in-group gossip from other topics in terms of its content and main features (cf. Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996), and we linked these with the theoretical perspectives that we categorized. In-group gossip topics were distinct from topics of storytelling and out-group gossip that might contain informal evaluative communication about a third party who was not known to the receiver.

In-group gossip topics were the most coherent among all the topics and contained more words, which are interesting findings. This indicates that in-group gossip topics involved the greatest similarity of words within the topic, implying a large degree of stability in the semantic content of gossip, which is achieved by exploiting a colorful vocabulary. Gossip topics involved beliefs and opinions about others surprisingly often and were about relationships with the target. Gossip topics contained more names, personal pronouns, and verbs related to personal perceptions of feelings and thoughts, while adjectives and nouns were less frequent. In contrast, storytelling topics contained non-participant names and plenty of function verbs.

In addition, we analyzed quantitative relationships between in-group gossip topics, annotation marks, and emotions identified with emotion dictionaries. We found that gossip not only involves informing people or setting norms in a group, but it may personally impact the speaker by unleashing anger and distress. Among other emotions, sadness and joy were more typical of storytelling rather than gossip. These results imply that social bonding is probably not the most important motivation for in-group gossip. The results suggest that it is storytelling and out-group gossip that may be more closely related to social bonding in conversations (Dunbar, 1998; 2004).

However, it is important to highlight the contextual limitations of our study. TV reality shows might not offer ideal conditions for supporting the evolutionary accounts of gossip, which may be better identified in small-scale societies (Besnier, 2009). Furthermore, the HuTongue corpus is unique in character as it covers an unprecedented amount of manually transcribed and annotated unfiltered spontaneous conversation, but in a very specific context involving only eight participants. The limitation of our corpus is that the conversations were influenced by a competition which took place during the period of recording. The latter theme probably occurred more frequently during the conversation than in everyday life situations, which may have influenced some of the topics that were identified during our analysis. The strongly competitive nature of the situation, however, does not necessarily mean that frustration and anger were greater because of this circumstance. To arrive at more general conclusions, our findings need to be validated in other collections of conversations in different milieus in the future.

A major value of the study is the construction and analysis of the large corpus of unfiltered spontaneous conversations. Furthermore, we have generated new insight for understanding gossip in everyday human conversations, but similar large-scale studies are needed to confirm our findings in other contexts, with more speakers, and in other languages. Subsequent analyses could identify the structure, the content, and the context of topics as well as their correlation with participants' presence and further relevant variables such as the time of day and activities carried out in parallel with speech.

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Appendix A

Ensuring quality

The quality of the transcription and annotation was tested in multiple dimensions and ensured in several ways. This included continuous supervision, qualitative control, automatized checks, and thorough checks of randomly selected samples. First, the annotators have been selected through a long trial process. Second, annotation marks and rules were developed in a trial phase using comments from and in interaction with annotators. Third, the quality of work of the annotators was measured by giving them the same texts and examining the transcripts' accuracy, the annotation tags, name tags, and timestamp usage, which are divided into sub-dimensions for more accurate feedback. We compared annotators by comparing their work and by using a reference annotator. Annotators with poor relative performance were suspended from further work and their texts were re-annotated when necessary. We provided individual feedback to annotators related to every quality assurance dimension.

These measures were continuously applied when the corpus was built. To compare our annotators' working quality, we used inter-coder agreement measures. Text similarity was measured by cosine similarity and Levenshtein distance. Due to the nature of spontaneous speech and the complexity of the annotation material we used indicators of text similarity and annotation agreement to evaluate annotators' performance. The inter-annotator agreement measures showed 74 per cent for participant (speaker) tags, 72 per cent for whether a text contained gossip tags, and 50 per cent for unique gossip tags after the deduplication of these tags for each row in the database (based on normed Levenshtein distances). The relatively low value in the last case indicates subjectivity bias in the evaluation of gossip.

Appendix B

Sentiment and emotion dictionaries

In order to measure the emotionality and sentiment characteristics of topics, besides the tagging of expressions and emotions we used a sentiment and an emotion dictionary developed and evaluated by the company Precognox (Szabó & Morvay, 2015; Szabó & Vincze, 2015). The sentiment dictionary consists of both positive and negative sentiments. Its reliability was investigated by measuring annotation agreement with two annotators at a 65.02 per cent

agreement rate (Szabó, 2014; Szabó, Vincze & Morvay, 2016). The emotion dictionary consists of six subcategories that rely on the Ekman-Friesen categories (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). It was translated based on the Affective Text Dictionary (Strapparava & Michalcea, 2007) and supplemented with additional synonyms. Later, for quality insurance purposes, the word matching method was used.

We used the dictionaries to identify basic correlations with the tags in our corpus and the topics obtained as a result of LDA topic modeling.

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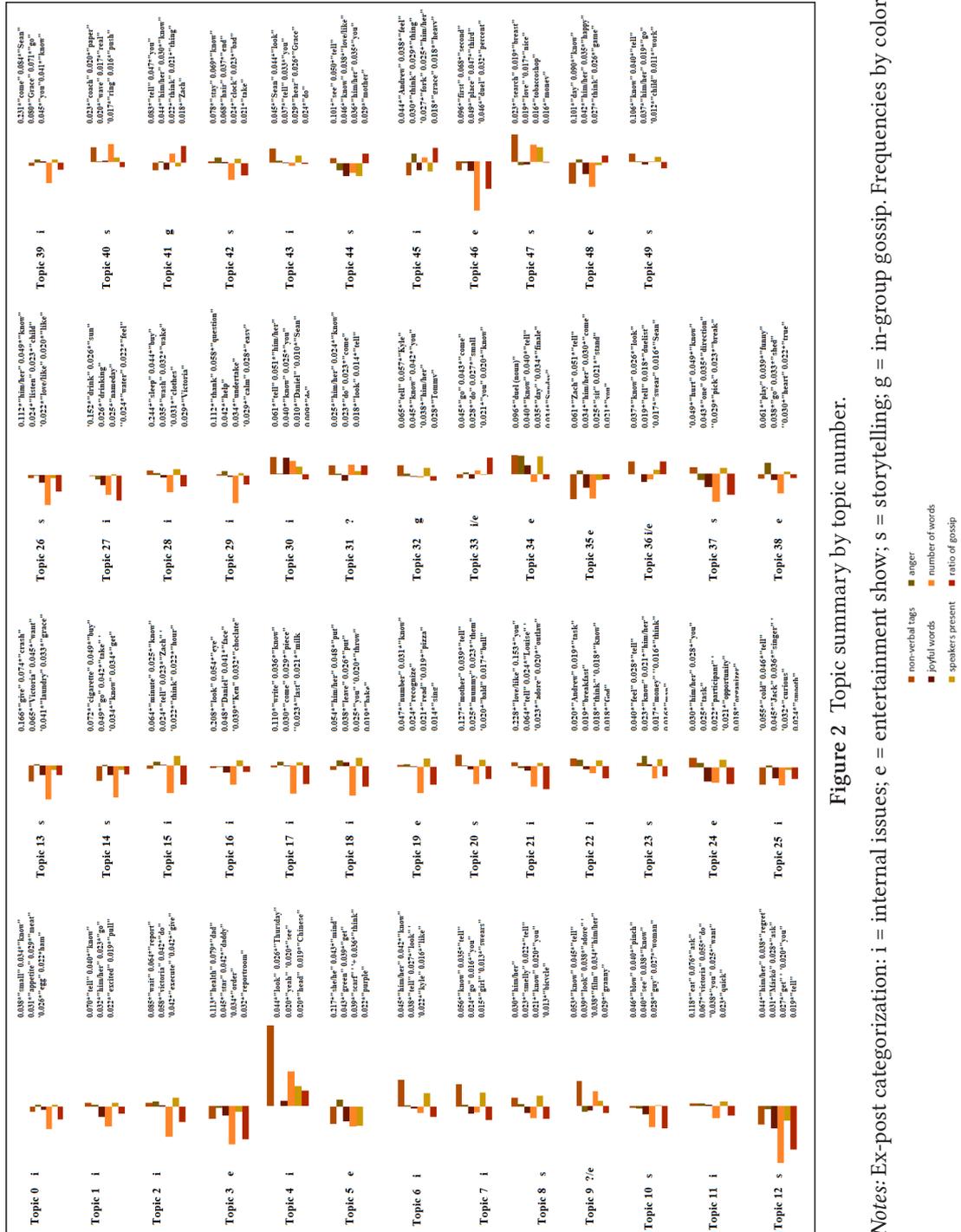
Appendix C

Tables and Figures

Figure 2 Topic summary by topic number.

Notes: Ex-post categorization: i = internal issues; e = entertainment show; s = storytelling; g = in-group gossip. Frequencies by colors:

Table 9 Topic summary by dictionaries and annotation tags, Spearman correlations (r_s) of topics and variables

topic	topic label	ratio of gossip tags r_s	p	speakers present r_s	p	participants present r_s	p	number of words r_s	p	ratio of joyful words r_s	p	ratio of sadness r_s	p	ratio of anger r_s	p	ratio of fear r_s	p	ratio of positive words r_s	p	ratio of negative words r_s	p	ratio of non-verbal tags r_s	p
topic 0	i	-0.064	***	0.011	0.078	0.081	***	-0.111	***	-0.016	0.007	0.016	0.008	0.008	0.21	0.024	***	-0.023	***	-0.02	0.001	-0.026	***
topic 1	i	-0.031	***	0.02	0.001	0.053	0.001	-0.092	***	-0.046	***	-0.003	0.579	0.01	0.1	0.021	0.021	-0.051	***	-0.045	0.334	0.02	0.001
topic 2	e	-0.072	***	0.042	***	0.082	***	-0.138	***	0.005	0.433	0.035	***	0.023	0.4	0.044	0.008	-0.008	0.178	-0.006	***	0.019	0.002
topic 3	i	-0.101	***	-0.016	0.008	0.049	0.042	-0.116	***	-0.029	***	0.005	0.392	-0.005	0.4	0.003	0.199	-0.035	***	-0.036	***	-0.039	***
topic 4	e	0.017	0.004	0.022	***	0.002	0.788	0.039	***	0.006	0.313	0.006	0.325	0	0.979	0.015	0.674	0.002	0.771	0.011	0.08	0.091	***
topic 5	i	0	0.989	-0.044	***	0.075	0.941	-0.045	***	-0.034	***	0.009	0.119	0.017	0.005	0.02	0.012	-0.04	***	-0.025	***	-0.039	***
topic 6	i	-0.05	***	0.064	***	0.074	***	-0.031	***	-0.01	0.093	0.023	***	0.008	0.195	0.021	0.001	-0.025	***	-0.036	***	0.126	***
topic 7	i	-0.062	***	0.065	***	0.076	***	-0.028	***	-0.034	***	0.011	0.061	0.008	0.03	0.017	***	-0.049	***	-0.039	***	0.105	***
topic 8	s	-0.056	***	0.051	***	0.031	***	-0.054	***	-0.031	***	0.003	0.608	0.013	***	-0.023	0.004	-0.044	***	-0.03	***	0.042	***
topic 9	?/e	-0.033	***	0.025	0.797	-0.002	0.725	0.07	***	-0.02	***	-0.021	0.001	-0.026	***	-0.002	0.784	-0.026	***	-0.022	***	0.119	0.112
topic 10	s	-0.105	***	0.002	0.797	0.04	***	-0.1	***	-0.04	***	-0.012	0.058	-0.011	0.07	-0.002	***	-0.047	***	-0.04	0.053	-0.01	***
topic 11	s	-0.11	***	0.055	***	0.095	***	-0.142	***	0.013	0.034	0.04	***	0.028	***	0.044	0.868	0.007	0.262	-0.012	0.053	0.028	***
topic 12	s	-0.067	***	-0.023	***	0.027	***	-0.088	***	-0.035	***	0.003	0.567	-0.005	0.438	-0.001	0.868	-0.046	***	-0.035	***	-0.029	***
topic 13	s	-0.024	***	-0.011	0.079	0.049	***	-0.086	***	-0.025	***	0.002	0.689	0.003	0.649	0.011	0.073	-0.036	***	-0.027	***	-0.041	***
topic 14	i	-0.088	***	0.046	***	0.098	***	-0.127	***	0.001	0.888	0.03	***	0.018	0.003	0.03	***	-0.01	0.1	-0.016	0.007	-0.013	0.037
topic 15	i	-0.027	***	0.026	***	0.063	***	-0.086	***	-0.028	***	0.002	0.756	-0.004	0.544	0.013	0.033	-0.038	***	-0.037	***	-0.007	0.278
topic 16	i	-0.087	***	0.014	0.022	0.059	***	-0.13	***	-0.002	0.696	0.027	***	0.019	0.002	0.038	***	-0.006	0.355	-0.01	0.091	-0.008	0.179
topic 17	i	-0.095	***	0.038	***	0.075	***	-0.135	***	0.017	0.004	0.037	***	0.028	0.018	0.044	***	0.011	0.064	-0.001	0.933	-0.016	0.008
topic 18	e	-0.082	***	0.04	***	0.078	***	-0.123	***	0.003	0.588	0.035	***	0.014	0.661	0.043	***	-0.004	0.475	-0.013	0.027	0.009	0.119
topic 19	s	-0.06	***	0.031	***	0.059	***	-0.083	***	-0.013	0.037	0.017	0.006	0.003	***	0.016	0.008	-0.022	***	-0.026	***	0.055	***
topic 20	i	-0.107	***	0.017	0.005	0.057	***	-0.095	***	-0.02	0.001	0.004	0.478	-0.007	0.262	-0.001	0.822	-0.03	***	-0.033	***	0.018	0.003
topic 21	s	-0.055	***	0.028	***	0.07	***	-0.032	***	-0.013	0.033	0.029	***	0.03	***	0.032	***	-0.009	0.129	-0.025	***	0.038	***
topic 22	s	-0.047	***	0.035	***	0.097	***	-0.056	***	0.009	0.133	0.05	***	0.048	***	0.053	***	0	0.987	0.002	0.737	0.015	0.014
topic 23	e	-0.039	***	0.018	0.003	0.054	***	-0.036	***	-0.033	***	0.015	0.013	0.011	0.068	0.023	***	-0.041	***	-0.034	***	0.023	***
topic 24	i	-0.027	***	-0.006	0.317	0.066	***	-0.042	***	-0.026	***	0.005	0.446	0.004	0.487	0.014	0.021	-0.027	***	-0.027	***	-0.041	***
topic 25	s	-0.061	***	-0.011	0.068	0.031	***	-0.11	***	-0.028	***	0.013	0.039	-0.001	0.843	0.004	0.504	-0.038	***	-0.029	***	-0.011	0.066
topic 26	i	-0.08	***	0.005	0.375	0.049	***	-0.061	***	-0.03	***	0.001	0.813	-0.013	0.038	0.003	0.681	-0.048	***	-0.04	***	-0.002	0.785
topic 27	i	-0.058	***	0.026	***	0.054	***	-0.085	***	-0.013	0.031	0.011	0.06	0.01	0.118	0.027	***	-0.027	0.046	-0.018	0.004	0.021	0.404
topic 28	i	-0.045	***	0.013	0.038	0.04	0.008	-0.135	***	-0.006	0.348	0.025	***	0.021	0.001	0.039	***	-0.012	0.046	-0.018	0.003	0.005	0.001
topic 29	i	-0.006	0.323	0.009	0.136	0.006	0.327	0.016	***	0.02	0.001	0.002	0.745	0.001	0.848	-0.001	0.874	0.021	0.001	0.007	0.239	0.021	***
topic 30	?	0.117	***	0.045	***	0.114	***	0.125	***	-0.008	0.206	0	0.955	0.014	0.02	0.004	0.553	-0.08	0.001	-0.069	0.119	0.132	***
topic 31	g	-0.052	***	0.102	***	0.114	***	-0.011	0.08	-0.008	***	0.04	***	0.034	***	0.048	0.172	-0.026	***	-0.016	0.008	0.132	***
topic 32	i/e	0.202	***	-0.012	0.044	0.01	0.111	-0.039	***	0.043	***	-0.01	0.09	0.018	0.003	0.09	***	-0.067	***	-0.058	***	-0.046	***
topic 33	e	-0.025	0.027	0.087	***	0.123	***	-0.06	***	-0.033	***	0.088	***	0.09	***	0.107	0.001	0.029	***	0.024	***	0.092	***
topic 34	i	-0.013	***	-0.014	0.018	0.022	***	-0.024	***	-0.037	***	0.001	0.812	0.008	0.192	0.02	0.002	-0.042	***	-0.013	0.037	-0.061	***
topic 35	i/e	0.064	***	0.024	***	0.059	0.037	-0.069	***	-0.033	***	-0.007	0.987	0.019	0.965	0.001	0.84	-0.039	***	-0.045	***	0.063	***
topic 36	s	-0.052	***	0.013	0.037	0.059	0.004	-0.09	***	-0.026	***	0	0.277	-0.016	0.009	0.001	***	-0.033	***	-0.036	***	0.015	0.013
topic 37	e	-0.07	***	0.017	0.004	0.068	***	-0.046	***	-0.014	0.021	0.017	0.412	0.001	0.811	0.027	***	-0.023	***	-0.023	***	-0.014	0.026
topic 38	i	-0.01	0.097	0.005	0.45	0.059	***	-0.145	***	0.011	0.067	0.032	0.005	0.027	0.009	0.028	***	-0.023	0.39	-0.02	0.001	-0.011	0.079
topic 39	e	-0.048	***	0.024	***	0.068	***	0.067	***	0.005	0.431	0.011	***	0.026	***	0.043	***	0.005	0.62	-0.009	0.353	-0.019	0.002
topic 40	g	-0.019	0.001	0.017	0.005	0.006	0.365	0.132	***	-0.091	***	-0.037	0.075	0.003	0.576	0.012	0.041	0.003	0.151	0.006	0.353	0.055	***
topic 41	i	0.235	***	-0.051	***	-0.041	***	-0.093	***	0.009	0.13	0.035	***	0.032	***	-0.04	***	-0.092	0.849	-0.072	0.693	-0.105	***
topic 42	s	-0.065	***	0.025	0.057	0.057	***	-0.047	***	-0.012	0.046	0.033	***	0.026	***	0.041	***	0.001	***	0.002	0.693	0.012	0.042
topic 43	i	-0.019	0.002	0.112	***	0.112	***	-0.028	***	-0.036	***	0.009	0.134	0.026	***	-0.002	0.761	-0.029	***	-0.024	***	0.188	***
topic 44	s	0.027	***	-0.037	-0.001	0.014	0.851	0.015	0.013	-0.022	0.002	0.012	0.044	0.025	-0.021	-0.002	0.84	-0.045	***	-0.051	***	0.014	0.018
topic 45	e	0.042	***	-0.026	0.45	0.046	0.026	-0.095	***	-0.019	0.217	0.002	0.759	-0.004	0.524	0.027	***	-0.031	***	-0.028	***	-0.038	***
topic 46	i	-0.053	***	0.005	0.995	0.046	***	0.048	***	-0.008	0.067	-0.006	0.333	0.023	0.097	0.023	***	-0.027	0.39	-0.026	0.001	-0.017	0.006
topic 47	e	-0.003	0.646	0.024	***	0.024	***	-0.034	***	-0.016	0.011	-0.01	0.534	-0.006	0.45	-0.006	0.302	-0.011	0.62	-0.015	0.017	0.076	***
topic 48	i	0.01	0.103	-0.003	0.603	0.032	***	-0.034	***	-0.016	0.011	0.004	0.534	0.005	0.45	0.023	0.302	-0.031	0.059	-0.028	0.017	-0.029	0.018
topic 49	s	-0.09	***	0.072	***	0.063	***	0.001	0.824	-0.035	***	0.008	0.213	0.004	0.54	0.034	***	-0.05	***	-0.038	***	0.114	0.006

Table 9 *(Continuing)*

	coughing		sighing		laughter		crying		mocking laughter		confused laughter		screaming		yawning		hiss		exultation		throat clearing	
	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p	r_s	p
topic 0	0.042	***	0.017	0.006	-0.042	0.436	0.033	***	0.023	***	0.014	0.019	0.034	***	0.026	***	0.034	0.045	0.037	0.048	0.016	0.008
topic 1	0.037	***	0.035	***	0.005	0.41	0.032	***	0.009	0.123	0.023	***	0.028	***	0.014	0.026	0.012	***	0.012	0.014	0.018	0.003
topic 2	0.079	***	0.059	***	0.005	***	0.033	***	0.049	***	0.06	***	0.071	***	0.064	***	0.059	0.001	0.056	0.014	0.03	***
topic 3	0.021	0.001	-0.018	0.004	0.09	***	0.022	***	-0.018	0.003	0.027	0.046	0.01	0.093	0.006	0.308	0.021	0.99	0.015	0.014	-0.024	***
topic 4	0.037	***	0.028	***	-0.054	***	0.03	0.502	0.043	***	0	***	-0.005	0.389	0.014	0.025	0	***	0.015	0.066	0.033	***
topic 5	0.008	0.215	0.009	0.125	0.134	***	0.02	0.001	0.064	0.111	0.062	0.949	0.045	***	0.057	0.027	0.027	0.003	0.042	***	0.037	***
topic 6	0.082	***	0.054	***	0.104	***	-0.003	0.637	0.057	***	0.075	***	0.049	0.31	0.043	***	0.042	***	0.031	***	0.051	***
topic 7	0.093	***	0.055	***	0.039	***	0.011	0.061	0.028	***	0.015	0.017	0.02	***	0.025	***	0.018	***	0.021	0.001	0.051	***
topic 8	0.06	***	0.037	***	0.123	***	-0.031	***	0.042	***	0.008	0.167	-0.005	0.001	-0.004	0.558	0.03	***	-0.027	0.146	0.01	0.088
topic 9	0.021	0.001	0.004	0.524	-0.011	0.084	0.073	***	0.028	0.409	-0.006	0.299	0.004	0.412	0.003	0.592	-0.027	0.36	0.006	0.392	-0.001	0.872
topic 10	0.005	0.417	0.009	0.121	0.013	0.034	-0.001	***	-0.005	0.237	0.03	***	0.054	0.532	0.058	0.12	0.006	0.154	0.068	***	0.022	***
topic 11	0.072	***	0.046	***	-0.032	***	-0.004	0.505	0.03	0.871	-0.015	0.987	0.002	0.701	0.02	0.001	0.058	0.001	0.017	0.006	0.014	0.003
topic 12	0.001	0.847	-0.003	0.59	-0.044	***	0.015	0.017	-0.007	***	0	***	0.05	0.723	0.054	***	0.009	***	0.056	***	0.014	0.026
topic 13	0.04	***	0.012	0.052	-0.027	***	0.034	***	0.001	***	0.032	***	0.014	***	0.01	***	0.02	***	0.024	***	0.018	0.021
topic 14	0.057	***	0.042	***	-0.019	0.002	0.014	0.026	0.038	0.004	0.013	***	0.071	***	0.053	0.09	0.049	***	0.051	***	0.007	0.003
topic 15	0.032	***	0.023	***	-0.002	0.735	0.033	***	0.018	0.006	0.032	***	0.049	***	0.06	***	0.014	***	0.06	***	0.012	0.237
topic 16	0.05	***	0.016	0.007	-0.026	***	0.038	***	0.017	***	0.021	***	0.058	***	0.055	***	0.053	***	0.039	***	0.012	0.049
topic 17	0.065	***	0.045	***	0.003	0.573	0.021	0.001	0.037	***	0.023	***	0.014	0.018	0.023	***	0.07	***	0.036	***	0.009	0.145
topic 18	0.042	***	0.032	***	0.04	***	0.047	***	0.025	***	0.027	0.909	0.043	***	0.027	***	0.051	***	0.014	***	0.028	***
topic 19	0.049	***	0.032	***	0.022	***	0.013	0.034	0.048	***	-0.001	***	0.066	***	0.052	***	0.036	***	0.045	0.023	0.006	0.334
topic 20	0.033	***	0.001	0.912	0.024	***	0.057	***	0.021	***	0.048	***	0.031	***	0.07	0.034	0.048	0.026	0.072	***	0.037	***
topic 21	0.036	***	0.043	***	0.009	0.156	0.055	***	0.04	***	0.036	***	0.023	0.081	0.025	0.073	0.08	***	0.012	0.054	0.052	***
topic 22	0.069	***	0.045	***	0.01	0.099	0.03	***	0.053	***	0.042	0.219	0.011	0.84	0.013	***	0.027	***	0.033	0.002	0.025	***
topic 23	0.024	***	0.037	***	-0.058	***	0.034	***	0.038	***	0.007	0.239	0.001	***	0.034	***	0.016	0.008	0.019	0.747	0.021	0.001
topic 24	0.023	***	0.039	***	-0.024	***	0.017	0.005	-0.004	0.927	-0.007	0.177	0.032	0.414	0.011	0.824	0.013	0.028	-0.002	0.945	0.011	0.076
topic 25	0.038	***	0.017	0.005	-0.016	0.009	0.008	0.202	0.009	0.504	-0.008	0.054	0.039	0.844	0.026	0.025	0.006	0.33	0.043	0.018	0.031	0.002
topic 26	0.021	0.001	-0.002	0.741	0.014	0.024	0.037	***	0.008	0.121	0.012	0.926	0.005	***	0.051	***	0.033	***	0.03	0.745	0.019	0.6
topic 27	0.041	***	0.023	***	-0.009	0.147	0.051	***	-0.01	0.177	0.032	***	-0.001	0.051	0.001	0.07	0.045	0.9	0.03	***	0.003	***
topic 28	0.033	***	0.05	***	0.007	***	0.007	0.279	0.03	0.092	0.001	***	0.104	0.829	0.014	0.015	-0.011	0.084	-0.014	0.018	0.058	***
topic 29	0.019	0.002	0.024	***	0.107	***	0.001	0.877	-0.01	***	0.057	***	-0.001	***	0.076	0.002	0.055	0.118	0.063	0.745	0.074	***
topic 30	0.044	***	0.061	***	0.134	***	0.034	***	0.043	***	0.06	0.27	0.104	***	0.107	0.82	-0.01	***	0.002	***	0.037	***
topic 31	0.075	***	0.08	***	-0.073	***	0.004	0.558	0.069	0.505	0.007	***	-0.012	0.051	0.015	***	-0.012	0.002	0.144	0.008	0.078	***
topic 32	-0.018	0.003	0.022	***	0.083	***	0.115	***	-0.004	0.002	0.113	***	0.132	0.829	0.019	0.003	0.128	0.118	0.016	0.028	0.05	***
topic 33	0.106	***	0.107	***	-0.073	***	0.026	***	0.107	0.002	0.052	0.081	0.043	***	0.019	0.881	0.019	0.002	0.042	0.008	0.015	***
topic 34	0.013	0.033	0.014	0.021	0.041	***	0.064	***	0.039	***	-0.006	0.356	0.023	***	-0.001	***	0.006	0.316	0.01	0.115	0.007	0.015
topic 35	0.053	***	0.068	***	0.002	0.803	0.005	0.437	-0.002	0.776	0.023	***	0.033	***	0.026	0.01	-0.003	0.568	0.042	***	-0.003	0.223
topic 36	0.033	***	0.031	***	-0.022	***	0.046	***	0.02	0.001	0.032	***	0.04	0.743	0.018	0.001	0.025	***	0.049	***	0.042	0.653
topic 37	0.043	***	0.022	***	-0.025	***	0.05	***	0.023	***	0.026	0.026	0.067	***	0.057	0.003	0.04	***	0.068	0.505	0.007	0.238
topic 38	0.011	0.069	0.023	***	-0.031	***	0.071	***	0.026	0.002	0.014	0.241	0.002	***	0.001	0.881	0.058	0.138	-0.004	***	0.016	0.008
topic 39	0.061	***	0.053	***	0.054	***	0.016	0.007	0.019	***	-0.007	***	-0.062	***	-0.056	***	0.009	***	-0.068	***	0.025	***
topic 40	0.021	0.001	0.015	0.015	-0.123	***	-0.048	***	-0.034	***	0.049	***	0.066	***	0.049	***	-0.038	***	0.056	***	0.047	***
topic 41	-0.055	***	-0.01	0.106	0.007	0.253	0.065	***	0.039	0.267	0.108	***	0.12	0.134	0.06	0.01	0.066	0.59	0.067	0.092	0.015	0.011
topic 42	0.05	***	0.026	***	0.189	***	0.047	***	0.102	0.388	0.021	0.001	0.009	***	0.02	***	0.049	***	0.03	***	0.036	***
topic 43	0.111	***	0.077	***	0.001	0.915	0.078	***	-0.007	0.339	0.022	0.01	0.022	***	0.018	0.003	0.003	***	0.001	0.857	0.024	***
topic 44	0.021	0.002	0.026	***	-0.061	***	0.037	***	-0.005	0.021	0.016	***	0.045	0.019	-0.016	0.008	0.023	0.001	0.033	***	0.012	0.041
topic 45	0.018	***	0.048	***	-0.026	***	0.04	***	-0.006	0.001	0.024	***	0.014	***	0.021	0.001	-0.02	***	0.001	***	0.034	***
topic 46	0.039	***	0.028	***	0.069	***	-0.007	0.252	0.014	***	0.045	***	0.024	***	0.034	***	0.024	0.004	0.006	0.327	0.068	***
topic 47	-0.004	0.564	0.019	0.001	-0.042	***	0.029	***	0.021	***	0.055	***	0.037	***			0.017					
topic 48	0.016	0.009	0.03	***	0.12	***	0.016	0.008	0.074	***												
topic 49	0.062	***	0.045	***																		

Topics for illustration that emerged as a result of an LDA topic model based on a document-term matrix with 12,961 documents (segments) and 8,530 terms, df=12959. *** significance level is $p < 0.001$.