“It Is Not the Netherlands Here.” How Parents of LGB Migrants Experience Everyday Bordering Against Nonheterosexual Belonging in CEE

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Chapter 8
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8.1 Introduction

> "I didn't really say, you know, 'I'm lesbian'," Paula recalls coming out to her parents, long before moving to Belgium from her Central Eastern European (CEE) country. Instead, she talked about wanting to move in with her same-sex partner: "We are a couple, […] we just wanna live our life together. And that's why we wanted to buy an apartment together." But this was not acceptable to Paula's father: "It is not the Netherlands here." "That was his comment," clarifies Paula, "Like, people would talk about it." Another CEE father, Ladislav, also worried about the reactions his migrant daughter might receive while visiting her home country with her wife, and said, "Sometimes I say to myself that there is no point in creating, like, stressful situations that could be resulting from this kind of wondering looks. […] In Belgium, it is natural […] and then they come here and think it is Belgium. And it is not Belgium."

Parents' unease about how others will react to their children's nonheterosexuality[1] is a familiar theme in the coming-out studies (Kuhar, 2007; Vasquez del Aguila, 2012). Particularly in contexts where a homophobic response is expected from a wider community, some parents do not acknowledge their children's nonheterosexuality or keep it a secret (Švab & Kuhar, 2014; Jhang, 2018). While strategic

[1] With a few specific exceptions, in this chapter I use the term "nonheterosexuality" instead of the more common "LGBT", or some of its more inclusive variants (e.g., LGBTQI+) as a compromise to the fact that individuals in heteronormative communities often use different language, including the term "homosexuality", regardless of its too limited focus on gays and lesbians, and also its medicalized connotations. Although I acknowledge that "nonheterosexuality" is problematic because it implies that all other sexualities are defined in contrast to "heterosexuality", I consider it a more appropriate term for the context I am describing, while also being more general and inclusive than "homosexuality", which I use only when it is the most precise term.

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family silences can also provide LGB individuals with grey areas to fully participate in kinship and family structures (Brainer, 2018), the parents' concern with the reactions of others can be hurtful to their nonheterosexual children (Kuhar, 2007; Reczek, 2020).

However, these types of parental reactions are more than individual responses to nonheterosexuality. They are also reactions embedded in socio-institutional contexts defining the political process of belonging (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019; Anthias, 2020) in heteronormative terms. In such contexts, not only do the parents have to reconcile the affective ties to their children with the wider views on nonheterosexuality—often shaped by stereotypes, misinformation and homophobic public discourse (van Velzen, 2007; Švab & Kuhar, 2014)—but they also face stigma by association (Goffman, 1963; Kuhar, 2007). As a result of these "nonheterosexual associations" the parents may find themselves teetering on the symbolic borders of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) within which they otherwise belong, most frequently by the virtue of their nationality, ethnicity/race, or religion. So, when the parents from the opening paragraph say that their home countries are not the Netherlands or Belgium, what they are articulating is their experience of everyday bordering against nonheterosexual (national) belonging.

In this chapter, I explore everyday bordering against nonheterosexual belonging in the case of CEE parents of LGB migrants who emigrated to Belgium or the Netherlands—two countries reputed for their "LGBT-friendliness"—from five countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland) characterized by a homonegative public opinion (e.g. Takács & Szalma, 2020), exclusionary LGBT legal framework (ILGA World et al., 2020), and recent anti-gender mobilizations (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017).

My analytic lenses of "everyday bordering" are derived from the concept of "intersectional bordering" (Cassidy et al., 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) which emphasizes the micro level of everyday negotiations of "us" and "them". These are both experienced differently by differently positioned individuals (intersectionality) and embedded in wider socio-institutional contexts (macro level). As the present analysis is more concerned with "everyday" than "intersectional", I have adapted the term accordingly—especially as I do not examine bordering against (im) migrants, but instead look at "stayers" with a peculiar perspective to illuminate the tensions and fluidity of everyday borderings. The "stayers" are the CEE parents of LGB migrants, and their peculiar perspective is grounded in their in-between position. On the one hand, these parents sustain transnational family and caregiving practices (Baldassar et al., 2014; Morgan, 2020) with their children living in Belgium and the Netherlands. This exposes them to different social and institutional models of families and sexualities that may not lead to nonbelonging elsewhere. On the other hand, the parents also remain situated in the CEE contexts in which challenging the dominant heteronormative order may carry social costs. This double positionality, then, makes parents sensitive to different ways sexuality and belonging are constructed in different contexts.

In the next section, I present the theoretical framework of this chapter, building on the concepts of state-sponsored/political homophobia and intersectional/

everyday bordering. Then I elaborate on the case and methods, which is followed by a contextualization of the parents' lives in five participating CEE countries, from the socialist period to anti-gender mobilizations. The main analysis focuses on the parents' narratives about their experiences and expectations of others' reactions to nonheterosexuality. In the conclusion, I connect these expectations and experiences to everyday borderings against nonheterosexual belonging in CEE.

8.2 State-Sponsored Homophobia, Everyday Bordering and Nonheterosexual Belonging

By the title of its annually published Report on State-Sponsored Homophobia, which surveys LGBT laws in various countries, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA World) drives home the point that homophobia is more than an individual response. It is a structural, state-sponsored socio-legal framework that shapes the experiences of nonheterosexual individuals at both macro and micro levels.

At the macro level, state-sponsored or strategic "political homophobia" (Bosia & Weiss, 2013) shapes the experiences of nonheterosexual individuals primarily by regulating their status as citizens. In most countries worldwide (ILGA World et al., 2020), nonheterosexual individuals are still excluded from full, intimate (Plummer, 2003) citizenship. Even though they might "belong" otherwise, their nonheterosexuality creates a new (internal) border that separates them, differently in various countries, from their co-nationals on a whole continuum of rights: from the very right to life, through non-discrimination, to entering into marriage and having children. This is partially linked to the fact that, although sexuality is not typically listed as one of the main criteria for national belonging (unlike ethnicity/race or religion), it is nevertheless embedded into the modern nation-states which came into being via heteronormative, homophobic and patriarchal nationalisms, i.e. heteronationalisms (Nagel, 1998; Slootmaeckers, 2019). In light of homophobia's function as a political tool (Bosia & Weiss, 2013), nationalisms do not necessarily remain intertwined with homophobia, as testified by the emergence of homonationalisms (Puar, 2007), where nonheterosexuality is protected at the expense of marginalized (e.g. racialized) sexualities (Slootmaeckers, 2019). But, heteronationalism is still a dominant bordering mechanism of national belonging in CEE since, as I detail later, it feeds off the 1990s national resurgences and bolsters the political project of anti-gender movements in the region.

At the micro-level, the legal frameworks of the state provide individuals—its citizens—with cues to what are "appropriate", or socially acceptable, responses to nonheterosexuality. In the context of state-sponsored homophobia, the message of repressive measures or restrictive laws is the message of bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) against nonheterosexual belonging. State-sponsored homophobia announces clearly that the nation-state's politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) positions nonheterosexual individuals outside this particular collectivity. The

consequences of such a symbolic bordering are then reflected in the everyday experiences of nonheterosexual individuals—but not only them. As I also present in this chapter, the parents of nonheterosexual individuals face stigma by association (Goffman, 1963; Kuhar, 2007) and experience the social cost of being the parents of those who are symbolically on the outside. As a result, the parents' concern with what "others will say" is a concern stemming from their (anticipated and experienced) sense that the borders of belonging have just shifted—and parents' positions have become less certain.

Taking advantage of the in-between perspective this may provide, this study focuses on how the parents of LGB migrants, embedded in the contexts of their CEE states, but also part of transnational social fields exposing them to multiple sets of norms and laws (Levitt & Schiller, 2004)—experience everyday bordering against nonheterosexual belonging in their communities.

8.2.1 Methodological Framework

This chapter draws from the 2018 interviews with eight parents of CEE LGB migrants. The parents were recruited via their sons and daughters who were married or raising children with same-sex partners in Belgium and the Netherlands and whom I interviewed in the study's first stage.[2] The parents formed a relatively homogenous group in terms of age and class background: they were between their early 60 s and mid-70 s, most had a university education and were retired. All parents were living in five CEE countries—Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland—that critically differed from Belgium and the Netherlands in terms of LGBT social climate and institutional and legal framework.

This critical difference is observable in, for instance, the persistent divergence in social attitudes towards gays and lesbians between CEE countries and Western European countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands (Takács & Szalma, 2020). It is also signalled, symbolically and legally, by both the constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage in all five participating CEE countries and their recent mobilizations against gender and sexual equality that particularly vocally targeted LGBT individuals and same-sex families (Darakchi, 2019; Korolczuk, 2020; Kováts, 2021; Mos, 2020; Tektas & Keysan, 2021; Vuckovic Juros et al., 2020). In contrast, same-sex couples have had the right to marry and have legally protected families for about two decades now in both Belgium and the Netherlands (ILGA World et al., 2020). Furthermore, the public image of "LGBT-friendliness" has become so central to these societies that even otherwise socially conservative far-right actors use the

[2] All data were collected within the TransNorm/TOFNITW project that received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Sklodowska-Curie grant agreement No 702650. The contents of this chapter are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.

(homonationalist) discourse of the protection of LGBT rights to pursue their other, most frequently anti-immigrant, political agendas (Dudink, 2017; Dhoest, 2020).

At the same time, as a sociologist sensitive to a sometimes overly simplified narrative of the (European) East–West divide in terms of LGBT rights and homophobic attitudes (see also Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2016; Takács & Szalma, 2020), I must also point out that Belgian and Dutch societies are hardly ideal when it comes to the state of LGBT rights (see, for example, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020), regardless of their high scores on the rankings of LGBTI equality laws and policies (ILGA-Europe, 2021). Equally importantly, both the participating and other CEE countries differ, sometimes to a great extent, in terms of the state of LGBT rights in the socialist period and in the developments that have followed since the 1990s (ILGA World et al., 2020; ILGA-Europe, 2021).

Nevertheless, one should not ignore an important difference between the participating CEE countries and Belgium and the Netherlands in terms of general social climate and legal and institutional contexts. It serves as useful heuristics for this study, which situates parents' narratives on their children's nonheterosexuality into the context of the parents' lives in socialist states, the subsequent post-socialist transitions and the ongoing anti-gender mobilizations in their CEE countries. This contextualization is presented in the next section.

8.2.2 Contextualization: From Socialism through Post-Socialist Transformations to Anti-gender Mobilizations

Gradskova et al. (2020) note that, despite the early decriminalization of homosexuality in many socialist CEE countries[3] and very varied paths in the development of LGB rights and activism during the socialist period across the region,[4] sexual revolutions in CEE were not happening in the public sphere, as they did in the West. Instead, the public sphere was occupied by the Communist Party, so the individuals were transforming intimacies in various ways in the private sphere (Gradskova et al., 2020), and the LGB communities and support networks were developing underground (O'Dwyer, 2012). Public invisibility, however, carries its consequences by breeding misrepresentation and stereotypes among the general public with little (known) contact or little knowledge about nonheterosexuality. This is the context in which the parents in this study—as heterosexual individuals born in the late 1940s and the 1950s—came of age.

[3] Poland decriminalized consensual same-sex activities in the 1930s and the other four participating countries did so in the 1960s and the 1970s (ILGA World et al., 2020).

[4] See, for example, the accounts of LGBT activism and gay and lesbian histories in different CEE countries during socialism, such as Vuletić (2003), Kurimay and Takács (2017), or Szulc (2018).

Coming out of socialism, the public spheres of CEE societies in the 1990s were taken over by the growing nationalism and religious re-traditionalization, which jointly subscribed to a heteronormative order that designed homosexuality as a threat to family, tradition and the nation-state (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015). Moving to the 2000s, many of these countries turned their eye toward the EU, which was, directly and indirectly, pushing for the institutionalization of LGBT rights, and thus also supporting local (and transnational) LGBT activism (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014; Slootmaeckers & Touquet, 2016). While activists' successes (and failures) across the five participating CEE countries differed considerably in nature and timing, these developments nevertheless contributed to a growing public awareness of homosexuality, although in many cases public attention (around the emerging Pride marches, for example) was also drawn to the attacks on homosexuality as immoral, sinful and unnatural (e.g. Renkin, 2009; Roseneil & Stoilova, 2011; O'Dwyer, 2012; Vuckovic Juros et al., 2020).

During the 2000s, pushed by the soft and hard pressure from the EU, the five participating countries experienced some strengthening of the LGB rights and/or activism compared to the previous period, although these developments were very uneven across different countries (see Roseneil & Stoilova, 2011; Kahlina, 2015; O'Dwyer, 2018). However, in 2018, when the interviews with the parents were conducted, the five CEE countries in this study were already experiencing or were about to witness a surge in anti-gender campaigns, in which lesbians and gays and their families were often set up as enemy figures endangering (traditional) families and children.

For example, triggered partly by the new same-sex life partnership bill under preparation, such a discourse was the focus of the Croatian 2013 campaign for a constitutional amendment to define marriage as a union between a woman and a man (Vuckovic Juros et al., 2020). It was revisited in 2018 during the debate about same-sex couples' access to foster care (Tektas & Keysan, 2021). Similar campaigns took place in Slovakia during the 2015 referendum asking for even stricter limitations on same-sex families' rights after the constitutional amendment to protect heterosexual marriage had already been passed by the Parliament the previous year (Maďarová, 2015). In Hungary, the constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage quietly became part of the New Fundamental Law already in 2012, pushed by Fidesz and their coalition partners after the previous government had recognized same-sex partnerships. However, it was only after the 2017 mobilizations against the Istanbul Convention that the anti-LGBT discourse (mostly in the form of attacks on "gender ideology") gained real momentum as part of the Fidesz populist political agenda (Kováts, 2021; Mos, 2020). Attacks on nonheterosexual individuals and same-sex families' rights were similarly used in Poland, especially since the Law and Justice came into power in 2015, and have intensified particularly since 2019 with the targeted attacks against the so-called "LGBT ideology" (Korolczuk, 2020; Kováts, 2021). In Bulgaria, the anti-gender developments were not clearly identifiable before the 2018 mobilizations against the Istanbul Convention, which attacked the "gender ideology" that supposedly promoted "homosexuality" and "transgenderism" (Darakchi, 2019). But even in that case, the frames of the protection of the

traditional family were used to promote the anti-LGBT discourse going as far back as 2012 (Darakchi, 2019).

While the main actors of the above developments were religious-conservative activists of anti-gender (transnational) movements (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), much of their success is also linked to opportunistic alliances with nationalistic and right-wing political groups (Kováts & Põim, 2015; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). These allied anti-gender activities were frequently presented as acts of sovereignty and defiance against the EU and the Western European "ideological" impositions (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kováts, 2021). This was especially so in Poland and Hungary, where the state instrumentally took on the leading role in the anti-gender mobilizations in the service of their illiberal transformations (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). But this was also happening in countries such as Croatia, where alliances with nationalistic and right-wing actors were more *ad hoc*, serving particular political purposes (Vuckovic Juros et al., 2020). Across all five countries of this study, the political project of the anti-gender mobilizations was strongly linked to the hetero-nationalist project of belonging. This is the context in which the parents' experiences of bordering against nonheterosexual belonging in CEE are situated.

8.3 Parents' Experiences and Expectations of Bordering Against Nonheterosexual Belonging

8.3.1 Legacy of Socialist Silences and Misrepresentations

In the context of coming of age in the framework of socialist silencing and misrepresentations of nonheterosexuality, the narratives of CEE parents—mostly university-educated individuals—testify to a lack of contact and information before their children came out. Among the parents who reflected on their earliest views, homosexuality is presented as almost unimaginable. Ladislav,[5] for example, attributes this to his conservative and religious[6] upbringing in Slovakia where "there was no other option" than heterosexuality. Others confess a similar lack of awareness as nonheterosexuality was removed from their everyday experiences and public discourse. Ivanka admits, "I didn't know that such a thing existed. I'm completely honest. I didn't know this could happen to someone." Then she reflects on why this was so in Bulgaria: "It wasn't talked about. During our time, during the communist regime. These things weren't talked about. They were forbidden, banned. Nobody talked."

[5] All the names are pseudonyms, although not the same ones that were used in other publications from the project.

[6] Religion, like sexuality, was also a matter of private sphere in state-atheist socialist societies.

8.3.2 *Parents' Reactions to Nonheterosexuality in the Context of Post-Socialist Re-traditionalization*

With the post-socialist transformation going hand-in-hand with the heteronationalist project and societal re-traditionalization, nonheterosexuality moved from the space of public invisibility to one of political controversy and polarized perspectives. That was the context surrounding the initial reactions of the five CEE parents in this study, who first learned of their LGB children's nonheterosexuality while the children were still living in their home countries, in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

These parents first responded with shock or even angry disbelief as the only representations that were easily available in their cultural repertoires (Swidler, 2000) at the time were based on stereotypes and the perceptions of homosexuality as an illness or abnormality. "I was very much surprised," Ivanka recalls, "because the boy had a fighting spirit, he took things in a very manly manner. […] I didn't know there were people like that […] and I started crying. I started crying from the surprise. At first, I thought that this was some sort of illness." "I was horrified," Jelena from Croatia similarly recounts her first reaction. "I was also angry, and unhappy, and sad, a lot of things. […] and I called [*an LGBT organization*] to ask if there is something to do, if this could be cured."

While many parents in this study changed their perspective with self-education and/or prolonged conversations with their children, another type of concern that also formed part of their first reaction was less easily relieved. This was the fear for their LGB children arising from the expectation that their society would react negatively (for similar reactions in other CEE countries, see Kuhar, 2007; van Velzen, 2007). For example, Marta, who says she had no problem with her daughter's nonheterosexuality because she loved her, goes on to specify the worries about being gay in Slovakian society she had nonetheless, "worries that someone might hurt her, because I have a feeling, or rather back then I had a feeling that our society is not ready for this yet. That the society will not accept this like me, as a mother."

Notably, the fear of social reaction also encompasses the parents personally, as they find themselves without readily available tools to process what this means for their children and them. The parents may thus worry that their communities will extend the hostility and the blame on them. Ivanka admits that she has not yet:

> "told anyone, save the relatives. The closest ones there are. […] The problem is that I can hear somebody say something or… to turn around and say something. And then you can feel uncomfortable when you are sharing, from the reactions of the opposite side, you know. […] I don't want to talk, because I don't know what the reaction and the attitude of the people will be towards this problem, here."

Ladislav, similarly, recounts people telling him:

> "It is in upbringing, you must have made a mistake," and reacting like he was being punished by his daughter's nonheterosexuality, "'Oh my poor, what did God do to you that you are punished this way, that your child does not behave normally.' It is still taken in a way as a punishment for something (laughter). […] It is God's punishment. […] And 'Jesus, Holy Mary, how have you survived that? Oh my God, that is dreadful. How have you survived that?' So it is not spoken loudly but in a way of feeling sorry for me."

In the context of such reactions, parents can come to perceive their LGB children's migration as a relief since it provides a solution to their presumably difficult future in the CEE community.

> "I said that I accepted things," confesses Ivanka, "while deep inside me, I was very much afraid. […] If he had stayed in Bulgaria, I think his life wouldn't have added up like that. […] There, all the doors are open. Do you understand? There, it seems these cases are more often like that […] So, things are looked upon differently. This deviation as well. The same way. That's why I think people there show an understanding and perhaps they are ahead. Society is more developed. And that is why the attitudes are more different than in Bulgaria towards these things."

I observed similar sentiments among the second group of parents as well, those who learned of their children's nonheterosexuality only after they had already migrated, in the mid- and late 2000s. These parents' initial fears were weaker because they could immediately see their children already living in societies where nonheterosexuality and same-sex families were accepted. Still, the fear that they would be stigmatized for their children's nonheterosexuality was strong nevertheless. Barbara from Poland remembers initially feeling very isolated and alone in her anxiety:

> "I hid it at the beginning because I was afraid of the reaction. […] I was afraid of the milieu, how people would see me. […] What people would say. Maybe they would turn their backs on us. […] I was scared of the reaction, what they would think of me as a mother. 'Your son is gay?' A bit of a shame, I thought."

Even Teresa, a well-travelled Polish woman and the only parent in this study who had previously had closer contact with nonheterosexual individuals, talks about the reaction of others in what is otherwise a narrative of personal acceptance:

> "Unfortunately, I didn't say the truth even to my closest colleague. […] She knows that my daughter lives in Brussels, that she's with someone, that she has children. […] She says I have cool grandchildren. I don't want to go into details because it won't really change my situation for the better, it could only make it worse. […] I can already see how people think, what stories they tell each other. I prefer to let it go and not hold the grudge against people I know for many years. […] People like to judge, 'How does this affect her character? And why did she allow it? Why did she raise her this way?' There would be such questions without answers."

8.3.3 Anti-Gender Mobilizations and Renewed Strength of Heteronationalism

Many parents in this study changed their patterns of disclosure within the extended family at some point, especially after the LGB migrants had their children abroad (for more details, see Vuckovic Juros, 2020). Nevertheless, looking beyond the confines of extended families, the parents' negotiations of their children's nonheterosexuality must also be situated in the context of anti-gender mobilizations, most forcefully targeting LGBT rights, that began in the participating CEE countries in the 2010s. In this context, the parents in this study frequently compared the current

social climates in their home countries with their perceptions of social attitudes in Belgium and the Netherlands as different.

Ivanka thus considers the messages that the politicians are sending and the public discourse in her CEE country as actively obstructing the development of the "consciousness" she attributes to the Netherlands. "I think that for the Netherlands these matters don't stand the way they do here in Bulgaria. Every time the question is brought up we hear politicians, public personas, who… they judge. In Bulgaria, things are very, very far away from… a growth in consciousness about everything related to these matters." Ladislav, similarly, considers how homophobic discourse shapes attitudes in his country:

> "And you know, when – the chairman of the parliament says that, or I don't know, that he would rather kill himself than, or – I am making it up – than he would have homosexuals, or something like that. […] (T)his is what makes me sad, that there are …um, people who say: 'I, these people, I don't like homosexuals,' it is only for one and only reason – that they heard about it, they read about it somewhere on the blog, they read some reactions that are there. […] According to my own opinion, if I did not perceive or did not have the influence of society, and there would be homosexual couples, just like there are heterosexual couples, they would live absolutely alright, without any disrupting moments. But because we, from early childhood, and often on the Internet you see those hateful blogs, literally, hateful blogs. And today, you cannot prevent one from being influenced…"

In the opening paragraph of this chapter, Ladislav notes how "it's not Belgium [here]." In Slovakia, he believes, "someone would come and slap them [a same-sex couple] on their ears," while in Belgium "it is natural." It is painful for him to imagine his daughter's life in such circumstances: "It hurts me to think that this country … looks at the… looks at my daughter through some glasses, right? […] I mind that here, the glasses for viewing are, like, simply that it is not normal." Therefore, unlike in Belgium, LGB individuals and same-sex couples must hide themselves to avoid threats, and that is why he never thinks "about them coming back to Slovakia." Jelena, similarly, notes how in Belgium "nobody is pointing a finger at him [son] […] he is living well," while she is certain that her son would not be able to find a job in Croatia as an openly gay man, his expertise regardless. For this reason, although his absence hurts her very much, Jelena has reconciled herself to the fact that he would "never come back. […] He has it good there […] There is no reason to come back here."

When same-sex marriage and families are brought up, the differences in life chances and opportunities for LGB migrants are even more strongly highlighted. Barbara also cannot imagine that her son, married to another man, would ever be able to return to Poland "with this mentality, with this government, with these right-wing people obsessed with husband, wife and family, family, family-, woman and man. It would probably be hard to live. Especially as married. We don't have marriages yet." When the (grand)children are involved, it is especially difficult for parents of LGB migrants to ease their fears, as they expect that the children raised by same-sex parent families would be stigmatized in their CEE communities. Ivanka, for example, explains that her son and his children are better off living abroad, rather than coming back to Bulgaria where she does not think they would be accepted, even though this "solution" comes with a personal cost for her: "Oh, I'm

very sad. I'm very sad he is not here. That the children, I can't even touch them, you know. Only photos."

The personal hurt created by the environment that perceives their LGB children as abnormal or ill, that threatens the LGB individuals' futures and families and pushes them to live far from home is thus part of the parents' ambivalent stance towards their children's migration to Belgium or the Netherlands. On its positive side, this migration opened up opportunities for a different kind of life for LGB migrants, the life some parents themselves found initially difficult to imagine, situated as they were in the context of their CEE communities. For example, Eszter was not at first certain that the reactions in Belgium would differ from those expected in her home country but was then reassured by her daughter that Belgium is indeed different.

> "I was coming to the wedding from Hungary, but beforehand I asked my daughter if- if- … there could be someone who would offend them, someone to go to the city hall, and I don't know, there- [laughs] I don't say that they would protest, but there are mobs that are causing trouble, or- or I was thinking of something like that, so I asked her, but she said, 'Oh no, something like that won't happen here. That's a completely accepted thing here.' So, that I didn't need to worry about that, it's highly improbable to happen there."

Some parents also had to confront their own (heteronormative) understandings of family in contexts of this new option for their migrant LGB children that was so vehemently opposed in many of these CEE communities. Barbara, for example, explicitly considers how "(w)e were raised, not only in Poland, in the traditional family model: a man and a woman." However, later comparisons to "how it is in the world" made her realize that this is not the only model, and that it is only that "(w)e [in Poland] didn't allow this thought that something is different, even though it's been different for a long time." Likewise, Eszter also emphasizes that "(h)ere [in Hungary], with us, you can only hear that [clap of hands] marriage can only happen between a man and a woman." She then goes on to repeat her husband's verbalized opposition to their daughter marrying, stemming from the same stance: "Okay, you can get married in Belgium, but you don't have to follow this trend by any means." In a similar vein, Ladislav specifies that "for the majority," and "for me too," "if you say marriage, it is a woman and a man." Nonetheless, witnessing intimately the acceptance of same-sex marriage in his daughter's host country helps him reflect on the role of institutional and legal frameworks in defining "normality": "That, classic Belgians, when they are there, and these kinds of weddings are absolutely common there. That means that there is legislation for that. And whether you want it or not, only by the fact that the law allows it, it is without any problems. And it does not divide society."

But, in an interesting twist to his perspective considering that the CEE heteronationalist public discourse typically paints LGBT rights as "imposed" by Brussels (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018), Ladislav also verbalizes a similar type of argument that the Belgian and Dutch conservative far-right actors use to associate homonegativity with immigrant/Muslim non-Belgian and non-Dutch values. Thus, Ladislav goes on to specify that he does not see "the danger from the Belgian- because, right next to them, a Belgian woman is living there [in

the daughter's neighborhood], the Belgians live there. Absolutely friendly." But, when he considers the possibility of Muslims moving into the neighborhood, he is less at ease about his daughter's life in Belgium.

> "I rather see the danger from… from… from the other side – Muslim side. That means, I don't even know if there is some kind of dealing with homosexuality there. I … I am not claiming that they must automatically be against in some way, right? But there- […] I am not afraid because of the side of the Belgians but rather the fact that it is nonhomogeneous-, you cannot have any expectations."

Going back to a more general discussion of Belgium or the Netherlands and their CEE countries, the parents typically fall back on the supposed divide between the two in terms of attitudes and acceptance of LGB individuals and same-sex families. Some parents explain this divide within the framework of progress, where CEE is lagging behind, "still at this stage of evolution," as Teresa phrases it. Consequently, some parents, like Teresa, also express hope that "the next generation will change it." Ivanka provides a similar generational argument, although she is more pessimistic about the time needed to affect this change:

> "(O)ur generation doesn't accept them. To say it outright, it doesn't accept these things as normal […] because we're conservative people, coming from an old time (w)hile young people are freer. They are more open. Perhaps there are those, among the young ones… that will have a rude attitude. But in the end. And that's how it is supposed to be. And I think it will take generations until things settle down in Bulgaria. And are accepted in the normal way. Not going to be soon. No."

Whether the cause of homonegativity is attributed to the values of older generations or to some other reason (Eszter, for example, specifically considers individual characteristics such as education and religiosity), the parents in this study tend to think in terms of an underlying difference between their CEE societies and societies such as Belgian and Dutch. In the process, the parents also reinforce the discourse that is used both in the European East and in the West to sustain this divide. In this discourse, popular among the (liberal) political elites in the East (Kováts, 2021) and the political actors and LGBT activists in the West assuming a homonationalist perspective (Kulpa, 2016), CEE is less developed in terms of civilizational values and is (forever) trying to catch up. However, rather than "encouraging" the new CEE generations to complete their catching up, this discourse, in its assumption of Western superiority, feeds the illiberal right-wing actors in CEE in their opposition to the Western "imperialism" and LGBT rights, that is fueling the current anti-gender mobilizations (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kováts, 2021).

8.4 Conclusion

In the analysis of this chapter, I focused on how the "others"—representing the wider imagined community of their CEE societies—were inserted in the narratives of parents discussing the nonheterosexuality of their migrant children. The purpose of such an analysis was to reveal everyday bordering against nonheterosexual

(national) belonging as experienced by the parents situated in a transnational social field. Following their children's migration to the Netherlands or Belgium, these parents became more intimately aware of the contrast between the perceived "normalization" of nonheterosexuality and same-sex families in their children's host countries (see also in Vuckovic Juros, 2020) as opposed to their experiences and expectations of the social climate in their CEE communities, especially in the circumstances of rising anti-gender mobilizations that frequently targeted specifically nonheterosexual individuals and their families.

The parents' reflections on the "others" thus revealed the deep personal cost of societal homonegativity, as they expressed their concerns both for their children and for themselves. Regarding their children and their same-sex families formed in the Netherlands and Belgium, the parents feared a negative reaction from the social circles beyond the (extended) family. This expectation reinforced their conviction that their migrant children would never return home, because they cannot belong "here" as they can in the "LGBT-friendly" Netherlands and Belgium. Regarding themselves, the parents also feared (or experienced) negative social consequences—e.g., pity, blame or rejection—of their "nonheterosexual association." These types of (experienced or expected) reactions were explained by nonheterosexuality (or its acceptance) belonging "somewhere else" (to Belgium or the Netherlands, for example), and not being part of their home country's "tradition" or national identity.

These are precisely the types of arguments embedded in the heteronationalist framework of collective identification (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015) and systematically reinforced and amplified by the anti-gender actors and their nationalistic, right-wing allies in CEE (see, for example, Ćeriman & Vuckovic Juros, 2023), especially as these groups strategically use homophobia to sharpen the borders between the European West and East (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kováts, 2021). Thus, while the European West–East divide is a construct, it is fed by the heteronationalist discourses of the European East—and also by the discourses presenting the European East as always lagging behind in "civilizational values" (Kováts, 2021; Kulpa, 2016). In consequence, the perception of this divide then becomes an element of everyday bordering of belonging (Cassidy et al., 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019)—experienced and then repeated by the parents themselves—that positions nonheteroxual belonging outside these CEE collectivities.

The conclusions presented above must be placed within the limitations of a very small sample of certainly self-selected (more supportive) parents. In addition, my analysis privileges the identification of interpretative patterns without specifying the prevalence or frequency of such patterns, as I consider that the latter is not meaningful in the analysis of data from such specific and small qualitative samples. Nonetheless, I have also examined the data for negative cases contradicting or complicating the identified patterns, and while their absence here does not mean they would not be found in different data, the patterns identified in this chapter still provide an illuminating picture of experiences of supportive parents of LGB children in CEE. Furthermore, this "critical case" (Patton, 1990) highlights the extraordinary experiences of supportive parents of LGB migrants who must negotiate their presumably homonegative environments with the new societal expectations and norms

witnessed in their children's lives in Belgium and the Netherlands. This specificity strengthens the epistemological value of identified patterns in the pursuit of theoretical generalization (Gobo, 2008), concerned primarily with the contribution of findings to the understanding of a deeper (but never decontextualized) mechanism at work—in this case, the embeddedness of the personal (micro) in the social (macro). The main contribution of this chapter is, therefore, reflected in spotlighting how the experience of everyday bordering against nonheterosexual belonging is embedded in a wider socio-institutional context.

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