

2016, a Visible Year: discursive uses of visibility in LGBT activism in Bucharest, Romania

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Summary

This article is a partial result of an ethnographic research of the discursive uses of ‘visibility’ among LGBT activists in Bucharest. Apart from the Introduction and Conclusion, the article has three main sections: one dedicated to the theoretical framework I employ, one dedicated to the methodology of research and one dedicated to the analysis and discussion of my findings.

In the introductory section I will present the starting point and relevance of such analysis. In particular, I will show that 2016, the year in which the research took place, was often discursively framed by activists as a particularly good year for the visibility of the community: in terms of Pride march attendance, media and cultural representation and community growth. I will as well consider the visibility brought by the conservative anti-gay group *Coaliția pentru Familie* (Coalition for Family, ‘CpF’).

In the theoretical section I will present the scholarly debate I engage with, concerning visibility in the Central and Eastern European’s LGBT movements. In current literature, such visibility is either presented as uncritically positive and tied to emancipation, or as deriving from Western-centric values in dissonance with the local context and only falsely positive. I will argue that such distinction is to be broken down and be rendered more complex by looking at the local use of discourses around visibility.

In the methodological section I will describe my own subjective stance, the ethnographic approach and the qualitative methods used during the research.

The analysis section will be divided into two parts. In the first, I will present various discourses concerning the Pride march and the visibility tied to it. I will show how the Pride march is a catalyst for dissonance and contrasting stances within the community, despite being overwhelmingly supported and presented as positive or necessary. In the second part, I will engage



with the type of strategies concerning visibility that the two main LGBT NGOs –MozaiQ and ACCEPT– adopt and sustain. If ACCEPT seems to operate according to what I called *selective visibility*, a careful and architected one, and MozaiQ adopted a more *obstinate* style of visibility, more outspoken and indiscriminate. By analysing such stances, I will refute the idea that visibility is a self-evident concept to be either embraced or rejected. I aim to show how local actors, by means of agency and reflexivity, strategically and politically engage with broader discursive frameworks on visibility in various manners.

Abstract: Over the last years, activists in the LGBT community in Bucharest have pointed out and promoted a significant increase in visibility. From new associations being born to more people attending the Pride, from more media coverage of LGBT topics to flourishing cultural and artistic productions on LGBT issues, visibility appears on the rise, as often argued by local activists. Drawing on a 6-month-long ethnographic research and on extensive interviews with activists, artists and personalities in the community, this article explores and problematizes the meanings of visibility among such actors.

In dialogue with the current literature on LGBT movements and their visibility in the CEE region, the article will address various meanings of visibility on a collective level starting from the diverse stances towards the yearly Pride march and the different political approaches to visibility embraced by the main LGBT NGOs in Romania. This article will point out reflexivity and agency of local actors beyond and within the normative globalising forces of Western LGBT discourses.

Keywords: LGBT, visibility, activism, Romania, Pride, the Coalition for Family.

Introduction

There are small changes, but they are happening and they are significant. Starting from more and more people attending the Pride, every year (...) and more and more people coming out and being able to stand their ground and stand for themselves and just being out. I see a lot of related projects in the art scene, which is very encouraging. I see more people talking on TV about this. (Patrick, TRANSform¹)

¹ Names have been kept original or anonymised according to individual preferences. Roles and titles within associations refer to the time the research was conducted.

I am positive about the direction that the movement is taking. It has never been so good, so visible, so connected as a movement. Never have there been so many out people. (Vlad, MozaiQ President)

The picture painted in these opening quotes, which emerged in dialogue with activists Patrick and Vlad, refers to the moment of change the Romanian LGBT² movement is undergoing at the end of year 2016: more people are attending the Pride march, more people are joining the old and new associations and activist groups, which are currently growing. Despite the literature on LGBT issues in Romania focusing mostly on the processes that in 2001 lead to decriminalization of homosexuality, (Stychin 2003; Nachescu 2005; Turcescu and Stan 2005; Andreescu 2011, 228), and on professional lobbying-oriented activism embodied by the Bucharest-based NGO ACCEPT (Stychin 2003; Nachescu 2005; Woodcock 2011); a much richer scenario is disclosing. ACCEPT is no longer the only NGO, with new associations such as the trans-lead and focused NGO TRANSform, founded in 2013, and the newer LGBT NGO MozaiQ, founded in 2015, working towards an alternative style of activism. An unprecedented number of people attended Bucharest Pride in the summer of 2016, which saw 2500 participants, as opposed to the 1000 people attending the previous edition. In the capital, projects of cultural and artistic nature revolving around community issues are flourishing: with opening of new queer socializing spaces, with steady queer nightlife activity and with growing interest in LGBT topics from the independent artistic, cultural and journalistic scene. As observed by different activists, the LGBT community has never been as visible and represented in its own terms as today.

The importance given to visibility within the community is palpable. During an end-of-the-year meeting of MozaiQ, the handful of young members sitting in the cosy meeting room were explicitly asked by the meeting-leader to brainstorm on the following question: “what made 2016 a good year in terms of visibility?” This question struck me as particularly interesting not only because it implies a shared understanding of the current moment as one characterised by an increased visibility, but also because it presents visibility as self-evidently positive and desirable.

² LGBT will be used throughout the paper as the preferred acronym for a matter of clarity and simplicity more than for a political purpose. Moreover, its use is preferred over a distinction between LGBT and queer, in order to avoid a US-centric interpretation and chronology of queer and identitarian politics that might not necessarily apply to the Romanian context (see Mizieleńska 2011, 85).

Curiously enough, the main reason listed as answer to this question by the meeting-participants was unanimously: “the *Coaliția pentru Familie*” (“CpF”, in English: Coalition for the Family). CpF is a civil society movement “upholding Christian and traditional values with the purpose of defending family and marriage” whose mission is to “protect and support the family based on marriage between a man and a woman” (*Coaliția pentru Familie*, 2017)³. In 2015 CpF launched a petition which gathered 2,698,447 signatures⁴ aiming at a change in the Constitution, restricting the definition of family to the marriage between a man and a woman. In their view, such a change would make it difficult for same-sex marriages to be legalized in Romania in the foreseeable future. However, the large media and political attention, as well as the visibility received by this campaign and –by proxy– by the LGBT community, were bitter-sweetly welcomed by some activists as unintentionally positive consequences of the debate.

Given these premises, a deeper reflection on the meanings of visibility seems pressing. Strikingly, though visibility is present in both emic and etic descriptions of the struggles against discrimination and inequality, its meaning and mechanism of promoting (social) change are not generally theorized. Moreover, as I will further discuss in the next section, visibility seems to be either assumed as obviously, and quite ethnocentrically so, emancipatory, or it seems to be theorized as alien to the local context and dismissed as falsely desirable. Both these approaches tend to overlook the agency of local actors in strategically engaging with discourses on visibility from various standpoints. In contrast, I tried to investigate precisely the plurality of discursive uses of visibility by LGBT activists.

Six months of research on the LGBT scene in Bucharest led me to obtaining an insight into discourses on collective visibility, particularly concerning contexts such as the Pride march, and LGBT organizations. Rather than merely looking at visibility as either an embraced or rejected concept, the analysis will focus on the shifting contextual meanings given to visibility by LGBT activists. It will be shown how the complexity of meanings that visibility can assume locally cannot be overlooked and that “LGBT visibility” as a commonly understood and monolithic concept should be problematised and broken down with a micro-scale approach.

³ This quote was to be found in an older version of their website, currently unavailable. The new version of the website is being rephrased and currently declares CpF to be apolitical and unaffiliated to any confession.

⁴ See Decision 580/2016 of the Constitutional Court of Romania, para. 32

Theoretical debates

Through this research I aim to engage with literature which approaches LGBT movements and its visibility in Central and Eastern Europe ('CEE') from variously critical viewpoints (Bilić 2016; Fejes and Balogh 2013; Kulpa and Mizielńska 2011; Woodcock 2009), which I will broadly reduce to two opposing stances. On one hand, visibility is presented as self-evidently tied to resistance and liberation and as a goal to be achieved overcoming societal homophobia (see for example Lorencová 2013; Fojtová and Sokolová 2013). Particularly, Lorencová (2013) sees growing media and international visibility of the LGBT community in Slovakia as a form of resistance "contesting heteronormativity and homophobia" (88). This positive take is shared by others, too, such as O'Dwyer (2012), who writes about the EU-fostered visibility of the LGBT cause in Poland as desirable even in face of the societal backlash it caused.

On the other hand, a second approach to visibility problematises the "Western gaze" in general (Navickaitė 2016) and specifically the Western narrative of LGBT liberation as universally desirable and as bound to follow a fixed linearity. For example, Butterfield (2016), Bilić (2016a) and Rexhepi (2016) present manifestation of publicness and visibility such as Pride marches in the former Yugoslav region as mere tools and symbols of EU enlargements politics played out using themes of tolerance and gay rights in an instrumental and colonial manner. Stella's (2012) ethnographic account of queer invisibility in provincial Russia shows how the assumption that visibility is per se positive is ethnocentric and normative, and seems to overlook how in certain contexts invisibility, rather than a sign of passivity and repression, holds potential for empowerment, safety and resistance. Indeed, visibility can not only lead to a potential polarization of the public opinion (Szulc 2011, 164), but it can have dangerous consequences and lead to hostility and violence (Miškovska Kajevska 2016; Stella 2012; Woodcock 2009).

However, both these stances seem— although to different degrees— to overlook the agency of the local subjects to engage with broader frameworks of power and to strategically embrace or resist the normalizing wave of Western discourses in contextual and reflexive ways. For this reason, in the ethnographic section, I will take a micro-focus on local discourses and meanings of visibility in order to move beyond the question of visibility as safe or unsafe, Western or local; refuting the notion that visibility is a monolithic and commonly understood concept.

Moreover, in order to unveil the complexities of local agency, a critical stance towards queer Western temporality and linearity is necessary. An Anglocentric conceptualization of LGBT

history and movements falls into a certain mainstream problematic discourse that presents Western narratives of LGBT liberation as universally desirable in their chronology. Such discourses present an imbalanced relationship between an enlightened and tolerant West that can teach and eventually redeem a homophobic and backward East: a colonial dynamic that Kulpa (2014) names “leveraged pedagogy”. As an alternative analytical tool, Mizielińska and Kulpa (2011) propose to look at LGBT movements in the CEE area through the lenses of *(geo)temporal disjuncture* and *queer asynchronicity* (Mizielińska 2011, 91), tools for de-centering queer theory from Western temporality. These concepts problematize narratives that see Central and Eastern Europe as in need to “catch up” with Western Europe, and to go through the various stages that the gay and queer movement went through in the West. Geotemporal disjuncture and queer asynchronicity acknowledge different stages, often contradictory discourses and tactics of LGBT movements as coexisting in a different linearity in the CEE region, not possible to be resumed and synthesized in an Anglocentric and Western model, that, despite appearing universal in discourse, is actually only applicable to a handful of local contexts, even within the “West” itself.

Methodology and Subjectivity

The ethnographic methodology provides great tools to look into the nuances of local uses and understandings of often taken-for-granted concepts, as shown by the good practice of the previously mentioned work by Stella (2012) on queer invisibility in provincial Russia and the research by Ross (2008), who explores local notions of visibility in urban LGBT Italian communities. These researches show how notions of visibility can be broken on an ethnographic level, as I will do.

I conducted ethnographic research from August 2016 to January 2017, which comprised participant observation at numerous events in Bucharest concerning LGBT activism and culture. I took part in relevant artistic and night-life events, as well as social and political events. Moreover, I conducted text analysis of online publications and posts, leaflets and community-related publications. I conducted 18 interviews with actors in the local LGBT scene, of which 4 are informal conversations and 14 are semi-structured in-depth interviews. While participant observation was conducted in Romanian, interviews were conducted in English and the quotes reported in the analysis section are original and not translated citations. My informant sample was a heterogeneous mix of activists of various gender identities and sexual orientations, but all having

in common their involvement in the scene. The majority of the informants belong to a younger generation of activists, the main current demographic involved in activism, who work on different projects: from NGOs (MozaiQ, ACCEPT, TRANSform) to artistic projects (narrative, theatre, photography, films) and festivals (Faqiff – Feminist and Queer International Film Festival); from university-based LGBT community organizations (CampusPride) to grassroots political and leisure collectives (Macaz, QueerNight). Through this sample, I attempted to cover most aspects of LGBT life in Bucharest concerning that specific timeframe.

Additionally, it is important for me to make use of this section to address my own subjectivity as a researcher, and the subject position I embody. On one hand, as a queer person involved in feminist and LGBT activism for some years, I felt a deep affinity and intuitive understanding of many of the community issues. My position granted me easier access and bond with many of the people I talked with, whose struggles and desires I largely share. On the other hand, my position as a Western researcher in the CEE region risked replicating a toxic and academically colonial system where Western and particularly Anglophone narratives and standards are arrogantly imposed on the region. Having experienced being an Italian student adapting to Northern European university standards, I kept wondering at what stage my own perspective and discourse became the one that I initially had to adapt to. At what stage did I stop being a –as they like to call us– “international” at a British or Dutch University and did I actively *become* that University? From which layer of privileged positionality was I conducting my research? If an awareness of these questions is by no means an answer in itself, such doubts became a present reminder over my data collection and analysis stages of the fact that my own identity was as much impactful as problematic, and that attention towards local knowledge, decolonial voices and critiques would be the only path to be followed to minimize my own biases.

Ethnographic Analysis

In the first section I will focus on discourses around the Bucharest Pride. I will emphasise how activists report a dissonance between such a visibility model, the socio-political context and the local format.

In the second section I will present two discursive approaches to visibility: a *selective* visibility (visibility desired only in certain contexts and under certain conditions), forwarded by the older and more institutional NGO ACCEPT; and an *obstinate* visibility (visibility desired in

most circumstances), forwarded by the newer NGO MozaiQ. The contrapositions of these two reflexive stances will emphasise the agency of activists in approaching a same goal of visibility from different political and strategical angles.

Visions of Pride

Gay Pride parades are increasingly globalised and widespread milestones of gay culture (Johnston 2005). Their institution in the CEE region is welcomed by some as a sign of liberation: “the emergence of annual Queer Pride Parades suggests the gradual overcoming of internalised shame and a growing emphasis on the desire to proudly and openly present diverse gender and sexual identities”, wrote Fojtová and Sokolová (2013, 108) concerning the situation in Czechia. However, other more critical voices challenge self-evident notions of visibility as paving the way towards LGBT liberation pointing at instances of EU-colonialism. For example, Bilić (2016a) stresses how the Sebian Pride was merely a political tool to favour EU entrance at the expenses of the LGBT community, which became an endangered pawn used in the political game. In dialogue with these debates, starting from the fact that activists embrace complex and varied stances towards the Pride march, I will further problematize what notions of visibility do Pride marches entail locally and show that the theoretical categorisations of visibility should be much more nuanced when placed in the Romanian context.

First of all, a discourse that pictures the kind of visibility obtainable through the Pride marches as positive and as sort of indicative of advancements of the movement was presented to me by ACCEPT’s president, Florin, who emphasised how the emergence of new voices and public figures is desirable, although not enough:

I mean, the fact that so few known LGBT people are vocal, are visible, embrace their identity in public is a big... continues to remain a big minus. So unfortunately this is still part of our reality today. And that's why it's so important to have this public gathering once, twice, as many times per year, like Pride marches, public events that are related to the LGBT, queer culture. (Florin, President of ACCEPT)

In this case, Florin highlighted the absence of LGBT public figures as negative. Given this absence, collective public visibility is even more needed. Both the need of individual and collective public visibility are framed as desirable, and their absence as undesirable, and as a sign of

‘backwardness’: “this is still part of our reality today”, hinting at need to catch up to a more advanced present, which is already a reality elsewhere.

Navickaitė (2016) pointed out how “the binary logic of “the West versus the Rest” which apparently relies primarily on a *spatial* partition of the globe, always operates in *temporal* terms as well, constructing the non-Western other as a backward other” (129). This temporal and spatial separation sets the basis for framing the CEE region as perpetually in need to catch-up to the West, to—as I formulated—a present happening elsewhere: an almost-there-yet-not-quite state of disparity that is well present in discourses over LGBT rights (Kulpa 2014, 432; Butterfield 2016, 49). This is not to say that such stances are adopted uncritically by activists. Indeed, as Giddens pointed out more than two decades ago, the reflexive nature of modern subjects is unavoidable, which comes from “the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices” (Giddens 1990, 38). Moreover, such subjects hold agency which allows them to navigate power frameworks and resist domination by sustaining personal and cultural projects (Ortner 2006, 143-145). Given these premises, LGBT activists’ discourses explicitly appealing to Western or EU models and values can be seen as reflectively and actively embraced by activists for a variety of strategical reasons. Those can vary from the necessity to appeal to funders, international networks and national and supranational institutions (Butterfield 2016) to the need to appeal to the larger local public opinion (Ayoub 2013, 299).

A second stance presenting the Pride and public visibility as a positive engine of change emerged in dialogue with Vlad, the president of MozaiQ, who belongs to a younger generation of activists. Before one of our meetings, I found interesting points of debates in an academic article he wrote on the recent history of Romanian LGBT activism (Viski 2016), where he critically approached the politics of visibility and Pride as not in line with Romanian locality. When questioned about it, his answer disclosed a strategic and reflexive stance:

The thing is that the Gay Pride itself, the going out in the streets in more colourful manner is obviously an imported concept. (...) It created a tension in the gay movement in Romania. First, the lack of compatibility between the Pride itself and let's say the local context -and the local gay community- is shown through [scarce] participation. (...) The second one is that if we look at the debates in these gay blogs and in all sort of community instances you have a discourse of the LGBT community saying "we don't wanna show ourselves in public, we do not agree with this type of, of Pride...". So there's

a rejection from the community of this idea. But obviously myself I don't agree with this view, because I think visibility is the only way you can go. (...) I think slowly, slowly (...) you do have more acceptance of these Gay Prides. (...) I think without the Gay Prides we would not be where we are today. (Vlad)

The discourse forwarded by Vlad renders the issue more complex. On the one hand he integrates in his pro-visibility and pro-Pride stance with a critical awareness of its foreign origin and its partial incompatibility with some local actors. On the other hand, he refuses to accept such incompatibility as prescriptive, which means that he refuses to let this premise block further action. The incompatibility between the local community and the kind of visibility proposed through the Pride format is thus highlighted as forming a sort of dissonance between those who do not wish for publicness and those activists who embrace it. The stance taken by Vlad, which reflectively challenges the perceived local hostility towards visibility, resonates with James Baer's statement (2009, 39 in Navickaitė 2016, 130) who argued that an attachment to 'local' non-Western stances as *per-se* liberating falls into a false rhetoric that romanticise what might be an oppressed position. The strategic adoption of Pride's visibility, in such discourse, entails a refusal to idealise local ways of being as immutable and a willingness to take action despite and in face of such premises, even with the full awareness of the dissonance to the local context that an "obviously imported concept" carries.

Given this dissonance, it is important to emphasise how the Pride became a catalyst of local plurality of community stances, and indeed it evoked different reactions among many of the people I interviewed. The importance to make sense of such a format in the Romanian context and its specific needs often emerged. For example, activist and film critic Andrei pointed out how the Pride is not political enough, and too party-like in dissonance to the needs of the current climate:

The queer Pride here should be more political...because, you know, you just take the pattern which is exploited abroad without taking into consideration the needs of the queer community here. And yes of course in, let's say, countries like France, England and so on, you do have the Pride conceived as a huge party. But here the needs of the community are slightly different... and of course I am not against parties! I support that thing, it has to be something cheerful, but it also has to be something more aware of the political context. (Andrei)

On the other hand, others considered it not like a party at all. Adrian –anthropologist and author of a successful semi-autobiographical gay novel– stated:

[the Pride is] still more like a parade. The party... it doesn't convince me as a party, you know. Because people feel stressed, you know, to party. The party is after. (...) I think it is about the fear of exposing, you know...the stress to be exposed. (Adrian)

While Andrei's and Adrian's positions appear antithetical, they do similarly address the fact that the Pride format and the local context interact and collide. Particularly, Adrian's quote highlights the aforementioned tension of exposure that Vlad mentioned too. Moreover, during our interview, Adrian critically added how the "Pride is about middle class". This critique is echoed by artist J., working with marginalised fringes of the community such as transgender sex workers. J. bitterly declared to me: "No, the people from the world that I am photographing, they are not the Pride people". They added:

In Romania the Pride is super fun. There were some incidents back in the past, but in the last years not. And it's like, very under the vibe of fun. But we should point out some things too, that we have this context...that's the problem with the Pride, that we're trying to mask things with "everything is fun", but deep down there are laying like huge problems, undiscovered problems, everyone's like...too laid back. (J.)

What emerges from these contrasting views is the fact that the Pride represents a point of dissonance for activists. Such dissonance can be interpreted through the lenses of *(geo)temporal disjuncture* (Mizielińska and Kulpa 2011) and *queer asynchronicity* (Mizielińska 2011, 91), analytical tools that acknowledge alternatives to Western temporal narratives of sexualities. Such lenses relate to the Pride being a point of dissonance, because temporal disjuncture and queer asynchronicity point at how different stages and discourses on LGBT liberation do coexist in a non-linearity, contradictory and tangled matter.

In this sense, disjuncture and asynchronicity can as well be seen as potentially rich for alternative political developments of the movement. Such stance is for example framed by activist, artist and scholar Veda who criticised the recent commercialization and presence of corporations as sponsors of the Pride:

The Pride still is not that bad, although it is bad. If we don't move quickly... like the tendency globally, all the Prides are appropriated by megacorporations and they're highly used to pinkwash all kinds of governmental shit. And if we don't, you know, if we don't do something soon, this will naturally just come about in Romania. (Veda)

Tangled and not-aligned alternatives to an Anglo-American narrative linearity and chronology of the LGBT movement could be potentially seen as an occasion to create a different and better narrative for the movement; a narrative informed by the Western origins of Pride, that entails its commercialization and its instrumentalisation for political purposes. The need to “move quickly” that Veda refers to is the urgency to enact a different pathway from the prefixed and dead-ended-looking narrative of Western LGBT movements, which are currently endangered by nationalist, imperialist and capitalist threats, as argued for example by Puar (2007) and Schulman (2011), who pointed out at phenomena such as homonationalism and pinkwashing. Imagining alternatives to the Anglocentric LGBT linearity, in this case, means imagining alternatives to the hijacking of social movements by corporate speculations and State interests.

As it will be shown in the next section, the Pride is not the only occasion to be publicly and collectively visible. Furthermore, issues of political visibility are often discussed in the community.

Visibility and Political Strategies

19 November 2016, a sunny day of protest. After a couple weeks of online campaigning, the day has come for the ‘Susțin LGBT’ (Eng. ‘I support LGBT’) march, a street protest organised under the slogan of ‘Dumnezeu nu face politică’ (Eng. ‘God does not do politics’). The march is meant to protest against the CpF initiative for changing the Constiution. It involves mostly young people, known faces from the community and many allies. While we gather waiting for more people to come, the organisers walk around distributing lyrics for the chants to be shouted, banners and tools to make noise. Most of the chants include slogans pro equal rights and against homophobia. Some slogans such as “homophobia destroys Romania” or “my country will not be taken by Putin or Russia” (which was eventually not chanted) create some controversy with the more radical participants, who refuse to carry “nationalist” signs and choose instead to parade with a banner reading “Queer is not a middle-class cause”. Plenty of police and journalists surround the gathering, which nonetheless proceeds uninterrupted and without tension in the city, with an

attendance of more than 500 people. I overhear excitement among people about the exceptional circumstance of having the voice of the LGBT community loud in the city.

However, this protest is not the Pride, and not everyone chose to participate: the association ACCEPT is not present. When I questioned the association's president about the reasons for the absence, I received this explanation:

[Susțin LGBT] was not organised by ACCEPT, that's the first thing. Secondly (...) as an organization dealing with political parties it was our engagement that we will not raise the issue during the electoral campaign. We take seriously our own engagement with our allies. (...) We do understand why [other organizations] are doing and how they are doing... I have some debates regarding how strategic they are. But that's a long discussion and I think any organization is entitled to have its own strategy or lack of strategy or whatever. (Florin)

This quote discloses the position towards visibility adopted by the ACCEPT branch of professional NGO activism, which could be called *selective visibility*. The official discourse of ACCEPT, highlighted both in this interview and through monitoring of their online presence, is pro-visibility. However, such desirable visibility is one strategically architected, which concerns carefully selected court cases possibly leading to significant legal changes, alliances with other organizations on a national and international level, appeals to European Union organs and supranational institutions and so on. This choice implies a careful relationship towards visibility, which, as highlighted in the quote, might come at the cost of previous political commitments. While not rejecting the need for visibility and publicness, and organising and supporting the annual Pride, selective visibility is a carefully measured one, to the point that actually a short-term invisibility is considered in certain circumstances more desirable, if eventually leading to positive strategical goals:

We managed to convince the main political parties to de-couple the referendum from political elections. I think this is an important small victory, but still a victory; otherwise the whole election cycle will be saturated by 'anti-', by hateful messages related to sexuality. (Florin)

This position was also sustained online, on the official Facebook page of ACCEPT, which praised the small victory obtained with the separation of the political elections from the proposed constitutional referendum. The temporary invisibility obtained by the de-coupling of the

‘referendum for family’ and the political elections is seen as strategically desirable, since it would avoid an unfavourable instrumentalization of the topic. The strategy of visibility adopted by ACCEPT matches the description that Butterfield (2016, 24) provides of professionalised NGO activism, mostly focused on lobbying and advocacy, discursively constructed as more ‘serious’ and hierarchically above grassroots activism.

A middle ground between professionalised and grassroots activism is adopted by younger associations such as MozaiQ and TRANSform. A board member of the former, explicitly defines ACCEPT as dedicated to mostly lobbying, while MozaiQ as dedicated to “political visibility debates” (Ovidiu, board member of MozaiQ and feminist scholar). These newer associations rejected the tactic of selective visibility, as it emerged in interviews with MozaiQ board members, since they were dissatisfied with the scarce public visibility fostered by such a carefully strategic approach:

Anyways ACCEPT refused to be part of that protest. That's another instance in which ACCEPT in many ways was just going on their own path and they (...) weren't convinced of this idea of going out on the streets being a good idea. I still think it was a great idea because we had 250 - 300 people. For the first time in University square, which is symbolic in Romania because that's where all the protests happened. (Vlad)

This quote refers to a previous protest that happened in the spring, but might as well apply to the Susțin LGBT March, where again different associations chose to either not participate or to participate according to their own vision of public visibility: strategically unsound or symbolically and politically necessary. Newer associations with less strategic limitations can choose to operate according to more *obstinate visibility*. TV debates, online controversies, political marches, workshops and lectures: visibility is desirable in itself, and obtainable through various means.

Because for example ACCEPT, they refuse any participation in any debate with any opposition. So they only go to these TV shows which are civil and which are, ok maybe you have opposition but only one, and it's very official discourse, whereas I prefer to go also on debates with, let's say, more aggressive people. (Vlad)

Visibility by various means is here preferred over carefully orchestrated visibility. However, obstinate visibility is not to be considered un-strategic. As already stressed, to understand the reflexive nature of the adoption of any of these styles of visibility is to acknowledge

the agency of all activists, who have different reasons for opting for one or the other. For example, obstinate visibility could be seen as a strategy in its allowing for very different stances to coexist without clashing: contextually shifting discourses can coexist in the same line of activism – ‘nationalist’ banners and an anti-classist and anti-racist stance, as described in the vignette. As Mizelińska (2011, 89) explained in a study on Poland, queer asynchronicity allows for identitarian and queer discourses to coexist and be formulated by the same association. In this context, obstinate visibility encapsulates a plurality of stances, prioritising visibility per se. Furthermore, obstinate visibility can allow for a plurality of alliances and dialogue with more interlocutors: changing audience and allies either over time or navigating them simultaneously. As Ovidiu stated:

It's true that [MozaiQ] was [started] in response to a specific reluctance with ACCEPT, let's say. It was an anti-movement, let's say. But then, we actually started to collaborate with ACCEPT (...). (We) are now collaborating, yeah I think pretty well. (Ovidiu)

Obstinate visibility is seen as almost an end in itself and as a position more favourable and desirable than closeted-ness. For this reason, it can happen that concerns of people opposing such visibility as dangerous more than beneficial are dismissed by younger activists as fear-based and coming from a position of oppression:

Most of them [concerns] are fear-based. Based not on things they directly experienced but on things they heard within their family and in society all their lives... so they just repeat what is being said. And there's always gonna be people like that I mean, but it's fine, that's why we go out and do stuff like that, so we do it (...) also for the people that are still afraid or are not able to talk like that. (Nina, activist)

With such discursive stance, the circle seems to be complete. Despite being strategically and reflexively embraced, visibility is yet again made to appear as obviously positive and self-evidently desirable, to the extent that activists who are visible are discursively constructed as vicariously fulfilling the desires of those who cannot be visible, or even don't wish to be, maybe victims of some sort of ‘false consciousness’.

Conclusion

This article stands as a contribution to current scholarly debates around LGBT issues in the CEE. The article addresses and unveils the complexity of the often taken for granted notion of ‘visibility’. In the context of the previous literature on LGBT issues in CEE that presents visibility as either a self-evidently desirable outcome to be reached or an alien and imposed state of being, I showed how activists in Bucharest complicate this view by assuming various strategic reflective stances, and by diversifying the contextual meaning of visibility. It is not sufficient to ask whether visibility is embraced or rejected, as some of the previous literature has done. What needs to be asked is to which extent is visibility embraced or rejected and how is visibility framed locally? In which occasions is visibility embraced or rejected? The agency of activists is not to be overlooked, nor is their capacity to navigate different discourses and stances that complicate previous notions of LGBT visibility.

More discursive layers have been explored by looking at how the Pride is talked about and conceptualised by activists. The strategic adoption of Pride as a tool for visibility leaves room for engagements in debates over its dissonance with the local context and its potential to follow a different path than the Western model. Moreover, I analysed different strategies of visibility adopted by the two main NGOs in Romania, revealing how visibility can be promoted and embraced while using quite different discourses. I described the approach of ACCEPT as promoting *selective visibility*, while the one of MozaiQ as promoting *obstinate visibility*. In both the first and second section of the analysis, this article has shown how different conceptions of visibility coexist in the LGBT community in Bucharest, and how, although they seek to reach similar objectives, they are consciously framed in different ways.

Further research is needed to cover topics left out from this analysis, such as how and whether discourses on visibility imply underlying struggles over representation, respectability and deviance or how is visibility conceived outside the area of Bucharest. In particular, an important contribution would be made by studies conducted from an intersectional perspective meant to show how factors such as geographical origin, level of education, ethnicity, class or gender influence the discourse on LGBT visibility in Romania.

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