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Queer Migration in Catholic Countries of Central and Eastern Europe: An Unexplored Topic

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Abstract

This paper explores the under-researched phenomenon of queer migration in Croatia, Lithuania, and Poland—three post-communist, Catholic-majority countries. Drawing on existing studies in the literature and empirical data, it examines how prevailing social conservatism—shaped by the influence of Catholicism and the distinct developmental trajectories of these countries—is reflected in research on queer migration. Although limited, the current body of knowledge confirms that concerns over LGBTQIA+ rights are a factor motivating emigration. The three examples illustrate how queer migration must be analyzed within the complex interplay between Europeanization and liberalization, and the backlash against these processes. This backlash, prominently supported by the Catholic Church, includes resistance to gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. By critically engaging with existing research, the paper underscores the need for future studies—particularly those investigating the gap between legal protections and prevailing social attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ individuals, the relationship between human rights backlashes and queer migration, the intersections between spatial context and personal biographies, and the connection between the queer migration and recent immigration waves in these countries.



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1. Introduction

Various current social problems linked to diversity, inequality, and pluralism emerge within the complex and dynamic relationship between religion and migration. Migration experiences influence religious beliefs, identities, and practices. Religions also help to motivate and control migration, and they may also benefit from migration (Beckford 2019). Religion and religious networks help migrants and enable integration, especially for first-generation immigrants (Connor 2011; Ramji and Marshall 2022). Religious beliefs held by migrants might become a challenge, which the literature refers to as managing religious diversity (Beyer 2022). Thus, while religion is frequently seen as a support during the processes of migration and integration in the host society, it may also serve as a gatekeeper to this integration as well as an identity marker that deepens social divisions and thus creates an unfavorable social environment for minority groups. In addition, international migration studies tend to generalize migrants as heterosexual people. Only recently has a growing body of international research started to draw attention to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in migration processes (e.g., Mole 2018). Thus, different aspects of

the intersection of migration and religion have yet to be uncovered, especially regarding sexual orientation in countries dominated by religions, such as some post-communist Central and Eastern European countries, that question the essence of gender identity, sexual orientation diversity, and the social inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals¹.

Regarding migration routes, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have largely been sending countries rather than receiving countries. The literature primarily emphasizes push factors for emigration, which have been connected to economic issues during the post-socialist transformation and the perceived better living opportunities offered in other parts of Europe (e.g., [Okolski 2021](#); [Park 2015](#)). However, there are other factors for emigration that have yet to be studied systematically, including the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals and their emigration due to prevailing animosities toward them. The question is if, and how, the prevailing social values, including the social role of religion, shape migration incentives. As we show below, the populations of post-communist countries are much more conservative in values in comparison to Western Europeans. Research demonstrates a connection between religiosity and lower rates of permissiveness in moral issues, and the overall influence of the confessional tradition in particular countries on moral issues, especially regarding the acceptance of homosexuality ([Halman and Sieben 2023](#), p. 149; [Breskaya and Zrinščak 2024](#), pp. 56–61; [Tereškinas and Vidūnaitė 2024](#), pp. 174–78). Additionally, religion's particular role in the nation-building process in many Eastern European countries paved the way to the construction of specific religion and state relations dominated by a favored national church ([Grzymala-Busse 2015](#)). In such a context, the role of the Catholic Church as a prominent public actor is crucial in generating negative perceptions and the public defamation of people of various gender identities and sexual orientations ([Klapholz 2025](#)). In addition, in line with the rise of populism and political conservatism, such attitudes have become ever more prevalent. For example, in 2019–2020 in Poland, more than one hundred local governments declared themselves as “LGBT-free zones” ([Bucholc 2022](#)). We do not know what the impact of the overall social climate and such political decisions has had on LGBTQIA+ individuals and their decision to leave the country. In addition, there has been a recent change in migration patterns, namely, a change since the 2015 Syrian War refugee crisis, when the European Union initiated refugee quotas for each country. There has also been a recent rise in immigration in some countries, like the wave of migration into Poland and Lithuania in relation to the war in Ukraine and labor-based immigration to Croatia. There is no knowledge about the experience of LGBTQIA+ immigrants in these changed circumstances.

Thus, this paper's primary aim is to fill the gap in the literature on LGBTQIA+ migration, specifically in three Central and Eastern European countries with a communist legacy and in which Catholicism is a dominant religion: Croatia, Lithuania, and Poland. More specifically, we delve into the issue of queer migration as a considerably unresearched topic, and as a topic that is not part of any academic and public discussions in these countries. The argument we put forward with this paper is that research on queer migration as a social phenomenon is essential for revealing important aspects of both migration and the social role of religion.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first present an overview of the literature about queer migration and religion, paying particular attention to Roman Catholicism's stance on LGBTQIA+ individuals. Then, based on data from various sources, we depict the three countries' profiles regarding the role of religion in their societies, the social position of LGBTQIA+ individuals, and their migration patterns. Following that, we summarize and comment on the existing knowledge about LGBTQIA+ individuals, religion, and migration in each country. Our focus is on the existing knowledge and how the overall social climate

in each country influences it. The concluding section summarizes the results and discusses the relevance of this paper for future research.

2. Queering Religion and Migration

Research shows that religion may contribute in various ways to migration that are connected both to its causes and the handling of its consequences. In this paper, we employ Beckford's (2019) conceptualization of religion, which is seen as encompassing a vast array of feelings, behaviors, connections, organizations, objects, positions, principles, symbols, and convictions linked to trust in entities, forces, and realms of existence said to surpass the strictly human. We also employ his definition of migration as shifts in a person's residence that entail crossing national, regional, or international borders. Migration is a process that can be reversed and result in, as well as be the result of, conditions ranging from temporary to permanent, voluntary to forced, and individual to large-scale collective movements (Beckford 2019).

Previous studies have paid attention to gender and generation as some of the critical factors in the intersection of religion and migration (Beckford 2019). For example, these are issues related to male circumcision or female genital mutilation, disagreements over suitable careers and marriage partners for women, accusations of apostasy or blasphemy, pressure to follow cross-cousin marriage patterns, and acceptable divorce forms, which can all cause high tensions within immigrant kin groups (Bader 2009; Beckford 2019; Kymlicka 2009). The dissociation from religious roots is one possible outcome of such tensions.

Recent research shows that sexuality should be considered more consistently in research into these factors at the intersection of religion and migration (Czimbalmos and Rask 2022). While considering religion among the factors sustaining heteronormativity, which affirms heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other forms of sexual expression through a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices, adding sexuality, the tendency of migration studies to assume that migrants are heterosexual people is challenged. A growing body of international research is drawing attention to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in migration processes (Mole 2018). Researchers refer to "sexual migration," "queer migration," and "LGBT migration" and analyze the motives and effects of migration through the lens of gender and sexuality (Binnie 2004; Luibhéid 2008; Mole 2021). The concept of queer migration considers the needs or desires of non-heterosexual identities, practices, and performances implicated in a queer migrant's decision to move (Gorman-Murray 2009, p. 443). Even when the migration motive is unrelated to sexuality, it appears that migration is a dynamic, two-way process in which the experience of migration may also influence sexuality—the way it is interpreted, enacted, and experienced (Mole 2021). Queer migration might have various types, such as coming-out migration, when queer people move for the purpose of self-reinvention as non-heterosexuals and to explore sexual desires in the process. There is also gravitational group migration, which is when queer people move to be near a neighborhood with a gay and lesbian presence. Relationship migration is another type of queer migration, where individuals move "with a partner to consolidate a same-sex relationship—or conversely, move away after a relationship breakdown" (Gorman-Murray 2009, p. 446).

These types of queer migration might not necessarily cross the country's borders; however, queer migration might also refer to moving to another country to take advantage of a more comprehensive range of sexual citizenship rights, such as same-sex marriage or anti-discrimination legislation (Mole 2021). In a more general sense, the concept of sexual citizenship addresses the ways in which societal norms and legal frameworks both influence, and are influenced by, understandings of sexuality, including issues like same-sex relationships and sex work (e.g., Richardson 1998, 2000). These issues are increasingly

becoming a focus in queer migration research. Consequently, research on queer migration might be seen to contribute to broader research into sexual citizenship concepts that also highlight how inequalities in sexual rights and recognition can perpetuate broader social injustices. As recent research shows, descriptions of premigration experiences, like living in a state of constant vigilance and fear, developing and using concealment strategies to pass as heterosexual and cisgender, and frequent victimization in daily life, were quite common among queer migrants (Alessi et al. 2017).

Researchers are increasingly focusing also on SOGI asylum, the sexual orientation and gender identity asylum process. These studies examine the problems and experiences of migrating sexual and gender minorities in Western European societies (Byström et al. 2023; Danisi and Ferreira 2022; Dustin 2018; McDonald-Norman 2017; Millbank 2009; Rosati et al. 2021; Shuman and Bohmer 2014; Spijkerboer 2013; Wessels 2013). Thus far, this research has shown that LGBTQIA+ individuals were disadvantaged in specific ways within the asylum process and experienced hostility and marginalization in wider society based on multiple factors (Danisi et al. 2021). ‘Intersectionality’ provides a framework for understanding how the experiences of LGBTQIA+ asylum-seekers are shaped not only by gender and sexuality but also by other social categories such as race, class, nationality, religion, age, and (dis)ability (Danisi et al. 2021). Religion featured regularly in the SOGI asylum accounts, both as one of the ways that asylum-seekers identified themselves and as a factor in their persecution.

Thus, research on the role of religion, particularly dominating religious organizations like the Roman Catholic Church, in the construction of attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals remains an emerging field of study in Eastern European countries. In general, diversification, including sexual diversification, among Christians is neglected by the Roman Catholic Church, which is undoubtedly an influential religious institution (Yip 2013). The existing research on these contexts indicates various strategies for coping with the Church. For example, research in Poland shows that LGBTQIA+ Catholics might leave the Church for more progressive religious communities, stay silent, or openly challenge their community (Graff 2006; Hall 2015; Mikulak 2017). The question is how the inner attitude toward the queer Catholics within the Church, particularly in societies where it holds significant influence, relates to the limitations on sexual citizenship and social injustice towards LGBTQIA+ individuals, with subsequent implications for queer migration. This complex inquiry warrants deeper investigation; this article seeks to advance the current discourse.

3. Methodological Note

The paper focuses on three countries that share important similarities and some differences. Similarities include the high religious homogeneity, marked by the dominant position of the Catholic Church, communist past, dominance of conservative values, and considerable, as it is commonly labeled, anti-gay/anti-gender mobilization by right-wing Christian groups, largely supported by the church. These are also countries in which, historically, the religion–ethnic link has been strong; this link has been strengthened in post-communism times as a part of the nation- and state-building process (Croatia and Lithuania), and in opposition to the liberalization connected to the Europeanization process in all three countries (e.g., D. Martin 2011; Ayoub and Page 2020). There are also some differences connected to the various types of communist regimes (Croatia as a part of a somewhat more liberal Yugoslav regime), a somewhat different level of religiosity, and the differences in the legal and policy treatments of the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. Still, this does not endanger a meaningful comparison; we use these countries as examples of

queer migration in a post-communist context dominated by Catholicism. In such a way, the comparative outlook employed in this paper can contribute to future research on this topic.

The paper is based on existing empirical research of all available sources of queer migration in these three countries. In other words, in order to determine existing knowledge, we researched the databases of scientific journals, the repository of master's and doctoral theses, and the websites of LGBTQIA+ organizations and other organizations known for advocacy of human rights in each country. In addition, the search was conducted according to the names of scholars with a publishing record on Catholicism, migration, and LGBTQIA+ issues. Although we did not have a time limitation, we primarily focused on research on queer migration since the collapse of Communism, which opened up historic opportunities for the countries that are the subject of this article to construct their human rights politics in a completely new way. Therefore, we were able to cover all, or almost all, the existing research, as this is a rare research topic.

We structured the country examples based on the gathered data, focusing on queer migration. This included research into both emigration and immigration, and an examination of the dominant Roman Catholic Church's role in sexual citizenship aspects such as same-sex marriage or partnership, as well as sex education.

4. Setting the Scene: Religiosity, Sexuality, and Migration in Three Countries

The first important issue is that the three countries have high religious affiliation populations, with the Catholic Church having a dominant position. According to Pew Research Center data (2017), religious belonging is remarkably high (93% in Croatia, 94% in Lithuania, and 96% in Poland), while belonging to the Catholic Church is 84% in Croatia, 75% in Lithuania, and 87% in Poland. Unlike many other European countries, where belonging is not always followed by Church participation, monthly religious service attendance is also high, with the partial exception of Lithuania: 40% in Croatia, 27% in Lithuania, and even 61% in Poland.

High religiosity is coupled with rather negative attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ people. The same source ([Pew Research Center 2017](#)) revealed that the statement that homosexuality should not be accepted by society is supported by 48% of Croats, 69% of Lithuanians, and 47% of Poles. Same-sex marriage is opposed by 64% of Croats, 85% of Lithuanians, and 59% of Poles. Younger people were more tolerant in their attitudes; however, the difference between younger people and the whole population was not very significant.

Consequently, LGBTQIA+ people face problems in openly showing their sexual orientation. While 51% of EU-27 citizens said that they are now fairly, or very open, to being LGBTQIA+, the same opinion is shared by only 28% of Croats, 21% of Lithuanians, and 34% of Poles ([FRA 2024](#)). Similarly, 53% of the EU-27 citizens said that they avoided often or always holding hands with same-sex partners, a view that was expressed by 78% of Croats, 67% of Lithuanians, and 72% of Poles. Another very relevant fact is that discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals is not only widespread but is firmly rooted in the idea that people with different sexual orientations do not deserve the same rights. While 69% of respondents in the EU-27 shared the view that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, the same view was shared by only 35% of Croats, 29% of Lithuanians, and 41% of Poles ([European Union 2023](#)).

A different picture emerges from data on the legal position of LGBTQIA+ individuals. According to the Rainbow Index, which ranges from 0 to 100%, and which is based on 74 criteria reflecting legal and policy-based situations for LGBTQIA+ individuals, Malta occupies the first place among EU countries (87.84%) and Poland occupies the last (17.5%).

Croatia's index (50.07%) is close to the EU average (50.61%), while Lithuania's score is 27.61% (ILGA Europe 2024).

In sum, three countries follow the general pattern that Eastern Europeans tend to be more religious as well as more conservative on sexuality issues than Western Europeans (Pew Research Center 2017, 2018; Freude and Bosch 2020).

In terms of migration, all three countries have traditionally been emigrant (sending) countries. In Croatia, in the last 35 years, migration patterns have been related to the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995), and, in general, the complicated post-communist social transformation. The emigration intensified after Croatia joined the EU in 2013 and negative net migration peaked in 2017. However, since the 2020s, the migration pattern has changed considerably. Due to a labor shortage, there has been a significant increase in immigrants from distant countries, particularly those from Asia.

Also related to post-communist social transformations, Lithuania's low wages were usually a primary push factor for emigration. Emigration surged when Lithuania joined the EU in 2004; emigration numbers remained high until 2020, when the situation started to change due to the return of Lithuanian emigrants and labor-based immigration, especially from Central Asian countries. Lithuania has also seen a significant increase in immigration from Ukraine and Belarus since 2022, caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Poland saw a significant exodus following the fall of communism, when the high unemployment rate and economic opportunity were the key motivators. Poland's 2004 admission to the EU was an important milestone, when the free labor movement contributed to further emigration. Poland has changed from a country of emigration to a popular immigration destination, particularly for people from Asia and neighboring Eastern European countries (like Ukraine and Belarus). Immigration is anticipated to continue to be essential in addressing labor shortages in Poland as the country experiences economic expansion and an aging labor force.

5. The Roman Catholic Church and LGBTQIA+

The Roman Catholic Church is a religious organization that has been criticized for its position towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. In the second half of the twentieth century, in response to feminist, lesbian, and gay movements, the Roman Catholic Church introduced the doctrine of complementarity, which stated that humans are defined as women and men and that marriage must be restricted to heterosexual people (Case 2016; Butler 2024). Various Church documents illustrate its teachings regarding homosexual relations, which are seen as a moral evil; at the same time, homosexuality is not condemned in itself, and it is suggested that homosexual people should be approached with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.²

Significant change was marked with the publication of *Fiducia supplicans* [Supplicating Trust], subtitled "On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings" (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2023b). This declaration has sparked public debates, as it allowed Catholic priests to bless couples who are not considered to be married according to church teaching, including same-sex couples. Similarly, in the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith document, "Answers to Several Questions from His Excellency, the Most Reverend José Negri, Bishop of Santo Amaro, Brazil, Regarding Participation in the Sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony by Transgender Persons and Homosexual Persons", it is stated that transgender people could be baptized, be godparents at baptism, and be witnesses at weddings, so long as such situations would not cause scandal (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2023a). Furthermore, this document indicated that a cohabiting homosexual Catholic could be a godparent under the priest's prudence, with the understanding that things would be "different" if the

person was not only “cohabiting” but also notoriously “more uxorious”—that is, in a sexual relationship. Documents like these illustrate the Catholic Church’s institutional approach, where teachings related to LGBTQIA+ issues are explained and particular situations are elaborated upon without necessarily introducing new guidelines, such as, for instance, Pope Francis’ famous phrase “Who am I to judge?” in his 2013 statement. Despite the Church’s stable position towards LGBTQIA+, internal attempts to initiate a discussion about change are also visible (J. Martin 2018), as well as the development of ecumenical queer theology and its impact on theologians and believers (Brintnall et al. 2017).

The reception of the Church’s official statements depends on the country, social circumstances, and local leadership. While parishes in some places, such as, for instance, Germany, are welcoming of the decision regarding same-sex couple blessings, others, like many in Africa and Brazil, are vocal in their opposition (Augustyn 2024). In Central and Eastern European contexts, there is a high mobilization against so-called gender ideology, which includes opposition to the equal rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Graff 2014; Butler 2024; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Takács et al. 2022).

In the following sections, we will discuss three examples of queer migration situations as well as research on the topic in Croatia, Lithuania and Poland. In each case, we will pay an attention to the position and the role of the Catholic Church.

6. Queer Migration in Croatia

Queer migration in Croatia has been studied only sporadically, in a limited scope. This reflects the broader neglect of LGBTQIA+ individuals as a distinct social group. The traditional features of Croatian society, such as national pride, Catholicism, masculinity, and heroism, were reinforced during the nation- and state-building process of the 1990s, amid war circumstances (Marinović Jerolimov and Zrinščak 2006; Stubbs and Zrinščak 2009; Grzymala-Busse 2015). Consequently, early research into queer migration focused on the political and social climate of that era (Hodžić 2010, 2017). Although same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized in 1977, and the first gay and lesbian organizations emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many of these groups were also active in anti-war movements. This dual activism led to their being labeled not only as “anti-normal” but also as “anti-Croatian”. The hostile social environment—strongly influenced by Catholicism—prompted some publicly visible gay and lesbian activists to emigrate (Hodžić 2010, 2017; see also Bilić and Kajinić 2016).

The political climate began to shift in the 2000s with the election of the first center-left government in post-communism and the start of Croatia’s Europeanization process. However, social attitudes have been slow to change. Croatia’s relatively late accession to the EU in 2013, compared to other Central and Eastern European countries, complicated the interplay between border openness and strict pre-accession immigration controls. Hodžić’s (2010, 2017) fieldwork recounts the case of a young gay man from Zadar who faced challenges traveling to Austria and then extending his stay with his partner there, exemplifying the complex intersections of borders, sexual orientation, and citizenship. This highlights the necessity of deconstructing citizenship as a heteronormative construct (Richardson 1998).

Some research on migration motives touches, albeit briefly, on sexual orientation. A 2021 study examining the experiences of 500 Croatian emigrants revealed that one respondent criticized the migration discourse for neglecting social issues: “You are focusing too little on social problems, e.g., I left the country because of homophobia to which I was exposed as a gay person” (Ružić et al. 2023, p. 96). In another study involving 15 participants, one cited the lack of rights for same-sex couples, such as marriage and adoption, as a primary reason for emigration (Velhes 2021, p. 35).

Research has also challenged the oversimplified view of a spatial hierarchy between conservative rural areas and liberal urban centers (Butterfield 2018). Space and the experience of being “out” are not static; LGBTQIA+ individuals continuously navigate and negotiate their identities within environments often perceived as hostile, seeking spaces that offer the promise of a better life (Butterfield 2018).

Class has emerged as an important analytical category in studies of queer migration. For instance, a case study on LGB migrants from Central and Eastern Europe living with same-sex partners and/or raising children in Belgium and the Netherlands highlights how migration can be a liberating and transformative experience. However, it also emphasizes the importance of considering other social dimensions, such as class, which the study explored in depth (Vučković Juroš 2022, 2024).

SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) asylum cases remain severely under-researched in the Croatian context. The limited research available reveals that these cases are treated like any other asylum applications, with adjudicators lacking specialized knowledge about the unique cultural and social dynamics of SOGI asylum claims, and about their countries of origin. This gap undermines the fair treatment of LGBTQIA+ asylum-seekers (Žeravčić 2022).

As immigration to Croatia is a relatively recent phenomenon, and as scholarly focus on queer migration remains scarce, there is currently no research exploring whether sexual orientation motivates immigration to Croatia or how LGBTQIA+ migrants navigate their identities within Croatian society.

Contemporary research on queer migration occurs within a deeply polarized social environment. On one side is the gradual liberalization of values and improvements in legal protections for LGBTQIA+ individuals, as evidenced by Croatia’s higher ranking on the Rainbow Index compared to Lithuania and Poland (ILGA Europe 2024). On the other side is a pronounced backlash, particularly since the 2010s, marked by the rise of right-wing associations opposing so-called “gender ideology”—a euphemism often used to challenge gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights (Vučković Juroš et al. 2020; Čerman and Vučković Juroš 2023). This opposition is strongly backed by the Catholic Church.

Key examples of Church-supported backlash include opposition to sex education in schools (2012); support for the 2013 constitutional referendum defining marriage strictly as a union between a man and a woman; and resistance to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 due to claims that it introduced gender ideology into the legal system. Additionally, the Church opposed the 2020 Constitutional Court decision allowing for registered same-sex partners to adopt children. Notably, the *Fiducia Supplicans* declaration and other statements by Pope Francis advocating for compassion for gay individuals were met with silence from Croatian bishops. A rare exception was Mate Uzinić, then Archbishop Coadjutor of Rijeka, who on 17 May 2021—International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia—quoted *Amoris Laetitia* and issued a public apology to gay people who feel rejected by the Church, calling for the respectful pastoral care that the document endorses (Zrinščak 2021).

7. Queer Migration in Lithuania

As with Croatia, research on queer migration is also scarce in Lithuania. One study of LBT women revealed an intersection of migration and the concept of citizenship. While all the study participants were Lithuanian citizens, they did not consider their citizenship as full, especially related to their right to create a family and marry, which was one of the factors for emigration (Miškinytė 2023). Another study revealed how individuals might negotiate belonging through narrativization; narratives of Lithuanian LGBQ persons were combined with the prevailing nationalistic narrative to create a special politics of belonging,

where these individuals became represented in the latter. Together, the elements aided in the participants' efforts to "homosexualize the national canon" (Kulpa 2011, p. 48), creating a welcoming image of Lithuania as a "Rainbow Nation" and mending the rift between them and their country. Yet, interestingly, LGBTQIA+ Lithuanians who had the chance to interact with LGBTQIA+ cultures while residing, working, or traveling in "old Europe" (Case 2009) did not consider these experiences to be crucial in helping them to feel like they belonged in Europe. Even if the study participants identified as LGBTQ, the story of Rainbow Europe did not help them feel like they belonged in the LGBTQIA+ welcoming West. Instead, a sense of *not* belonging was stressed; other factors of their social location, such as their age group, place of residence, or immigrant status, rather than their sexual self-identifications, were less important (Kamarauskaitė 2024).

Since the decriminalization of homosexuality in Lithuania in 1993, LGBTQIA+ individuals have faced social exclusion due to the dominating cultural and social norms supported by the powerful traditional and conservative actors in Lithuanian society. Frequently, Lithuanian religious and political elites base their antagonism towards LGBTQIA+ individuals on the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and its approach to homosexuality practices. The political influence of the dominating Roman Catholic Church and its satellite organizations on political positions related to LGBTQIA+ persons, the backlash of the implementation of LGBTQIA+ rights since joining the EU, and the status of secondary citizens are some of the challenges that LGBTQIA+ individuals face in Lithuania (Tereškinas 2010).

The open public conflict between LGBTQIA+ individuals and organizations and the Roman Catholic Church has eclipsed any discussion about the religiosity of LGBTQIA+ individuals and the implementation of human rights in general (Ališauskienė 2017). Lithuanian media analysis showed that the Roman Catholic Church continued to be an essential actor in the field of human rights and changed its focus from the individual's rights to freedom of conscience and religion to the rights to life, focused on the fight against abortion and euthanasia (Ališauskienė and Kuznecovienė 2012). After Lithuania's entry to the EU, the Church in Lithuania began to promote traditional family values and lobby against LGBTQIA+ human rights and has thus consequently ignored the existence of queer Catholics. In only around 2017, an initiative from the Franciscan order to provide safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals and their parents within the Church in the capital city of Vilnius became public. The 2018 research on LGBTQIA+ religiosity showed the existence of internal queer migration from rural areas to the larger towns to join other LGBTQIA+ individuals and avoid social control and exclusion in rural areas due to their sexual identity (Ališauskienė 2018).

In 2019, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania stated that same-sex marriages conducted abroad and between Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian citizens should be legalized in the country. During the 2020 Parliamentary election, the newly founded liberal political party, Freedom Party (in Lithuanian 'Laisvės partija'), set as one of its objectives the legalization of same-sex partnerships within 100 days of being in power. After their successful elections, the party joined the ruling coalition; however, their objective was never achieved, as the issue sparked deeply polarizing societal debates and received ample resistance from conservative social groups and the Roman Catholic Church leadership. Following Pope Francis' encyclical "Amoris Laetitia," in 2022, the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference stated that the laws regulating civil partnership should not equate this union to the family created by marriage (Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2022). This position was a reaction to the draft of the law of civil unions, which was not passed by 2024. In light of these developments, where the human rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals remain legally neglected, the possibility of emigration continues to be perceived as the sole option for some queer people seeking to live in dignity with respect to their family lives.

The 2021 migration from Belarus to Lithuania wave opened gap in knowledge, public perception and sensitivity towards queer migrants. According to the Lithuanian media, many queer individuals among the migrants to Lithuania had psychological problems as they were retreating from violent environments in their home countries. Meanwhile Lithuanian migration officers lacked knowledge concerning SOGI asylum claims (Danauskienė 2021; Vorobjovaitė 2021). During the 2021–2022 migration wave, the Lithuanian migration department was criticized for not separating vulnerable LGBTQIA+ migrants in the temporary accommodation center for foreigners from other groups with negative attitudes and stereotypes about queer individuals (LR Seimo kontrolierių įstaiga 2022).

8. Queer Migration in Poland

Research specifically addressing LGBTQIA+ migration in Poland is similarly limited. The 2021 quantitative survey showed that 11.8% expressed intentions to do so, with the majority (88.2%) indicating otherwise. Among those planning to emigrate, gay men comprised the largest group (13.2%), followed by queer individuals (12.9%), trans persons (12.8%), and bisexual men (11.4%). Conversely, lesbian women (10.9%), bisexual women (10.7%), and asexual individuals (10.2%) showed less interest in emigration. Those considering relocation tended to be young and residing in socially conservative regions. Key drivers of emigration included experiences of discrimination (34.3%), employment opportunities (19.7%), and lack of access to education (Winiewski and Świder 2021).

Another study showed that the decision to migrate often stemmed from the perception of greater social acceptance for LGBTQIA+ individuals in Western countries than in Poland. One of the study participants shared, “We usually go abroad for holidays, to southern or western Europe. There, things like that [public displays of affection] are not an issue” (Jabłońska and Gawryś 2013, p. 85). Incidents of violence and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals for the same behavior persist in Poland (Nigdy Wiecej 2024).

Queer migration considerations were seldom addressed in public discourse, while the LGBTQIA+ media raised concerns of same-sex couples regarding the recognition of their parental status in other EU countries, in contrast to the situation in Poland. These and other challenges weighed heavily on the decision-making process for LGBTQIA+ individuals contemplating leaving Poland or choosing not to return (Biedroń 2023).

Despite a gradual increase in social tolerance towards LGBTQIA+ individuals and their rights, 2019 marked a significant reversal. Politicians rapidly shifted public opinion, with 41% of Poles believing that LGBTQIA+ individuals were “flaunting their sexual orientation”; 36% viewing them as “insulting Poles’ religious beliefs”; and 27% considering them “a danger to the family” (Czerwiński et al. 2020). Other influential figures, including Catholic Church officials, the media, and various organizations, fostered these sentiments. Public television aired prejudiced materials such as the film *Invasion*. At the same time, fundamentalist organizations intensified efforts, leading to the creation of “LGBT-free zones” and attempts to ban sex education from schools. In 2019, the law protecting LGBTQIA+ clients against discrimination in the service industry was abolished and a record number of local authorities attempted to ban Equality Marches. Violent acts escalated, including attempts to place explosive devices at marches and organized attacks on participants (Winiewski and Świder 2021). Prejudice-motivated violence significantly impacts the quality of life of LGBTQIA+ individuals, with victims being more prone to depression and low self-esteem (Winiewski and Świder 2021).

The 2019–2020 years witnessed unprecedentedly hostile and dehumanizing statements from leaders of the Catholic Church against LGBTQIA+ individuals. These statements, coupled with discriminatory opinions and behaviors, often amplified during election campaigns by right-wing politicians employing religion-based rhetoric, have had significant

ramifications. The overwhelming majority of LGBTQIA+ Poles perceived the Catholic Church as an important political force opposing freedom and civil rights, attributing this stance to the increased frequency of discriminatory and dehumanizing experiences in various aspects of life and, subsequently, to the deterioration of their mental health (Skowrońska and Poniat 2021).

An analysis of official statements by Polish bishops, with a focus on 35 excerpts concerning the LGBTQIA+ community, revealed varying degrees of opposition within the Polish Episcopal Conference, which has 150 members. While only two archbishops issued critical and harsh statements, such as statements about the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals from pastoral care, others were silent but did not openly oppose such statements (Skowrońska and Poniat 2021). At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church is losing its members (Krzyżak 2020).

The situation of SOGI asylum-seekers in Poland is still in a grey zone. In 2019, two individuals from Morocco and Uganda were granted asylum due to their homosexual orientation (Biuro Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich 2019). In 2024, queer refugees continued to face challenges regarding legal protection and access to housing, healthcare, and the labor market (ORAM 2024).

9. Conclusions

This paper has sought to illuminate the complex and often overlooked topic of queer migration in three post-communist countries—Croatia, Lithuania, and Poland—where Roman Catholicism exerts significant social and political influence. These societies institutionalize and culturally reinforce heteronormativity, resulting in the marginalization of migration driven by sexual orientation—a phenomenon largely neglected by both public discourse and academic research.

Grounded in a literature review and existing research from the three countries, this study first contextualized the issue by comparing data on religiosity, societal attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ individuals, and prevailing migration patterns. It also briefly examined the role of Catholicism, particularly under the papacy of Pope Francis, which raised expectations among LGBTQIA+ communities due to perceived shifts in the Church's discourse on homosexuality. However, developments, such as the acknowledgment of LGBTQIA+ dignity, the non-condemnation of homosexual practices, and the provision of blessings for same-sex partnerships, have been met with vocal resistance from local churches, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. While this paper does not aim to comprehensively analyze the relationship between the Catholic Church and LGBTQIA+ individuals, it uses the lens of queer migration to explore the intersections among Catholicism, migration, and LGBTQIA+ issues.

The research and public debates from these three countries confirm that queer migration remains underexplored. Nevertheless, existing studies affirm that sexual orientation is an important, albeit often hidden, dimension of migration, linked to broader human rights concerns and social dynamics within specific national contexts. The overarching social climate—shaped by communist legacies and the enduring influence of Catholicism—has been instrumental in both challenging LGBTQIA+ rights and maintaining silence around queer migration. The Catholic Church continues to be a central institution in the analyzed countries opposing LGBTQIA+ rights, contributing to the public lack of knowledge on queer migration. However, the complex interaction between Catholicism and other societal factors, including each country's development trajectory, warrants more systematic study.

All three countries have experienced liberalization, particularly in connection with EU membership. In Croatia, this liberalization is evident in its relatively high position on the Rainbow Index, which broadly evaluates the legal status of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Yet, such legal progress often contrasts with persistent social conservatism. Backlashes against liberalization are particularly evident in Poland's establishment of so-called "LGBT-free zones" and the widespread mobilization against "gender ideology" across all three nations. These reactions should be further analyzed for their relationship with queer migration trends.

The paper affirms several insights from the literature on queer migration (e.g., [Gorman-Murray 2009](#); [Mole 2021](#)). First, migration is influenced by a multiplicity of factors; while economic motivations may dominate, sexual orientation is a significant, though sometimes concealed, motivator—revealed before, during, or after migration. Researchers should avoid oversimplifying migratory trajectories and instead prioritize the lived experiences and voices of queer migrants. Second, relocation to seemingly more liberal environments—whether within national urban centers or through international migration—is a key factor influencing migration decisions. Nonetheless, assumptions about a spatial hierarchy of tolerance are overly simplistic; personal circumstances and social location heavily mediate migration and return decisions. Third, sexual citizenship remains a contested and polarizing issue, as well as the role religion, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, plays. Preliminary findings suggest that navigating borders and citizenship intersect with other identity dimensions, particularly class. Future research should investigate these intersections more thoroughly, including the roles of ethnicity and race. Fourth, although still limited, all three countries have begun to encounter SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) asylum claims, especially in the context of newer immigration trends. As these countries increasingly become destinations rather than sources of migration, queer migration is likely to take on new dimensions—further underscoring the need for continued and expanded research, as well as adaptation by states and societies to it.

In conclusion, this paper calls for increased academic and policy attention to queer migration in Central and Eastern Europe. Far from being a marginal issue, queer migration offers a critical lens through which to examine contemporary social, cultural, and political dynamics.

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Notes

- ¹ In this text we will use the umbrella term LGBTQIA+ (i.e., Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, intersex, asexual and others) to approach the existing diversity of gender identity and sexual orientation individuals in contemporary societies. We will use LGBTQIA+ and queer terms as synonyms in this paper.
- ² For more information see: Roman Catholic Church Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (further CDF) *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics (Persona Humana)* (1976), letter to all bishops *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Person* (1985), *Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons* (1992),

Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992), and the Congregation for Catholic Education document *Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (2019).

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