

Reviews & Critical Commentary

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Gays in the Neighborhood? European Attitudes about Homosexuality a Quarter Century after the Fall of the Soviet Union

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This article is part of our **Over the European Rainbow** feature.



- Several hundred people came out for the gay pride parade in Vilnius in 2010. However, it took approximately 500 policemen to keep more than 1,000 anti-gay protestors at bay. Credit: Andrius Vaitkevicius

by **Judit Takács and Ivett Szalma**

Igor Kon, a leading Russian researcher on sexuality, in one of his latest articles suggested that homophobia can be seen as a litmus test for democracy and tolerance in Russia, and interpreted sexual minority rights as contributing to the well-being of all citizens, irrespective of their sexual orientation (Kon 2010). In the present article we attempt to apply this litmus test not only to Russia but to other European countries, too.

Our main goal is to present empirical findings to see whether a quarter of a century after the political system changes that started in 1989 in the (now post-socialist) Eastern parts of Europe there are any signs of convergence between the Western and the not so Western parts of Europe regarding homophobic, or more precisely, genderphobic attitudes. In this context, homophobia can be defined as a specific subset of genderphobia, the institutionalized and often internalized fear of breaking gender norms. Previous research has shown that homophobia tends to be associated with traditional views regarding the roles of women and men in society; social rejection of gays and lesbians seems to be part of a broader gender belief system characterized by normatively appropriate, and usually not at all overlapping, paths of women and men in society. Additionally, the relationship between gender inequality as measured by the Gender Inequality Index (GII)[1] and the manifestation of homophobic views was shown to be significantly strong by our previous empirical findings, too (Takács and Szalma 2011, 2013).

We should also keep in mind that democratic transition does not run smoothly, nor is it fast. We tend to agree with Ralf Dahrendorf that “the formal process of constitutional reform takes at least six months; a general sense that things are moving up as a result of economic reform is unlikely to spread before six years has passed,” while 60 years are barely enough to “transform the constitution and the economy from fair-weather into all-weather institutions which can withstand the storms generated within and without” (1990, 92–93). Thus it can be expected that even about a quarter century after the political system changes in the former Eastern bloc, there are still significant differences between the former state-socialist countries and Western Europe regarding the institutionalization of same-sex partnership and family forms, and the expressed levels of homophobia.

Institutionalization of same-sex partnership and family forms

By the early twenty-first century, decriminalization of same-sex sexual activity of consenting adults had become a legal norm cultivated by the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe. In 2006 the European Parliament issued a resolution on homophobia, calling on the member states of the EU to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are protected from homophobic hate speech and violence, and that same-sex partners enjoy the same respect, dignity, and protection as the rest of society.[2] In 2014, the European Parliament issued another resolution on the EU Roadmap against homophobia and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity.[3]

Today the legal institution of same-sex marriage exists in 10 European countries and a growing number of countries offer registered partnerships as a legal option for same-sex couples. Adoption by same-sex

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couples is also available, with certain caveats in some cases, in a growing number of countries. Table I provides an overview of the introduction of same-sex marriage, registered partnership, and joint adoption in 19 European countries.

TABLE I. Introduction of same-sex marriage, registered partnership and adoption by same-sex couples in 19 European countries (1989–2013)

Countries	Same-sex marriage	Registered partnership	Adoption by same-sex couples
Austria	-	2010	2013[4]
Belgium	2003	2000	2006
Czech Republic	-	2006	-
Denmark	2012	1989	2007/2009[5]
Finland	-	2002	2009[6]
France	2013	1999 (PACS)	2013
Germany	-	2001	2004[7]
Hungary	-	2009[8]	-
Iceland	2010	1996	2006
Ireland	-	2010/2011[9]	-
Luxembourg	-	2004	-
The Netherlands	2001	1998	2001
Norway	2008/2009[10]	1993	2009
Portugal	2010	-	(2013)[11]
Slovenia	-	2005	2011[12]
Spain	2005	-	2005
Sweden	2009	1994	2003
Switzerland	-	2004	-
United Kingdom	2013	2005	2002/2008[13]

This table highlights how same-sex partnership and family forms are institutionalized to varying degrees in most parts of Northern and Western Europe. In fact, these legal institutions were started in Denmark (in 1989 with the introduction of same-sex registered partnership) and the Netherlands (in 2001 by 'opening up'[14] the previously exclusively hetero-marriage for the use of same-sex partners, too). However, there are only three non-Western European countries – Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary – where same-sex registered partnership has been introduced since 2005. In countries having legal institutions such as same-sex marriage, people are more likely to directly encounter manifestations of same-gender family and partnership forms as ordinary facts of everyday life, the social contexts of which are usually not secret meeting places but public space. These personal encounters in everyday interaction are important because of their potential to help people form less prejudiced and more open-minded opinions on the lived realities of lesbian women and gay men.

Homophobic attitudes

The source of our empirical findings is data from the European Values Study (EVS)[15] and the European Social Survey (ESS).[16] The EVS, a large-scale longitudinal survey research program, has been conducted every nine years since 1981 and uses multi-stage probabilistic sampling. The EVS provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values, and opinions of citizens all over Europe by applying standardized questionnaires. The first three waves of EVS (1981, 1990, 1999) had the following general acceptance questionnaire measuring homosexuality- and homophobia-related attitudes: *Please tell me ... whether you think homosexuality can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between.* In 1990 another EVS variable was introduced to measure reactions to homosexuality in the immediate setting: *On this list are various groups of people (including people with a criminal record, left-wing extremists, heavy drinkers, right-wing extremists, people with large families, emotionally unstable people, Muslims, immigrants/foreign workers, people who have AIDS, drug addicts, homosexuals,*

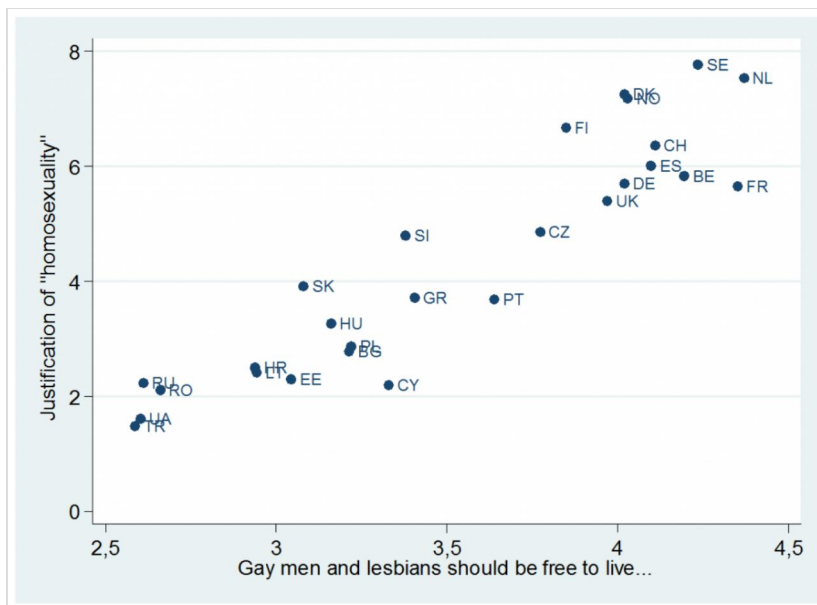
Jews, Gypsies, Christians) – *could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?*[17]

The European Social Survey (ESS) was initiated in 2002 by the European Science Foundation in order to study changing social attitudes and values in Europe. The ESS is a repeat cross-sectional survey administered every two years that consists of a core module and a module focusing on specific academic and policy issues that rotates at each round of data collection. The ESS core module includes one general acceptance question about the agreement level with the statement that *gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish* (where freedom of lifestyle is meant as being free and/or entitled to live as gays and lesbians). It has been included in the core module of the main ESS questionnaires since 2002 in all data collection waves already completed (2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012).

Diagram 1 illustrates the relationship between the 'justification of homosexuality' – whatever that might exactly mean – (EVS) and the acceptance of gay men and lesbian women (ESS) variables. The 2008 results present Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Croatia, Lithuania, and Estonia among the most homophobic countries, while the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark can be found among the least homophobic ones.

DIAGRAM 1

Relationship between the variables 'justification' of homosexuality (EVS) and social acceptance of gay men and lesbian women (ESS) in 23 European countries



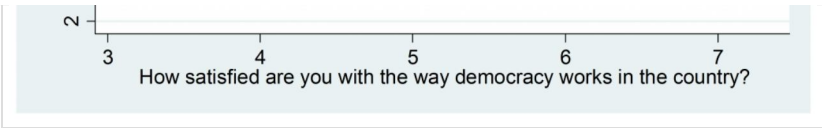
Source: EVS 2008, ESS 2008 own calculation.

There also appears to be a relationship between satisfaction with democracy and social attitudes toward gays and lesbians. ESS data gathered in 2012 from 23 European societies, show that the democracy deficit – expressed predominantly in the former state-socialist countries that are also characterized by the lack of same-sex partnership legislation – may contribute to the development of homophobic social environments (See: Diagram 2). Inversely, satisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system appears to be correlated with a higher level of social acceptance of lesbians and gays. In addition to higher levels of social acceptance, these countries, including Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, and Finland, also have institutionalized forms of same-sex partnerships.

DIAGRAM 2

Social acceptance of gay men and lesbians and satisfaction with democracy in 23 European countries



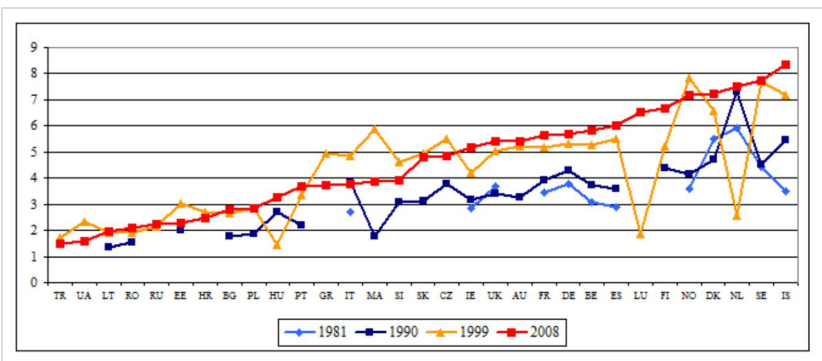


Source: ESS 2012.

Diagram 3 provides an overview of the changes over time in the mean values of the 'justification' of homosexuality EVS variable between 1981 and 2008. Diagram 4 shows the evolution in the mean values of the non-preference for homosexual neighbors EVS variable between 1990 and 2008. Even though in 1981 there were only 14 participating countries in the EVS,[18] the longer-term trends reflect a general decrease in homophobic attitudes. (Table 2 and 3 in the Appendix summarize the mean values of these two EVS variables country-by-country.)

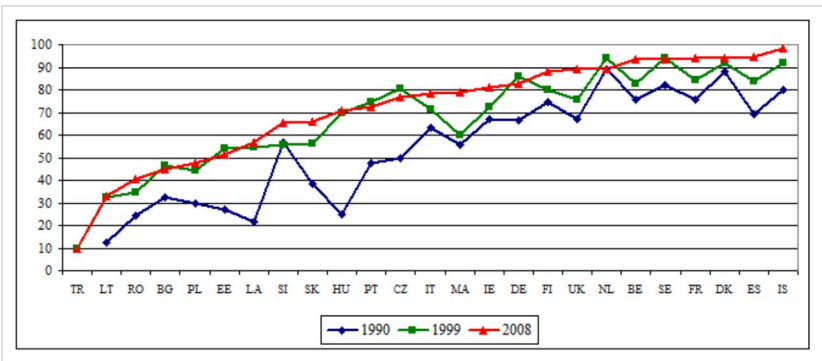
We can observe a significant increase in levels of acceptance especially regarding homosexual neighbors between 1990 and 1999 in post-socialist countries, including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, and Poland. In fact, these results reflect a more dynamic decrease of the social distance aspect of homophobia (willingness to have gay or lesbian neighbors) in the post-socialist countries than in the non-post-socialist countries. However, to be fair, we have to note that the levels of non-preference for homosexual neighbors were much higher in post-socialist countries around 1990 than in most of the Northern and Western European countries.

DIAGRAM 3.
 'Justification' of homosexuality in Europe between 1981 and 2008
 (1 = 'homosexuality can never be justified'; 10 = 'homosexuality can always be justified')



Source: EVS 1981, 1990, 1999, 2008.

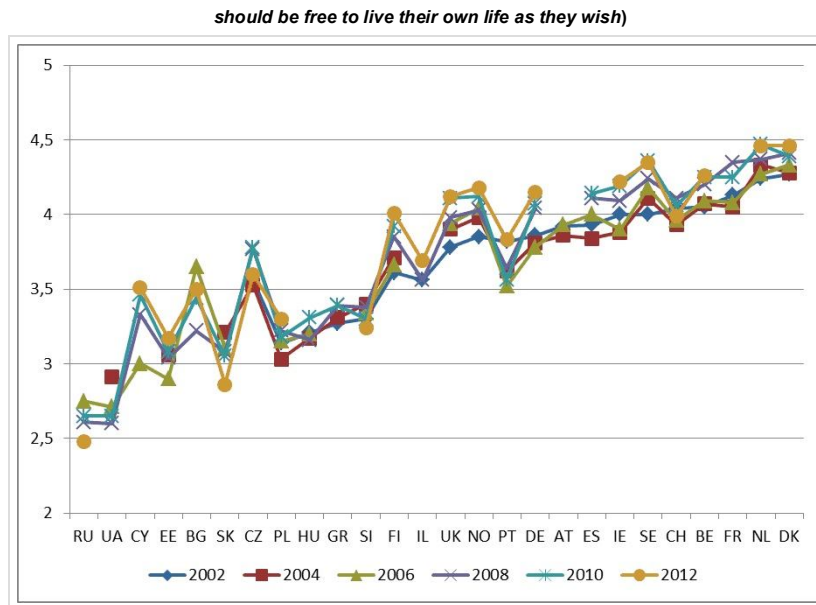
DIAGRAM 4
 (Non-)Preference for homosexual neighbors in Europe between 1990 and 2008 (Percentage of those who have indicated that they would be willing to have homosexual neighbors)



Source: EVS 1990, 1999, 2008.

Diagram 5 pictures changes over time in the mean values of the *gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish* ESS variable between 2002 and 2012 (in only those countries that took part in at least three ESS rounds). We can observe a general decrease in homophobic attitudes here, too. However, we should call attention to the Russian results, indicating not only the lowest levels of tolerance toward gay men and lesbian women among the examined societies in all ESS rounds, but also manifesting a trend counter to most of the other European countries. In 2012, the Russian results – similarly to those of a less homophobic post-socialist country, the Czech Republic – reflected a lower level of acceptance than in the previous years, while Slovenian and Polish respondents expressed higher levels of acceptance than in the previous ESS round of 2010. On the other hand, we should also take note of the long-term presence of Denmark and the Netherlands at the least homophobic end of the social acceptance axis. (Table 4 in the Appendix summarizes the mean values of this ESS variable country-by-country.)

DIAGRAM 5
 Social acceptance of gay men and lesbian women in Europe (2002–2012)
 (1 = strong disagreement; 5 = strong agreement with the statement that *gay men and lesbians*



Source: ESS 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012.

If we focus on the latest ESS results, we should point out that in 2012, among the 23 examined countries, there were only 2 countries with a median value of two: Russia and Kosovo (where 1 meant strong disagreement and 5 meant strong agreement), which means that in these countries the majority of respondents disagreed with the statement that *gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish*; while in two other countries, Slovakia and Estonia, the median value was three, expressing neither agreement or disagreement. At the same time, Iceland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Belgium were characterized by a median value of five, reflecting much higher levels of general social acceptance toward gays and lesbians. (Diagram 6 in the Appendix gives an overview of the mean and median values of this ESS variable in 23 examined countries.)

Conclusion

With a few exceptions, including Russia, the level of social acceptance toward lesbian women and gay men in Europe has increased since 1989. However, there are still significant differences between the Eastern and the Western parts of Europe in the legal institutionalization of same-sex partnership and family forms, as well as in the manifestations of homophobic attitudes. Dahrendorf seems to have been right: we need more time to rid ourselves of the state-socialist legacies of prudishness and direct, uniform control of private lives. A quarter of a century after the political system changes in most post-socialist countries, the private lives of people are still regulated by an institutionally discriminating state that also fuels homophobic views by maintaining the unequal treatment of gays and lesbians regarding their family lives.

While we are aware of the fact that 'what exactly is Eastern Europe' is a question exceeding the scope of our present discussion, we must note the problematic nature of constructing Eastern Europe in our mental maps. Most self-defined Eastern Europeans would probably agree though that it is a typical semi-periphery, located West from 'the East', and East from 'the West', often seen as inaccessible in more than one way: historically and geographically with its indefinite beginnings and ends, and linguistically with its many globally incomprehensible languages. However, we can only hope that homophobia does not prove to be an inherent component of the mental construction of Eastern-Europeanness.

Judit Takács graduated in History, Hungarian Language and Literature and Cultural Anthropology at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, and completed an M.A. in Social Sciences at the University of Amsterdam. She holds a PhD in Sociology and works as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Sociology, CSS, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, responsible for leading research teams and conducting independent research on gender issues and family practices, social exclusion/inclusion, HIV/AIDS prevention, anti-discrimination and equal treatment policies. A list of her publications can be found [here](#).

Ivett Szalma holds a PhD in Sociology from the Corvinus University of Budapest. She currently works as a Postdoc Researcher at the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS). She is the Head of the Family Sociology Section of the Hungarian Sociological Association. Her research topics include the effects of economic crises on work-life conflicts, post-separation fertility, childlessness, measurement of homophobia, and adoption by same-sex couples.

APPENDIX

TABLE 2. 'Justification' of homosexuality in Europe: Mean values (1981–2008) (1 = 'homosexuality can never be justified'; 10 = 'homosexuality can always be justified')

Country	1981	1990	1999	2008
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TR		1.72	1.48	
UA		2.35	1.61	
LT	1.35	1.90	1.95	
RO	1.52	1.91	2.10	
RU		2.13	2.23	
EE	2.00	3.02	2.30	
HR		2.72	2.49	
BG	1.77	2.66	2.78	
PL	1.85	2.84	2.86	
HU	2.71	1.44	3.26	
PT	2.18	3.36	3.68	
GR		4.95	3.71	
IT	2.71	3.86	4.83	3.79
MA	1.77	5.88	3.87	
SI	3.08	4.62	3.91	
SK	3.11	4.92	4.79	
CZ	3.76	5.50	4.85	
IE	2.84	3.15	4.20	5.20
UK	3.69	3.42	5.06	5.40
AU		3.27	5.21	5.42
FR	3.44	3.92	5.20	5.65
DE	3.77	4.27	5.34	5.69
BE	3.10	3.75	5.25	5.83
ES	2.90	3.59	5.51	6.01
LU		1.86	6.51	
FI		4.40	5.20	6.67
NO	3.59	4.14	7.83	7.18
DK	5.48	4.69	6.59	7.25
NL	5.91	7.33	2.55	7.53
SE	4.43	4.53	7.72	7.76
IS	3.49	5.45	7.19	8.34

Source: EVS 1981–2008.

TABLE 3. (Non-)Preference for homosexual neighbors in Europe between 1990 and 2008 Percentage of those who have not indicated that they would not like to have homosexual neighbors

Country	1990	1999	2008
TR		10	10

LT	12.6	32.22	32.80
RO	24.57	34.82	40.67
BG	32.5	46.60	45.09
PL	29.53	44.57	47.31
EE	27.08	54.23	51.31
LA	21.59	54.49	56.73
SI	56.9	55.67	65.64
SK	38.12	55.97	65.89
HU	24.72	69.72	70.55
PT	47.59	74.40	72.34
CZ	49.55	80.66	76.69
IT	63.18	71.30	78.30
MA	55.73	59.98	78.88
IE	66.8	72.49	80.95
DE	66.25	85.95	82.92
FI	74.83	79.87	88.14
UK	66.78	75.90	89.18
NL	89.09	93.82	89.24
BE	75.9	82.53	93.27
SE	82.33	93.99	93.68
FR	75.65	84.21	94.26
DK	88.35	91.95	94.30
ES	69.21	83.58	94.59
IS	79.91	92.14	98.54

This article is part of our **Over the European Rainbow** feature.

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[1] The GII measures gender inequality in a given country by reflecting women's disadvantage in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and the labour market. GII values can range from 0 – indicating that women and men fare equally in a country – to 1, indicating that women fare poorly in all measured dimensions. Source: <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/gii/>>.

[2] European Parliament, *Resolution 18 January 2006* (P6_TA-PROV(2006)0018), available at: <www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2006-0018+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

[3] European Parliament, *Resolution 4 February 2014* (2013/2183(INI)), available at: <www.europarl.eu>.

ropa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2014-0062.

[4] Only second-parent (or step-parent) adoption, i.e., adoption of the biological child(ren) of one's partner.

[5] First only second-parent adoption was introduced, followed by the introduction of joint adoption rights for same-sex couples.

[6] Only second-parent (or step-parent) adoption, i.e., adoption of the biological child(ren) of one's partner.

[7] Only second-parent (or step-parent) adoption, i.e., adoption of the biological child(ren) of one's partner.

[8] In Hungary the legal institution of registered partnership for same-sex and different-sex couples was introduced already in 2007, but only same-sex registered partnership came into operation in July 2009.

[9] In the Republic of Ireland the legal institution of same-sex registered partnership was introduced in 2010 (Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act), being in effect from January 2011.

[10] The Norwegian Parliament enacted a gender neutral marriage law in June 2008, which came into operation on January 2009.

[11] On May 17, 2013, the Portuguese Parliament voted in favor of allowing second-parent adoption.

[12] Only second-parent (or step-parent) adoption, i.e., adoption of the biological child(ren) of one's partner. It is a special case because there was no new legislation introduced, but in 2011 Slovenian legal experts successfully used the old adoption legislation (originally introduced in 1976 with no specific reference to the gender of adoptive parents) for showing that second-parent adoption is in fact legal.

[13] Adoption & Children Act – England & Wales 2002; Scotland 2008.

[14] The original Dutch bill used the expression of 'opening up marriage' to emphasize that there is only one type of marriage in the Netherlands, which is equally accessible for different-sex as well as same-sex partners.

[15] Source: www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/.

[16] Source: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/.

[17] In 2008, in the fourth wave of EVS, a third homosexuality-related variable was introduced, measuring the agreement level with the statement that *homosexual couples should be able to adopt children* – but we will not focus on this variable now.

[18] Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Great Britain, Northern Ireland.

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