

LIVING 'LA VIDA' INTERNET: SOME NOTES ON THE CYBERIZATION OF POLISH LGBT COMMUNITY

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In this text, I am going to explore various forms and meanings of the process of cyberization of Polish LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community. I will also want to analyze how cyberspace functions interchangeably as private and as public space, depending on the context. Throughout the paper, I will be commenting on the process of *being* and *becoming* lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, that is increasingly and intrinsically linked with cyberspace; looking at the Internet as a space for negotiating issues of (sexual) citizenship. In the first section, I will provide background historical information on the Polish LGBT movement, as I believe this is crucial for the understanding of the meanings of the Internet for the community at the moment. In the second section, I will concentrate on the intersections of cyberspace and the coming-out process, passing on later to the analysis of blogs. In the section that follows I will analyze briefly the presence of LGBT issues on on-line discussion boards, situating the analysis around a salient event for Polish gay and lesbian movement, that is, the Poznan March of Equality. Finally, I will talk about the meaning of the Internet for Polish LGBT organizations.

This paper grows out of two sources—on the one hand, an increasing body of literature on the relationship between various manifestations of cyberculture and queer culture/activism, on the other hand, my own experience of coming out and into the LGBT community and activism via the Internet. My own positionality—a Polish immigrant living currently in the UK—is forcing me to rethink the meaning of the cyberspace, as a home, a welcoming place of what Anne-Marie Fortier calls “ontological security” of being among kindred spirits, that is often central to the experience of both immigrants and queers (Fortier 2002, 190). As Kunstman adds in her work on the efforts of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel to establish an on-line queer community; in the case of queer immigrants, the ethnic and the sexual connectivity are interwoven, underlying yet more the concepts of sexual citizenship (Kunstman 2004). As McLelland further notes, the Internet technology provides a unique



opportunity for relationship building between individuals who are otherwise deterritorialized, diasporic and transnational (McLelland 2002, 389).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before analyzing queer lives in virtual space, I am going to provide some background information that is crucial to the understanding of the processes I am describing and discussing in the paper. As far as legal issues are concerned, homosexuality is legal in Poland, having been removed from penal code already in 1932. Age of consent is 15 years old, both for heterosexual and homosexual intercourse. It is not possible for same-sex couples to marry or register their relationship. When it comes to anti-discriminatory laws, Article 32 of the constitution provides only a vague clause that reads “no one shall be discriminated against in political, social or economic life for any reason whatsoever” (Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 1997). At the moment, the Polish Labor Code is the only legal act in Poland that mentions sexual orientation (Pogodzinska 2005). The prejudice of the society, both on a private and public level is still quite high. According to the most recent survey on discrimination based on the grounds of sexual orientation available,¹ about 13% of gays and lesbian experience physical violence, about one third—psychological violence. 70% hide their sexual orientation at the job and in public sphere. About one third claim that if offered the possibility, they would consider moving abroad (Raport 2004). 86% don’t want their children to come in touch with gays or lesbians. 40% believe, that homosexual acts between consenting adults should be illegal, about the same number would prefer not to have any contact with gays and lesbians at all. Finally, only 4% believe that homosexuality is normal, and a further 55% claim that it is a deviation from the norm that should be tolerated but not accepted (Wenzel 2005).

Various of authors locate the beginning of the presence of homosexual issues in public discourse in Poland at the beginning of 1980s, pointing to the article of Barbara Pietkiewicz published in 1981 in the weekly *Poli-*

¹ The report was based on 632 questionnaires, of which 359 were filled in by men, 216 by women and 7 by transsexual persons, while in 50 cases the respondents did not provide information on their gender. Over 90% of respondents were between the age of 18 and 40, which could be due to the fact that most respondents were contacted in gay clubs or discos. As for sexual orientation of the respondents, 48.7% were homosexual men, 8.1% bisexual men, 22.5% lesbians, 11.7% bisexual women, 0.3% FTM transsexuals, 0.8% MTF transsexuals, and 7.9% respondents failed to provide data about their sexual orientation.



tyka (Politics), where the author described the attitudes of Poles towards homosexuality and provided a glimpse of the Warsaw gay scene (Wiech 2005, 237; Kurpios 2004). In Poland, like in most of the other countries of the Central-Eastern European region, gay and lesbian life until 1989 took place in small circles of friends (Flam 2001, 14). When discussing the possible beginning of the emergence of the gay and lesbian movement, Kurpios mentions Akcja Hiacynt (Action Hyacinth) as a crucial event for the mobilization. On the 15th of November 1985, at the order of the minister of internal affairs Czesław Kiszczak, Polish state security officers initiated an action of gathering files with information on homosexual men. The data were gathered between 1985 and 1987, in total 11,000 men were registered as homosexuals in the "pink archives" (Kurpios 2004).

The creation of officially recognized and legal gay and lesbian movements in Poland was only possible after 1989, when after the fall of the communist regime non-governmental organizations could freely register and gays and lesbians had a chance to emerge as new social actors (Flam 2001, 12; Zuk 2001, 45). The first gay and lesbian organization in Poland, Stowarzyszenie Grup Lambda (The Association of Lambda Groups) was registered in 1990 (Adamska 1998, 26). Branches of the association were created also in Krakow, Gdansk and Wroclaw, where the activists provided a safe meeting space, organized movie nights, parties, conferences and meetings, and published leaflets on safer sex (Adamska 1998, 111). Most of the local branches of the Association of Lambda Groups ended their activity in 1997, while some of the activists connected with the Warsaw branch created Lambda Warszawa in 1997, which was the only gay and lesbian organization between 1997 and 2001. The organization concentrated for the most part on community-based activities, that is on providing counselling and legal activities, support groups and organizing cultural events.²

The victory of Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (The Alliance of the Democratic Left) in parliamentary elections in 2001 seemed to announce a breakthrough point for gay and lesbian activism in Poland. During the electoral campaign, this left-wing party promised to introduce a same-sex partnership bill and anti-discrimination protection for sexual minorities. Nevertheless, the bill that would legalize same-sex partnership never materialized and in the end, the hopes connected with the Alliance of the Democratic Left were dashed (Gawlicz and Starnawski 2004, 190). In September 2001, a group of activists in Warsaw under the leadership of Robert Biedron, a member of the Alliance of the Democratic Left, creat-

² See <www.lambda.org.pl/warszawa> (5 December 2006).

ed the national organization Kampania Przeciw Homofobii (Campaign Against Homophobia), the first one in Poland that would focus on gay and lesbian visibility. It was also in 2001, that queer studies began functioning as an academic discipline,³ at least informally within the circle of committed researchers, who created Kolo Naukowe Gender Studies “Nic Tak Samo” (Academic Association of Gender Studies “Nothing Is the Same”) and organized the first conference devoted to queer studies in Karpacz (Basiuk, Ferens, and Sikora 2002, 12).⁴

The first successful LGBT Pride Parade in Poland occurred in May 2001 in Warsaw. The Parade was organized by Polish branch of the ILGCN (International Lesbian and Gay Culture Association). The organizers, in their official statement, called upon the Polish president to respect minority rights in Poland and reminded him that these rights are being constantly violated (Gorska 2006). Parades in 2002 and 2003 in Warsaw gathered increasing numbers of participants from all over the country, 2000 and 3500 respectively (Gorska 2006).

The social campaign organized by the Campaign Against Homophobia, called “Niech nas zobacza” (Let them see us) in the spring of 2003 was a breakthrough in terms of public visibility of gays and lesbians in Poland. The first project of this kind in Poland, “Let Them See Us” was a social advertising campaign which consisted in an exhibition of 30 photographs of ordinary looking same-sex couples (15 lesbians and 15 gay men), holding hands. The exhibition opened in four galleries (Krakow, Warsaw, Gdansk and Sosnowiec) around the country and was followed by a nation-wide billboard campaign. Each image was stamped with the words “Let them see us!” in red. The aim of the campaign was to provide positive images of gays and lesbians and also introduce the issue of sexual minority rights into public discourse (Basiuk 2004, 123). Since the campaign was financed partly by the office of the Plenipotentiary of Equal Status of Men and Women, then responsible also for protection of sexual minorities against discrimination, discussion ensued in the Polish parliament as to whether Polish taxpayer’s money should be wasted on “promotion of deviations and deprivations” (Leszkowicz 2004, 20).

³ Gay and lesbian studies are not officially recognized by the Academy of Polish Sciences. However, within the sociology or psychology departments it is at least theoretically possible to undertake research on gay and lesbian issues (Informal conversation with Jacek Kochanowski, whose Ph.D. was devoted to issues of gay identity in Poland, April 2006).

⁴ As the founders of the association claim, it was impossible to register an organization at the University of Wroclaw whose name would contain words “lesbian,” “gay,” “queer” or “homosexual.” Despite its name, the organisation deals with queer studies. See <www.nts.uni.wroc.pl> (5 December 2006).

“Let Them See Us” was a crucial moment for the presence of gays and lesbians in the public sphere. As Graff claims, “a mere few years ago gays and lesbians were still basically invisible to the heterosexual majority, at least not as an interest group with specific demands” (Graff 2006). Warkocki argues that “Let Them See Us” was a spark that started a fire, pointing out the connection between the campaign and the events in Krakow during the March of Tolerance, the first march to stir public controversy:

There certainly exists a relationship between “Let Them See Us” and the Krakow events. Before this billboard action there were gay and lesbian parades in Polish cities, in Warsaw, to be more exact. However, it was only after this symbolic spark that introduced homosexual subjectivities into public discourse that it turned out how Poles react to any kind otherness (Warkocki 2004, 105).

The March of Tolerance was the only public event planned during the four-day festival of gay and lesbian art and culture *Kultura dla Tolerancji* (Culture for Tolerance), organized by a group of students from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow (Kubica 2006). During the weeks preceding the planned date of the march, 7th of May, the event met with the heated opposition from the local government, city council, university authorities, local right-wing and Catholic organizations. About 1500 persons participated in the March of Tolerance. Before they were able to reach the final destination of the March, the participants were stopped by an illegal demonstration comprised of local politicians of *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (The League of Polish Families), members of the ultra right-wing organization *Młodzież Wszechpolska* (All-Polish Youth), skinheads, football hooligans from Cracovia and Wisła (Vistula) clubs. They threw eggs and stones at the marchers, shouting “Gas the gays,” “We will not give the Wawel castle away,” “Deviants and perverts” (Kubica 2006).

Public resistance to the increasing visibility of gay and lesbians was growing in tandem with the emergence of nationalist and xenophobic feelings connected to Poland’s entrance into the European Union in 2004, as well as the rise of right-wing political forces. Over a month after the march in Krakow, Lech Kaczyński, the mayor of Warsaw, cancelled the Warsaw Pride in June 2004 mentioning security reasons, and the possibility of danger to public health and morality, as reasons for the cancellation. One thousand demonstrators held a rally in protest against the ban.⁵

In November 2004, as a reaction to the attack on the March of Tolerance in Krakow and the ban of Warsaw Pride, the first March of Equality

⁵ See <www.paradarownosci.pl> (5 December 2006).

was held in Poznan, as part of Days of Equality. The March took place despite the protests of right-wing parties and Church authorities claiming that the march would be “promoting homosexuality which is a serious disease” (Kowalczyk 2005, 42). On the day of the March the participants managed only to cross the street, before they were attacked by a group of right-wing protesters who threw eggs and lemons, and shouted “Gay trash, get your hands away from the children,” “Lesbians and faggots are ideal citizens of the European Union,” “Healthy Poles are not like that.” The police turned the participants back to the starting point and informed that their safety could not be guaranteed should the march be continued (Kowalczyk 2005, 41).

In May 2005, the Mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczynski, banned the Warsaw Pride for the second time, claiming that the parade would interfere with the unveiling of a statue to General Stefan Rowecki who was a leader of the Polish underground during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw in the Second World War (Baczkowski 2005). The organizers tried using every legal resource possible to undo the decision of the Mayor, which violated the freedom of assembly guaranteed by the Polish constitution, albeit unsuccessfully. On the 12th of June about 3,000 demonstrators defied the ban, thus recurring to civil disobedience. The presence of then vice-Prime Minister Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka as well as European MPs from the Green Party, Claudia Roth and Volker Beck, made it possible for the participants to march through the streets of Warsaw, under police protection from right-wing March opponents, who were throwing eggs and bottles and tried to block the streets (Baczkowski 2005). As Graff remarks, in the fall of 2005 the issue of freedom of assembly for representatives of sexual minorities and organizations supporting sexual minorities became one of the key themes of the presidential elections, where the candidate’s attitude towards sexual minorities served as a litmus test for his views on modern democracy, Poland’s westernisation, freedom of speech and “traditional values” (Graff 2006).

Lech Kaczynski, now president of Poland, representative of the right-wing party Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc (Law and Justice) began his presidential campaign by producing a widely-publicized leaflet entitled “Catholic Poland in Christian Europe,” which elaborated on his desire to build a Catholic Poland, based on strong moral principles. The leaflet listed two previous bans of Warsaw Pride (in 2004 and 2005) among his successes in the fight against “demoralization.” Kazimierz Ujazdowski, representative of Law and Justice, when appointed as the minister of culture, openly called for “no tolerance for homosexuals and deviants,” adding “Let’s not mistake the brutal propaganda of homosexual attitudes with calls for

tolerance. For them our rule will indeed mean a dark night" (quoted in Kowalczyk 2006). Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, appointed by Law and Justice as the Prime Minister, in one of the first interviews after winning the elections advocated introducing a bill that would prohibit homosexual teachers from teaching in public schools.⁶ The ban of the Poznan March came only a month after the elections, becoming a symbol of the new political regime.

The Poznan March of Equality was one of the events planned for the second series of the Days of Equality in Poznan. Four days before the planned date of the march, that is, on the 15th of November, the Poznan Mayor refused to issue a permit for the march, arguing that the march would cause "significant danger to public morality and property" (Graff 2006). A day before the planned date of the march, after all legal attempts to undo the Mayor's decision had failed, the Poznan March organizers took the decision to go through with the demonstration, since the ban violated the freedom of assembly guaranteed by the Polish constitution. The police brutally broke up the peaceful demonstration and arrested 68 participants (out of about 500). The events in Poznan sparked a huge wave of protests against the attack about democratic principles in Poland and a discussion on the freedom of assembly and sexual minorities' rights.

COMING OUT IN CYBERSPACE

Owing to the history of oppression, marginalization and exclusion that LGBT individuals have faced because of their sexual orientation, the social vacuum of anonymity provided by the Internet has contributed towards a tremendous rise in its popularity amongst sexual minorities, and the situation in Poland is no exception (Garry 1999). Woodland calls cyberspace a "distinctive kind of 'third place'" for many gay and lesbian people: "These on-line 'queer spaces' . . . are 'third places' in combining the connected sociality of public space with the anonymity of the closet" (Woodland 2000, 418). As such, they are relatively "safe" spaces to encounter and experiment with a queer identity—an experimentation that might carry over into real life. As Kunstman notes:

[T]he . . . feeling of security is mediated by the very nature of interactions on-line, which are based on complicated games of anonymity and intimacy, privacy and disclosure. In the case of closeted gays and lesbians, for example, cyberspace can provide an

⁶ Legally, the introduction of such bill would be against the Polish constitution and the Polish Labour Code.

opportunity to meet the like-minded and perform one's sexuality (albeit virtually), while remaining anonymous (Kunstman 2004).

Polish gay and lesbian Internet started around 1996, with the creation of the first gay portal, called "Innastrona" (Different page). The first lesbian portal appeared around 1997, and was called "Inny Krakow" (Different Krakow). Both titles are connected with a Polish phrase "different love" which rather euphemistically encodes homosexuality. In 1998, the first lesbian mailing list, POLLES, was created on a free American server. The virtual friendships that formed through the list soon transformed into meetings, picnics, relationships and affairs, with the list being crucial for women from small towns and villages who had had no access to LGBT services previously (Gorska 2006). As Podgorska claims, the Internet has given Polish gays and lesbians a sense of community and the possibility of contact with the outside world. It is a way of locating gay- and lesbian-friendly services such as clubs, helplines, travel offices, sympathetic lawyers, psychologists and gynaecologists, and up-to-date information on events relevant to the LGBT community (Podgorska 2004).

As LGBT services and organizations in Poland are established only in a few bigger cities (Warsaw, Krakow, Poznan and Wroclaw) and readily accessible information about lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender persons, free of value judgements and homophobic attitudes is practically absent from mainstream publications and the educational system, the Internet is very often the point of departure for many individuals' coming out process. Since gays and lesbians do not seem to be worthy of being awarded full citizenship status, remaining in cyberspace seems to be a forced strategy of survival in the face of rampant public homophobia, and so countless private queer lives can be lived fully only in their virtual, on-line version (Weseli 2006). The quintessential rite of passage, memorialised in so much of gay and lesbian literature, used to be entering a gay and lesbian bar, in order to find connections to the hidden world, unveiled in cigarette smoke and the thrill of the forbidden. Now the connection can be established at the click of the mouse, which does not mean that the moment of mirroring one's own experience has become any less dramatic. The experience of Baszka, a 52-year old lesbian, quoted by Podgorska in an article on the situation of lesbians in Poland, is one of countless examples of searching for identity through the Internet: "At last, three years ago [I] dared to type that word 'homosexuality,' into Google. Two million pages. Then [I] typed: lesbian. One million pages. Oh my God, [I] thought, this world exists after all" (quoted in Podgorska 2004).

Since mainstream culture is reluctant to include queer content, like any person becoming part of a culture, gays or lesbians have to learn the ways of being, knowing, and acting socio-discursively within the community:

Scratch the surface of most coming-out narratives and you find a story of literacy, about someone reading between the lines of the culture's texts in search of some scraps that may speak to her or his desires. Recent generations talk of scanning the web for coming-of-age while coming-out stories or trying on different personas in a chat room before physically occupying any queer space in public. This unique dynamic works somewhat like a large-scale social science experiment: Let's find out what happens when a social group is so effectively silenced and isolated that each prospective member must to some extent initiate her- or himself into the group (Linne 2003, 669).

Among the proliferation of LGBT-themed websites, one can find the latest news, personal ads, mailing lists for teenagers, future "rainbow parents." Above all, the Internet facilitates personal contacts; in particular for gays and lesbians from small villages or towns, the Internet is the only place where they can feel safe. They cannot talk to their own friends or family, but when chatting, they can meet other queers and lesbians from all around the world.

CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT

Alexander, analysing the content of gay and lesbian themed websites notes that the Internet provides a wealth of opportunities for exploring how a variety of queers construct, represent, and articulate their own understanding of sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual politics (Alexander 2004). In this section I want to concentrate on a particular example of self-representation on the Web, that is, blogs,⁷ which constitute a new form of personal media (Kim 2005, 101-102). Landa comments that it should come as no surprise that many homosexuals choose to express their desires more openly through their cyber identities, and that there should be such a high proportion of lesbian and gay blogs, since many on-line diaries: "perhaps bespeak an obscure, unspoken attempt at coming out; at achieving a self-revelation which would allow them to make their private and public selves coincide and hence put an end to the ten-

⁷ The term "blog" is a contraction of "Web log." A blog is a website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal on-line diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic (Scott 2006).



sion inevitably deriving from concealing important aspects of one's personality" (Landa 2005, 106).

Blogs are another possibility for expression for those belonging to marginalized groups, whose voice is not always compatible with the politics of mainstream culture. They offer one of the few opportunities to write about one's own experiences without the constant stress related to coming out and the possibility of rejection by one's family and peers. Thanks to the possibility of publishing commentaries, as well as relative control over the commentaries, the authors of on-line diaries receive support from other Internet users and in this way can compare and confront their experiences from other persons belonging to minority groups, thus aiding them in the formation of their (queer) identity (Radwan 2005, 23). Blogs can often help to find one's own voice, even though it may not fit any of the pre-established social categories, as seen in the following two examples from the countless LGBT-themed blogs:

We, a regular 2+2 family, two adults, two kids, daily problems, bills to pay, some pets such as hamsters, dreams, plans for the future, dilemmas what to cook for lunch and where to find some additional money for entertainment. . . . You could even say we are a very nondescript, usual Polish family, if it hadn't been for one single detail—our home is extremely feminized, there's no male element, because all of us are women.⁸

I was born a long time ago with XX chromosomes, or at least this is what everybody around thought of me. For the past ten years I have been in a body that has been subjected to a number of necessary changes. All of this would have been impossible, if it hadn't been for my own determination and medical progress. Today I am a normal guy, maybe not exactly very happy about what I can see daily in the mirror, but for you, my dear readers, I am unrecognisable today in the street, you'd never know about my past if I hadn't started to write down this blog.⁹

Furthermore, it is not only the writer that benefits from creating the blog, it is also the readers. Blogs breaching upon the subject of gay and lesbian relationships and families can provide a safe setting for awareness-raising experience. Radwan comments that the use of blog is particularly valuable in the case of transsexual persons,¹⁰ who write about their experiences from the pre-op period, the operation itself, post-op life and about their intents of trying to find a place in a world that operates strictly on the binary gender system (Radwan 2005, 24). It is quite un-

⁸ See <<http://les-rodzina.blog.pl/archiwum/?rok=2005&miesiac=7>> (5 December 2006)

⁹ See <<http://www.transseks-km.blog.pl/>> (5 December 2006).

¹⁰ Examples of such blogs are: <<http://transseks-km.blog.pl/>>, <<https://transseks-nadia.blog.pl/>>, <<http://transatlantyki.blog.pl/>>, <<https://ono.blog.pl/>>.



likely to find those stories in the media or in schoolbooks, except maybe in their sensationalized versions.

WHEN THE DISCOURSE AWAKENS

Moving away from the solely personal aspect of queer cyberspace, it can also function as a space for plurality of opinions, providing thus a chance for awakening the discourse on the taboo issue that has largely been silenced: the social exclusion of gays and lesbians. As Gawlicz and Starnawski claim, as a result of “awakening the discourse,” one can observe a marked shift in terminology, an attempt to move the discussion on homosexuality from the realm of biology, medicine, psychology and re-frame it in terms of human rights and social pluralism (Gawlicz and Starnawski 2004, 180). Interestingly, cyberspace has provided an opportunity for free expression not only for gays and lesbians but also a safe haven for homophobes and thus one can talk of witnessing two parallel and interrelated processes, not only the awakening of gay and lesbian-friendly attitudes but also the awakening of homophobia.

In this section, I am going to provide an analysis of comments posted on an on-line forum as a reaction to articles on the Poznan March of Equality in November 2005 appearing between 16 and 25 November 2005, that is, from the moment that the decision about the cancellation of the March of Equality by the city authorities was made public till about a week after the march, when the discussion was slowly winding down. During those days, the pace of the discussion was really hectic, while articles on the March appeared daily on the front page of the newspaper. I chose this particular method because discussion forums, especially those on the sites of the biggest Polish national dailies, seem to enjoy enormous popularity, furthermore, a virtual discussion forum can also serve as a “laboratory” of attitudes and beliefs, as Internet users have become more and more diversified as a group in terms of their social status, religious or political beliefs. As Gawlicz and Starnawski report on their research of discussion forums during the debate on same-sex partnerships in Poland in the summer of 2002, within a couple of hours from posting an article related to gay and lesbian issues, one can expect a torrent of a couple of hundred e-mails (Gawlicz and Starnawski 2004, 179).

As Graff claims, in the fall of 2005 the phrase “gay parade” and the question “should it, or should it not, have been banned?” became one of the key themes of the presidential elections. The question was not framed as a joke, after all, a candidate’s attitude towards sexual minorities served



as a litmus test for his views on modern democracy, Poland's westernisation, freedom of speech and "traditional values" (Graff 2006). The nation is a homogeneous creation, and so Kowalczyk in her analysis of the events surrounding the March of Equality in Poznan notes how public gay and lesbian events disturb and dismantle the carefully sustained fiction of homogeneous Polishness, untainted by abject Otherness, be it homosexuality, disability, difference in religion or skin colour (Kowalczyk 2005, 41). In fact, conservative rhetoric skillfully links "instinctive" dislike of sexual "deviance" with heart-felt Polish patriotism, a sense of belonging, as evident in a quote from the Internet forum I analysed:

As a citizen of Poland I demand respect for my majoritarian beliefs and the protection of my children against demoralization. . . . [T]hose who are ashamed of living in a country which is as backward as Poland—the gates of the EU are open for them. Maybe unemployment in Poland will be smaller when the Europeans leave for where it is nice, tolerant and free (viola33, 28 November 2005).

According to Marody and Mandes, in Poland, religion was (and still is) the main source of collective rituals through which the national identity was formed and is sustained in Polish society (Marody and Mandes 2005, 17). The importance of religion in the construction of national identity has been salient during the EU accession process. Thiele claims the conservative right perceive Poland's entry into the EU as an opportunity to reintroduce Catholic-Christian values to the mostly secular societies of Western Europe, where Poland profiles itself as the new religious-conservative power in the Union (Thiele 2003). Graff also notes that some of the prominence of homophobic attitudes in Poland can be seen as a reflection of national pride and the notion of Poland as an island of "normalcy" in the sea of Western European degeneracy. Another argument is connected with the claim that homosexuals already have more power than heterosexuals, while gays are conspiring to dominate EU politics, to destroy religion and the traditional family (Graff 2006). There are a number of posts on the forum, which support the above claims:

I am of the opinion that the existence of similar "homoparades," faggot marriages etc. in the countries of the old EU is not an argument that should lead to allowing something like that in [Poland]. We are a beautiful country, with a Catholic tradition and we should not waste that. I can just say one thing to the arse holes from the EU: "if you can't fight us, join us. Maybe it's time your society and laws got normal again?" I am a regular citizen, for whom the authorities and the police provided safety. . . . EU has nothing to say in here, fortunately we live in a Catholic country that is capable of having its own opinion and will not adjust in every issue to the ideas of EU (drhuckenbush, 20 November 2005).



I have a right to be a Catholic and not to like pederasts. I have a right to consider them to be deviants and not to employ them in my company (filo_de_putino, 27 November 2005).

Another salient issue concerning links between (homo)sexuality and national identity is that of citizenship. According to Patricia Wood “citizenship can be described as both a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a bundle of rights and duties (civil, political and social) that define an individual’s membership in the polity” (Isin and Wood 1999, 4). Citizenship is at the same time an exclusionary and inclusionary concept, never expanded to all members of any polity (Isin and Wood 1999, 20) As Richardson argues, claims to citizenship status are closely associated with the institutionalization of heterosexual as well as male privilege (Richardson 1998, 88). She adds further, that even though lesbians and gay men may eventually be afforded certain rights, “lesbians and gay men are granted the right to be tolerated as long as they stay within the boundaries of that tolerance, whose borders are maintained through a heterosexist public/private divide” (Richardson 1998, 89). Within the prevailing Polish nationalist discourse, gays and lesbians, if acknowledged at all, can only be citizens if they remain invisible as “good” citizens and do not claim “special privileges”:

For sure, it is not about discrimination of disabled persons or discrimination on the basis of political or religious beliefs. The thing is that the aim of the march was to demonstrate sexual difference, sexual deviance, which are not and cannot be accepted by the majority, the healthy part of Polish society (kaisy7, 20 November 2005).

When it comes to citizenship, within its heteronormative understanding, rights and duties connect and the promotion of the common good is located within the private sphere of the nuclear family. Rights are dependent upon evidence of common good, and follow from responsible behaviour (Goldberg-Hiller 2000, 43). Within this logic, homosexual citizens, presumably hedonistic and childless, are accused of aggravating the low demographic rates and contributing towards the danger of “true” Poles being replaced by racial “others”:

You are the reason there are fewer and fewer Poles born that will lead to financial trouble because there will be nobody to work and so new workers will have to be brought in. The cheapest ones and unfortunately they won't be our neighbours from the East but Turks, Arabs and other animals from Africa (vitmik, 25 November 2005).

The anxieties regarding visibility of homosexuals can be viewed as responses to processes of social and cultural change (Epstein 1994, 43):



MAPPING THE SCENES

There is a saying—give them a finger, they'll want a hand . . . in a year they will demand a Love parade. We will join the West but in terms of vulgarity and sexual anomalies. Does the fact that we live in a democratic country force us to follow the example of other countries? Can't we live in our own way? What do I care about the ideas other countries might have? All the time we are following the West, and not living like a free country with their own ideas (viola33, 1 December 2005).

What kind of Poznan do we want? We want a city, which is quiet and righteous, where order and the decisions of city authorities are respected. Where the extremists are not imposing their point of view on the majority of city inhabitants and do not insult people under the guise of fighting for tolerance. If "Europeanness" means fights, drugs, prostitution and intolerance for values respected by most of the inhabitants then I don't want such a Europe (XL, 26 November 2005).

Epstein notes the prevailing link made between homophobia and anti-communism, where homosexuals and communists pose serious threats to the prevailing social and sexual order (Epstein 1994). This link is also made in numerous claims about the existence of a powerful "homosexual lobby" apparently supported by the West:

Those "homosexuals" are just a guise for commies who do not have other salient issues once they suffered such a defeat, so they found for themselves "fight for gay rights." . . . Under the guise of "freedom, equality, tolerance," they want to transport to Poland "new, secular traditions" which rule in the Euro-Soviet Union. . . . Everything adds up to some new totalitarianism. . . . In Sweden or France there is such a phobia of homophobia that they can even lock you up if you say that homosexuality is not normal. In my opinion, treating disease as something natural . . . is dangerous and can lead to the failure of our civilization and in twenty years we'll have situation like in France now (bocian, 22 November 2005).

I want to live in a normal city where I won't be afraid to walk in the centre and that suddenly a weird pederast will jump up in front of me and attack me with his dick. I don't want to be bothered in the name of equality and vaguely understood tolerance by hordes of homo-terrorists (wielgus, 23 November 2006).

While cyberspace seems to have provided a safe haven for homophobes, it also offers an opportunity of free expression for gay- and lesbian-friendly voices marginalized within mainstream discourse (Gawlicz and Starnawski 2004, 182):

The situation with the Poznan March of Equality is really embarrassing, everybody in the West is laughing at Poland and protesting. Have the politicians lost their minds completely? How can you forbid a legal march? And why, instead of protecting gays, are the politicians fighting with them? It's absurd, a real nightmare. . . . Why does Poland always have to be so retarded (pyrunochron, 26 November 2005).



I feel like crying when I am looking at what happened in Poznan. I was hoping that after the march was cancelled in Warsaw there won't be any more similar attacks on democracy in Poland.¹¹ I am ashamed, not to mention the intolerance. As you can see, the EU was not really meant for us, maybe we should just shake hands with Lukashenko. I am sad and ashamed for Poland (eastpaka 20 November 2005, 00:37).

Even though by analysing discussion forums one can find really homophobic utterances, which could suggest that the discussion forum are dominated by this type of argument, persons striving for the equality of homo- and heterosexuals were actually in majority. First of all, basically all homophobic messages were immediately answered and commented upon, in order to show that the homophobic postulates don't make any sense. For instance, when some persons argued that homosexuality is an individual caprice, caused by social conditioning, it was shown, that the aetiology of homosexuality has neither relevance to the discussion nor to the decisions taken by homosexual persons. One could also notice general resistance to the sexualized image of homosexual persons, at the same time, persons involved in the debate were trying to point out that the discussion refers to barriers gays and lesbians encounter in their daily life "far away from their beds." One could also observe examples of "just anger," that demonstrate outrage at putting persons belonging to sexual minorities into a symbolic and societal ghetto (Basiuk 2004, 150). An unexpected and positive outcome of the discussion in cyberspace was the emergence of collective subjectivity of gays and lesbians and the emergence of plausible political strategies. For instance, gays and lesbians were presented as persons whose votes might be important, thus not only waking up the emancipatory discourse but also empowering the participants to act together and for instance create a database of sympathetic psychologists or support the activities of existing LGBT organizations.¹²

¹¹ This comment refers to Warsaw Pride, which was cancelled in June 2005 by Lech Kaczyński, then mayor of Warsaw, now Poland's resident. Despite the cancellation, about 10,000 participated in an illegal march, together with representatives of German Green party and Poland's then vice-Prime Minister, Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka.

¹² The Internet forums enjoy a rather dubious legal status. While praising the freedom of speech, the big portals hosting Internet forums often preface each with a set of rules; for instance, the *gazeta.pl* forums includes a disclaimer it is not permitted to publish posts that are illegal, incite hate on the basis of race, religion or ethnicity or propagate violence. Homophobia, however, is nowhere specifically addressed, there are also no viable legal sanctions against persons uttering homophobic remarks, be it in virtual space or in "real" space. Furthermore, the category of hate crime does not exist in Polish law, and the media law does not address issues of homophobia, either.



CYBER-ORGANIZING

At the same time, the Internet has very often served as a springboard for LGBT initiatives and activism. This is where the organisations look for volunteers, provide information about their on-going activities and present their projects. The Internet also serves as a tool for networking, both at the national and the international level. It is also an extremely useful and often powerful tool for monitoring the media, and serves as a place for public discussions on LGBT issues, especially in the case of visibility campaigns.¹³ The Internet is an invaluable tool for the day-to-day operation of LGBT organisations. First of all, because of difficulties with securing funding, most LGBT organizations do not have a physical office, and almost all activity is coordinated via mailing lists, with the participants being spread all over the country (and sometimes all over the world).¹⁴ There is also quite a trivial, but not insignificant aspect to communication via the Internet—it is simply cheaper, and some of the groups established in mid-90. had to be dissolved only because their members could not bear the financial burden of long-distance and international calls, and so, for instance, Kowalska attributes the downfall of the Association of Lambda Groups to the lack of a communication infrastructure (Kowalska 2006).

Kowalska sees the emergence of the Internet as freeing local initiative and enabling local groups to communicate, and thanks to the absence of censorship and the luxury of anonymity to build a positive image of gays and lesbians. As Kowalska claims, the Internet enabled the community to consolidate and more importantly, to effectively lobby and also gain international cooperation (Kowalska 2006). Cyberspace allows not only the planning of successful projects, it is also a tool to conduct those projects, especially when politicians and journalists need to be addressed urgently. In the cases of homophobic utterances of politicians and public persons, a mass-mailing action can be started immediately, and the message can be spread through various portals and discussion lists (Piatek

¹³ Notably, three Polish LGBT portals at the moment—www.homiki.pl, www.innastrona.pl and www.lesbijka.org—are acting as informal watch-dogs, monitoring the press and news for instances of homophobic utterances.

¹⁴ A perfect example of this phenomenon is the Lesbian (LBT) Coalition (see www.porozumienielesbijek.org), which is an informal group comprising over a hundred women in Poland and abroad, who coordinate their actions via a yahoo group. One should also remark on the numerous mailing lists of umbrella organisations such as ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association) or IGLYO (International Gay and Lesbian Youth Organization) that function transnationally and allow for very quick communication between partners in various countries, especially when the occasion necessitates an international mass-mailing campaign.



2004). Mass-mailing is also employed by international organisations offering their support to Polish LGBT initiatives, as was the case with the Krakow March for Tolerance or Warsaw Pride. Cyberspace is the only place to find up-to-date information, which in the case of LGBT projects is of crucial importance. In cases of more controversial projects, venues have been known to withdraw at the last moment, and officials have refused to grant permission to hold events. This was the case with Warsaw Pride in 2005 and the Poznan March of Equality in 2005, where the organizers communicated their battle to hold a legal demonstration, and when that failed, their appeal to civil disobedience through the website.

In my concluding remarks, I will comment briefly on what was my starting point for this paper, and, probably contrary to expectations, it did not occur to me to "Google" my key-term, cyberization (I did that only later). My primary point of reference was a conceptual piece by Sarajevian artist, Vanja Hamzić, entitled "Cyberization III" which presents dozens of gay-related URLs (mostly gay dating websites) in black, arranged horizontally on top of one another. Some of the letters in the URLs are in colour and if the viewer is patient enough, he or she can make out from these letters words such as *love*, *passion* and *happiness*, emotions hidden within the cyberworld. The piece was a great, yet disturbing comment on the process of cyberization of the LGBT community, producing lives that could only be fully experienced on-line. Thus, through my paper I have been trying to show multi-dimensional aspects of cyberspace, stressing its positive aspects, as well as pointing out to a constant interaction and negotiation between activities undertaken in cyberspace and in the so called "real world."

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