

**Chosen Families, Creative Resistance: LGBTQ+ Life Beyond
Political Rhetoric in Poland**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the gap between Poland's anti-LGBTQ political rhetoric and the lived realities of LGBTQ individuals. Through interviews with LGBTQ individuals and couples in Polish cities, I explore how people navigate contradictory social and political landscapes. The research reveals how participants actively build chosen families and develop strategies to protect their relationships while resisting institutional exclusion. Despite political hostility, LGBTQ visibility has increased over the years, whether in media, or in public, creating protective environments. The academic contribution of this research challenges the existing ideas about linear progression, catching up to Western standards while also challenging East-West divides, thereby avoiding binaries. Instead, I reveal a nuanced perspective on LGBTQ issues showing how meaningful social change happens through everyday acts of family-making, networks of resistance, and increasing visibility. These findings offer insights not only for understanding Poland but for other contexts where LGBTQ communities create meaning despite hostile political environments.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the openness and trust of the thirteen interview partners, of which most of them are couples, who shared their stories with me. To the couples and individuals who welcomed me into their lives, spoke honestly about their experiences, and trusted me with their personal narratives, I say thank you. Your trust and willingness to participate in this research made this work possible. I hope I have honored your voices and experiences in these pages.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Violetta Zentai for her patience, guidance, and intellectual support throughout this research process, which resulted in this work of research. Your feedback pushed me to find my own voice in my research resulting in my own contribution to scholarly debate and to create stronger connections between existing parts.

My time at Central European University provided the intellectual foundation for this research. I thank the faculty in Sociology and Anthropology for challenging me to think beyond binaries and engage seriously with questions of power, resistance, and lived experience. The interdisciplinary environment at CEU shaped how I was able to think about and approach complex social phenomena and how to structure and create original research. I would also like to highlight how doing fieldwork was a privilege that not many other students were able to do which was a truly changing experience that challenged me to grow and gain more skills as a researcher.

Personal thanks go to my dear partner Anwar who was always present throughout and supported me throughout this process. Without your kind words and your unwavering support - both financially and emotionally - this would have not been possible. My thanks also go out to my friends AJ and colleagues at CEU who encouraged me when I doubted whether I could

undertake research on Poland. Your belief in this project sustained me through difficult moments of fieldwork and writing. To those who helped me make initial contacts and navigate the research landscape in Poland, your support and resources made this possible.

I thank my mother, whose own journey and experiences shaped my understanding of home, belonging, and the complexities of identity. Growing up between Germany and Poland gave me an appreciation for the ways people create meaning across borders in sometimes difficult political environments. Her support for my endeavours has been the rock I was able to stand on. Navigating both my master's degree and post-graduation has been an incredibly difficult journey that would have not been possible if not for the support of my mother and my partner.

Finally, I acknowledge that this research represents one perspective on a complex social reality. I hope it contributes meaningfully to conversations about LGBTQ+ lives in Poland, while recognizing there are many more stories that remain to be told.

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List of Abbreviations

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
EU	European Union
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
LPR	Liga Polskich Rodzin (League of Polish Families)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice)
PO	Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform)
SLD	Democratic Left Alliance
SWANA	Southwest Asia and North Africa
TR	Twój Ruch (Your Movement)

Introduction

In an elementary school outside of Toruń, Agata faces a contradiction that captures the complexities of LGBTQ life in Poland. When her young female students discussed Valentine's Day and mentioned they have boyfriends, she asked, "Why do you not have girlfriends?" Then she went on to explain that "girls can have girlfriends too." While that did not pose a problem in the children's eyes, she told them that while two women could not marry in Poland, they could in other countries. The children reacted shocked upon the revelation of this information. Agata's story shows a broader paradox in Poland today. She is simultaneously resisting by teaching children about same-sex relationships while conforming to societal standards by concealing her identity and the existence of her partner to her colleagues at work.

These paradoxes are found throughout Poland, a country where "LGBT-free zones" existed until 2025. In contrast to that, findings suggest that there is growing social acceptance and tolerance among Polish society. A country where teachers can risk their jobs for mentioning their orientation while mainstream television features rainbow families. A country where the lack of legal recognition clashes with visible LGBTQ communities visible in urban centers.

When international media covers LGBTQ issues in Poland, the story is often about repressive politics, the role of the Catholic Church and a political ideology built on anti-LGBTQ sentiments. ILGA Europe consistently ranks Poland among the worst EU countries for LGBTQ equality. This political reality, however, tells only part of the story. Beyond that, there is a more complex social landscape where individuals like Agata form families, build communities, and find ways to resist norms while navigating this political climate and restrictive environment.

This thesis examines this gap between political discourse and lived realities in Poland. My central argument is that while Poland's political and legal landscape has not supported LGBTQ

rights, this perspective neglects the capacity of LGBTQ communities to create alternative forms of belonging, kinship, and most importantly resistance. A resistance that can be as simple as teaching school kids about going beyond heteronormative ideals or holding hands in public to actively defying norms by advocating for rights and community spaces in the form of activism. My goal is to challenge dominant perceptions and representations and highlight the agency. Through interviews with couples, a short historical analysis, with the addition of media coverage, I aim to show a nuanced picture of Polish society, one of growing social acceptance, resistance and active communities and, therefore, trace how politico-legal restrictions shape family life, what daily and legal strategies individuals adopt and what resistance in this context can look like.

This thesis contributes to several scholarly debates. First, it engages with literature on anti-gender movements and illiberal populism, building on work by Agnieszka Graff (2010; 2014), Elżbieta Korolczuk (2020), and Andrea Petö (2015; 2021), to show lived experience. From there, it takes a look at Polish queer theory aiming to decenter Western-centric frameworks, drawing on Robert Kulpa's work on leveraged pedagogy (2012; 2014) in which the authors show how Western narratives of linear progression often misrepresent the complexities of LGBTQ experiences in the region. While these frameworks remain important, I also engage with a critique of their approach that challenges their findings (Navickaitė's 2014; 2016). This leads me to draw on concepts such as transculturation (Cerwonka 2008) to develop a realistic and grounded analysis that aims to avoid both Western universalism and Eastern European exceptionalism while emphasising dynamic complexities. This is complemented by anthropological work on everyday resistance and queer kinship, drawing on Kath Weston's (1991) work on families of choice, De Certeau's (1980) concepts of tactics versus strategies, and Anand Pandian's (2019) anthropology of hope that emphasizes how marginalized communities navigate and transform their circumstances through practical engagement.

The thesis is structured in three main analytical sections. The first examines relationship formation and family-making practices. This part explores how research participants navigate coming out and construct families of choice that may include partners, friends, and biological relatives. The second analyzes everyday strategies for circumventing legal restrictions, from workplaces to legal strategies. The final section examines political and public dimensions of LGBTQ life, including media representation, advocacy campaigns, and resistance networks that challenge both state policies and social prejudices.

Chapter 1 – Background and Contextualization

Łukasz Szulc (2018) provides a comprehensive analysis of the history and current state of LGBTQ identities in Poland and the region overall. The author challenges common ideas about LGBTQ experiences in the region and highlights the diversity and complexity of these communities, especially in the context of the post-1989 transition. With the help of historical materials, Szulc is able to provide insights on the experiences of being queer in the 1980s and the emergence of organized activism in late-communist Poland. The role of alternative media, particularly the magazines *Biuletyn/Etap* and *Filo* helps to show how they shaped public understanding and acceptance of homosexuality in Poland. In this book, Szulc manages to show the complexity of LGBTQ politics with its Western influence and adaptation to local specificities while also situating these discussions within the discourse of LGBTQ rights in the region, situating the discourse beyond its progressive/backward binary. Instead, Szulc focuses on the influence of local history and political developments.

An important milestone in the history of LGBTQ rights was the decriminalization of homosexuality in Poland in 1932. This not only marked a progressive shift as it decriminalized consensual same-sex acts but also presented a rupture with previous legal framework originating from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Imperial Russia, and Prussia, which had

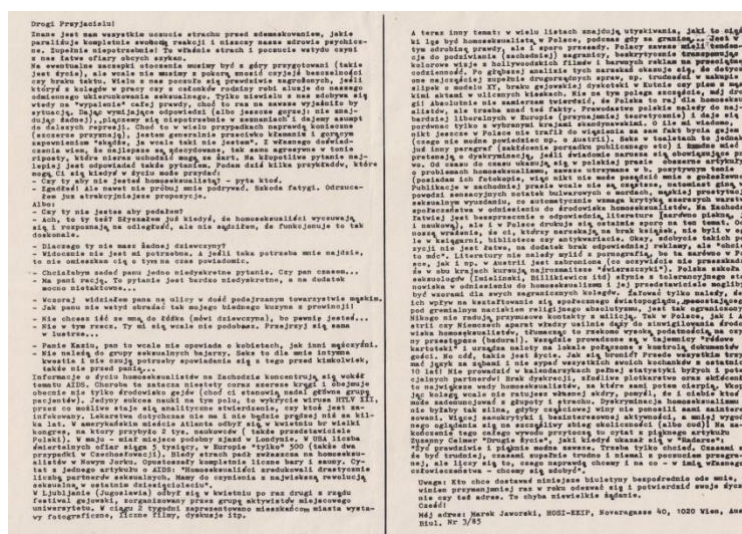
previously criminalized such acts. Along with that, the age of consent was set at fifteen years without distinguishing between same-sex and opposite-sex acts. It is also important to mention that after 1932, homosexuality was never recriminalized which sets it apart from many other countries in Europe (Platek 2009; Szulc 2018, 97-98, 211).

An interesting part of Szulc's (2018, 101–11) book is his historical insights to LGBTQ rights and realities during communism. During the communist era, there was significant repression, discrimination of LGBTQ individuals with severe restriction of public expression or organization with the most commonly known event the Operation Hyacinth in the mid-1980s, which aimed to identify and control the homosexual community through police raids and surveillance. This, however, did not stop people from participating in underground activism, particularly in the 1980s which laid the groundwork for activism post-1989.

This underground activism was often done in the form of producing magazines which helped to share information and address important issues relevant to the LGBTQ community such as education of legal rights and overall creating visibility and connection to the community. The magazines also included discussion of broader social issues such as feminism, ecology or anarchism. The magazine formed the basis for self-organization of activists as they highlighted the importance of organizing and solidarity. Drawing inspiration of Western and Eastern models of activism, the creators started to envision their own model of activism in Poland which was focused mainly on gaining societal acceptance and gaining political recognition (Szulc 2018, 127-50; 185-207).

An example of that can be seen in the following image of the third edition of the *Biuletyn* magazine from 1985.¹ In this edition of the magazine written by Marek Jaworski from Vienna, Austria, the author raises awareness about disclosure, coming out, and sexually-transmitted diseases among them HIV/AIDS. In this article, he informs the readers about the dangers and spread of HIV/AIDS as well as scientific progress made around the disease.

Figure 1: Third Edition of *Biuletyn* Magazine (1985).



Then, the fall of communism in 1989 enabled organized and more visible LGBTQ activism which is especially clear with the establishment of the first NGO Lambda Group in 1990. While these developments constituted an important moment for LGBTQ politics in Poland and the region overall, Szulc (2018) demonstrates, on the contrary, the historical continuity of LGBTQ activism in Poland with its different influences and political developments.

This can be evidenced by the archival materials included below that I gathered from a field trip I took at CEU where the class visited an exhibition by the Open Society Archives and Hatter

¹ Marek Jaworski (1985). *Biuletyn* 3 Queerstorya, accessed November 9, 2024, <https://queerstorya.pl/zbiory/biuletyn-1-1983/biuletyn-3-1985/>.

Society called "Records Uncovered" that ran in 2022 which was focused on exploring LGBTQ experiences in Central Eastern Europe. In the exhibition, there were various archival footage of magazines and photos that showcased important historical moments, the past struggles of LGBTQ activism and lives in the region in the second half of the 20th century. Interestingly, it also showed the various interconnections between groups and organizations in the region illustrating how activists also engage with global movements and wider social issues.²

While I did not take pictures of everything in the exhibition, here I want to include some of the material that was exhibited for *Records Uncovered*. The first image shows people demonstrating for same-sex love and rights described as a “peaceful demonstration of homosexual love” and several signs that read “We are Everywhere - Gays and Lesbians” or “Love is One”. Unfortunately, I could not retrieve the date either from the pictures or the newspaper, but by the open media coverage on LGBTQ demonstrations, I assume these were taken in the nineties post-1989.

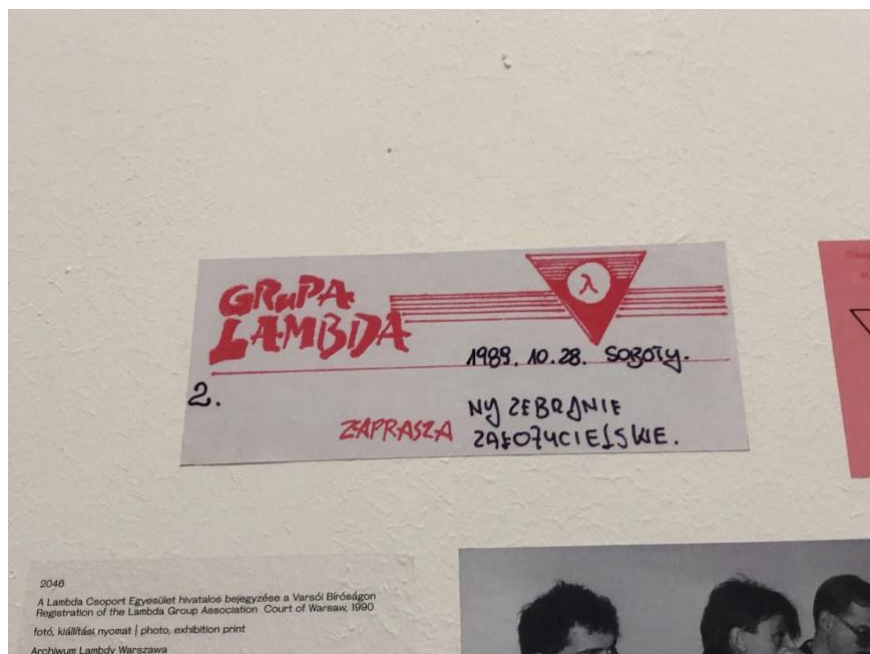
² “Records Uncovered,” Open Society Archives, accessed November 9, 2024, <https://recordsuncovered.osaarchivum.org/en>

Figure 2: Personal images from the exhibition *Records Uncovered* (2022).



The second image below is a sign of the first gay organization in Poland called *Grupa Lambda* on which it says “Group Lambda is inviting you to the founding meeting” on October 29, 1989.

Figure 3: Personal images from the exhibition *Records Uncovered* (2022).



With the fall of communism which fundamentally transformed the landscape for LGBTQ rights, there was also another remarkable era that changed LGBTQ politics with Poland's

pursuit of European Union membership. As Poland navigated the process of EU enlargement from the late 1990s onward, LGBTQ rights became increasingly politicized and important in the process. This positioned it from a marginalized social issue into mainstream political issues that called into question debates over European values, national identity, and Poland's place in the European community (Slootmaeckers, Touquet, and Vermeersch 2016).

In their book "The EU Enlargement and Gay Politics", the authors (Slootmaeckers, Touquet, and Vermeersch 2016) provide a comprehensive analysis on how the enlargement process influenced LGBTQ rights and political developments, showing how LGBTQ rights have an important symbolic value in EU politics and discourse. They base this argument on the concept of Europeanization (Radaelli 2003, 30) that is understood as a process of spreading certain concepts, ideas or policy paradigms based on EU norms that then integrate into local political structures, discourse and policies. In the process of enlargement, the countries start integrating these norms to adhere and advance in their enlargement processes. They also highlight critical voices that view the so-called 'Pink Agenda' as a line dividing East and West between supposedly LGBTQ-friendly and homophobic countries (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011; Ammaturo 2015). In the process of enlargement, the authors also argue that while LGBTQ rights can become front and center, it stands in contrast to the actual EU power and legislation in this field that is, according to their analysis, rather limited. Despite that, Slootmaeckers, Touquet, and Vermeersch (2016) show that how LGBTQ rights and human rights overall become entangled in the EU enlargement policy, becoming an increasingly important aspect in accession negotiations.

In their case study on Poland, the authors O'Dwyer and Vermeersch (2016, 123-139) offer a particularly interesting insight into how enlargement politics shaped LGBTQ politics and which political and social consequences arose from that. They identify two key developments:

(1) EU accession and the adoption of the non-discrimination principles in the labor market which led to backlash with conservative political movements mobilizing against these changes, plus (2) when the LGBTQ movement shifted from being a social movement to eventual electoral success in form of the election of *Your Movement* (Twój Ruch [TR]) in 2011. While these are described as two distinct phases, they are in reality interconnected according to O'Dwyer and Peter Vermeersch (2016, 125).

In the post-accession period (2005-2006), the most socially conservative and nationalist government since 1989, electing PiS-LPR coalition. *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS), translated as *Law and Justice Party*, was in coalition with *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (LPR), *League of Polish Families* in English, both represent conservative ideals that do not see LGBTQ advancements as compatible with their agenda. This represented the height of political homophobia at that time which led to increased visibility and strengthening of the LGBTQ movement. This eventually led to the 2011 emergence of *Your Movement* (Twój Ruch [TR]), a niche party founded by Janusz Palikot that positioned itself against the Catholic Church's influence in politics and challenged conservative nationalist values. This window of opportunity allowed the party to emerge and to directly confront what O'Dwyer and Vermeersch describe as "[...] taboos of the Polish hard right" (p. 134).

Twój Ruch's entry changed political arrangements in the party system which forced mainstream parties to engage with LGBTQ rights which were previously sidelined. The party received 10.02% of the vote in 2011 and elected two LGBTQ activists to parliament: transgender activist Anna Grodzka and Robert Biedroń, leader of Poland's largest gay-rights NGO. This forced both the center-right Civic Platform (PO) and center-left Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) to be confronted and engage with LGBTQ issues more directly. Between 2012

and 2013, three parliamentary proposals for registered partnerships were submitted and voted on.

This transformation shows how sometimes niche-party politics can make it out of the sidelines managing to create opportunities for legislative proposals. Philip Ayoub's (2016) talks about how visibility coined in his book "When States Come Out", *norm visibility* can lead to empowerment of certain social groups making it possible for them to claim the rights [...]" (p. 22). In the author's view, visibility is defined as "the relative ability of governments and publics to see and interact with new ideas and images that define the standards of appropriate behavior within their international societies." This empowerment can bring these particular social groups "to the center of political debate and public recognition, making it possible for them to claim the rights [...]" (p. 22). Based on Alexander Wendt's (1999) argument that states have identities, Ayoub's central argument is that states themselves can "come out" by recognizing the rights and claims of certain groups. The 2011-2015 period in Poland represented precisely this phenomenon, where increased LGBTQ visibility through electoral success forced mainstream parties to engage with issues they had previously ignored, demonstrating how "coming out" becomes both a social and political process for making the invisible visible within European democratic frameworks.

While this window of political opportunity brought about the advancements outlined above, the late 2010s experienced a political shift in Poland that drastically changed the perception and public debate on LGBTQ rights. With the return of the Law and Justice party (PiS) to power in 2015, LGBTQ rights became a central target of what Graff (2010) calls "political homophobia," whereby anti-LGBTQ rhetoric was strategically used to construct Polish national identity in opposition to perceived Western European values. Ayoub (2016, 187-191) reveals how the Catholic Church's and its role in the Solidarity movement resisted Poland's

history of occupation and foreign influence. The deep ties to the Catholic church enabled religious nationalism in what Ayoub terms a "defend the nation" frame (Ayoub 2016, 186), whereby PiS systematically framed homosexuality and gender equality as Western impositions on 'authentic' Polish culture, reflecting what Korolczuk and Graff (2018) identify as an "anti-colonization narrative" that portrayed the party as defender of traditional values against globalization and liberal elites.

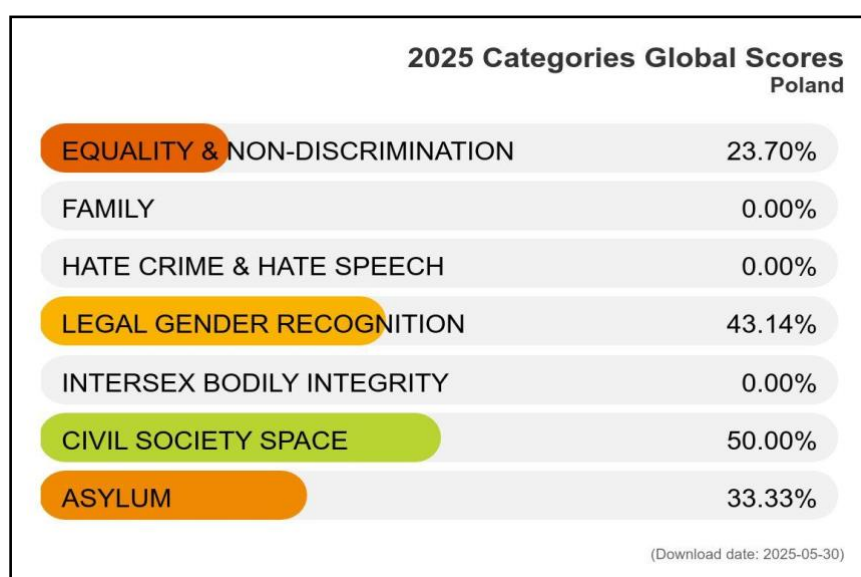
This historical rundown of Poland's history, precisely its interconnection with LGBTQ movements and rights, and political developments sets the stage for contextualizing my research question. This is a crucial step to understand the strategies, lives and experiences my research participants (and many others) live and the families and communities they create because of or, rather, in spite of these developments. But before I dive into that, understanding the current rights and situation presents an important starting point to contextualize current developments and the strategies families choose to mitigate the situation.

Starting with the ILGA Rainbow Map³ gives us a good overview of the current state of rights and lack thereof and how it compares to the rest of Europe. This rainbow map assesses the current state of laws and policies that have a direct impact on LGBTQ people's human rights to award them with the percentages of how much they comply or not with protection of LGBTQ minorities in various areas. The EU average stands around 51%, while Poland's overall score is 20.50%. Only Romania scores lower than Poland among EU countries with 18.63%. From this map, it is clear that Central Eastern Europe scores on average much lower than Western European countries.

³ ILGA Europe (2025). *Rainbow Map Europe*. Accessed 5 May 2025, Available under: <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/>

In the image below, for example, it shows to what extent there is legislation and protection in the areas such as *Equality and Non-Discrimination*, *Family*, *Hate Crime & Speech*, *Legal Gender Recognition*, *Intersex Bodily Integrity*, *Civil Society Space*, *Asylum* in Poland. It is clear that many of these subcategories have no legislation at all.

Figure 4: ILGA Europe Map Poland Score Categories (2025).



Here, I want to draw attention to the category *Family*. A category that has no existing policies or legislation. In this category, there are 10 domains listed. (1) *Marriage equality*, (2) *registered partnership* (similar to marriage), (3) *registered partnership* (Limited Rights), (4) *cohabitation*, (5) *no constitutional limitation on marriage* all falls under formal partnership, whereas (6) *joint adoption*, (7) *second-parent adoption*, (8) *automatic co-Parent recognition*, and finally (9) *recognition of trans parenthood* belongs to parenting and adoption rights. Category (10) *medically assisted insemination* (couples) and (11) *medically assisted insemination* (singles) is under reproductive rights. The listed categories are assessed when looking at *Family* rights in different countries. This makes me clear that none of them have any policies or legislation that allows for formal recognition, parenting or reproduction. This constitutes the starting point in the research and formulation of the research question. This legal

vacuum forces couples to develop the creative legal and informal strategies that will be shown in the data analysis.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

In this literature review, my goal is to trace academic debates on Poland's recent political developments in terms of women's and LGBTQ rights with an emphasis on anti-genderism in favor of conservative family values.

The first part explores the concept of anti-genderism and its manifestations in Poland and the broader Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, with specific focus on Poland. I will critically engage with the work of prominent scholars such as Agnieszka Graff, Elzbieta Korolczuk, and Andrea Pető, who have significantly contributed to our understanding of how gender and sexuality have become politicized and co-opted to further illiberal populism and its advocacy for a return to traditional values. Furthermore, I will also investigate the emergence of sexual politics and its role in shaping national identities and European integration debates.

The second part of the review shifts focus on tracing debates in queer theory and sexuality studies in Central Eastern Europe at the intersection of postcolonial theory. For that, I include the most prominent authors of queer Polish scholarship such as Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska (2011, 2014) and their approach to understanding Western narrative of progression in LGBTQ rights. I will complement this by including Navickaitė's critique of queer Polish scholarship to provide a more nuanced understanding of East-West binaries.

Throughout this review, I aim to discuss the current literature and understand how it contributes to my understanding of the issue at hand. By critically engaging with these diverse bodies of scholarship, my goal is to provide a nuanced perspective on existing debates while also contributing to it by centering the debates on lived realities in my empirical analysis.

2.1. Anti-genderism and illiberal populism: a perspective of resistance

Agnieszka Graff (2010, 2014) and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2020) are both very prominent authors writing on anti-gender movements that have on occasion, corporate (Graff and Korolczuk 2017, 2018) on academic publications. They both contributed to linking the rise of the political use of the word ‘gender’ by right-wing, conservative groups and its implication for political homophobia, often expressed as ‘LGBT ideology’. Their articles collectively demonstrate how sexual politics has been co-opted into political agendas, particularly by conservative and populist movements that view gender equality as a threat to national identity and family values. Thus, gender became an umbrella term for a wide range of societal issues including negative economic and cultural developments which are seen as consequences of liberal values and globalization.

One of the most cited articles *Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”* by Korolczuk and Graff (2018) analyzes the rise of "anti-genderism" as a new ideology of illiberal populism. This term links critiques of neoliberalism and globalization to gender conservatism. They argue that anti-gender movements use an anti-colonization narrative to portray gender equality as a form of Western imposition on ‘authentic’ local cultures. This portrays conservative groups as defenders of ‘authentic’, local culture and ordinary people against globalization and Western liberal elites. Moreover, anti-genderism ideology is present throughout nationalist groups across Europe which are able to effectively mobilize grassroots social movements such as concerned parents organizing against sex education in schools. This led to concrete changes in how sex education is taught in schools, resistance to ratifying the Istanbul Convention, and eventually the rise to power of Law and Justice party.

In another publication, Korolczuk and Graff (2021, 67-91) provide a comprehensive overview of the anti-gender movement(s) for which they identify three distinct phases. The first phase (2012-2015) focused on mobilizing against sex education in schools and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention that aims to prevent violence against women. The second phase (2016-2018) the authors identify occurs at the same time as the Law and Justice party (PiS) came to power which actively used anti-gender rhetoric to further their anti-immigration agenda. During that time, they also mobilized for the restriction of abortion laws that was eventually passed in 2020. The third and most recent phase (2019-2023) was characterized by intensified attacks on LGBTQ rights that eventually led to the creation of "LGBT-free zones" in numerous Polish municipalities in 2020.

In another article, Graff (2010) specifically examines the politicization of homophobia in Poland. The author's main argument is based on the observation that the anti-LGBTQ rhetoric became a key element in constructing a new conservative, Polish national identity. Graff (2010) identifies several key aspects: (1) framing homosexuality as a Western imposition, (2) the parallel between anti-Semitism and homophobia in Polish nationalist discourse, and (3) the strategic use of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric by right-wing politicians. She then goes on to introduce the concept of *politicized homophobia* which describes how homophobia became intertwined with nationalist sentiments and debates about European integration.

Other authors on anti-gender movements in the region are Andrea Pető (2015; 2021) who has extensively written on the role of anti-gender movements and discourse in Hungary. Throughout her work, Pető advances three core arguments about the gendered nature of illiberal transformation: (1) opposition to the liberalism as a key ideology where the illiberal is an alternative to the post-1989 neoliberal project, (2) family mainstreaming and anti-gender as foundational pillars of illiberal ideology and (3) the appropriation of key concepts, tools and

funding channels of liberal politics. Building on these theoretical foundations, the author demonstrates that anti-gender rhetoric is employed not just as a backlash but as a fundamental tool used by political elites to frame gender equality as a threat to traditional family values. The core difference between Pető against Korolczuk and Graff (2018) is the regional focus of Pető with a focus on Hungary and Poland (2015; 2021), whereas Korolczuk and Graff (2018) make international linkages in their work.

In similar vein, Cornejo-Valle and Ramme (2022, 25-46) compare the case of Poland and Spain and the co-optation of sexual politics, specifically focusing on the framing of moral panic. They make an interesting case arguing that even though the rhetoric invokes local, family values, this rhetoric is often replicated from international movements and institutions such as the International Catholic Church or World Congress of Families. Also, they point out the paradoxity of right-wing movements that often claim to protect “the family” and “womanhood” that only allow for a narrow definition of what family and womanhood means (p. 44-46).

A common thread between all the publications that they wrote shows how the right effectively uses anti-genderism as the movement’s new ideology against supposed ‘Western liberal values’ against the traditional, heterosexual family that represent ‘authentic, local values’. While they successfully describe and analyze this co-optation of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist rhetoric as well as listing real policy outcomes, their work effectively relies on an argument that is reproduced throughout. While they change the angle of analysis and specific target group that the right mobilizes, the core argument follows a similar pattern which can essentially be broken down to conservative, right-wing groups protecting ‘traditional family values’ against what is perceived as ‘Western liberal values’ including feminism, sex education and LGBTQ rights.

However, there remains the question of counter-mobilization and resistance. How do groups affected deal with the rhetoric directed at them and the resulting political scapegoating? What

does that tell us about people's lived experiences? These are the questions reserved for the empirical analysis of my thesis. In Korolczuk's (2020) article, however, there is a mention of strategies used by conservative movements to oppose women's reproductive rights in Poland. This movement was opposed by the more socially liberal women's movement that successfully mass mobilized for greater reproductive rights. They were able to combine medical and legal experts to address women's experience and the potential effects of further restricting reproductive rights. One reason for the successful countermobilization, Korolczuk, was the emotional response many women had to the conservative body of knowledge on women's experiences and its discrepancy to actual lived experiences, drawing on Hemmings' (2012) concept of affective solidarity, that addresses this discrepancy between ontology and epistemology, to explain the success of mobilization.

This article stands as an important contribution speaking about counter-mobilization, a movement of resistance that was so often missed in this line of academic scholarship. I consider this, especially, important in showing how despite the overwhelming notion of Poland and Hungary's illiberal populism and its democratic backsliding, there is growing resistance and, in fact, mobilization that leads to networks of resistance and solidarity between (un)affected social groups. This resistance is a core aspect of my research that I want to direct focus on.

Korolczuk and Jacobsson (2017, 1-25) challenge the conventional view of civil society in Poland as weak or disengaged. In the chapter, they highlight that traditional measures of civil society strength such as institutional engagement, NGOs, or formal political activism do not represent adequate measures to capture the strength of civil society. Instead, they argue how informal networks, grassroot mobilization, and spontaneous social movements, such as the feminist protests, labor strikes, and anti-government demonstrations, were evidence of a civic participation in Polish political events. Often this form of activism and civil engagement

happens to be overlooked for more traditional measures of social movements. Their perspective offers a nuanced understanding of Polish civil society that is partially organized outside of strictly institutional frameworks. This understanding of countermobilization especially in form of informal networks and grassroots organizing is a core aspect that I am highlighting by showing how informal networks of communities, organizations and everyday acts of resistance are practiced by research participants.

2.2. A discussion of sexual politics and narratives of progressiveness: Situating Central Eastern Europe

While earlier I was taking a look at the political scapegoating of right-wing movements and parties in claiming cultural authenticity, I will trace the debate about these political developments and its link to sexual politics by either author writing on the region to understand how they view and frame these debates. Thereby, I aim to provide a wide perspective of arguments to find a balanced conclusion that places my work within these debates. In that, I want to emphasize the complexities of everyday life, strategies and resistance to said developments by centering my respondents' views on the developments and how it affected and continues to affect their life choices.

An interesting aspect worth highlighting is Graff's article discussed earlier (2010, 585-602) Is the term *political homophobia* which places Poland's case within broader European discourses on sexual freedom, citizenship, and migration. For that, the author compares it to the Dutch case where sexual politics are linked to European politics of migration, co-opted as a tool of exclusion towards immigrant groups. In the Netherlands, images of gay couples kissing were used in integration courses for immigrants which signifies the progressive character of the Netherlands against the regressive immigrant that is measured according to how liberal or progressive to be able to be accepted. This shows how sexual politics are nowadays intertwined

with Western European modernity and self-understanding. Although in the case of Poland, homophobia is politicized against traditional values, in both cases, it, essentially, furthers a conservative agenda that are both instrumentalizing LGBTQ rights for their political goals. Attitudes towards homosexuality become a test for Western or non-Western values.

Interestingly, Graff (2010) challenges the idea of narrative of progressive politics in the West in contrast to regressive politics in the East but shows that in both cases sexual politics become intertwined with political agendas that aim to include particular groups of people. An idea that we can also find in Butler's (2010, 105) work on how sexual politics are linked to modernity that helps to distinguish between 'modern' and 'pre-modern' societies based on attitudes towards gender and sexuality. This idea was also developed by Jasbir Puar's (2007) book "Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times," which describes the idea of how LGBTQ rights and acceptance become connected to nationalist ideologies and xenophobia. In this book, the author introduces the concept of homonationalism which refers to the way some Western nations incorporate acceptance for LGBTQ rights into the national identity while simultaneously constructing the "racialized others" (often Muslims or immigrants) as threats to this inclusive, "progressive" national identity. Homonationalism allows for these nations to present themselves as "liberal, modern, and tolerant" in contrast to non-Western cultures considered "backward" or "oppressive". The co-optation of LGBTQ rights results in the marginalization of queer people of color under the guise of protecting LGBTQ rights, instead, it reinforces ideas of nationalism, cultural superiority and xenophobia.

A Polish queer theorist called Robert Kulpa (2014) talks about Puar's homonationalism to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which is positioned as inferior to Western Europe in feminist and LGBTQ politics. The author introduces the concept of *leveraged pedagogy* to describe how Western Europe practices cultural hegemony over the CEE region that serves to

reinforce Western European values of liberal sexual politics as universal by portraying the region in need of saving. Based on European Parliament resolutions on homophobia, Kulpa argues that Western Europe positions itself as a teacher to CEE, framing the latter as "in transition," or homophobic. An important aspect to facilitate the narrative of 'saving' the region from regression by following Western liberal values is its geographical and cultural proximity. This dynamic follows the logic of Orientalism, for which sexual politics have become a new arena of domination and control of the Western Europe's perceived cultural superiority.

In the first chapter of *De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, Mizielińska and Kulpa (2011) provide an overall theoretical framework and the main argument to "decentralize" queer theory and provide valuable insights of queer and sexuality studies from Central Eastern Europe (CEE). They argue that queer theory has been Western-dominated, more specifically by Anglo-American writers, and centered around experiences in the West. In this chapter, they discuss the unique position of the region that is European, and at the same time, marked by its communist past and stuck in an ever-lasting "transition" that is trying to catch up to Western, liberal standards. From that, they develop the concept of *temporal disjunction* to describe non-linear timelines and developments of LGBTQ rights, activism and identities in the CEE region that according to the author do not follow Western logic of linear progression. At the same time, much of LGBTQ activism that started to emerge in the 1990s used Western models of activism, terminology, and ideas which do not always fit the historically and culturally specific context, eventually leading to what the authors call a *temporal disjunction*. Thus, this book serves to critique Western universality and emphasize local specificity whilst paying attention to transnational linkages and globalization processes.

Kulpa and Mizielińska contribute to Polish and Eastern European queer theory, critiquing Western queer theory, orientalism and introducing important theoretical frameworks. Their work can be situated at the cross of understanding the connection between queer theory, nationalism, cultural anthropology, but also overall politico-historic development. They question power dynamics and critique the marginalized position of non-Western queer authors within queer and sexuality studies. With concepts such as *temporal disjunction* or *leveraged pedagogy*, they successfully managed to reframe CEE as unique and not in need of ‘catching up’ to match Western standards of progression in terms of LGBTQ rights and more.

Their contributions stand as important pieces of work in the region that can be situated within a longer tradition of authors critiquing Western-centric narratives and imaginations of Central Eastern Europe. One of them is Larry Wolff (1994) who claims that the very concept of Eastern Europe understood as a separate region is a cultural construct emerged during the Enlightenment period by known authors such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and many more. The main argument in Wolff’s book is that the very idea of “Eastern Europe” is essentially a Western idea which helped to assert Western superiority. Eastern Europe was seen, instead, as semi-exotic, semi-barbaric region that functioned as a bridge between civilization and barbarism. Similar to Wolff, Todorova (2005, 140-164) critiques the reductionist approach to understanding nationalism in Eastern Europe which is seen as backward and always catching up. A key argument in her text is the element of time. Whereas the West is focused on the present, the non-Western world always refers to the past and, therefore, lives in another time. Her argument is based on analyzing several writers such as Peter Sugar and Hans Kohn who claim that nationalism is imported to Eastern Europe and their very fundament rests on different ideas. Instead, Todorova points out that nationalism arose simultaneously across Europe and took several hundred years to be enforced across different countries.

This argument is also extended to feminist theory where authors such as Clare Hemmings' (2010, 1-25) claim that the idea of Western dominance and universality is also reproduced within feminist theory and historiography. This is significant, according to her, as these ideas materialize in real politico-economic actions. This argument reflects concepts discussed earlier such as *temporal disjunctions* (Kulpa and Mizelińska 2011). Hemmings challenges the notion of a well-reproduced feminist historiography with strictly identified temporal divisions to undermine the impact black, lesbian and non-Western feminist had on the development of thought and movements. Hemmings' arguments resonate well with Todorova's (2005, 140-164) observation of highlighting the reductionist approach to historiography. These authors illustrate the need to rethink dominant narratives and, instead, understand the complex interplay of influences on history and political developments.

However, I think it is important to highlight a slightly different perspective on the direction queer and sexuality studies are developing into such as we find in Navickaitė's (2014) article in which she reviews the application of postcolonial theory to sexuality studies in Eastern Europe, especially focusing on the theoretical framework on *temporal disjunction* presented in the first chapter "De-centring Western Sexualities" (Kulpa and Mizelińska 2011). Navickaitė (2014, 168-171) argues that in its attempt to challenge the queer studies canon, it, instead, reinforces the East-West binaries which eventually leads to a reproduction and alignment with nationalist, anti-Western rhetoric. Navickaitė, specifically, mentions that their argument is not substantiated by evidence and that Kulpa and Mizelińska only reference to discourse of Western hegemony and orientalization is a documentary talking about pride marches. Instead, the author claims, activists on the ground actively fighting homophobia are appealing to EU agencies and bodies to increase LGBTQ rights (p. 171).

In another publication, Navickaitė (2016) eventually comes to a similar conclusion as Kulpa and Mizielińska (2011). While critically discusses the narrative of Western progressiveness and its influence in framing Central Eastern Europe, Navickaitė (2016) bases her critique on the basis of three main books (1) *Sex and Russian Society* (Kon and Riordan 1993), (2) *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe* (Stulhofer and Sandfort 2005) and (3) *Beyond the Pink Curtain: Everyday Life of LGBTQ People in Eastern Europe* (Takács and Kuhar 2007). She joins the idea that positioning Western Europe as the universal model of sexual liberation often ends up framing Eastern Europe as perpetually homophobic and in need to “catch up”. This idea eventually leads to reinforcement of the binary logic of West-East division and fails to take into account the local specificities and nuances of sexual politics in Eastern Europe (p. 274-75).

However, the crucial difference in Navickaitė's analysis is that she argues Eastern Europeans themselves also contribute to reproducing narratives of Western superiority, rather than being merely passive subjects of Western discourse. She explains that it is rather common for many in Eastern Europe to view themselves as part of the West to which they aspire to belong, especially after Soviet Russian dominance in the region (p. 276). Additionally, she claims that many Eastern European researchers and scientists themselves reproduce these narratives of Western superiority (p. 284, 291, 294).

Cerwonka (2008, 809-829) observes the tendency of feminist scholars to frame Central and Eastern European (CEE) feminist scholarship primarily in terms of its difference from Western feminism. Emphasizing its difference can ironically reinforce existing power structures rather than challenge. Instead, she emphasizes a nuanced approach that focuses on the intersection and flow of ideas across said boundaries. Based on this idea, Cerwonka proposes the concept of *transculturation* to understand how feminist ideas mutually influence and transform in

different contexts, instead of solely focusing on strictly national or regional categories. Similar to Navickaitė, Cerwonka highlights complex dynamics and transnational processes and traveling of ideas that mutually reinforce or sometimes contradict each other. Her overall argument calls for a more complex understanding of how feminist thought develops and circulates, moving beyond simplistic notions of East-West difference and towards a more nuanced view in feminist scholarship.

Although Mizelińska's (2011, 85-102) claim of CEE's uniqueness and the antidote to Western school of thought, contradict her statements of how Western ideas of LGBTQ activism have been deployed in Poland. Although she argues that the elements employed in LGBTQ activism stem from different periods of LGBTQ activism in the West, therefore sustaining her and Kulpa's claim of temporal disjunction and non-linear progression of events. By that, she essentially shows us that in many aspects how Western concepts travel to Poland and are adapted to the socio-political developments.

This idea of understanding the complexities of sexual politics in Poland is what I consider the main argument in my thesis. While highlighting elements of homophobia, conservative attitudes that are stereotypically associated with Poland, I also show how in practice this perception does not always hold true. LGBTQ life and communities in Poland are ever more present and organizing to resist the political homophobia and the lack of LGBTQ rights. While that has historically been the case, it is becoming more and more visible and specialized. Many of my interview participants have shown me in what ways they find loopholes, strategies and places of support to form meaningful communities, families and relationships.

At the same time, I do not intend to dismiss the political developments and the impact they have had on the LGBTQ community in Poland. Therefore, my approach is to let my research and approach be guided by the empirical data I collected and the observations that come from

that. By that, I want to emphasize the complexity of balancing the two the same way that my interview participants balance these nuances and complexities. This leads me to base my argument on approaches of *transculturation* (Cerwonka 2008).

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Before answering the research question, I formulated above, I will shortly explain my methodology and data analysis. In this section, I aim to discuss my methodology by engaging with theoretical and practical approaches that have guided me throughout the process of data collection and analysis. In the same way, I want to reflect on my experiences during fieldwork in Poland and my positionality in the field as an insider/outsider. Focusing on the latter requires critical thinking and self-reflection to observe the nuances of how my position impacts the conversations I had and how it undoubtedly changed the data I collected but also created the opportunity for me to share meaningful insights to people's lives.

Notes on Positionality

Choosing Poland as my field site came from a deeply personal place. I spent most of my life in Germany as a kid of a Polish single mother. I attended mostly German schools with little to no diversity. So, going to Poland meant also to explore my background and engage critically with socio-political developments. This research was a meaningful and personal endeavor that weaved together many aspects of my life and gave me the chance to explore and connect with my roots.

My position as a researcher resonates strongly with Lila Abu-Lughod's (1991) concept of "halfies" which are described as partially insider and partially outsider to the communities they study. Abu-Lughod argues that halfies occupy a complex liminal space, being "people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage"

(p. 137). Abu-Lughod points out that halfies face dilemmas that "[...] reveal starkly the problems with cultural anthropology's assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other." Halfies cannot comfortably assume the self of anthropology because the self is split between different systems. This creates what Abu-Lughod (2016, 468) calls an "uncomfortable awareness" about ambiguity of our position which also brings in a variety of perspectives that comes from different systems. As someone Polish-German, I am always caught between the different worlds and systems. While I started my research in doubt whether I would be capable of going through and providing an interesting insight, this unique position as a "halfie" led me to consider a variety of perspectives that I bring together, analyse and use to guide my research. This unique position also allowed me to explore my own initiatives and gain a deeper understanding of Polish society.

While research is often an inquiry into a field or issue, this might only be partially true. As time progressed, I realized that my motivation for the research came from a personal place. I wanted to explore my roots and experience life in Poland as an adult and the fieldwork offered me the chance to connect my personal motivation to my research interests of connecting gender and sexuality to everyday life. Growing up around the LGBTQ community in Hamburg exposed me early on to gay culture and the struggles of my queer friends. I do realize that my allyship may only go so far as to offering a truly "queer perspective". While I up to this date identify as heterosexual, I view sexuality and gender expression as fluid categories that can also change throughout one's lifetime. That is not to say that I do not acknowledge my position and privilege as a straight person. As an attempt to "queer the perspective", I have included various streams of queer theory, both international and local, to show the nuances and try to remain close to the insights that participants offered.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge how my socioeconomic background has influenced and shaped this research. Growing up working class in Germany, as a child a Polish single mother, experiencing both exclusion and inclusion based on adaptation, has made me very flexible to fit into different environments. This is exactly why I chose to write my research on strategies of life on how marginalized communities create meaningful lives and navigate these difficulties.

Interviews

The most important source of data comes from thirteen interviews I conducted between November and December 2022 of which eleven consisted of couples' interviews, the last two of single-person interviews. The in-depth interviews provided the appropriate method to discuss and capture the complexities of the different themes and the semi-structured nature allowed me and the interviewees to highlight aspects of their life that either one of us found important to express. The length of the interviews varying from one hour to an hour and a half allowed me to explore people's lives thoroughly touching on a range of themes: family, partnerships, politics, work, community, and strategies. While I prepared an interview guide to help me guide the interview process, interesting stories or sentiments especially stood out to me which I, then, further explored with spontaneous questions.

The first interviewees I was introduced to through my personal network of friends and other acquaintances. Later, the interviewees were, then, mostly commonly referred to me by other interviewees -- a technique called *snowballing*. This led me to conducting two interviews in Łódź, six with couples living in Warsaw, and two remaining ones with couples in Toruń. Two interviews were conducted in person, of which one happened in their private family home and the other in public. Most other individuals preferred to have online video calls as it allowed them to arrange the time freely, according to their schedule. Due to technical issues, another

single-person interview and the subsequent data were, unfortunately, lost and could not be retrieved. This forced me to fall back to the remaining twelve interviews.

Data Analysis

After gathering the data from interviews, the transcription was partially done on a software Descript and then corrected by me personally. Subsequently, I coded the transcribed interviews on Atlas.ti Web – a data analysis software tool for qualitative data analysis. I coded each interview with categories that broadly described the content and overall sentiments (not to be confused with a sentiment analysis) of the interviewee's responses. For example, when speaking about coming out to a supportive biological family, it was coded as *Acceptance*, *Coming Out*, *Family*. This process allowed me to thoroughly process the interviews and understand trends among the data. This revealed that *Acceptance*, *Coming Out*, *Community*, *Discrimination*, *Family*, *Family of Choice*, *Legal restrictions*, *LGBTQ network*, *Political Climate* received especially high frequency among the data. These reveal a mixed picture where positive experiences of acceptance meet legal restrictions. The coding helped me guide the next part - the data analysis where I highlight the most important aspect that my interview participants discussed.

Chapter 4 – Data Analysis

4.1 Relationships and family-making (connecting it to families of choice)

In this section, I will discuss key aspects of coming out, family-making, community, relationships with families of origin, and queer family-making in Poland. While the next section addresses daily life and strategies, which are often intertwined with these topics, I consider it as an analysis of practical approaches to everyday life and the strategies people

adopt in response to legal restrictions and other forms of delegitimization of same-sex partnerships.

While understanding sexuality and citizenship (Lind 2010) and intimate citizenship (Plummer and Richardson 2005) are important in understanding how the social structures and institutions favor certain forms of relationship over others, these approaches have a strong reference to the state and, therefore, lack reference to agency. Béres-Deák (2020, 5) sees that the concept of sexual citizenship not only captures the relationship between the individual and the state, but instead understands citizenship as belonging to communities, families, and other networks which is what I want to elaborate on in the following.

Stories of coming out, and relationships with families of origin are integral parts to understanding people's lives and more importantly, the families they go on to create later in life. This became even more clear to me when reading Kath Weston (1991, 112-119) who writes about coming out as an important event. It often includes fearful anticipation from the person coming out that feels like "ripping off a mask" (p. 116) and finally establishing congruence between the inner experience and external presentation (p. 117). Families of choice, thus, partially emerge after having experienced rejection from families of origin. Out of that, people form kinship ties based on choice and love which implies that people have agency in choosing who they consider a kin (p. 227-230). "[...] Most chosen families are characterized by fluid boundaries, eclectic composition, and relatively little symbolic differentiation between erotic and nonerotic ties." (p. 452). This fluidity of non-heterosexual relationships partially stems from a lack of institutional frameworks, it also offers the opportunity to freely create and choose your kins (Weeks et al. 2001, 107).

Here, I would like to add Mizielińska et al.'s (2018, 976-77) contribution to stress the importance of contextualizing our research. Although queer theory in Anglo-American

tradition represents an ever-changing and constantly adjusting scholarship as the authors (Mizielińska et al. 2018, 976-77) claim, its focus often rests on Western societies which lack representation from outside. Thus, the authors propose to adopt a framework of ‘*queer transculturation*’ which enables the examination of queer kinship through empiricism to show the lived realities of non-heterosexual people while showing how Western concepts of queer theory (e.g. homonormativity [Duggan 2004]) are renegotiated as they travel across socio-political contexts. This approach emphasizes the need for ongoing dialogue to challenge the dominance of Western theoretical perspectives which need to include queer lives globally by grounding research in specific spatial and temporal contexts.

To avoid falling into the trap of understanding family exclusively as kinship bonds we form later in life with said partner, ex-lovers, and friends, it is just as important to highlight that queer kinship equally involves connections to family of origin. Mizielińska et al. (2018) claim that in many non-Western contexts, the boundary between family of choice and origin is not as distinct and can be a lot more blurry. As I will highlight, many have integrated their families with their partners and friends seamlessly and sometimes even in spite of difficult relations.

During fieldwork, I realized that most of the interview participants had supportive families and environments that made coming out either seamless or overwhelmingly supportive and positive. During the transcription and subsequent coding of interviews, the word *Acceptance* had the highest frequency among most participants. Whereas other codes such as *Concealment*, *Rejection* or *Tolerance* were much less represented and mostly related to specific persons and their relationship to their family or workplace. Overwhelmingly, I heard participants share positive experiences whether with family, friends, or at work. One of my participants, Filip, described his coming out:

“My family totally embraced it with open arms. And those friends (from there) as well, also without any resentment or signs of reluctance or any kind of dissatisfaction.”

This is very similar to the case of Anna and Ewa who are a middle-aged couple in their thirties who got to know each other during the pandemic like many other couples I interviewed. At the beginning of the interview, Anna highlighted many times that they are very open about their partner and that they feel accepted by everyone in their lives including family, friends, and colleagues who treat them as any other couple. While these sentiments still reflect the current life and environments they find themselves in, in the case of Anna and Ewa there is an interesting difference in their queer experiences. Anna only started dating women much later in life in her thirties much like her mother who started seeing women in her sixties when she moved abroad and lived in Belgium. Unlike Anna, Ewa’s experiences reflect a different reality. She has been dating women for over twenty years and growing up in a small town, there was a lot of concealment and hiding or simply avoiding speaking about her romantic or sexual interests to others. Over time, this need for concealment has changed, she observes: “[...] In Poland, I haven't felt in recent years like I have to hide very much.” This might be partially due to her long years of activism at a local NGO in Kielce before she moved to Warsaw which made her identity as a public figure and a lesbian known to most as she says.

However positive many of my participants’ experiences may be, there were also a few participants who shared very painful and negative experiences in their coming out. Szymon recalled his coming out as follows:

“For me, it's definitely worse. Different, worse. I came out a year ago to my parents through a letter. That's how it happened, and I came out to my mom, dad, and sister. [...] Yes, and my parents are very angry, sad, and disappointed because of it.”

He also went on to describe how this negatively impacted his relationship with his parents, leaving him feeling this unpleasant tension whenever he visits them, which happens less and less often. He also says that “my parents don't really want to meet Emil, they don't really want to hear about him. [...] There are just a few occasional questions.” According to Szymon, these questions reveal his parents’ hope that one day he will “change” his sexual orientation.

This phenomenon is captured in the concept *transparent closet* (Kuhar and Svab 2014, 19) which refers to the situation where the disclosure of homosexual identity is acknowledged but not further talked about. The family refuses to accept the consequences of that disclosure which, essentially, leads to a push back into the closet — the *transparent closet*. This concept is not just applicable within the realm of family but also extends to other social settings. In the case of Emil whose parents were made aware, refuse to accept his identity and, along with that, his partner Szymon.

Stories like that are not experienced in isolation: Tomasz comes from a small town in Lesser Poland known for its strong Catholic presence. Only after 23 years, his mom came to visit him and his partner Mateusz and gave her blessings by giving them a Virgin Mary icon: “I accept you, live your life your way, just hang the picture, but I support you.” He described that as a “beautiful” experience. While this journey eventually ended in acceptance, it can be a long painful process to get there. Tomasz’ partner Mateusz, that comes from a more liberal family, described his coming out:

“[...] It was quite a long process. I could not get along with my mom primarily because there was a lot of denial. She knew it when I was in my twenties. The topic just disappeared. Yes, it was one conversation. She couldn't handle it, and then she pretended that the conversation never happened. For years, I pretended that the conversation never happened”.

When individuals come out to their families, Weston (1991, 113) states that they seek confirmation to prevent the denial that follows. However, sometimes it is inevitable that some parents cannot process their children's coming out and instead pretend that it did not happen or, in the case of Szymon's parents, hope that it is a temporary event that might eventually change.

The same can be true in case of extended family. While most coming out stories are centered around immediate family such as parents or siblings, most have little contact with their extended family. As Tomasz puts it: "That's why I don't like such family gatherings, I avoid them with the extended family because they are really strangers to me." He then goes on to say: "I have my family here in Łódź, the one I've created, Mateusz is my family, the most important one here. We also have friends and they are the most important people to me." Here, he makes it clear that his partner Mateusz, his friends and immediate community in Łódź are whom he considers his family, a family binded by choice, and love, and commitment, thereby offering an alternative to blood ties (Weston 1991, 101).

Tomasz also added a very interesting observation about expressions of commitment and love beyond visible signs thereof such as living together, making future plans and other emotional signs. He calls them "connecting themes" which can be understood as rituals or traditions that couples create to show their love and commitment to each other. Rituals include celebrating anniversaries or creating yearly books with photos, memories, and stories of common experiences. While Tomasz understands these rituals as a substitute for the lack of having children and connection to their families of origin, this lack of public affirmation of same-sex partnerships in face of institutional and legal repression make strong narratives of love and commitment crucial (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 105). These narratives are often expressed through

the creation of couple traditions and rituals, which serve to affirm commitments and deepen attachments (Driggs and Finn, 1991).

With the lack of any form of legal partnership or marriage in Poland, most couples have the choice to either get married abroad or do a humanist wedding that has no legal validity and acts as a form of celebratory ceremony. Łukasz and Adam made the decision to get married in Germany where it was legalized in late 2017. For them, it was a romantic and emotional gesture that reaffirmed their commitment to each other. They also expressed how their families' presence, especially their fathers organizing the bachelor party, added a special and amusing touch to the event.

Other affirmations of commitment and often an integral part of family-making, as Tomasz and Mateusz stress, are having a dog named *Berlin* whom they refer to as their child: “When our child appeared, that is Berlin, the dog, everything changed even more.” This feeling of family often complemented by either dogs or cats resonated with a lot of other couples I met and talked to. Emil and Szymon got their dog Shelly around two years ago. Emil described that he had this longing for a dog once they moved in together which he considered reaching the next level of their relationship.

“But as you noticed, she's a member of our family. Together, we form a triad with her. She is very important to us and we take care of her. And I think that's why I use such vocabulary, such terminology that should typically be reserved for humans, not for dogs. Even when I talk about her, people get the impression that she is indeed a family member, like a child.”

Generally, pets can be great companions for everyone but especially among LGBTQ populations, pets can become an important part of chosen families as was shown in a study by Hully and Ortyl (2019). With experiences of exclusion and rejection (McDonald, Matijczak et al. 2021), pets can provide a sense of comfort and belonging (MacNamara 2019; Muraco et al.

2018; Putney 2014). The high numbers of pet ownership among LGBTQ populations (Matijczak et al. 2024, 246) are also reflected among most of my interview participants which have either dogs or cats.

Weston (1991) often mentions that families of choice are not just composed of romantic ties and children, they often cross household lines and incorporate ex-lovers and friends making families of choice fluid in boundaries that somewhat resemble networks. In the case of Tomasz and Mateusz, they describe their relationships with women in their lives as a system of support:

”You know, not even just in couples, but women dominate our lives. And it turns out that it’s the women who remember and support us, who ask how we are doing, and who keep in touch regularly.”

In this case, they do not explicitly use the word family, however, Weston (1991, 217) mentions to qualify or understand certain relationships as family, it takes regular meetings, emotional and material assistance, and a common history.

In the case of Tomasz, and Mateusz, they differentiate their female friendships from other friendships by emphasizing their commitment, support, and emotional assistance to each other which provides them with a system of support or in other words, a family to fall back on. Throughout the interview with Emil and Szymon, it becomes clear that they do not feel a strong connection to the wider gay community, whether due to lack of community spaces or different lifestyles and interests. Yet Emil’s integration of his former partner Andrzej and his new partner who are now a constant present in his and his partner Szymon’s life are exactly the choices that show the fluidity of gay families that distinguish them from traditional, nuclear families that draw a cross line between blood ties and friends.

Friendship often symbolizes and becomes an essential part of understanding queer experiences. This partially stems from living outside of heteronormative realm whereas friendship in queer communities provides the affirmation, emotional security as well as intimacy that can lack in other romantic and family relations. The flexibility of friendships can fulfill needs in times of uncertainty and risk which leads many to forming deep and meaningful connections in their friendship (Weeks et al. 2001, 51-53). It can represent a form of disruption to heteronormativity and the convention of family life as Foucault (1996, 206-209) claims. Its disruptive character not only comes from subverting traditional social institutions that are primarily focused on monogamous marriage and reproductive sexuality within the family, instead it subverts these norms by centering non-institutionalized social relations with fluid boundaries, not governed by law or social norms. This, Foucault claims, can be seen as a form of resistance to existing power structures.

In conclusion, the experiences of coming out, family-making, and community in queer lives reveals the significant transformations and redefinitions of kinship and support systems. Stories of coming out, whether met with acceptance or rejection, are pivotal moments that shape the trajectories of queer individuals and their subsequent relationships. The creation of families of choice, characterized by love, commitment, and fluid boundaries, highlights agency in forming kinship ties beyond biological connections. The supportive presence of friends, ex-lovers, and even pets, plays a crucial role in these chosen families, offering emotional and practical support that traditional family structures may lack.

The experiences shared by my interview participants highlight the diversity within queer communities. While some find seamless integration and acceptance within their families of origin, others face rejection and must navigate the complexities of forming alternative support networks. The stories of Tomasz, Mateusz, Emil, and Szymon exemplify the varying degrees

of acceptance and the creative ways they cultivate meaningful connections with their families, friends, and communities.

The importance of rituals, traditions, and legal affirmations of commitment are important components in family-making. Whether through symbolic ceremonies, the adoption of pets as family members, or the integration of friends and ex-partners, these practices reinforce the bonds and provide a sense of belonging and stability. Ultimately, the experiences of forming families of choice and navigating their relationships offer valuable insights into how we form families with the people around us despite or in light of rejection and restricted access to LGBTQ family rights.

4.2 Everyday life, strategies, and practicalities (connecting this part to the literature of everyday strategies, and intimate citizenship)

I concluded the first part of the analysis by highlighting how people create meaningful families and communities despite rejection, socio-legal obstacles and lack of institutionalized frameworks. The balance of hope and challenges that drive people toward creating supportive, loving environments, also expose them to the harsh realities and systemic obstacles that complicate their journey. This is the essence of Laurent Berlant's (2011) *cruel optimism* which describes a condition in which individuals remain attached to unachievable or detrimental desires, even though these attachments negatively impact their well-being. Therefore, cruel optimism arises when the very things people long for—such as upward mobility, romantic relationships, or societal acceptance—are inherently flawed or inaccessible within the structures of contemporary life. This concept is particularly relevant in understanding the struggles of minority groups, who often aspire to inclusion and recognition within systems that

are fundamentally exclusionary and resistant to change, as they navigate their lives. This is what I will be discussing in the following section.

Most of the stories I just shared were stories of coming out to people's families of origin. And while that constitutes one of the most important parts of coming, many remain in the closet in certain parts of their lives which I found can often be the workplace. Coming out does not signify one's final exit from the closet. Even the most openly gay people can remain in the closet in certain parts of their lives. With every new encounter, new closets can be created or reentered. Remaining in the closet also does not mean that it provides shelter and safety, instead, it can create uncertainty about who remains in control of this information because nobody can fully control clues and codes about one's sexual identity (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990, 67-81).

This holds particularly true for some of my interview participants and their relationship to their workplace. Natalia is a university professor and her recent change of work caused her to speak carefully about her queerness and by extend, her private life:

"I changed jobs some time ago. This is significant because at my previous job I had already come out to almost everyone and there was no problem. But that was at a university, and now I'm at a different university, and I think it matters somewhat which discipline these people are from. [...] I don't want to generalize, but the university where I worked before was very open in its equality policies, etc. It's a university, so I didn't feel like it was just corporate talk. [...] Now, at my new job, I'm only out to a few specific people. I first checked if they were LGBT-friendly. Most of my bosses and colleagues at my current workplace definitely don't think they're homophobic, but they have a traditional view of family. [...] When they say certain things, I know I don't

want to engage with them. At work, there's no topic of conversation with these people regarding my personal life."

As Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, 68) writes, every new encounter can erect new closets even for the most openly gay people. In the case of Natalia, this holds true with her new place of work. In her case, it is not just the colleagues or work environment, it is also very much determined by the university's initiatives to show their support by introducing various equality policies.

Many of my respondents do not share their orientation at work and consequently, any information about their romantic lives to their colleagues or employers. This holds especially true for those working in state institutions especially in the area of education. In one of my interviews with a lesbian couple living in Toruń — a mid-sized town in the center of Poland — Agata who works in a school outside of Toruń in an even smaller town mentioned that „at school, no one knows about me, no". Over the years, she got used to avoid speaking about certain parts of her private life. She mentioned that she had become accustomed to avoiding certain topics. Instead of pretending to have a boyfriend or husband or changing the partner's gender, she prefers not to share too much detail.

This also functions as a great example to understand daily strategies that people employ — not speaking about their private lives at work or changing information to not expose one's identity. This was, for example, also the case with Marcin who decided to not share anything about his private life at work, whether about his partner or any other details. Even though his company openly shows support for LGBTQ inclusion at work, he specifically chooses to keep his colleagues at a distance and not to make friends with anyone.

While Agata chooses not to share any details about her romantic or private life at work to conceal her sexuality, yet she does not conceal her beliefs entirely. Teaching in elementary schools, she tries to educate her students and create a space in her class that embraces openness.

When her class was celebrating Valentine's Day, the girls in her class said that they don't have "boyfriends" and she responded by saying: "Do you have any girls?" and when the kids were unsure about it, she went on to explain: "I say that girls can have a girlfriend." By teaching her students about diversity and opening their minds beyond heteronormative relationship norms, she found her way to resist and reveal herself in a way she feels comfortable.

Recently, the children in her class were discussing Valentine's Day and one student mentioned that she does not have a boyfriend to celebrate with. However, Agata remarked that she can also have a girlfriend, not just a boyfriend. While the kids accepted that, she explained that in Poland, same-sex marriage is not currently allowed, which surprised the children who were unaware of this restriction. She then elaborated that while a woman could marry another woman in a different country, upon returning to Poland, the marriage would not be recognized, and her wife would be considered a stranger. This revelation genuinely shocked the students.

It becomes clear that Agata is trying to open her students' minds to same-sex relationships and love which is not always a given in state education institutions. Later, in the interview, she explains that for sex education, which is called "Family Life Education" in Poland, teachers are given a guidance book to help teach and she immediately says "[...] This is exactly the textbook that our association has heavily criticized for portraying homosexuality as something abnormal and unnatural." She also recounts a story of a fellow teacher friend: "She can't say that if someone asks about it [homosexuality], she should actually say that she can't talk about it." She expressed frustration, questioning how children are supposed to know about these things. That's why Agata takes the opportunity to explain these issues whenever possible.

In De Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1980, 37), the author differentiates between strategy and tactics by defining each through the element of power, "[...] A tactic is determined by the absence of power just as the strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (p. 37). De

Certeau (1980, 37) claims that tactics arise out of spontaneous circumstances in various forms and locations to manipulate rules and structures. An important factor he highlights is that tactics are used by the weak as one of the only opportunities to subvert systems of oppression and power that are imposed on individuals. In the example of Agata as a teacher, she clearly understands that within educational institutions, any mention of support for any other sexual identity outside of heterosexuality goes against the Polish state norms of gender and sexuality. Yet tactics like openly speaking to her students about LGBTQ rights, educating them on non-heteronormative relationships and wearing “a rainbow pin because I have it on the bag that I take to work.”, she defies these norms everyday and manages to resist them in meaningful and impactful ways outside of her involvement in local activism.

Other daily strategies that I asked my participants about concerned medical emergencies. In my interview with Emil and Szymon, they mentioned recording a short video on the other person’s phone where they agreed that in case of a medical emergency or someone’s passing, they would have access to their belongings or medical records. This is what I would call a non-formal strategy that does not involve any legal documents or authorizations which I mentioned earlier. In my observation, these actions make up the majority of so-called “strategies” as only a few legal options are available. As Bourdieu (and Wacquant 1992, 133) would phrase it “strategy without a strategist” which means that a strategy does not follow specific steps or actions, instead it should be understood as a flexible way to cope with ever-changing circumstances. Most legal strategies are only considered after long years of partnership and age in which people buy properties, have children or might come from non-accepting families for which legal documents can provide protection.

In another interview with Marcin and Bartek, we talked about renting and properties. When they were looking for a place in Warsaw, they encountered some issues. They found a place

they liked at a decent price, but when the agent learned about their relationship, they started making excuses not to rent to them. Ultimately, they found another place with friendly owners. Marcin expressed that his relationship often forces him to emphasize his background. However, when they were looking for an apartment to buy, they had a pleasant experience and did not feel discriminated against. They shared an interesting observation: the more money involved and the higher the price, the less interest there is in other aspects. Marcin noted that landlords of cheaper rentals are highly involved in their tenants' lives, whereas those of pricier properties mainly care about timely payments and proper upkeep.

It is important to note here that navigating life is not just about adopting tactics and finding loopholes, it is often a question of resources which can make certain aspects of life easier. Similarly laid out in Bourdieu's (1977, 72, 95; and Wacquant 1992, 18) concept of habitus that represents the internalized system of dispositions shaped by past experiences that guides individuals' perceptions, actions, and responses to ever-changing situations. This concept of habitus informs strategy which refers to actions that follow social norms and patterns without conscious planning, embodying a "strategy without a strategist" and representing a flexible "feel for the game." What I want to highlight is how habitus links the field (interaction with social actors) and capital that allows individuals with certain forms of capital to develop certain strategies (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 120).

While de Certeau's conception of tactics is relevant in everyday life situations in which individuals take on tactics that arise out of spontaneous circumstances, not all strategies or tactics are born out of that. In Poland, the non-existent LGBTQ family and partnership rights make families and couples "strangers" in the eyes of the law. That leads some to opt for legal strategies by means of having authorizations in certain domains of life or notarial acts that regulates matters such as property, inheritance, finances, medical emergencies or certified

letters as in the case of Tomasz and Mateusz. In their notarial act, it was especially important to regulate inheritance and property. In case of their passing or other emergencies, they would otherwise have no rights to access each other's belongings which minimizes the risk associated with the lack of legal rights.

What is important to point out about this, is that their first notarial act was issued in Warsaw at a law firm working exclusively on LGBTQ rights. Through their network, they received a specific recommendation to approach this law firm. While I did not receive any specific information on which law firm they worked with, I also stumbled across the firm *Law and Legal Adviser's Office* (Polish: Kancelaria Adwokacko-Radcowska)

during my fieldwork which is focused on a variety of fields that pertain to LGBTQ rights such as same-sex couples, family rights, children's rights, discrimination and hate crimes, transgender issues, equal treatment in the workplace, tax security as advertised on their website. On their website, they share information about what kind of services they provide for couples (name change, recognition of foreign marriage licenses, will, inheritance).

This is just one of many examples of networks and services that are offered to protect LGBTQ individuals and families in face of legal restriction. This network, as I witnessed throughout my fieldwork in my interviews or various online sources, reports and online groups/activists, is constantly growing. To give another example, in one of my interviews with Agnieszka and Julia, they mentioned that they made use of mental health services specifically for LGBTQ individuals called *Open Space* (otwarta przestrzeń) that offers a variety of services ranging from individual or group therapy organized around different areas of need.

Concerning 'rainbow families', the topic of children does concern at least around one-third of the couples that I talked to, with some having more concrete plans than others. In the case of Łukasz and Adam, who were considering surrogacy for a while, have reached out to different

companies with which they already had several appointments in which they learned about the cost, the process, and legal regulations around it. They shared that doing surrogacy in the US would have cost them an impressive sum of money and caused some legal difficulties as it is impossible to have two fathers on a Polish birth certificate, only the biological father and the surrogate mother would be mentioned in the Polish documents. In that case, the other father would become a so-called social parent who lacks any protection or legal claim to the child.

Kimberly Richman (2019, 78-83) talks about *legal consciousness* which is a concept to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and engage with the law (or lack thereof). It involves understanding how people make sense of the law and its impact on their daily lives, and how they use the law to navigate social relationships and institutions, especially with the lack of family rights. In this chapter, the author talks about how legal cases can set a precedent to broaden the scope of the law, e.g. more inclusion in legal definitions of a parent or family. As one of my interview participants Julia remarked “lawmakers never considered the possibility of non-heteronormative relationships or the idea that children might be involved”. Similarly, as was the case with a court ruling in 2018 where Poland's Supreme Administrative Court overruled previous administrative decisions, recognizing the transcription of a British birth certificate listing same-sex parents into the Polish birth register. This is just one of many examples that can be seen as a precedent ruling that marked a significant shift that impacts the legal consciousness about rainbow parenthood and families.

In this analysis, I wanted to highlight the balance between hope and challenges faced by the couples I spoke to as they navigate socio-legal obstacles to create meaningful families and communities. Despite the systemic barriers in contemporary life, these individuals employ various strategies and tactics to assert their own rights and their families. From managing personal disclosures in the workplace to leveraging informal and legal strategies for medical

emergencies and inheritance, their resilience is evident. Through acts of everyday resistance, such as Agata's efforts to educate her students about diversity, they challenge and subvert oppressive norms. Ultimately, the stories reveal a profound determination to create supportive and loving environments, illustrating the complex interplay between personal agency, community solidarity, and institutional constraints.

4.3 Politics and Public Sphere

Anand Pandian's (2019, 45-47) approach to anthropology emphasizes how individuals and communities practically navigate and transform their circumstances through creativity and practical engagement. This approach, which can be categorized under "anthropology of hope", offers interesting perspectives on how marginalized communities live with and tackle inequalities and systems of oppression by highlighting their ways to overcome obstacles by resisting, adapting and transforming their situations. Pandian exemplifies his argument by exploring the ways in which urban communities organize informal support networks due to absence of formal systems. These communities, then, go on to create alternative economic systems relying on their informal networks. This example is, especially, relevant in the case of legal restrictions and political scapegoating. This is the key argument I aim to construct in the upcoming part where I highlight the resilience and network of resistances that have formed despite politico legal restrictions.

A core argument I aim to construct is how vibrant LGBTQ life is in Poland, and how people create meaningful communities and families despite the lack of political and legal rights, which remains an important aspect that shapes people's lives and the choices they, therefore, make. With Poland's eight years of PiS in government, the country came under scrutiny for restricting abortion, freedom of press, regionally introducing LGBTQ free zones, democratic backsliding and co-opted rule of law, the public discourse formed in media and academic publications was

often focused on deeming Poland as regressive in terms of Western standards of progression. ILGA Europe (2025), for example, ranks Poland as the country with the least LGBTQ rights in the European Union (Bogatyrev and Bogusz 2024, 1). This thought reflects in Butler's (2010, 105) work where they link sexual politics to the concept of modernity which categorizes societies into 'modern' and 'pre-modern' based on their attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Discourses about modernity and progress use sexual freedoms and sexuality to determine the level of progress a society has made (Bracke 2012, 237-252). In the case of Poland with its lack of LGBTQ rights, it is seen as regressive

From the early 2010s to the 2020s, the word “gender” suddenly became a word of public interest. In 2013, it gained substantial media presence among right-wing, religious groups and movements. The mobilization against gender, an imported ideology from the West, was framed as a threat to authentic family values and as an invitation to engage in pedophilia and moral decay. This campaign around ‘gender ideology’ manifested itself on online websites, radio interviews, posters detailing the danger of ‘gender ideology’ in public schools, parents started to address local politicians by means of petitions, and teachers being fired if they spoke out against (Graff 2014, 431-43). Other well-known campaigns from the *Fundacja Pro - Prawo do Życia* (Foundation Pro - Right to Life) called “Stop Pedophilia” which claims that an LGBTQ lobby wants to ‘sexualize children’ through sex education in schools. This campaign was very known because of the driving vans featuring slogans of their campaign (s. below) (Tilles 2023).

Figure 5: Foundation Pro - Right to Life Campaign on "Stop Pedophilia" (2023).



Subsequently, media and academic publications started to pick up on this new trend on the right-wing's new-found interest in sexual politics. Among others, authors such as Graff and Korolczuk (2018, 2022), Graff (2014), Korolczuk (2020), Ayoub and Chetaille (2020), Grzebalska, Kóvats and Pető (2018) have dedicated significant time to write and publish about this in the context of Poland and Hungary. Other popular news and media outlet such as POLITICO⁴, Euronews⁵, Süddeutsche Zeitung⁶ and countless reports from known organizations like ILGA⁷ publishing a timeline on major events that happened from the 2010s to 2020s.

Here, I would like to bring an example of how this affected one of my interviewees, Tomasz, who mentioned that the harassment and constant negative media attention had severe psychological effects and anxiety which made him afraid to leave the house. This led him to

⁴ Nicolas Camut, "Poland still worst country to be gay in the EU: Report," *Politico*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-still-worst-eu-country-to-be-gay/>.

⁵ Una Hajdari, "Could Poland's controversial LGBT-Free Zones finally be consigned to history?" *Euronews*, July 21, 2023,

⁶ Florian Hassel, "Und die katholische Kirche macht mit: Polens 'Stop LGBT'-Gesetz," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/meinung/polen-pis-katholische-kirche-lgbt-sa-nsdap-1.5452494>.

⁷ ILGA-Europe, "Poland: Anti-LGBTI Hate Timeline," <https://www.ilga-europe.org/report/poland-anti-lgbti-hate-timeline/>.

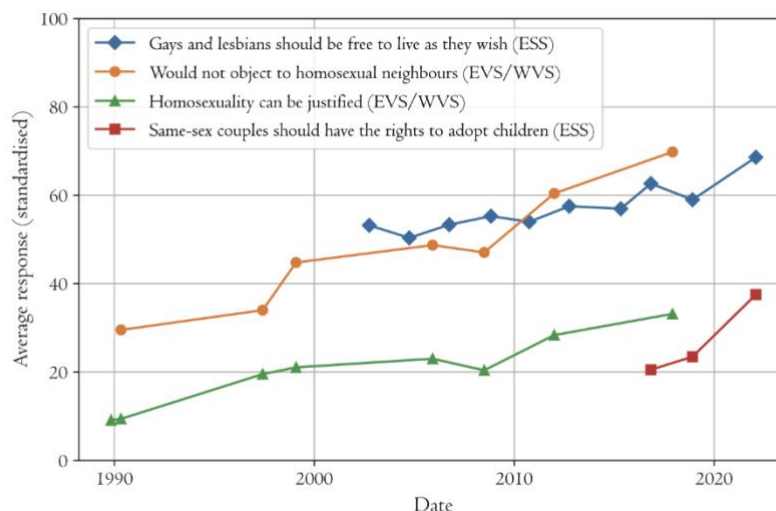
eventually seek therapy. By mentioning that, I want to make sure to stress that while resistance of civil society and networks of support are forming, the political scapegoating and harassment did negatively affect the community which was a feeling shared by many other interview participants. Mizielińska (2022, 30-31) also shares that observation by saying that the LGBTQ community has become the scapegoat to unite the electorate against a common enemy as a distraction from other issues such as pedophilia in Catholic Church, failure to adequately deal with the pandemic and state debt.

These are political developments that affect real people in the choices they make, the experience they have and the feelings they share which I do not intend to dismiss, however these images also contribute to Poland and the region being perceived as regressive and backward. These are sentiments I encountered by several people to which I talked to about my research interests and fieldwork. The majority of people I interviewed shared the observation that while the politico-legal sphere is clearly lacking behind in LGBTQ rights, societal attitudes have changed towards supporting more and more LGBTQ rights with a majority of the Polish population supporting civil partnerships.

The steady increase in acceptance of the LGBTQ community also is reflected in survey results. Since the 1990s, there has been a constant increase in acceptance of partnerships, neighbors and recently also adoption (Bogatyrev and Bogusz 2024, 3). The graph below shows how most survey answers have steadily increased over the years. This also reflected in the coding of my interview transcripts of which *Acceptance* had the highest frequency.

Figure 6: Rise of LGBTQ Acceptance in Polish Society (2022).

Figure 2: Favourability of attitudes to homosexuality in Poland during 1989–2022 according to the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Values Study (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS)



Notes: For comparability, we rescaled the ESS and EVS/WVS variables from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates the least favourable attitude option and 100 signifies the most favourable attitude option for each question. The y-axis values represent weighted average responses for given years.

This leads me to highlight the network and public presence of LGBTQ communities and families in Poland by analyzing my interview data and other empirical data I found online on social media or TV channels. The consciousness about rainbow families and couples is not only legally challenged in said cases but also through various online and media platforms. The privately-owned TV channel TVN regularly features clips or interviews with rainbow families. This picture is from a live TV interview with Klaudia and Alena Szyszka in which they talk about recently having a daughter, their family life, the challenges they face, societal expectations, and their experience being a rainbow family.

Figure 7: Dzień dobry TVN featuring Rainbow Family



8

Having watched many of these clips, also while trying to understand the landscape and get an insight into empirical data, I found a connecting theme in almost all of the videos. Besides talking about their lives, relationship, and children, most interviews express the message of normality. They often aim to portray rainbow families as “any other family” that provides a loving, safe home for their children. While acceptance of same-sex civil union is relatively high with around 56%, only 12% of Polish believe in adoption of children as a right for same-sex couples.⁹ Raising awareness and showing couples that talk about their daily lives which resembles our lives underlines the message of normalcy and creates a feeling of relatability.

The association *Miłość Nie Wyklucza* (trans. Love Does Not Exclude) is running a large campaign called *Jesteśmy Rodziną* (We are Family) from 2022 until today that is about promoting rights and awareness of rainbow families through media and public engagement. Part of the campaign, for example, are videos introducing different families where they talk about their personal stories and lives. They also provide educational resources on how to properly represent rainbow families or other reports on societal perception of rainbow families. Raising awareness in this context means they bring the stories of these families to the wider

⁸ Source: Dzień Dobry TVN

⁹ <https://zorientowaninarodzine.pl/wyniki-badan/>

public and show the insecurity these families experience because of the lack of LGBTQ family rights. This is necessary, they state, because “one in four people in Poland does not know whether rainbow families live in Poland”.¹⁰

Another example is the project *Szkola Zaufania* (school of trust) which was initiated by the foundation *GrowSPACE*. The foundation releases an annual ranking of LGBTQ friendly schools which provide a safe and inclusive environment for queer youth and children raised by same-sex couples and families. For the ranking, they gather data from surveys from a large group of participants (teachers, students) and also analyze school policies, practices and general environment. The school that was ranked the best was *I. Społeczne Liceum Ogólnokształcące* (1st Social General Secondary School) in the West of Warsaw. In 2024, the conference presenting the results of the study was for the first time held in the Ministry of Education¹¹. The involvement of the ministry not only legitimizes and raises public awareness about the importance of inclusive schools and education systems but might also influence future policy-making.

With the most recent elections in 2023, the right-wing, socially conservative party PiS was voted out of office and replaced with the coalition of the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska), the Third Way (Trzecia Droga), and the Left (Lewica). These parties have various stances on LGBTQ issues (Gwiazda 2021). The only tangible promise of the coalition, so far, is to criminalize anti-LGBTQ hate speech (Civic Coalition et al. 2023). Furthermore,

¹⁰

https://kampania.jestesmyrodzina.pl/?_gl=1%2A1ol6d79%2A_ga%2AODk1ODI0NDU0LjE3MjEzODk4MTk.%2A_ga_G5VBWGM3LY%2AMTcyMTM4OTgxOS4xLjEuMTcyMTM4OTg1Ny4wLjAuMA..%2A_ga_617Z77L28F%2AMTcyMTM4OTgxOS4xLjEuMTcyMTM4OTgzNi4wLjAuMA..&_ga=2.165169336.626240876.1721389820-895824454.1721389819

¹¹ <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/szkola-zaufania--wyniki-rankingu-szkol-przyjaznych-lgbtq--konferencja-wiceminister-pauliny-piechny-wieckiewicz>

the Civic Platform that holds the majority of the seats in the parliament (Sejm) also holds favorable views towards same-sex civil partnerships such as the other two coalition partners of which the Left also expressed their support for full marriage equality. While these represent promising development in the advancement of LGBTQ rights, the semi-presidential political system is dependent on the president, Andrzej Duda (PiS), who has publicly expressed unfavorable and discriminatory views on the LGBTQ community on many occasion and is yet to remain in office until August 2025 which complicate positive developments (Bogatyrev and Bogusz 2024, 4-5).

Aside from promising new political developments, the urban nature of places like Warsaw and Lodz allows most interviewees to live openly and with access to places of community. While some experienced instances of discrimination or even threat of violence, most remarked that living in Warsaw offers most to feel comfortable and have the chance to be open with their sexuality. Earlier, I detailed how even in Warsaw, not all feel that comfort and some may not always choose to be open which is dependent on various factors (workplace, age, gender expression, etc.). However, Łukasz mentioned that Warsaw allows them to live in a bubble where they feel free, open and accepted which mostly prevents them from having difficult situations to deal with. Filip also remarked that Warsaw creates that anonymity which facilitates everyday life.

Ghassan Moussawi's book *Disruptive Situations* (2020) mainly challenges the popular imagination of Beirut, Lebanon as exceptional and progressive in comparison to other places in the SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) region which the author calls 'fractal orientalism'. Instead, Moussawi shows the complexities of everyday life, activism, violence and strategies that concern the LGBTQ community in Beirut. Here, I want to highlight Moussawi's use of the work *al-wad* which means 'the situation' and is used by the author to

(1) capture the complexity of everyday life, and (2) as a tool to understand queer strategies. As part of queer strategies, he introduced the concept of the ‘the bubble’ which is understood as a temporary retreat that allows individuals to escape *al-wad*’ and it can be a spaces, neighborhoods, or networks of support. The bubble, according to author, is hereby connected to having certain privileges (neighborhood, class, etc.) which allows those inhabiting it to be able to ignore sociopolitical context, escape normative gender and sexual identities.

Moussawi derives the concept from Warner’s (2002) concept of counterpublics and Mische’s (2015) theory of publics as places of partial suppression. In that, he understands the bubble as a temporary retreat but “[...] at a macro level, these bubbles, oftentimes coupled with everyday practices of denial of *al-wad*’, serve to unwittingly maintain narratives of modernity and progress and of Beirut’s exceptionalism” (p. 139-40). While this conceptualization speaks to the books’ essence of highlighting in what way fractal orientalism plays out, I would like to apply this to my research by highlighting how urban centers such as Warsaw are small bubbles that provide escape from broader socio-political realities and, therefore, represent a queer strategy on how to live (mostly) comfortably and openly in Poland.

Data Analysis Conclusion

In this analysis, I aimed to highlight important themes that emerged from the interview and online data that were divided into (1) families and communities, (2) everyday life and strategies, and at last (3) political and public sphere. In the first part, I told stories of coming out with varying degrees of acceptance highlighting the complexity of relationships to families of origin. This led me to include stories of family-making in relationships and communities which are termed as families of choice in which I showed how families of origin can be part of family-making, blurring the commonly perceived distinction between the two. The second part I dedicated to understanding the strategies of navigating everyday life through informal and

formal strategies whereby people resist the existing circumstances and sociopolitical, legal restrictions. In the last part, I aim to show the growing networks of resistance that appear publicly through media, television, and public campaigns which provide resources for the community and their needs.

While the second and third part overlap in many aspects, the core argument in this analysis was to show how everyday resistance and resilience manifest in the networks of families and small communities, and on larger scales with LGBTQ law firms and NGOs advocating for political changes. My observation and collection of examples highlight how despite wide-spread perception of Poland and the region as homophobic and ‘regressive’, there is growing everyday resistance in Poland that promotes more open and inclusive social attitudes towards LGBTQ populations and same-sex families. Everyday resistance manifesting in queer networks of kinship that raise public awareness, and therefore wide-spread support, produces favorable politico-legal results.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I aimed to offer a glimpse into the gap between the anti-LGBTQ political developments with lived realities. Among my key findings is that the LGBTQ networks and communities are expanding and active to become visible and gain wider acceptance. These networks also help individuals to navigate homophobic environments and fall back on lawyers, schools and organizations that offer specialized services. These networks and resources can also be seen as a source of resistance in a country with few LGBTQ rights in place. Another key finding I would like to point is the growing societal acceptance that reflects in urban spaces, media, and interpersonal interactions, contrasting the intense anti-LGBTQ rhetoric of the late 2010s.

This leads me to also highlight the contradictions in both of these arguments. While some couples live openly in urban centers, the realities in smaller urban centers, the generational gap and resulting different experiences show the complexity of human lives and interpersonal relationships. At the beginning, I mentioned Agata's stories about teaching school children to see beyond heteronormativity. This story retells how in our everyday life, we can resist despite fearing the consequences, all whilst concealing ourselves for protection – walking a thin line between what is possible and what is forbidden from the perspective of the person. This story like many others shows the contradictions, hope and resistance that is representative of my key argument in which I aim to show the nuances of LGBTQ lives and experiences in Poland.

My analysis on family-making practices shows that my interview participants actively create and sustain families and communities through rituals and common practices that go beyond family, friends, families of origin, romantic partners, former romantic partners, and even pets. The dynamic nature of creating communities and eventually families has also revealed that families of origin are not excluded from these processes, instead are often integrated into these structures. While legal frameworks do not allow for formal recognition of the couples, legal and daily strategies alongside common rituals and residence strengthen the commitment between couples and their families. While legal recognition is an important dimension that many (but not all) voiced to be desirable, it only represents one dimension of how people construct families and communities. This finding not only challenges conservative ideas of family structures but also queer theory that view marriage as fitting into heteronormative ideals and as assimilation into reproductive frameworks (Duggan 2003, Munoz 2009).

While this debate on assimilation raises important theoretical questions, it also neglects the realities of families that lack the right of recognition, for whom inheritance, children and tax benefits are not accessible. Therefore, many take on strategies, both formal and informal, to

work around the circumstances, using both legal ways (notary agreements) and informal ways (visibility) such as navigating public spaces. These strategies can be described as strategies of visibility and consolidation, whereas other strategies such as concealment or restricted disclosure, while also informal everyday strategies, are rather strategies of protection and partial concealment. This shows the difficulty of navigating through lack of legal and societal restrictions.

Ayoub's concept of 'norm visibility', defined as 'the relative ability of governments and publics to see and interact with new ideas and images that define the standards of appropriate behavior within their international societies' (2016, 22). This helps to explain the unprecedented levels of public visibility for rainbow families and LGBTQ lives. This visibility operates independently of state recognition, creating what Ayoub describes as the movement of marginalized groups 'to the center of political debate and public recognition' even when formal rights remain absent. This visibility on social media, traditional media such as newspaper and TV, and physical visibility in urban centers, also functioning as bubbles (Moussawi 2020) with LGBTQ spaces and networks paints a different picture of family that shows the resistance to the political narrative of the previous government.

This research makes several contributions to existing academic debates. It challenges dominant narratives that frame Poland and Central Eastern Europe as regressive and catching up to Western standards. It shows the vibrancy and resistance of LGBTQ individuals through daily strategies and existing networks and spaces. For that, I focus on the data that revealed a rich, complex and at times contradicting picture. This work also discusses Polish queer theory that argues to move beyond Western-centric frameworks that positions the region as fundamentally different, my analysis adopts a nuanced approach that centers what Cerwonka (2008) terms "transculturation" which describes how ideas, practices, and resistance strategies flow and

transform across contexts. This approach offers a nuanced perspective to show how contradictions and complexities exist alongside each other.

This leads me to say that while making this argument, I recognize the limitation of this research. Having mostly been in contact with individuals living in Warsaw and other urban centers creates natural limitations that, if mostly speaking about smaller towns and predominantly conservative regions, might have offered a different glimpse into LGBTQ lives in Poland. This research also excludes perspectives on transgender experiences that might disregard my findings and insights as it can significantly alter the experiences of family life, everyday strategies and public visibility. This would constitute a meaningful addition to my research and provide greater insights into LGBTQ lives in Poland. Here, it is also worth mentioning that many of my participants are well-educated, while not all coming from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, they have certainly managed to a certain level of financial stability that allowed them to make certain choices such as buying property (while common in Poland, it still shows a certain level of financial stability).

While the research is grounded and contextualized in Poland, the findings and insights can reveal an interesting picture to other contexts in the region and beyond. Similar patterns of political hostility and legal restriction existing alongside resistance and gradual social acceptance appear across Central and Eastern Europe, whether that be in Hungary with even greater political hostility and yet more legal recognition. The findings can offer interesting insights into meaningful family-making, acts of resistance, strategies and (partial) visibility in other restrictive environments, from Eastern Europe to other regions in the world.

The increasing visibility and growing societal acceptance may eventually lead to politico-legal changes. At the same time, the findings also challenge the very idea that legal recognition is the primary measure of LGBTQ progress. While important for material and legal security, the

visibility and growing networks of resistance suggest that societal transformation can happen in spite of these environments. This research highlights how everyday resistance and public visibility can function as foundation for change in which the networks, activism and resistance plays a pivotal role.

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