

## Oxford Handbooks Online

### **The Post-Communist Identity Crisis and Queer Migration from Poland**

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The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises

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Subject: Archaeology, Gender and Sexuality Online Publication Date: Sep 2018

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190856908.013.21

### **Abstract and Keywords**

An examination of the lived experiences of Polish queer migrants in London shows how a crisis in Polish national identity following the collapse of communism in 1989 constructed nonheterosexuals as a threat to Polish norms and values, thus fueling homophobic rhetoric, violence, and discrimination and prompting queer Poles to view migration as a potential means of escape and self-realization. An analysis of the narratives of twenty-five Polish LGBTQ migrants living in London revealed different modes of domestic and cross-border queer migration as well as a range of ways in which sexuality directly and indirectly influenced their decision to move abroad.

Keywords: migration, identity, sexuality, queer, Poland, London, homophobia, nationalism

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Until relatively recently, the academic study of migration did not explicitly deal with sexual difference, implicitly assuming the 'typical migrant' to be heterosexual. Since the mid-1990s these assumptions have been challenged by scholars who have produced a small but growing literature on the migration experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* and queer (LGBTQ) subjects. This body of work comprises theoretical analyses of the relationship between migration and sexuality (Binnie 1997; Mai and King 2009; Manalansan 2006); queer rural-to-urban domestic migration (Gorman-Murray 2009); border crossing by queer migrants and the legal hurdles which they have to overcome (Cantu 2009; Luibhéid 2008); the construction and reconstruction of sexual identities following migration (Kuntsman 2009); and the emergence and the lived experience of queer diasporas (Eng 1997; Fortier 2002; Manalansan 2003; Mole 2018; Watney 1995). Moreover, while much has been written in the migration literature about population movements arising from crises related to economic downturns, natural disasters, or conflict, the impact of ideational crises on mass mobility has been underexplored.

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This chapter will use the experiences of Polish queer migrants in London to show how a crisis in Polish identity following the collapse of communism in 1989 constructed nonheterosexuals as a threat to Polish norms and values, fueling homophobic rhetoric, violence, and discrimination and prompting LGBTQ Poles to view migration as “a means of escape and of self-realisation” (Binnie 1997, 240). The chapter examines how homosexuality was constructed in postcommunist Poland, with a view to gaining a sense of the social environment in which the interview respondents grew up and also to understanding why attitudes towards sexual minorities unexpectedly became more negative following Poland’s accession to the European Union. This section will be followed by a brief explication of methods and an analysis of the factors prompting queer Poles to migrate, with a focus on both domestic and cross-border migration.

## Homophobia and the Crisis of Identity in Postcommunist Poland

In many ways, 1989 marked a watershed in the lives of LGBTQ Poles. While homosexuality was not criminalized during the communist era, it had nevertheless been presented by the state as “a symptom of ‘Western depravity’” and as inconsistent with “socialist morality” (Klisyński 2001, 161).<sup>1</sup> Homosexuals were frequently kept under observation by the Civic Militia or the Security Services, with an individual’s homosexuality becoming of interest to the authorities if this could be used “as a means of recruitment or blackmail” (Tomasik 2012, 20). After 1989, Polish gays and lesbians had far less to fear from the police and other state authorities, gay and lesbian venues were opened throughout the country—at least in the larger cities—and magazines aimed specifically at LGBTQ individuals were launched. However, the long-hoped-for liberation for gays and lesbians soon came into conflict with attempts by the state and society to redefine Polish identity after fifty years of communist rule.

The collapse of state socialism set in train a process of unparalleled social, economic, and political transformation. Not only did the Soviet-style economic system need to be dismantled and new democratic political institutions rebuilt from scratch but a new cognitive framework had to be found through which citizens could make sense of the world around them and guide their decisions about whom to trust and with whom to cooperate. In the context of the social turmoil triggered by the end of the communist system and the “shock therapy” economic policies introduced thereafter, both nationalism and religion provided a sense of cohesion and stability by offering a credible explanation of the past and a guide for the present and the future. In many cases, it was the past itself that served as the guide for the present and the future. In rejecting the hated communist era, Polish political elites harked back to the interwar Second Republic and its traditional norms and values. As this period was held up as the opposite of the abnormal communist era, *traditional* became equated with *normal*, with traditional gender and sexual roles thus seen as “an important aspect of the nostalgia for ‘normality’” (Watson 1993, 472–473). However, what was seen as ‘normal’ was defined strictly in national, Catholic, and heterosexual terms. In the Polish context, the three concepts are largely understood as indivisible: to be Polish is to be Catholic and heterosexual. In the search for stability, any form of diversity (such as ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities) can therefore seem threatening (Inglehart and Baker 2000, 28). In Poland, as in much of Central and Eastern Europe, there was thus a tendency among individuals disoriented by the social, economic, and political changes triggered by the collapse of communism to “cling to traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and emphasize absolute rules and familiar norms in an attempt to maximise predictability in an uncertain world” (Inglehart and Baker 2000, 28). The rise in nationalist feeling after 1989 further exacerbated social antipathy towards homosexuality.

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While most academics understand nations as social constructs, the prevailing view outside of academia is that they are natural phenomena, growing out of extended kin groups, united by shared biology, culture, history, norms and values, stretching back centuries if not millennia. To ensure the nation maintains its internal homogeneity and clear demarcation from the Other, nationalists put considerable effort into promoting its biological and cultural reproduction, a process that can be ensured only by naturalizing the patriarchal family and associated public and private roles of men and women. As I argue elsewhere, individuals performing nonnormative sexualities “are thought to threaten this national narrative by undermining the patriarchal family, failing to adhere to national stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, confusing the public/private roles of men and women, undermining the nation’s internal homogeneity, and deviating from its shared norms, especially those derived from religious teaching” (Mole 2016, 109–110). Given that Polish-ness is understood to be inextricably linked with Catholicism and heterosexuality, homosexuality was represented by nationalist politicians as a threat to national values, thereby legitimizing the marginalization of Polish LGBTQ citizens and attempts to restrict them to the private sphere.

While most political institutions in Poland were weakened by the collapse of communism, the one institution which emerged stronger after 1989 was the Polish Catholic Church. Having acted as the *de facto* political opposition to the Polish Communist Party throughout the period of state socialism and, following the election of Karol Wojtyła to the papacy in 1978, credited by some with precipitating the fall of the regime, the Catholic Church acquired enhanced legitimacy and political power after 1989, acting as the ultimate arbiter of national values—particularly with reference to issues of gender and sexuality. While intellectual debates about sexual orientation did appear in the 1990s in Catholic journals such as *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Więź*, they did not stray far from the position set out in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, namely that same-sex acts are sinful in that they “close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2357) Far from restricting its views to the pulpit, the Church actively lobbied successive governments in the 1990s to ensure that their position on issues relating to sexuality was in line with Catholic dogma. According to former Polish MP Robert Biedroń, the Catholic Church succeeded, for example, in ensuring that there was no reference to sexual orientation in the non-discrimination clause of the Polish Constitution (Selinger 2008, 25).

The accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004 led to an intensification of political debate about the place of LGBTQ individuals in Polish society. Given the EU’s introduction of various measures aimed at promoting the legal equality of sexual minorities—including the incorporation of sexual orientation into the Equalities Agenda through Article 19 of Treaty on the European Union and the requirement that member states ban sexual orientation discrimination in employment—nationalist politicians presented the EU’s more liberal position toward LGBTQ rights as a threat to Polish values. In the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary elections, nationalist and populist parties used the issue of LGBTQ rights to draw a boundary between the “decadent West” and the

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“traditional East,” with attitudes toward sexuality in Poland becoming “a reference point for political self-definition and national pride” (Graff 2010, 584). While homosexuality could perhaps be tolerated in private, there were various attempts to clamp down on manifestations of nonnormative sexuality in the public sphere, with Pride marches a particular target. In the summer of 2005, Lech Kaczyński, the Mayor of Warsaw, refused to issue a permit for an Equality Parade on the grounds that it was “obscene” and “would upset the feelings of the religious” (Selinger 2008, 19). The march went ahead anyway and participants were attacked by members of All-Polish Youth, a right-wing nationalist organization, which was given permission by Kaczyński to hold a “parade of normality” a week after the Equality Parade (Selinger 2008, 19).<sup>2</sup> The influence of religion on Polish politics became even more pronounced from October 2005, following the election of the Law and Justice Party, led by Jarosław Kaczyński, the brother of the Mayor of Warsaw, and its coalition partners, Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families, which embraced an ultra-Catholic and highly nationalist political agenda. The coalition came to power, in part, on a campaign to protect Polish national values from the perceived secular and liberal principles of the European Union. The perception in Poland of a marked cleavage between Polish and European values was strengthened by the publication by the European Parliament of three resolutions in January and June 2006 and April 2007, in which Poland is either implicitly or quite explicitly criticized for its failure to respect the rights of its LGBT citizens (European Parliament 2006a, 2006b, 2007). The tone of the resolutions was interpreted in Poland as being highly patronising and resulted in a feeling of wounded national pride and a backlash against both the EU and the promotion of LGBT rights, the two now seen as inextricably linked. Following criticism from the European Parliament, therefore, it became a matter of national sovereignty that Poland be allowed to criticize sexual minorities, with homophobia thereby becoming “the new voice of patriotism” (Graff, 2010, 590).

The outcome of this politicization of homophobia in tandem with the negative rhetoric from the Church and stereotypical portrayal of sexual minorities in the media was an environment in which homophobic attitudes dominated and many LGBTQ Poles faced discrimination, verbal abuse, and physical violence. A Eurobarometer survey conducted by the EU in 2006 found that 76 percent of Poles opposed same-sex marriage (the third-highest in the EU) and 89 percent were against the adoption of children by homosexual couples (the highest in the EU) (Eurobarometer 2007, 43). A survey of more than 1,000 LGBTQ Poles published by the Campaign Against Homophobia in 2007 showed that 17.6 percent of respondents had experienced physical violence, with 40 percent of those having been attacked three or more times, while over half of those surveyed reported suffering psychological abuse, including verbal harassment, threats, blackmail, insults and graffiti (Abramowicz 2007, 15–17). Homophobia in Poland had reached crisis point.

In such contexts, sexual minorities have to decide how to respond to situations in which they are constructed as a threat to society, national mores, and religious values. One could argue that for sexual dissidents, the basic response is one of loyalty, voice, or exit, to use Hirschman’s classic paradigm (i.e. attempt to remain invisible, engage in public protest to bring about change, or leave the country) (Hirschman 1970). While the three

strategies are not mutually exclusive and individuals can certainly adopt all three at different stages of their lives, in the section that follows the brief discussion of my methodology I focus on the 'exit' strategy adopted by LGBTQ Poles, analysing how for many migration became "a means of escape and of self-realisation" (Binnie 1997, 240).

### Methodology

The qualitative research upon which this chapter is based is drawn from a larger project conducted in 2012–2014 on LGBTQ migration from Eastern Europe and Latin America to London and Berlin. Eligible respondents for the specific research that follows were literate men and women aged 18 years or over who self-identified as nonheterosexual migrants from Poland and who lived or worked in London. The sample was recruited through dating and community websites on the Internet, community venues, and through snowballing. Informed consent was sought using information sheets in both Polish and English. In total, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviewees were aged between 23 and 39; 16 were men and 9 were women. As none of the interviewees identified as trans\*, I refer to my respondents collectively as LGBQ but to nonheterosexual Poles in general as LGBTQ. The interviews were carried out in English, took place in a university office and lasted, on average, 45–50 minutes. Participants were offered GBP 25 as an incentive. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data management and analysis were facilitated by the use of the qualitative software N-Vivo. The verbatim data was coded and ordered within a thematic matrix, which emerged both from reviewing extant literature and from the interview data itself. N-Vivo helped identify key themes in the respondents' narratives, around which the chapter has been structured: growing up LGBQ in Poland, social attitudes towards homosexuality, experience of homophobia, the decision to migrate, and relations with the ethno-national diaspora in the UK and with friends and family at home in Poland. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identities.

### Queer Migration

A few words about terminology. When referring to my interview respondents as queer, I use the term as an alternative for lesbian, gay, and bisexual to reflect the fact that the latter terms were not adopted by all the migrants I interviewed.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the idea of 'queer' was to a large extent brought about by migration in that the mass movement of people to the West from various non-Western cultures brought into sharp relief the numerous "sexual identity categories and practices that [did] not depend on Western conceptions of selfhood and community," thus producing a range of queer identities and subjectivities (Manalansan 2006, 229). With reference to queer migration, queer is used in part to take account of the queer subjects of the processes of migration

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but also to refer to the role of nonnormative sexualities in the migration experience and the ways in which the presence of nonheterosexuals problematizes the dominant understandings of migration. While “queer migration,” according to Andrew Gorman-Murray (2009, 443), relates exclusively to cases where “the needs or desires of non-heterosexual identities, practices and performances” are implicated in the queer migrant’s *decision to move*, I argue, following Hector Carillo, that to conceptualize queer migration fully, we also need to consider the lives of queers “in their places of origin, their exposure to local and foreign sexual ideologies prior to migrating, their agency in adapting and appropriating ideologies and practices prevalent in both home and host countries, and the transformations in sexual identities and behaviors that they experience after migration” (2004, 58).

In the academic literature, the dominant explanation for migration sees the main motivation as economic, with individuals moving abroad to gain higher wages or acquire marketable skills (Stark and Bloom 1985). While economic considerations certainly do play a role in queer migrants’ decisions to move abroad, they are often far less important than social and political factors. Indeed, less than a quarter of the respondents in this study mentioned economic factors, whereas 23 of the 25 interviewees referred to their sexual orientation as a reason influencing their decision to leave Poland. As Iryna explained: “I didn’t migrate because I wanted to visit another country or I wanted to earn more money or I wanted to have a better job, I did it because I was gay and I didn’t live good (sic.) in my country.” It is important to stress that issues related to sexuality were not always the primary reason for migrating but sexuality was nevertheless the single most cited factor directly or indirectly influencing the decision to move abroad.

From the migration experiences of my respondents, it was possible to make out two main pathways from Poland to the UK. While a number of my interviewees moved directly from their home towns to London, most relocated from the smaller towns they grew up in to larger cities—primarily to the nation’s capital, Warsaw—before subsequently moving to Britain. As Ryszard succinctly put it, “[If] you’re gay, you move to Warsaw or you can move abroad, or you move to Warsaw and *then* you move abroad!”

### Domestic Queer Migration

Migration from small towns to cities is a common experience of LGBTQ people the world over (see Weston 1995) and the motivations of the queer Poles in this study in many ways mapped on to those identified by scholars working on other societies. In his study of queer migration in Australia, Gorman-Murray (2009) identifies three main patterns. The first is “coming-out migration,” whereby LGBTQ people migrate with the aim of “self-reinvention as non-heterosexual and to explore bodily sexual desires in the process”; the second is “gravitational group migration” (i.e., “moving to be near a neighbourhood with a gay and lesbian presence”); the third is “relationship migration,” where individuals move “with a partner to consolidate a same-sex relationship—or conversely, moving away

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after a relationship breakdown” (446). As the experiences of my respondents show, these motivations were in many ways intertwined.

While all respondents did eventually come out to their parents (in most cases prior to migrating to the UK), moving away from their home towns enabled those who had not yet come out to extricate themselves from the social control of their families to perform their sexuality in line with their own desires and reduce the risk that their sexual behavior and identity would be reported back to their parents before they felt ready to tell them. For those who were not ready to come out but who wanted to explore their sexuality, living in their home towns might increase the risk of word getting out that they were gay or lesbian. The fact that, according to Bartosz, “everybody knows everyone,” in small towns in particular but also to some extent in cities, meant that it was difficult to ensure that your private life stayed private. As Konrad explained: “[I]f you want to live in the closet, you really need to watch out, because [ ... ] people are not very, you know, they don’t care that it’s your secret.”

Migration to Warsaw, which was frequently referred to as the most liberal city and its inhabitants the most open-minded in the country, offered an unparalleled gay scene, providing queer Poles with a sense of community and the opportunity to engage in sexual relationships—often for the first time. It was the fact that Feliks “didn’t know any gay people” in his small home town, that there were “no gay places” and he was not out to his parents that prompted him to move to the capital with the aim of “looking for guys.” For many respondents, domestic migration to Warsaw and other large cities was thus motivated by the desire to come out, reinvent themselves as nonheterosexual and explore bodily sexual desires in cities with a gay and lesbian presence—rather than enhance their economic capital, as the dominant theories of migration would suggest.

Yet for others domestic migration to Warsaw or one of Poland’s other cities only *partly* enabled them to live their lives on their own terms—particularly when it came to long-term relationships. For Ireneusz, access to the gay bars and clubs that opened in the mid-1990s did enable him to meet other men but, for him, the sexualization of the gay scene and even of gay magazines (“every kind of advertisement was about sex”), in tandem with the dominant media discourse about gays and lesbians presented as being in opposition to the “traditional family,” led him to believe that being in a same-sex relationship on the same terms as a heterosexual relationship would not be possible in Poland: “Being gay [in Poland] is not about being in a relationship. It’s about sex only because everyone says so.” Even for those, like Adam, who were in a same-sex relationship, the dominant discourses around appropriate gender and sexual behavior and the heterosexualization of public space placed restrictions on his ability to express his feelings towards his boyfriend in ways that would have gone unnoticed had his partner been a woman:

When I started dating and I had a partner that I wanted to go out with, yeah, I didn’t ever feel comfortable about, I don’t know, showing our affection in public places, so to speak. And I didn’t mean like just snogging in the middle of a square



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or something but I mean, you know, those little gestures, like holding hands or just sitting close to each other on a bench somewhere, things like that or holding hands in the cinema.

What my findings suggest is that domestic queer migration only met some of the needs of queer Poles in terms of their ability to live their lives on their own terms, due in large part to the retraditionalization of gender and sexual norms following the identity crisis triggered by the collapse of communism. The general impression given by my respondents—even those who had moved to Warsaw or other big cities—was that they felt that they did not fit into Polish society, which, I argue, is due to the fact that hegemonic discourses of Polish identity constructed LGBTQ Poles as a threat to national norms and values. Even presenting a gender image that did not adhere to the traditional ideas of how Polish men and women should behave and even what they should wear was a source of disquiet. As Adam explained: “Poland is very rigid in terms of maintaining certain gender identities. [ ... ] More often than not, there’s no malice in the remarks people make [but] it still makes you feel kind of uncomfortable.” Bartosz, for example, reminisced that pressure to conform to traditional norms in Poland forced him to regulate his own gender performance to such an extent that he would not have dared wear the skinny jeans he had on during the interview in the medium-sized Polish town he grew up in. He did not fear for his personal safety, but rather he felt a sense of unease and was thus unable to live his life on his own terms. Thus, whether or not LGBTQ Poles migrated to more liberal cities such as Warsaw, their freedom would still be constrained to some degree by hegemonic discourses of ‘acceptable’ gender and sexual norms. One way to extricate themselves from these constraining forces was to leave Poland.

### Cross-Border Queer Migration

It is important to emphasize that, contrary to some Western media reports (e.g. Graham 2007) and unlike a number of the Russian migrants whom I interviewed as part of the larger project (Mole 2019), none of the Polish respondents reported fleeing the country in fear of state persecution, with only two having personally experienced physical violence. Rather, the general impression given by the respondents was that their decision to migrate was prompted by the belief that moving to London would grant them greater freedom to perform their sexuality in line with their own desires. As Grzegorz explained: “I think homosexuality just plants this thing in your head that you’re not going to be free until you go somewhere where you’re accepted, you know.” And if Poland was seen as the place where homosexuals are “not going to be free,” the “somewhere you’re accepted” was clearly understood to be the West, an idea implanted in Grzegorz’s head from an early age. The fact that the first gay character he saw on Polish television was in an American TV series established in his mind a link between more positive attitudes towards homosexuality and the West:

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I remember when I was a child and we were watching *Dawson's Creek* and they had a—do you remember that?—they had an openly gay character there and that was, I guess, a big thing, to know that in the Western media, this actually happens.

This belief that the West was more accepting of sexual diversity was also produced through direct experience. Once they became EU citizens in 2004, Poles were able to travel freely through the European Union and queer Poles saw for themselves what life was like for LGBTQ people outside of Poland. It was this that led Feliks to conclude that people were “more relaxed” about sexuality in countries like Germany or Britain, prompting him to decide “to live a normal life somewhere else.”

While for most respondents, like Feliks above, their sexuality had a direct impact on their decision to move abroad, largely in line with the motivations identified by Gorman-Murray, for others the influence was more indirect. Grzegorz, for example, argued that being gay means that you are more open to difference (“you have to accept the fact you're different and it has to open your mind somehow, otherwise you'd end up hating yourself”), which makes gay people more open to trying different things, such as experiencing foreign cultures. For Jacek, it was more to do with the fact that, as a gay man, he did not have the responsibilities of a husband and father to tie him down: “I can be a bit selfish and do what I really want. So maybe that was the idea. That's why I want to live abroad, to do different things.”

Unlike the factors motivating migration within Poland, very few of the respondents decided to move to the UK to come out. Almost all had come out to their friends and families in Poland prior to moving to London and, in most cases, the reaction had been quite positive—again in contrast to the experience of many of the Russian-speaking respondents in the larger project (Mole 2018). Only Irena used cross-border migration for self-redefinition purposes. As she explained: “I never wanted to admit still then that I'm gay and [ ... ] the easiest way for me was to just leave Poland and start my life somewhere else as an openly gay person.” While not exactly “coming out migration,” for Agnieszka, it was migration to London that gave her the space to come to terms with her own sexual identity: “I think it was the migration that allowed me to, kind of, engage with my sexuality and then, once I was conscious of it, then I think, but I guess I saw things abroad that made me feel like, well, that's a lot better than being at home because they have all these resources and it's not such a big deal.”

While very few respondents cited the desire *to come out* as a factor motivating them to move to Britain, the ability *to be out* to most people beyond a small circle of friends and family was identified as a factor which, if not prompting them to move to the UK in the first place, was at least seen as a reason to stay. To Dariusz, this was tied up with the perception that people in London were more accepting of sexual difference.<sup>4</sup>

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I feel much more comfortable being out here at work, everywhere I go, I do feel that, you know, I don't have to be ashamed of it any more, there's nothing to hide. [ ... ] I know that people here will understand, if they don't, no problem. So, this is the attitude that, you know, I didn't have in Poland. I just felt like if someone has a problem with me being gay, they'd probably beat me up or something.

Compared with “coming out migration,” “gravitational group migration” was cited more frequently as a motivation—particularly for those who had moved directly from small towns to London, rather than first moving to Warsaw or other major Polish cities. Florentyna, who grew up in a town of just 50,000 people, initially wanted to move to Edinburgh but eventually opted for London because of the greater range of LGBTQ venues there: “I wanted [ ... ] to go to a town that has a bigger gay scene than the one I experienced at home.” While those respondents who moved from Warsaw or other big cities were less likely to refer to London's gay scene as a motivating factor, they did notice the impact access to a gay scene like London's had on LGBTQ Poles who had migrated from the Polish countryside:

I think a lot of Polish gays, when they come from villages, [ ... ] come here and they absolutely explode with freedom. [ ... ] They're from places where it's really frowned upon and it's really tough. [ ... ] It's interesting how when they come here, you know, they just, it's nice to see, they just explode with gayness.

(Grzegorz)

Although none of the respondents was motivated to move to London to consolidate a relationship or to deal with the effects of a break-up in line with Gorman-Murray's “relationship migration” pattern (2009, 446), a number of the men and women I interviewed were prompted to migrate by the sexual citizenship rights for couples available in the UK compared with Poland. Ireneusz explained that, as Poland does not legally recognize same-sex couples, neither he nor his partner would be able to inherit the property they co-owned in Kraków in the event one of them died. The children of Ireneusz's niece would have a greater legal claim to his inheritance than his partner. A number of my respondents also planned to take the opportunity to adopt, get married, or enter into civil partnerships in the UK, and this was cited as a reason for wanting to stay in Britain. As Norbert reminisced: “I remember in 2005, that was the Civil Partnership Act, and that was the first news I read when I was in the country, the first newspaper that I purchased, it was about the Civil Partnership Act and I literally cried on the bus to Manchester.”

In general, and contrary to dominant theories of migration, it was thus the draw of London's gay scene, sexual citizenship rights, and the perception that there was greater acceptance of difference that drew most of my respondents to the British capital, rather than the opportunity to earn money. Ireneusz and his partner specifically ruled out moving to some countries, such as Russia, “even if it would be really good because of the

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economy” as it was not perceived as being “gay friendly.” Freedom to be oneself trumped all other motivating factors. And, even though a number of respondents still referred to Poland as ‘home’, it was clear many felt more *at home* in London:

At home, as I walk down the street, there's a chance that, like, I'll get a lot of looks, that people will stare because of my hair, because of what I'm wearing or I don't know what, to be honest, I don't always know what it is, but then every time I came to London, I felt like nobody really thinks that there's anything weird about me and I felt freer to wear clothes that I wanted to wear. [ ... ] I just felt like at home in the sense that I didn't feel different, like I didn't feel strange.

(Czesław)

Given the size of the Polish diaspora in London and the number of Polish shops, restaurants, and bars in the city, it would not have been difficult for the respondents to move between their Polish and British worlds but few did, with many of my respondents pointing out that they would not associate with Polish people in Britain just because they shared a nationality with them. While most of the people I interviewed did have some Polish friends in London and enjoyed the opportunity to speak Polish with them and make jokes they knew would be understood (“I just have a different sense of humor when I'm with my English friends and a different one when I'm with my Polish friends.” [Bartosz]), they tended to avoid Polish venues because they felt they had little in common with most Polish economic migrants—in part due to the perception that the latter were “very closed minded and very traditional” and “don't like gay people” (Norbert).<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Russian-speakers in the larger study, none of the Polish respondents sought out other queers of the same nationality as a way to perform their sexual identities in a specifically Polish environment and thereby create a community of belonging in the UK, defined in both sexual and national terms. In any case, most of the respondents made frequent use new technologies, such as Skype, and cheap flights to enable them to maintain interpersonal ties with the homeland and a sense of Polish-ness, although in some cases this required some respondents to police their behavior to bring it more into line with Polish norms:

I realized that the closer to Poland I am, I become more reserved, more closed, like we go to Stansted<sup>6</sup> and we're a couple and apparently when we are at the airport already, we don't speak, we don't hold hands, we stay in the line for the plane like two friends, not a couple. We're surrounded by all those Polish people and we are, like, separated. (Dariusz)

## Conclusion

In the context of the academic analysis of migration crises, the experiences of queer migrants allow us to challenge dominant economic understandings for population movements and at the same time consider, alongside economic downturns, natural disasters, or conflict, the impact on mass mobility of ideational crises—in this case, the

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identity crisis in Poland that followed the collapse of state socialism in 1989. As religion and nationalism emerged as the cognitive frameworks through which Poles made sense of the world, sexual norms underwent a process of retraditionalization, with homosexuality largely rendered invisible and queers marginalized and expected to restrict themselves to the private sphere. This process was exacerbated by Poland's accession to the European Union and the latter's denunciation of Warsaw's treatment of its queer citizens, with the result that criticism of sexual minorities became a matter of national sovereignty and homophobia a new form of patriotism. The crisis of homophobia that ensued prompted LGBTQ Poles to see migration as a way to escape the repressive discourses of politicians, the Catholic Church, and the media and live their lives on their own terms.

In analyzing the narratives of the LGBTQ Polish migrants in this study, a number of patterns emerged. Firstly, it was possible to make out two modes of queer migration, domestic and cross-border, as well as both an indirect and direct influence of sexuality on the decision to migrate. Indirectly, queer migrants' sexuality made them more open to difference and to trying different things, such as experiencing foreign cultures, which was facilitated by the fact that gays and lesbians are less likely to be tied down by spouses and children. A range of sexuality-related factors having a direct impact on queer migrants' decisions to relocate could be identified in the interviews, although it was clear that the factors motivating domestic and cross-border queer migration were different. Domestic migration to Warsaw and other large cities in Poland was motivated primarily by the desire to come out as LGBTQ and explore bodily sexual desires in cities with gay and lesbian venues. Yet, in many ways, they were still relegated to the private sphere of the home or gay and lesbian clubs in that their freedom to perform their sexuality on their own terms in the public sphere was constrained to some degree by hegemonic Polish discourses of acceptable gender and sexual norms.

With cross-border queer migrants, very few of the respondents moved abroad to come out, as almost all had done so in Poland. In addition, it was noticeable that the London queer scene was less of a draw for those who had first migrated to Warsaw or other big Polish cities before moving to the UK. The main differences in the factors prompting domestic vs. cross-border migration were twofold: firstly, the sexual citizenship rights available in the UK but not in Poland (primarily, civil partnership or marriage and adoption) and, most frequently cited, the perception that there was greater social acceptance of difference, including of sexual difference. Whereas migrating to Warsaw did allow the respondents to perform their sexuality in line with their own desires in the private sphere, migrating to London enabled them to perform their sexuality to a greater extent in line with their own desires in the public sphere as well.

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### Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> No laws criminalizing homosexual activity between consenting adults were ever introduced in independent Poland, although such laws were enacted on Polish territory by the occupying powers during the country's partition (1795-1918) and remained in force until 1932.

<sup>(2)</sup> In September 2005 the Regional Administrative Court in Warsaw ruled that the ban was unconstitutional and in 2007 the European Court of Human Rights announced that Kaczyński's refusal to allow the parade to go ahead had violated "several principles covered by the European human rights conventions, such as freedom of assembly and prohibition of discrimination" (Kubosova 2007).

<sup>(3)</sup> Queer is also used to refer to non-cisgender individuals, although trans\* migrants are not part of this research.

<sup>(4)</sup> It is important to emphasize that attitudes toward homosexuality outside London are not always as positive as in the capital and that anti-LGBT hate crime remains a serious problem throughout the UK.

<sup>(5)</sup> Recent research shows that migration to London by Central and East Europeans can result in their attitudes towards homosexuality softening (see Mole et al., 2017).

<sup>(6)</sup> One of the international airports serving London.

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