

LGBT Community - Constraints and Practices of Space Appropriation in Bucharest¹

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Abstract

Space appropriation gestures happen in everyday activities and conflicts can arise from a resistance of particular groups to such demands. A right we usually take for granted, as is for instance that of being with our friends in a pub, for LGBT people seems to be a continuous negotiation with the people around: to what extent the latter allows them to express their gender and sexual preferences. The article dwells on the following questions: how does the capital city of Romania, Bucharest, question the sexual orientation and gender of LGBT people, in what way they respond to such challenges and what role does space appropriation play in this situation? Thus, we will differentiate between urban public spaces and sexualized heteronormative places, investigating the practices (supported or not by legal instruments and social groups) used by LGBT people to appropriate space. As such, we use interviews and participative observation to analyse the interaction between the LGBT community and urban spaces with an eye on potential negative consequences of the current situation.

Key Words: LGBT Community • space appropriation • coping mechanisms • homophobia

Introduction

The issue of discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation is altogether not new anywhere in this world. The types of discrimination though, at least in the case of Romania, and specifically Bucharest have changed dramatically from blunt, state sponsored discrimination to a more individualized and subtle one. Today we can find them more under the form of different constraints. In order to pinpoint those constraints we are going to employ space as an analytical tool, as a lens, if you may, to look at a particular sub-culture in Bucharest's landscape, namely the LGBT community.

What sex or gender is the person next to us, with which we enter a conversation,

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work or simply share a piece of the public space is without doubt important for who the person is, for what they have become. However, it is disturbing when this aspect of human identity takes precedence in areas of our life where other factors should be relevant (like, for instance, our skills for a job), instead of being a matter of our private, personal realm.

What we are interested to see in this article is how does the capital city of Romania, Bucharest, question the sexual identity of LGBT people and in what way they respond. Thus, we'll talk about urban spaces as sexualized and heteronormative, and investigate the practices (supported or not by legal instruments and social groups) used by LGBT people to appropriate space. As such, we analyse the interaction between LGBT people and urban spaces, as well as between LGBT people and heterosexual urban inhabitants.

The first part of the paper will deal with the important terms and dichotomies that recur throughout the article such as: space vs. place, homophobia and transphobia and the Bucharest LGBT Community. Secondly, the paper goes a bit into describing the research process followed by an array of what we consider to be relevant literature for our particular concerns. The last part is concerned with results and interpretations, and some concluding remarks.

Conceptualization:

It is important for the economy of the text that certain terms get clarified, with the scope that the message will be received in the intended manner. The differentiation between public space and sexualized heteronormative place, as it is going to be further elaborated, should be put in connection to space appropriation mechanisms. The formation of the LGBT community is tightly connected to the idea of bounded space. As Accept and supporters of their objectives continue to stage events, they assert the right of LGBT people to be present and visible in the public space and at the same time the shape of a community starts to be envisioned.

Public space and Sexualized heteronormative place

Gans (2002: 329) defines social space as departing from natural space and being characterized in relation to three criteria: boundaries, use and meaning, the ownership transforming the space in someone's place. However, people do not refer to all social space as place, and even when it is legitimate to call it so, we do not refer to it as place in

all situations. So, we wondered what it is that makes us use the latter term, when we do. Our conclusion was that we tend to use it more when the accent is placed on consequences of power relations. Let us consider the instance of the public space as the discursive area of battle between different interests. One result of such debates would be that the boundaries between public places in a city (**community** - owned and regulated) and private areas there are in a continuous change. Space is, thus, fragmented by power relations and broken into places. Let us take another example, closer to our study. The day the LBTG parade was organized in Bucharest, the street they marched along, as well as the area where they stopped for a while, called the “discrimination-free zone” are both parts of the public space. That was, still, a space they were appropriating, since it became their place for the brief period of hours, they had owned it at a physical and discursive level. In the morning of the same day, on a different street, the march of normality took place and rallied people who shared a heteronormative view: the city belongs to straight people that could be easily categorized as men or women. They appropriated that specific space with anger and thus that became an area where LGBT people had no place to be in, from their perspective.

The difference between space and place is thus the difference between the general and the specific, the difference between an objective, societal and a subjective, personal perspective. The answer to our question is then that we would talk about “space” when at stake are issues of border, use or meaning, in their general form, *i.e.*, as they result from the aggregation of particular viewpoints. We use “place”, when it is more about the ownership, accessibility, use and meaning as invested by individuals.

The LGBT Bucharest Community:

Community is one of those concepts that have been discussed relentlessly in the literature, thus encompassing an impressive array of meanings and connotations. Sometimes when a concept receives this much scrutiny, it does not help illuminate it but rather to decrease its analytical power. In most cases, the term *community* is a useful shortcut, not inviting further questioning because, after all, who does not have an opinion about what a community is? But as soon as one tries to get a sense of what are the bonds that keep people together, how these bonds are sustained, what are the inclusion and exclusion elements and others factors, the shortcut becomes problematic. This was one of our first issues, meaning we tried to look a bit beyond the over-optimistic connotation of community (Day 2006: 90), and understand to our best ability

the fabric that constitutes the Bucharest LGBT community.

The community, regardless of the approach taken, is not a static formation but rather a dynamic process, and in this sense it must have a history and a trajectory. Before the constituency of Accept NGO in the mid 1990's, the Bucharest public discourse, let alone the Romanian one, lacked completely any mention of the existence of an LGBT community, partly because homosexual propaganda of any kind was illegal but mostly because an LGBT community as such did not exist. What today bears the name of *community* was formed, as we can see it, as an opportunity structure. In some cases opportunities are presented by formal organizations facilitating interactions between people that otherwise appear to be quite dissimilar (Neal 2012). Our community question gains two dimensions in this sense: firstly it appears that the community is also bounded, amongst other criteria, by a physical dimension, and secondly, this characteristic made possible the development of specific types of networks. To be clear, the idea of boundary is extracted from the discourse of Accept officials, which clearly differentiate between communities residing in different cities. In this sense, there is a Bucharest LGBT community, as well as, for example, a Ploiești LGBT community (hence the physical dimension) with most of the same goals as the Bucharest one but with potentially different challenges. Accept also plays an important role in facilitating ties between networks, not only with other nationally based LGBT communities, but also with international ones. The discussions with the Accept representatives illuminated partly the directionality of information flow through the extended national network, having at its core the Bucharest LGBT community. The representatives visit periodically LGBT communities outside of Bucharest as to understand their constraints and offer support, while the other communities come to Accept when in need of legal and bureaucratic assistance.

Boundaries are put in place “so as to include some and leave out others” (Day 2006: 116). This means that we can identify elements of inclusion and exclusion in/from the structure. In our particular case an element of inclusion but also self-exclusion is the adherence, or non-adherence respectively, to the principles put forward by Accept¹. Another criterion of self-exclusion is the one of indifference and/or reservation towards the official community's stance. Schematically put, the opportunity structure can be envisioned as having a strong pro-active core, a larger peripheral mass that adheres to

¹ We do not exclude the possibility of other centres of polarization to exist, but if they do they do not have well established public structures, official stance or visibility.

the values and principles put forward, but are rarely active, some gravitational fuzzy elements¹, that subscribe to some of the principles but do not feel as being an integral part of the community, and the invisibles² which do not adhere to the institutional approach to community. In other words, we do not focus on the fixed elements and relationships but rather on the dynamics at play in the continuous process of creating the community. The scheme presented above will serve as a landmark, helping us approximate throughout the research, where within the circles of the community we find ourselves.

Homophobia and transphobia

Anyone trying to extract a definition of *homophobia* from the sexual minorities literature would find themselves in great difficulty, since, as it is accepted in many academic articles, there is no widely approved use of the term. The meaning we use in this paper is mainly based on that found in Bernat et al. (2001: 180), since it is one of the common views, where homophobia is composed of "negative affect (i.e., aversion, discomfort, and fear) and behaviour (avoidance and aggression) toward homosexuals". We would like, however, to add *prejudice* (McCormak 2014) and replace *homosexuals* with *sexual minorities*, as McCormak rightfully does. In other words, it seems of better use a definition composed of the meaning attributed by the two researchers, where the cognitive level (thoughts) triggers a change at an emotional level (feelings towards), which can be followed by behaviour (discrimination), all of which are directed in this case towards sexual minorities.

Still, as discussed in Herek (2004), the extensively spread term "homophobia" has some important shortcomings. Not only does it make reference to the intense feeling of fear known as "phobia", but is also strictly associated with individual behaviour and leaves out the norms and expectations of the social realm inhabited by individuals. Discussions also concern the discrepancy between the meaning conferred on the term in dictionaries and academic writings compared to a meaning gained from enactment in real life situations, *e.g.*, in homophobic speech (Plummer 2014: 128).

On this backdrop, Herek (2004) puts forward two concepts, *heterosexism* and *sexual prejudice*, to replace *homophobia*. **Heterosexism is more like a macro-level**

¹ A similar idea can be found in a discussion about weblog community boundaries found in Eftimova and Hendrick (2004).

² They emerged as characters in the conducted interviews but we never got the chance to meet them.

concept that attempts to grasp a cultural context which devalues any mark of nonheterosexual way of life, and thus “perpetuates sexual stigma” (Herek 2004: 16). Sexual prejudice, on the other hand, pays attention to the individual and expresses their “hostility and negative attitudes [...] based on sexual orientation” (idem). Plummer (2014), on the other hand, argues in favour of *homophobia* in the conceptual debate with *heterosexism*, since the former is invested with an emotional meaning that the second lacks. We understand that to him *heterosexism* is more like a sanitized, academic term, clean from real life impurities.

In this paper, we chose to use mostly the term *homophobia*, as defined above, because we wanted to include all three dimensions (cognitive, emotional and behavioural) the term gives access to. In the same way we will use the concept *transphobia*, with the obvious difference that in this case, the target population is transgender. We also draw on the distinction introduced by Herek, but only when we consider important to treat separately the macro- and micro-level perspective.

Methodology

We decided to approach the topic “hands free” and open minded, partly because we did not have a previous contact with LGBT people and also because the Romanian literature on the subject is quite thin and lacks the voice of the community. To begin with, we contacted some of Accept’s representatives, with the hope that they could link us to LGBT people willing to participate in our study. Accept is the first and most visible NGO promoting LGBT rights at a national level. Their main activities involve lobbying, advocacy campaigns, media monitoring and information collection and dissemination, but also social and cultural activities with the purpose of facilitating the creation/strengthening of relations among the LGBT Community members and friends. After several sessions of observation we started the construction of our interview guide. In order to get a glimpse of what it means to be LGBT in Bucharest, we made use of our six interviews. The guide for discussions was split in bulks of open ended questions on topics such as socialization, gender identity, places in Bucharest and their degree of LGBT friendliness, formal education, working place and associations, be them political or not. We built the interview guide with the hope that the respondents will give more direct information regarding their relation to the city and specific places here. However, their first reaction was of surprise as to why we were so interested in places, description

of and attitudes towards them, since they did not, at least not consciously, value or devalue specific places. To them, it all seemed to be more about people and events than places. As we came to discover later, the urban space and specific places within Bucharest did represent important foci for the development of what they called their community. Suffice it to look at Accept's headquarters, which was mentioned in five of our six interviews as an important place for the respondents, a place where they feel safe and where they can meet friendly faces. This is how place emerged as having an important role in the way in which LGBT people feel constrained by the city and respond to it. The interviewees were readily willing to recount their experiences, and they all shared the opinion that research is much needed and always welcomed. Because of this, the dialogues went smoothly, but we did sense at times that fragments of their discourse were rehearsed, not because they were about to be interviewed but maybe because of repetitive exposure to situations where they felt responsible to educate. The transcripts also revealed some markers of entitlement¹, even if we did not use opinion questions. The questions we asked were mainly about their personal experiences and the fact that we received many times answers in the name of larger groups or the community they belonged to made us think that this might have been a distancing strategy.

We were also involved in participant observation that spread throughout the month of May and the beginning of June. The main events that can be included here are the: International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT),² Tomboy party,³ "Homohistories",⁴ discussions on "Being Trans in Romania",⁵ Bucharest Pride Parade.⁶ We were also present, doing non-participant observation this time, on the private virtual group destined to the LGBT community residing mostly in Bucharest, but not exclusively, acquaintances and Accept volunteers. Generally, we did not encounter

¹ We considered as marks of entitlement phrases such as "we would never go there", "we" as in the LGBT community or "it's not like that at all".

² International annual event, celebrated also by Accept, where all the members of the LGBT community and their supporters were invited to take a picture with the official IDAHOT symbol and, if willing, to transmit an anti-homophobic message to the camera with the purpose of putting together a short spot.

³ A party organized by some of the core members of the LGBT Bucharest community several times a year, at irregular intervals, initially focusing on women but welcoming all trans, gay, straight, drag, gender neutral, questioning, bi, non-wanting-to-be-labelled with no restrictions towards heterosexuals

⁴ An event that concentrated on the communist period and how gay persons managed to obtain information about gender identity, how they negotiated and kept secret their identities in a period when being gay meant you were breaking the law

⁵ The discussions were held in a centrally located café, taking the model of an informal conference with a moderator and two transgender males as special guests.

⁶ The parade is an annual event in Romania beginning with 2005, in which LGBT people and supporters of the cause march on a main street of the city, with symbols and banners, in order to increase their visibility and promote acceptance.

“gatekeepers” to restrict the access to information, meaning the conferences and discussions were public and no invitation was needed. More of a restriction was the fact that the outlets for information about the events were quite limited to the people connected in some way to the community.

Relevant studies:

Urban spaces are associated with the characteristics that create possibilities of development for subcultures, which focus on identity politics and space appropriation. Referring to German urban spaces, **Doderer (2011: 431-2) describes an environment in which sexual minorities activist groups make use of the public space to stage cultural events (e.g., film festivals and parades) and open social locations with or without commercial purposes.** To this she adds the specialization of the media on the LGBT community, with radio stations, TV channels that target it, as well as the creation of virtual spaces with special destination for community problems. She argues that the urban life favours as such the expansion of an “LGBT culture”, through a (re)production of space, if we might add using Lefebvre’s (1991: 416) terms.

Larger cities provide anonymity in the context of diverse groups, and an alert rhythm of life, which is why they represented the favoured choice of gay people for social and cultural gatherings (Kitilinski and Leszkowicz 2013: 72). Compared to rural spaces, or small cities, these urban spaces allow LGBT people to escape the strict social control pervasive in small, tightly knit communities and meet other non-heterosexual people (Doderer 2011: 432). By helping them preserve the anonymity, the city triggers a mechanism related to networking, where events are promoted mainly through word of mouth and helplines (Valentine 1995: 101) which maintains a lack of visibility even among them. As a consequence, LGBT people can become isolated, a problem especially identified in single LGBTs in older age (Doderer 2011: 434).

On the other hand, in their study on LGBT Polish citizens, Kitilinski and Leszkowicz (2013: 70) underline that urban safety still represents a weighty issue in all Eastern European countries where the majority resists the social integration of sexual minorities. The authors put forward two examples of assaults based on ethnic and sexual criteria, to show that even in cities with an active cultural life, perceived as more liberal, such was the case of 2013 Wroclaw, there is a stringent need in the public sphere for LGBT people to be protected from verbal and physical violence. Here we can identify

common demands of LGBT and feminist movements, which present the groups they represent as vulnerable in “spaces which have been designed and largely built by men” (Doan 2007: 67).

Transgressing gender roles in a visible manner make LGBT people, but especially transgender people, vulnerable to discrimination and violence (*ibidem*). Prior investigations in urban spaces belonging to Western countries found out that their interaction with the city revealed them as being at serious risk for verbal and physical assaults (Witten and Eyler 1999).

Romania, among other Central and East European countries, adopts a more conservative approach towards the social integration of LGBT minorities, and its capital city fits very well this pattern. Though providing a basic legal framework that sexual minorities can use to counter discrimination on the labour market (Altman et. al 2012: 441), it is still far from granting civil rights such as that to marriage or same-sex partnership (Kitilinski and Leszkowicz 2013: 70). Legal protection, however, is not enough to change mentalities or to ensure the safety of sexual minorities. Not only that, but Accept’s director mentioned in an interview on RFI (2014) that a significant issue is also the absence of information in the public space and the lack of procedural clarity in implementing the rights of the LGBT. We certainly agree with the second point. Suffice it to take the example of changing documents for a transgender person, to see that the procedure is difficult to follow.¹ As for the former point, it can be noticed that the information exists, concerning the rights of the LGBT people, in *Monitorul Oficial*, for instance. However, it is true that it is not widely disseminated or readily available.

Another strand of research that drew on talks about potential negative consequences of heteronormativity and coping mechanisms employs LGBT members. Research carried out both in the U.S.A. and Europe uncovers multiple negative consequences that can arise from practices of discrimination, stigmatization, isolation, either verbally or physically. Firstly, people that are aware that their gender or sexual self does not conform to social norms can internalize homophobia, as a consequence of social pressure, which leads to anxiety, depression and even suicide (Altman et al. 2012: 440). Even as late as 2012, cases of suicide were reported among adolescents in the U.S.A. as consequence of bullying on account of sexuality (*ibidem*). On European ground the situation stands not far. A 2009 study conducted in Denmark concluded that the

¹ See for details a report written by Asociația ACCEPT & Centrul Euroregional pentru Inițiativa Publice (2014) on the juridical recognition of gender identity.

attempted suicide rate in LGBT people is four times as large when compared to the rest of the population (Gransell and Hansen 2009).

Stigmatization documented on transgendered people can also lead to suicide, attempts being very frequent within this category. Transgender people have more difficulties in finding employment when their physical appearance cannot be easily assigned to one of the binary gender categories of female and male. As a consequence, some may look for low status work places which put them at risk for health problems deriving from social practices associated with these jobs, such as substance abuse (Doan 2007: 61). Another highly vulnerable subcategory is composed of gay men, especially with respect to HIV infection, given the difficulty in access to information and potential marginalization which increases the efforts needed to access resources associated with preventive practices (Altman et al. 2012: 443).

In a study on “men who have sex with men,” either of whom belongs to ethnic and racial minorities in the U.S., Choi et al (2011) discovered five coping strategies the subjects resorted to, when confronted with racism and homophobia.¹ The five strategies act on two levels: indirect, with the aim of limiting triggers for homophobic reactions and reducing the impact of such reactions when they happen, but also direct, engaging the stigmatized. The situation is more complicated in the case of this study due to the intersectionality of discrimination, since the stigmatization can have its origins in both race and sexuality. In such cases it is difficult to disentangle the two systems. One of our respondents, Irina, recalled an experience she had with a friend of hers who was a gypsy and a homosexual. His entrance was refused in a bar in Bucharest, but even she had difficulties in explaining why; was it because of the colour of his skin or because of his rather effeminized behaviour?

Another study sees the coping strategies employed by transgender individuals as divided in facilitative and avoidant (Budge, Adelson and Howard 2013: 546). The former category of strategies focus on operating at the level of the self, its skills and behaviour, but also on finding appropriate sources of support or happiness. The avoidant set of strategies, as the name suggests, have the role of avoiding an emotional behaviour in relation to the stressing factor. Examples include minimizing the stressors or assigning

¹ "To minimize opportunities for stigmatization, men used (1) concealment of homosexuality and (2) disassociation from social settings associated with stigmatization. To minimize the impact of experienced stigma, men (3) dismissed the stigmatization and (4) drew strength and comfort from external sources. Men also actively countered stigmatization by (5) direct confrontation." (Choi et al. 2011)

them other meanings, or redirecting the emotional response as in overeating.

To meet the purpose of our paper, we have divided the coping strategies identified in *affirmative* and *negative*. Given that we emphasize the relation between people and space/place, “affirmative” refers to civic activism aimed at reclaiming the group’s place in the public sphere, which includes among others, space appropriation tactics. The term “negative” is assigned in this case to attitudes and actions that refuse engagement with the public sphere, and include changes incurred upon oneself, like for instance, withdrawal from the public space, decreased visibility or self-restraint. In other words, negative strategies are closely related to the avoidant strategies presented above, but we believe the term is more useful since it uncovers two more meanings compared to “avoidant”: change and consequences.

Kitilinski and Leszkowicz (2013: 70) explain how on the background of slow structural improvement of LGBT integration in Eastern Europe countries, a strong activism has taken shape. The authors underline also that the movement has a political character (*idem*: 71), justified by the affiliation with other minority rights movements for an “urban citizenship that promotes the visibility and participation of all minorities” (*idem*: 69). As it appears, LGBT activism in Poland is leading to a normalization of the situation. What we mean is that the sexual identity is fortunately put more in the background than being a qualifying characteristic. Here, we can point to the cases of two openly transgender, respectively homosexual individuals which were elected in the Parliament in 2013 (*idem*: 72). While this example refers to a more distant relationship between citizens and the political arena, the case of Robert Biedron, the elected mayor of Slupsk, “a conservative city of 97,000” constituents, as Lyman (2014) states in a New York Times article, is more informative. Not only did his sexual orientation not seem to make a difference to the voters, but it did not constitute a bone of contention in the competition for the City Hall. “Of course they [the voters] knew I am gay, because everyone in Poland knows that I’m gay [...] But it did not matter. In the campaign, none of the seven candidates tried to use it as a tool against me, not even the right-wing ones” (*idem*).

Results and Interpretation

Public space and sexualized heteronormative places

Imagine a public space where all of us would have their gender identity questioned at

every step. For most of the public space in Bucharest, LGBT people go unnoticed and they themselves do not have to be self-conscious about their gender identity. However, there are specific places that compel one to place oneself in either male or female category, which becomes difficult when you identify as neither. These places governed by heteronormative practices, such as toilets, pools and gyms but also those that involve bureaucratic processes, sustain a permanent state of anxiety mostly for bi-gender and transgender people. The situation is most stringent in the transition period when their physical characteristics do not match the gender previously assigned to them. Take the simple example of a routine bus pass control. In Bucharest, bus passes do not have a photo, but they do have your name on them, the name in the birth certificate, which in these cases is associated with the official sexual identity. The suspicious bus pass controllers will in most cases, if not always, believe you are trying to fool them, which can lead to embarrassing situations.

The gendered nature of public places derives mostly from the general social tendency to preserve the classic dichotomy. Both Patrick (transgender male, 29 years old) and E. (bi-gender, 20 years old) were questioned about their identity on the street by strangers, who did not manage to classify them with precision as male or female, and possibly wanted to ridicule them into adopting one such category. “I was on my way to Chişinău, last year, before the transition, and a man in the bus felt the need to ask me if I am a girl or a guy on a tone that I considered a little rude” (Patrick). “I had a certain haircut and I was walking on the street and a guy asked me, out of nowhere: Are you a girl or a guy?” (E.)

Importance of urban spaces for the development of LGBT culture

Three spaces in Bucharest emerge as having a particular importance for the development of the LGBT culture: the University environment, spaces associated with liberal arts and places appropriated through public manifestations like Bucharest Pride Parade. Patrick, for instance, affirms the importance of urban space through its liberal arts and the “funky” places associated with it, which in turn are associated with an open mind. “Cool, funky places in Bucharest are automatically LGBTQIA¹ friendly”. Speaking about adopting the term of transgender, he says that he assimilated it “around the age of 20, when he got to University, in Bucharest.”

¹ Where letters Q, I and A stand for queer, intersex and asexual.

When E. talks about meeting LGBT people – online and in real life, she says that in real life she met them “through other friends or when I was staying in a hostel [in Bucharest, while at University], a colleague of mine was lesbian.” She also talks about University as an open, friendly place, where she gets along with people, with whom she goes out, as opposed to the village she grew up in, as a child and the small town where she went to high school.

Urban Safety and Homophobia

When asked about an overall impression on the city’s safety and attitude towards LGBT people, the general response was a positive one, but when we broke down to the issue of safety and constraints into specificities, the respondents seemed to contradict themselves. For example, even though not afraid to wear their symbols, they still maintain an attitude of prudence because “you do not know what kind of people you are going to meet” (Sasha, transgender male, 30). The symbols worn must be of a subtle nature, and easily hidden in case of danger. This is sort of a motif amongst our respondents. Regarding the use of symbols, one of us did a small experiment inspired by our interviewees concerns, wearing for three months two visible rainbow symbols, with no signs of public annoyance. Two possible conclusions may be drawn from this experience: either the majority does not know what the rainbow stands for, and those that do are not homophobes; or homophobia outbreaks are more common towards organized groups of LGBT people promoting events. One recent occurrence is suggestive for this assessment, whose aim was to present aspects of the life and history of gay and lesbian people. It was organized by the Spiritual Militia¹ and hosted by the National School of Political and Administrative Studies. The central attraction was a play, based on four interviews depicting the life of the homosexual person in the “golden age”², followed by a debate joined by both students and professors. The event per se ran quite smoothly; the problems arose afterwards. While leaving, the organizers were approached by a group of young men who pushed the girls aside and started beating on the boys. They made sure that the victims understood the reason they took the beating, meaning because they were trying to promote gay rights.

It is a generally accepted idea that Bucharest is the best city to express yourself as a sexual minority. However, when talking about Bucharest in this positive tone, most

¹ Non-governmental organization with the declared purpose of mobilizing citizens’ civic conscience.

² Pre-1989 period.

respondents refer to the central areas of the city. In their discourses, they frequently made a distinction between the centre and the peripheral areas, associating the former with mind-openness, a higher level of education, spaces which promote dialogue and diversity. As you go further away towards the outer city, these characteristics tend to fade away, in their opinion. Both Patrick and Sasha made assertions like “the centre is very different from peripheral areas, neighbourhoods at the margins [of the city] are completely different worlds”, and respectively “(LGBT friendly areas) are mostly everywhere... in the central area... I don’t know... as you go further away towards neighbourhoods where people have a specific lifestyle... I don’t know... we meet mostly in this area.” Also in the discussions with the other interviewees, the idea of a group mental map of the city emerged, where they have some Xs placed on specific pubs/clubs, or larger (peripheral) areas, but also approval checks marking other specific places or areas. The classification seems to be made according to both personal experiences and those of LGBT people around them.

Legal and Social Support in the city

The story of the legal support begins with the abrogation of the Article 200. The communist legacy included a harsh legal stance on homosexual relationships, which was perpetuated until mid-1990s, when the legislation softened as a consequence of international pressure. Firstly, instead of incriminating indiscriminately homosexuality, the law was modified to refer to homosexual acts that happened in public or triggered public outrage. A few years later, following the insistence of international bodies which took the form of requirements for the Council of Europe and EU accession process and monitoring period¹, in 2001 Romania finally abrogated the infamous article. The fact that the legal acceptance of homosexuality was a consequence of foreign influences and not an expression of Romanian society’s values and beliefs, which lagged behind, is easily noticeable today. In other words, the legal and the social support in Romania, in general, but also in its capital-city as a particular case, are not on a par. And this is not to say that the legal provisions are the best of possible scenarios, not even by far, but that this is an instantiation of implementing a form first, which is hoped to shape the substance it contains, in time. If there is a minimum legal context that recognizes some of the basic human rights of homosexual people, like that of expressing their sexuality,

¹ For a detailed account, see Long (1998), a report published by Human Rights Watch and International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.

engaging in homosexual relationships and belonging to groups that would work to better their situation,¹ there are still institutions and individuals which have difficulties in accepting this as a fact. And they are commonly known as homophobic by the offended party or by some third party when they bother to question these attitudes and label them in some way.

The question we ask ourselves at this point, departing from the distinction introduced by Herek (2004) between heterosexism and sexual prejudice is whether Bucharest is displaying sexual prejudice or heterosexist attitudes. And to answer it, we suggest we take a look at two recent events that took place in the city, in a public and a private place, and were discussed in the media. One is related to the Central University Library in Bucharest, who held initial talks with Accept's representatives regarding a public event in which a writer, activist of LGBT rights and Special Adviser on LGBT Mental Health at Yale School of Psychiatry, Andrew Solomon was to give a talk. After an informal agreement on the space provided by the library for the event, it subsequently withdrew its permission and refused to justify their decision. Accept believes that the library's management later realized what the nature of the event would be, *i.e.*, a talk on sexuality and gender, with a focus on homosexuality and transgenderism, which led to a negative response. The director of the library denies such accusations claiming it was all just a misunderstanding (Călin and Cerban 2014). If Accept is right, and its director and the delegate of the writer did meet with representatives of the library and received an informal permission (which the Library's director denies, but without offering clear information), then we could assume that there was someone in the management that was not very fond of the topic or afraid of public reactions to such an event. The assumption is based on the fact that there is no rule or procedure that forbids discussions on LGBT issues in public spaces. As such, it is either about sexual prejudice or fear of sexual prejudice. What kind of public reactions are we talking about? If we go back a few months ago, we might see how such a worry may not be completely ungrounded, given the February 2013 incident at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, where a group of people boycotted the projection of a movie that should have been one

¹ Not only that, but these provisions are reinforced each time a judicial court rules in favour of gay people that have been discriminated. Some of these cases are detailed in Iordache and Ionescu (2010) - thematic study. One of our respondents (Irina, 43, lesbian) also talked about one such case, which happened after her return in Romania in 2005, in which her resignation was demanded by the company she worked for on the grounds of her sexual orientation. She talked to a lawyer, and in order for her not to file a complaint, she received compensations from the company.

of the LGBT Month events. Not only that, but the protesters demanded that the manager of the Museum be removed from his position for having agreed for the institution to host the events.

The second case is an example of potential mutual feedback of the two types of attitudes: heterosexism and sexual prejudice. The facts were described in the media as follows.¹ In an internationally renowned gym, in Bucharest, at the pool, two gay men came with their four-year old twins, a girl and a boy. The parents changed their children in the men's locker, and the presence of the little girl bothered some of the other men there. In response to a complaint, the couple pointed that their family was homoparental, at which point the other guy started to address them injurious words, and the conflict ended with an appeal to the management. The following day, a notification appeared at the pool specifying that children should not be taken in the opposite sex's locker. The situation was criticized in the media and a complaint of discrimination was filed against the gym by the National Council against Discrimination and Accept. Following a serious agitation that was created around the topic in the media, which put the company's image in danger, the latter issued an official position (Marcu 2014b) in which it promised to arrange a special place for children to be changed. They also underlined that they do not wish to discriminate and want all their members, regardless of their sexual orientation, to feel welcome.

How is the feedback mechanism working in this case? Schematically, the individual-level hostility (here sexual prejudice) determines a community level rule. In this case, the initial response of the gym was not directly heterosexist, but indicating a potential tacit approval of the legitimacy of the sexual prejudice. This in turn supports individual-level attitudes. In this case, out of the public debate between the hostile and the sympathetic attitudes (both expressed in several articles), the latter established a victory, which is manifested in the public attitude adopted by the company.

While we are at it, it is fair to mention that though the majority of the interviewed people were willing to be in harmonious relations with heterosexual people, all were referring to themselves as a distinct group. Some of them also manifested sexual prejudice towards heterosexual people. Irina (lesbian woman, 43), for instance, was one of the persons who displayed strong feelings of belonging to groups formed generally of gay men and lesbian women, but also other members of LGBT. She made it clear that she

¹ For a more comprehensive account, see Marcu (2014a).

would more easily renounce a friendship with a heterosexual than a gay person, because the former are easier to find. When the topic of frequented pubs and clubs came up, in describing the places, she made negative evaluations of heterosexual behaviour in such settings. She and her friends seem to build their groups and attachments, and more generally identity, in opposition to heterosexual groups, using expressions like “we are not like them”, “unlike us, they...”.

Reiterating a distinction we made in conceptualization, *homophobic* works better when applied at individual level, and *heterosexism*, when making an evaluation of higher-order objects, like groups, societies, their norms and regulations. From the examples above, situations that were the focus of public debates on LGBT issues in Bucharest for the past months, we see that the degree of heterosexism found in formal public or private institutions is determined by the public pressure in one way or the other. We could assert that Bucharest does not appear as either heterosexist or homophobic, given the resolution of these cases. All the above examples show that homophobic attitudes or sexual prejudices do exist, but they are not sufficiently strong as to put a monopole in the public debate; on the contrary.

If the legal situation of homosexual people is not as good as it could be, comparing to other countries in the EU for instance, in the case of transgender people, the legal provisions are completely lacking. To change their identification documents, for instance, an issue that is central to transgender people,¹ there is only indirect and unclear guidance on procedures (Iordache and Ionescu 2010: 42-3)². Another issue mentioned by our two transgender male respondents, but also by E. (bi-gender) was the underdeveloped medical assistance they need so much to perform the transition safely. Patrick, for instance, underlines the lack of medical doctors trained to help transgender people, explaining that “I was looking for someone specialized in the area and someone else suggested that I go to Accept because they would offer me support, medically and legally”. In 2011, the first female to male surgery was accomplished at a hospital in Bucharest and was partly financed by the National Agency for Health Insurance (CNAS). However, the experiences of six other people that Patrick knows about, tell him not to be confident in the success of such surgery in Bucharest. According to him, out of six people he could recall at the time, who undertook breast extirpation surgery, five had

¹ At a discussion with Transform members, organized during the Bucharest Pride week, much of the dialogue revolved around the tricky issue of appropriate identification documents.

² Complaint expressed also by Accept’s director in the aforementioned RFI interview.

anaesthetic scars, and for the other it took a very long time for the wounds to heal.

E., on the other hand, underlines the lack of information in the public space and difficulties in finding out about her gender “I didn’t have information; on the TV there wasn’t anything about this... I heard of Trans (FtoM and MtoF) when I was 14 [when she started to use the Internet] and then I found out about all things included under the ‘trans umbrella’ and I was very confused”. The lack of information in the public sphere leaves people ignorant or misinformed about LGBT people. Thus, if the situation arises in which a child goes to his/her parents and tells them he/she is a transgender they might refuse the reality and react violently, trying to ignore the situation, like E’s mother did.

Another important source of support, as well as of conflicts can be found in other NGOs’. On the one hand, Accept creates links with other organizations by helping the latter further their cause, or a common cause.¹ On the other hand, NGOs which are led by different values (especially those with religious or nationalistic stance) pair to discredit Accept’s position in the public space. To evaluate the support Accept receives from other NGOs in Bucharest, we looked at social media pages, especially on Facebook, but also at the presence of representatives of such social bodies at the Bucharest Pride Parade. At the parade the only ones that were (visibly) present were coming from Active Watch. Two volunteers were standing in the “discrimination-free zone”, with typewriting machines, surrounded by some of Accept and Transform representatives and at times a few others. Coming out of one of the typewriter, a page was leaning backwards and had already written on it a paragraph of what was supposed to be a story on an LGBT topic. The improvisation action had been announced a couple of days before on their Facebook page and was called “Povești gay la minut” (Gay stories in a minute). Other NGOs share on Facebook events organized by Accept, as it promotes in turn actions staged by their fellow activists.

For Patrick, as well as for Sasha, Accept played an important role also because of the support groups they attended there. It is from here that they knew each other and gathered the necessary moral support to found their own association for transgender people. This development is similar to the ones in other communities, where

¹ See for example a letter signed by 53 organizations, including Accept, which was sent to the mayor of Bucharest, in which they demand a meeting meant to discuss the situation of 27 families that were evacuated from buildings that were retroceded by the state to private actors. The letter is available in Romanian at the following address: http://www.ce-re.ro/upload/cerere_audienta.pdf.

transgender people used more general LGBT communities to secure a more stable position and develop their own way from there, “an entry point to the city,” that previously excluded them (Doan 2007: 64). LGBT organizations are used in this case as a substitute for the broader social support they needed.

Coping strategies

A small portion of the LGBT community in Bucharest is a highly active, but they are active more civically than politically. The activities developed by Accept are a good example of this behaviour. Except a few petition distributed to their secret group and some very short discussion about Euro parliamentary elections the political constraints are not tackled upon at all. At a first guess someone would say that maybe there is no political constraint element, but the fact that transgender people cannot legally change their name and sex on their papers unless they sue the state is a problem pertaining to the political realm. The interviews revealed that even though the respondents understood the importance of political acceptance of the LGBT community it is the last step on their list, after trying to manage their issues together with doctors, psychologists and lawyers. This situation is highly different in other ex-communist European countries, such the example of Poland that was mentioned in the literature review, which has two members of the LGBT community in Parliament (Kitilinski and Leszkowicz 2013: 73). As for the involvement of LGBT representatives in Romanian politics, a comment Patrick made might be suggestive for their *blasé attitude* “to me, the political area is a very complicated one”.

A different type of activism is portrayed by E. Given the fact that she has limited contact with the LGBT group in Bucharest, in real life (one lesbian girl, one bisexual girl and a gay man), she oriented herself to the virtual environment, where she found space to express herself, and where she feels she can help, thus turning to the form of online activism. “I decided to make a blog for bi-gender people [...] I share resources, if I receive questions about another gender, I redirect the person to people I know and have that gender”.

Another instance of civic involvement that also illustrates the practices of space appropriation used by LGBT people in Bucharest, we suggest that we take a brief look at the Bucharest Pride Parade from 7th of June 2014. Legally, the parade is allowed, a part of a well-known street in Bucharest was closed for the traffic, and the area was full of

policemen and gendarmerie. A two way street interpretation can be brought into attention. From one point of view, the security forces played a role in keeping the happy crowd safe. This was a viable concern considering that during the morning of the same day, an anti-homosexuality march of “normality” took place in the city. The second interpretation comes to mind only when you take a few steps away from the parade and you watch it through an outsider’s eyes. The anti-discrimination zone appeared to be rather enclosed than protected. The area had the shape of a semi-circle coming out of the main street. On one side, along the street, there were rows of gendarmerie and policemen, who placed a fence between them and the participants. On the other side, the open area was limited by the entrance to a park, delimited by trees.

Given that it was our first Bucharest LGBT Parade, we found ourselves in the impossibility to approximate its success. Thus we asked around. It was registered as a moderate success taking as variables the fact that the number of participants was comparable to the previous years, there were no conflicts and some heterosexual families even brought their children. We felt, though, that the support was limited. From the point of view of the general public, there were few supporters, given the public stigma associated with, or in many other cases indifference towards LGBT people in Bucharest.

This was a medium-scale event, of which the organizers believe it should have by now “entered the customary of the city”¹. As of this year its name was changed from Gay Pride to Bucharest Pride, which is a further hint to a practice of reclaiming their place in the public space. Space appropriation gestures happen in everyday activities and conflicts can arise from a resistance of particular groups to such demands. A right we usually take for granted, as is for instance that of being with our friends in a pub, for LGBT people seems to be a continuous negotiation with those around: to what extent the latter allow them to express their gender and sexual preferences. Such an example was given to us by Irina, who talked about some gay friends of hers that went into a pub to drink a beer. Because they “have a much more vivid way of expressing themselves”, some guys sitting at a table next to them, identified as belonging to a football gallery “asked them to finish their beer and go out”, which they did to avoid a violent clash.

The interviews showed that the community is often split into gangs, but when their identity is challenged by outsiders, a feeling of solidarity arises as a strong coping

¹ The statement comes from an interview on Radio France International taken to Florin Buhuceanu, the Director of Accept Association.

mechanism. For instance, if the word spreads that one of their own got in a way discriminated, the gang from which the person was bares no importance, everybody stops going to that place: " When I saw what was happening, I put a great red cross on the situation and I said 'nobody goes there anymore'[..] I would say that they lost some business".

As for the negative strategies, we propose one simple example. Sasha is the one that talks about an incident where he (before the transition) and his girlfriend at the time were assaulted by a group of guys in his neighbourhood, because they were holding hands on the street. "After the first fight, we stopped holding hands, but they still beat us". This is classic self-censoring behaviour adopted. Another coping strategy was to talk to one of the guys and explain that he was not in a relationship with that girl, which was another censorship of manifestation of his identity.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to uncover the perceived constraints and coping mechanisms experienced/used by people that belong to the LGBT community, in Bucharest. In doing this, we used public space as a mediator in the relationship between the city and LGBT people. Since throughout the article we focused on what the Bucharest public space offers and the different places within, to wrap it up, we propose a change of perspective. With that purpose in mind, and in the good feminist tradition, let us turn our attention towards *what is missing*.

Firstly, we conceptualized public space as a battlefield for different interests, which divide it in places whose ownership is of a fluid nature. We found that these places can be heteronormative, neutral or LGBT friendly. While the first category of places, like pools and gyms are governed by rules which visibly question the identity of transgender people, for instance, the LGBT-friendly places provide the necessary support and instruments for affirmative actions. From the interviews, this quality of friendliness was assigned to places such is the university or places associated with the liberal arts. Nevertheless, if we are to think of what is missing from this picture, we realize that we are mostly unaware of the efforts they make in space appropriation actions. This happens because the instruments at their disposal are either limited or their legitimacy is contested by other parties.

An example we discussed throughout the article is the Bucharest Pride Parade.

The instruments employed in this case were at a discursive level, *i.e.*, changing the name of the parade to include the reference to the city; at the physical, palpable level, by using Accept's headquarters and resources in organization, but also through the employment of physical demarcations, to temporarily delimitate the "discrimination-free zone" or the whole street they were marching along, for that matter.

Another thing that is missing and was denounced in our interviews is visibility of the LGBT community in Bucharest. One reason we identified for this issue is the reduced public space they can use to assert their identity and demand recognition, given the obstacles they encounter in the form of other fragments of the civil society. As we understand, there are at least twenty organizations that openly and constantly militate against LGBT's organized demand for equitable treatment from society. The urban environment is appreciated for the anonymity aura that it offers, which is associated with a kind of freedom that small cities and villages lack. On the other hand, a peril created by this situation is the invisibility cloak with which it gets to cover not only members of LGBT community, but also their problems. This lack of assertion leads to a shortage of well trained, specialized doctors in LGBT issues, either psychologists or endocrinologists.

Good news is that we managed to identify a community-like structure. But as discussed, its current shape was established mainly through outside catalysers such as international pressures. What we can see missing is an array of internal catalysers that would, according to the community model described in the conceptualization, facilitate a better integration within the community.

A question we asked ourselves in this paper was whether Bucharest is characterized by sexual prejudice or heterosexist attitudes. What we found is that displays of sexual prejudice are common, but given that the legal background is favourable to the development of the LGBT community, instances of heterosexism (where we refer to institutions) are rare. What public institutions can do is avoid contact or association with LGBT actors, be they people or organizations, or their causes, as might have been the case of Central University Library of Bucharest, if our understanding is correct. The manifestation of individual or small-level sexual prejudice is not, however, as strong as to prevent Accept from promoting their cause.

Lastly, some other important findings we drew from the interviews are related to the needs of the LGBT communities and the role of the state. It is not enough for the state to

provide a basic legal framework, for LGBT people to be protected. What is needed is also dissemination of information in the urban public sphere, to avoid confusion and stigmatization; social support for people when they realize/accept their gender or sexuality, in order to prevent isolation and improve social integration, but also in case of discrimination/assaults; help LGBT communities establish organizations and develop activities for this community and heterosexual and LGBT communities to work together for what was called in the literature review the “urban citizenship” that would ameliorate the life quality of urban residents. Actions organized by feminist groups such as marches and lobby for police protection, better public illuminating system, improved treatment of female victims of abuse (*ibidem*) could be of very much use if they broadened their reference group to encompass LGBT people.

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