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**Transnational Solidarity and LGBTQ+ Rights in Slovakia: The Role of  
Politicization in Seeking Solidarity Abroad**

**Master's Thesis**

**Author: Michaela Weberová**

**Email address: [michaela.weberova01@estudiant.upf.edu](mailto:michaela.weberova01@estudiant.upf.edu)**

**Supervisor: Juan Carlos Triviño Salazar**

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## **Transnational Solidarity and LGBTQ+ Rights in Slovakia: The Role of Politicization in Seeking Solidarity Abroad**

**Abstract:** *This master thesis investigates the relationship between the politicization of LGBTQ+/queer rights and the modes of transnational solidarity pursued by LGBTQ+ activists in the context of Slovakia. The study identifies that the increasing visibility of queer rights in the public discourse leads to polarization and political backlash against activists and civil society organizations (CSOs) that focus on LGBTQ+ rights. Following the trend of politicization, CSOs pursue solidarity abroad. I conduct a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with local CSOs operating in Slovakia. The results highlight three main modes through which organizations seek transnational solidarity concerning the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia: first, by pursuing resources and financial means as compensation for the public underfinancing of the nongovernmental sector in Slovakia. Secondly, activists seek solidarity as a form of encouragement and to generate pressure on the opposing political forces. Finally, the search for transnational solidarity constitutes a response to the local adaptation of global political backlash against LGBTQ+ rights. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between local activism in a relatively hostile political environment and the pursuit of transnational solidarity.*

### **Introduction**

It is often thought that transnational activism amplifies the cause and provides new opportunities for domestic activists to attain wider solidarity for their cause, both on a national and supranational level. However, such conceptualization needs to describe the complex relationship between the transnational and national spheres of activism. While transnational solidarity helps activists emphasize their demands in the international sphere, its pursuit reflects the challenges present at the national level. This could potentially affect the course of action and proximity of domestic activists to transnational networks. This research aims *to examine civil society mobilization in the transnational sphere concerning the politicization of social issues at the national level.* I operationalize this aim through the following question: To what extent does the politicization of LGBTQ rights on the Slovak national level promote transnational solidarity among civil society organizations?

To explain the effects of politicization and political backlash on the pursuit of transnational solidarity I conceptualize three key concepts: solidarity, politicization, and modes of transnational activism. Here, I employ the definition of solidarity by Lahusen et. al. who describe it as ‘a disposition and practice of help or support towards others’ (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021 pp. 5-6) and politicization as ‘an increasing contentiousness of decision-making in the process of regional integration’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2012). By ‘transnational’ I understand a form of activism that ‘transcend[s] national borders’ (Tarrow, 2005) Concerning the political environment of the case study, I analyze transnational solidarity through the lens of European Integration and Europeanization. I operate with an assumption that the strategies and modes of transnational solidarity pursued by local civil society organizations (CSOs) are conditioned by the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights and activism. However, the increasing salience of LGBTQ+ rights in the political sphere is habituated by the prominence of support or backlash, therefore the subject of the study is not only the visibility of the LGBTQ+ themes but *the political discourse* through which public figures and society view LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia.

LGBTQ+ rights constitute a highly polarizing theme in Slovakia. While the European Integration of Slovakia led to the creation of protection laws from identity-based discrimination, within the last 20 years of its EU Membership LGBTQ+ people have witnessed multiple attempts to impede their rights. The process of politicization itself does not predetermine the polarization around grievances, however, what creates the demarcating line between solidarity and opposition is the political context in which the issue becomes politicized. The case of Slovakia presents a unique opportunity to examine not only the effects of polarization on transnational solidarity but also how the sociopolitical environment preconditions the public discourse of LGBTQ+ rights. Queer activism presents a specific set of demands, such as equal marriage or gender recognition, that are frequently challenged by conservative, religious, nationalist, and far-right groups, which enjoy substantial popularity in a predominantly Catholic and conservative country such as Slovakia.

To analyze the relationship between politicization and transnational solidarity in the context of LGBTQ+ rights, I organize the thesis in the following manner; first, I conduct a comprehensive literature review on transnational solidarity and forms of activism as well as the effects of politicization on the CSOs. Secondly, I present a theoretical framework through which I introduce theoretical terminology that I operationalize in my analysis of CSOs and

transnational solidarity. Then I explain the history, main policies, and key events concerning LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia in the case study section, followed by methodology. I conducted 4 semi-structured interviews with local CSOs that pursue, oversee, or analyze LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia. I applied thematic analysis of the interviews to investigate commonalities and differences in the strategies of pursuit of transnational solidarity between the participating organizations. Then I present the results of the interviews and the discussion which forwards the interpretation of the findings. The findings of the analysis show that LGBTQ+ organizations and activists inform their strategies in the search for transnational solidarity in three ways; by pursuing resources as a result of lack of public spending on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), by compensating for the lack of solidarity on a national level and generating pressure on public figures and lastly, by appropriating their work to global political backlash against LGBTQ+ rights which found its success in the Slovak political environment. Lastly, I summarize the findings and discuss the limitations of the study in the conclusion.

## **Literature Review**

### *Solidarity in the national and transnational environment*

What accounts for solidarity and how do civil society organizations apply it? In broad terms, solidarity is an ‘act of support in meeting people’s needs’ (Baglioni & Montgomery, 2020, p. 98). Lahusen et.al. argues that solidarity is a form of disposition and practice of care towards others (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021, p. 5). Solidarity mobilizes groups around shared grievances or ‘objective deprivations’, though it has also been contested whether a grievance constitutes a necessary precondition for solidarity to occur (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Arnsperger and Varoufakis distinguish solidarity from altruism or a feeling of reciprocity. Instead, they propose a more profound definition that it is an act of sacrificing something one values ‘on behalf of some targeted group of people’. In contrast, such sacrifice tends to lose comfort and ‘peace of mind’ (Arnsperger & Varoufakis, 2003).

The reason that accounts for loss of comfort when expressing solidarity is two-fold. First, in the case of a general and non-specific type of issue, solidarity evokes little to no opposition. However, a more specific and targeted appeal for solidarity creates more room for the contestation of the demands that the particular group seeks (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis,

2021, p. 17). Hence, the relationship between the distinctiveness of solidarity and its contestation is inverse; more pronounced demands for acts of support lead to less reciprocation of the acts of support among the civil society. This relationship is highlighted further by the second reason for challenging solidarity; when an issue reaches significance within society or touches upon a politically salient issue, it becomes politicized and consequently, disputed. As a result, it is not only the issue that is politicized, but the solidarity movement itself, together with its strategy, actors, and means of protest (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021, p. 11).

What distinguishes transnational solidarity movements from the national level is whether the grievance or issue around which the group mobilizes transcends borders and in principle, cannot be tied to a specific area or a country. For example, activism around refugees, disability, or minority rights is usually tied to a greater transnational sphere of civil society organizations as the issues are not area-specific and revolve either around general principles or experience of the same issue in multiple national contexts (Baglioni & Montgomery, 2020; Fernández, Lahusen, & Kousis, 2020; Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021). Transnational solidarity can take various forms, either a top-down (from institutions to organizations and individuals) or bottom-up (from local to transnational level) process, a collaboration between activist circles, or a beneficiary relationship between organizations (Ayoub, 2012; Fernández, Lahusen, & Kousis, 2020).

### *Translating the local to global*

Some scholarship highlights concerns about whether solidarity can be effectively conveyed and its demands properly translated from a national level into the transnational sphere. For example, Baglioni's and Montgomery's study on transnational civil society organizations finds that although cross-border cooperation between organizations is common, the scope of their work is mainly centered around the area in which they operate (Baglioni & Montgomery, 2020 p. 98). Minami (2018) identifies three main impediments to pursuing global support for a local cause; firstly a misrepresentation occurs when local actors gain support from international organizations that fail to embody the local voices. Secondly, a misperception occurs when the local activists introduce global norms to local audiences unfamiliar with the terminology and international actors. Lastly, a mismatch leads to local

movements mistakenly identifying international rights movements for their aims, overshadowing other actors in the transnational sphere of activism (Minami, 2018).

Part of the problem with matching local movements to transnational ones lies in how transnational solidarity is conceptualized. Özdemir in his study of urban solidarity with refugees and irregular migrants highlights a literature gap in how the majority of the existing research considers cities (and in general, solidarity towards migrants) ‘as monolithic units in the migration governance’ and omits the role of different actors that influence migration policies in each city (Özdemir, 2022 p. 2). Özdemir develops an overarching typology of four analytic categories through which actors provide solidarity; top-down (governance to individuals), bottom-up (CSOs to the governance), hybrid, and limited based on the specific actions of the consecutive local governments and CSOs (Özdemir, 2022 p. 2). The prime example of top-down solidarity is the use of the European Union and its instruments in creating transnational alliances across the Member States (Ayoub, 2013; O’Dwyer, 2012; Holzacker, 2011). Ayoub (2013) highlights how the Europeanization of new Member States led to the creation of new opportunities both for top-down and bottom-up modes of LGBTQ+ activism especially in the Member States with a low track record of LGBTQ+ rights that could now get backing from both EU institutions and countries that enjoy greater support of LGBTQ+ rights.

Solidarity is conditional not only in the pursued strategy but also differs on the geopolitical level. Holzacker identifies three modes of interactions between civil society organizations and the political environment in which they are situated; morality politics (prevalent in Italy and Poland), incremental change (used in the UK’s Stonewall and Hungary), and high-profile politics, which utilizes international governance bodies such as European Union to seek cooperation (Holzacker, 2011). Memorialization initiatives and diaspora involvement also bolster transnational movements. In their study of the Omarska concentration camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Koinova and Karabegović identify a four-stage process through which local organizations at first find an opportunity to seek support beyond their locus, secondly, the local activities become coordinated with transnational NGOs, thirdly, their activities become contextualized in different states and finally, the memorialization shifts from the national to the supranational level (Koinova & Karabegović, 2016).



Tying interrelated movements together is another example of how transnational solidarity can emerge from seemingly local or national issues. Gabriel's and Macdonald's study on NAFTA's inclusion of migrant worker rights to labor rights unexpectedly created novel transnational advocacy for migrant rights and forged alliances between trade unions and migration activists (Gabriel & Macdonald, 2020). The renegotiation process for the NAFTA agreement bolstered labor and migrant rights movements, and by entangling the issues together it amplified demands for migrant workers' rights (Gabriel & Macdonald, 2020 p. 69). However, in other cases, pursuing consensus among varying activist groups can also lead to cleavages if the platform that is supposed to provide an international space for cooperation and group mobilization presents strategic issues to those groups. De Moor highlights how the Paris Climate Summit (COP21) resulted in an 'efficacy dilemma', where the climate activists mobilized against rather than in favor of the COP21, an international platform that was supposed to unite them (de Moor, 2017). In the case of COP21, the underlying issue was that it became apparent to everyone who participated that the summit was unable to resolve the problems it set itself and therefore, it resulted in the erosion of trust between activists and international bodies (de Moor, 2017, p. 1070).

#### *Politicizing activism and civil society organizations*

Politicizing the issue around which activists mobilize creates a gateway to creating new forms of transnational activism. Blühdorn and Deflorian in their analysis of international movements after the 2008 financial crisis examine how the current political landscape reconfigured public discourse and changed social activism to the point that a new theoretical framework is necessary to understand the relationship between re-politicization of activism (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2021). They understand politicization not as a void process but as a re-politicization of political affairs. In the theoretical framework that the authors use, public affairs were becoming heavily depoliticized in the 1990s, and the emphasis in policymaking was put on professionalism and expertise rather than its impact on the political environment (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2021 p. 261). After the stock market crisis in 2008, social movements contributed to the subsequent political crises in neoliberal and technocratic politics and demanded actions that in essence re-politicize the discourse around economic and social issues (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2021 p. 263).

Politicization has also been linked to incremental polarization and the creation of new political conflicts (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2021 p. 263). Apart from the new modes of action for social movements, politicization can also have a detrimental effect on both national and transnational activism. Across the EU's Member States, there has been a trend among the political elite to impede the work of non-profit and civil society sectors and implement securitarian measures on NGOs and voluntary organizations (Glasius, Schalk, & De Lange, 2020; Reggiardo, 2019). Glasius, Schalk, and De Lange in their study of 96 countries observed a rise in illiberal norm diffusion in policymaking regarding NGOs across all continents (Glasius, Schalk, & De Lange, 2020 p. 466).

Backlash as a result of politicization is put not only on civil society organizations but also on minority rights. Within the EU, this is often understood as a part of a wider politicization and backlash against the Europeanization of domestic laws, through which Member States have to implement norms such as nondiscrimination clauses based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Ayoub, 2012; O'Dwyer & Schwartz, 2010). In the study of Poland and Latvia, O'Dwyer & Schwartz found that national identity strongly correlated with the adoption of nondiscrimination norms (O'Dwyer & Schwartz, 2010 p. 240). The politicization of LGBTQ+ rights, however, is not only connected with anti-Europeanization sentiments, it also results from a far right-wing or conservative backlash when certain identities become visible in the political sphere (Ayoub, 2014; Dergić et al., 2022). In his contrast of two European catholic countries, Poland and Slovenia, Ayoub finds better a norm reception for LGBTQ+ rights in Slovenia where conservatism and catholicism have a less formal standing than in Poland (Ayoub, 2014).

While the scholarship identifies how transnational solidarity helps local activists and CSOs to mobilize and spread conscience around an issue, there is a lack of literature on the conditionality of transnational solidarity in the national and local context. As Minami (2018) highlighted the issue regarding the conveyance of local activism into the international sphere, the relationship between transnational solidarity and local activism is mediated by multiple factors determined by the local political context, opportunities, and salience of the issue. This study aims to explain how the public discourse of LGBTQ+ rights determines the quality and strategy used for seeking transnational solidarity by local activists.

## *Local politicization and the subsequent transnational strategies*

This research provides a unique insight into the field of transnational solidarity both in theory and in its empirical analysis. To the knowledge of the author, it is the first study to examine the mediating effects of the local politicization of a particular issue on transnational solidarity. The politicization of activism and its iteration of LGBTQ+ rights has been previously studied mainly concerning either the national or transnational sphere (Ayoub, 2013; Holzacker, 2011; Hughes, Krook, & Paxton, 2015; Koinova & Karabegović, 2016; Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021). However, little attention has been given to the process through which activists access the transnational sphere and how their political environment conditions this process. The theoretical contribution of this master thesis to the scholarship on transnational solidarity lies in the analysis of the conditions that lead to seeking solidarity beyond the local and national and to examine the strategies and type of solidarity that the local activists seek concerning their political environment. While there has been research on transnational LGBTQ+ activism in Poland, Germany, and Slovenia (Ayoub, 2013; Ayoub, 2014 Holzacker, 2011), there has been no study on transnational solidarity or its effect on LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia. As an EU Member State with a high level of political polarization and minimum framework and protection of LGBTQ+ rights it presents an opportunity to examine the incentives of activists and civil society organizations to seek transnational solidarity concerning their political context and strategies which they employ by doing so. Within the parts of the Case Study and Methodology of my thesis, I present a comprehensive summary of the state of LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia and the public discourse around activism and civil society organizations that engage with queer rights.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### *Framing solidarity and politicization*

This research aims to assess how the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights in the context of Slovakia promotes transnational solidarity among civil society organizations. I operationalize Lahusen et. al.'s definition of solidarity 'as a disposition and practice of help or support towards others' (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021 p. 5). The emphasis within the definition is on the word 'practice', as solidarity is understood as an action that promotes virtues such as empathy or altruism (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021 p. 5; Passy, 2001).

Lahusen et. al. denote that solidarity presumes the existence of groups in which people share responsibility toward each other (Lahusen, Zschache, & Kousis, 2021 p. 6). Such responsibility might capture the needs of a diaspora where people share a cultural, national, or regional identity (Koinova & Karabegović, 2016), however, LGBTQ+ individuals constitute an extensively heterogeneous group. Demands of queer activists also significantly vary based on the political context, hence the shared grievances vary not only in extent but also in their content (Ayoub, 2014; Holzacker, 2011; Swiebel, 2009). For example, in Eastern Europe, a backlash against the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights is more prominent than in Western Europe, with less legal coverage of LGBTQ+ rights compared to its Western counterparts (Swiebel, 2009). Scholarship attributes this to an intersection of trends in politics, such as the backlash against Europeanization (Kriesi, 2016), regional conservatism and fundamentalism (Ayoub, 2014), high polarization in a country, or a result of an interplay of all of those phenomena.

Transnational solidarity of LGBTQ+ rights requires the assessment of two dimensions across which its local or regional manifestation differs; *salience or politicization* of the issue in the particular context, institutions, resources, and *strategies* available to pursue solidarity abroad. Whether a particular set of grievances is made significant for seeking solidarity depends on how much the issue provokes contestation in a particular country, with the politicization of the issue having a crucial role in establishing the importance of an issue and seeking solidarity. Through politicization, I understand both; a shift in public discourse from private to public (Dergić et al., 2022) and ‘an increasing contentiousness of decision-making in the process of regional integration’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2012).

Within the scope of this particular research, politicization of LGBTQ+ rights manifests in a two-fold manner. It impacts both the grievance around which activists mobilize and it also politicizes actions of solidarity. The grievance, or identity politicization develops when a particular group starts to share a collective understanding of the structural aspects of shared injustice and desire for social change (Curtin, Kende, & Kende, 2016, p. 267). Curtin et al. highlight that the grievances are not uniformly distributed within the group, as experienced marginalization or privilege reflects one’s intersection of identities and group affiliation, however, the dynamic interplay of identities contributes to greater reflection in activists’ work on the structural oppressions and grievances (2016 p. 267, 282). The common structural grievances for CSOs and activists tackling queer rights across member states are

overcoming discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, legal recognition of the partnerships, and in more recent discourse, gender recognition and access to healthcare for transgender people (Kollman, 2009; O'Dwyer, 2018; O'Dwyer & Schwartz, 2010; Swiebel, 2009).

*The transnational sphere: The EU's role in seeking solidarity beyond the national*

The second analytical dimension used within this study is the transnational sphere, particularly the role of the European Union in pursuit of solidarity beyond the national level. The EU institutions and governance level provide an overarching resource and strategy that is to activists' disposition within the Member States. O'Dwyer and Schwartz argue that LGBTQ+ rights have become more prominent in countries after the EU enlargement due to the inclusion of nondiscrimination clauses in national policies, which provoked antigay mobilization in Poland and Latvia (O'Dwyer & Schwartz, 2010). They frame this contestation as a failure of the Europeanization of policies that aim to protect sexual minorities. The EU has a critical role in establishing a minimum protection framework (via non-discrimination policies) and establishing partnerships between international and national organizations for LGBTQ+ rights in the Member States (Kollman, 2009). Ayoub argues that European Integration provided new opportunities for activists in Member States with weak LGBTQ+ protection and promoted cooperative transnationalism, not only on a top-down level but also by linking national organizations and groups of different Member States (Ayoub, 2012). Ayoub differentiates between horizontal opportunities, which constitute peer-to-peer partnerships between organizations or bottom-up cooperations (from local to transnational), and vertical (top-down) opportunities, which are supplied by European Institutions and international organizations such as ILGA Europe (Ayoub, 2012 p. 280).

Europeanization and European Integration have a critical role in explaining the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights in the case of Slovakia and beyond. Ayoub argues that while European Integration facilitates opportunities on all levels for pursuing solidarity for LGBTQ+ rights, the European Union subsidizes and cooperates with civil society and policymakers mainly through the top-down process of interaction between the EU institutions and their funding mechanisms and the Member States (Ayoub, 2012 p. 280). Della Porta and Caiani describe this process as an 'externalization of protest', where the European level is used as an arena for mobilization (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Employing the European

institutions and legislation for protest and activism highlights the European Union's significance in national politics and it also explains the contestation of EU-related policies and values. Kriesi argues that the politicization of European Integration is 'embedded in national political conflict structures' (Kriesi, 2016 p . 32).

The EU brought LGBTQ+ rights into the spotlight by facilitating and subsidizing cooperations between organizations, however, the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights as a part of the Europeanization process is mediated by another important factor. While LGBTQ+ rights are not in the direct competence of the EU legislature, they are framed to be a subset of values that the EU represents and contested by the political actors who oppose those values. O'Dwyer and Schwartz argue that the anti-LGBTQ+ mobilization can be attributed (apart from the aforementioned failure to Europeanize domestic policies) to illiberal governance and opposition to norm diffusion of the EU's liberal values (O'Dwyer & Schwartz, 2010).

It is not only the LGBTQ+ rights, but organizations that pursue them that become objects of political contestation. A trend has been observed where the activities of NGOs and CSOs have become publicly reprimanded by political figures. Watson and Burles (2018) observe the tendency of state representatives to question the legitimacy of the non-governmental sector, their harassment, and attempts to eradicate and implement regulations on NGOs. They argue that these reprimands are done through a depiction of NGOs as political bodies rather than social or cultural institutions (Watson and Burles 2018 p. 444). Glasius, Schalk, and Lange (2020) attribute the political restrictions on NGOs to illiberal norm diffusion, which the states disseminate through learning from other examples and following techniques and tactics implemented in other places where such reprimands have been implemented successfully.

LGBTQ+ activists' search for transnational solidarity constitutes both a strategy and an incentive to widen their support and improve the public discourse around queer rights. LGBTQ+ rights are not a part of the EU's jurisdiction yet organizations in the Member States rely on the European legislative framework. It is due to the EU's liberal democratic pillar which emphasizes human dignity, human rights, and non-discrimination that activists use European institutions and policies to pursue their policies (Cantó & Arregui, 2022; O'Dwyer & Schwartz, 2010). The political backlash against queer rights in Slovakia is a result of a multifaceted sociopolitical environment where European Integration, its liberal democratic

pillar, and the civic sector are subject to public contentiousness. The next section explains the key events and evolution of LGBTQ+ rights and activism since Slovakia's accession to the European Union.

## **Case Study**

Slovakia constitutes the bulk of Central and Eastern Europe Member States that accessed the EU in the 2004 Enlargement, after fulfilling the conditionality criteria for the EU Membership (European Council & Council of the European Union, 2024). Yet there are persisting nationalist and anti-European trends in Slovakia of which effects can be seen also within LGBTQ+ activism. This section explains the critical events for both LGBTQ+ activism and rights after 2004 and up until the present and explains the choice for the case study.

As a part of the accession procedure, the country adopted an antidiscrimination law in 2004 which condemns discrimination based on multiple conditions, including gender and sexual orientation explicitly named in the law in 2008 (Ministerstvo spravodlivosti Slovenskej republiky, 2004). However, hate speech against LGBTQ+ people is not criminally penalized in Slovakia (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2008). Another legal study of the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights highlights that the criminal penalization of discrimination against transgender people is arguably covered by the antidiscrimination law based on gendered violence (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009).

There is no legislative framework or institution that would allow same-sex partnerships, inheritance, access to view protected health information, or adoptions by same-sex couples. In 2014, the parliament passed a constitutional change in the marital law, which explicitly defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, stirring criticism from LGBTQ+ activists (Burčik, 2014). The law problematizes not only attempts to formalize partnership unions between nonheterosexual couples but also challenges same-sex marriages of foreigners who wish to gain citizenship or permanent residency in Slovakia (Denník N, 2022).

Despite the lack of a legal framework, LGBTQ+ rights are a conspicuous and highly polarizing topic in the political environment of Slovakia. Almost every year during the Bratislava Pride march a counter-event “Pochod za život” (March for Life) led by conservatives against “gender ideology”, abortions, and nonheterosexual partnerships takes place at the same time, whereas in 2016 another counter-protest led by the far-right stirred violence in the city (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020). Studies and rankings on LGBTQ+ rights show that acceptance of queer people is generally lower than in the rest of Europe. In the Special Eurobarometer Survey on LGBTQ+ discrimination only 31%, compared to the EU’s average of 76%, agreed that nonheterosexual people should be given the same rights (European Commission, 2019).

In October 2022, there was a terrorist attack on the Bratislava queer bar Tepláreň where two people died and one was injured (BBC, 2022). While political leaders expressed mourning, many were hesitant to call the murder a terrorist attack, while the lawmakers and LGBTQ+ organizations hoped the shock would persuade conservative voices to extend the rights and protection of queer people (Osvaldová & Zdút, 2022). Instead, retaliation against civil society organizations and proponents of LGBTQ+ rights became more prominent and the government failed to pass a law that would grant a limited partnership institution to LGBTQ+ (Baran & RTVS, 2022). In early 2023 transgender rights activists celebrated the passing of a guideline for health practitioners to not recommend nor command castration and genital surgery to legally recognize change of gender (Zdút, 2023). However, the guideline was shortlived after the snap elections in September 2023 the new government canceled the bill, reversing the previous policy under which transgender people are required to undergo surgery to get their gender recognized, with activists calling this reversal as backward and traumatizing for many who wish to not undergo surgeries (Zdút, 2023).

LGBTQ+ people and activists face legal, societal, and political backlash in Slovakia. As a result civil society organizations primarily focus on improving safety and supporting LGBTQ+ rights. Within the 20 years of accession, there has been little change or improvement in LGBTQ+-related legislation. While the civil society sector is far from being the only one that impacts the legislative processes, the conditions in Slovakia hinder the work of NGOs and CSOs. In April 2024, the Slovak government passed a law proposal into second reading that would grant the opportunity for the Ministry of Interior to directly dissolve organizations that receive funding higher than 5000 eur per year from abroad in case the



organization fails to identify itself as an “organization with foreign support” (Platforma pre demokraciu, 2024; Silenská, 2024). NGOs and activists argue that this violates the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights while copying the Hungarian restrictive NGO law (Platforma pre demokraciu, 2024).

When the local political domain obstructs civil society from engaging and organizing, this is when solidarity starts being sought from abroad (Ayoub, 2013). As Ayoub argues, European Integration opened a new political opportunity structure for countries to mobilize on a European level and to persuade national lawmakers and politicians by creating pressure from the supranational level (Ayoub, 2013). As in Slovakia civil society organizations and activist groups that engage with LGBTQ+ rights experience impeding both the issues and organizing, the case study presents a unique opportunity to look into how CSOs and NGOs operationalize transnational solidarity and if they compensate for the lack of national solidarity by seeking it abroad.

## **Methodology**

This study qualitatively analyzes the effects of politicization on transnational solidarity concerning LGBTQ+ rights, civil society organizations/non-governmental sector that focus on LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy and in the context of Slovak Republic. I treat politicization as an independent variable, whereas I focus particularly on the national politicization of LGBTQ+ rights, advocacy, and the organizations that tackle this issue in Slovakia. Transnational solidarity is understood as the dependent variable, conditioned by politicization of the LGBTQ+ issues and advocacy on the national level.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from 4 distinct civil society organizations that operate in Slovakia and at least part of their focus is on LGBTQ+ rights in the Slovak context. The questions which constituted the structured part of the interview can be found both in Slovak and in English translation in the Appendix part of the thesis. All respondents were either working or volunteering for their respective organizations at the time of the interview. Three of the interviews have been administered with one respondent from their organization and one interview has been made with three respondents from the same

organization. All interviews were conducted in the Slovak language and the subsequent analysis was translated into English.

Both respondents and organizations have partaken in the study voluntarily and have not received any form of compensation for their participation. Respondents and organizations have been made anonymous to protect their identification as both the topic and their work are sensitive in the political context of Slovakia. Organizations have been coded (SK01, SK02, SK03, and SK04) and general information about the areas of their expertise and interest can be found in Table 1 presented below. I implemented a high level of anonymization as the CSO landscape in Slovakia is small and by providing any further specification, organizations or participants could be potentially identified.

<b>Organization's Code</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Characteristics of the Organizations</b>
SK01	1	Educational programs and activism training, human rights reports, safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people, facilitation of the dialogues between public figures, Church representatives and LGBTQ+ people, petitions
SK02	1	
SK03	1	
SK04	3	

*Table 1:* Coding for the participating organizations and their respondents. Characteristics of the organizations refer to the bulk of themes that the CSOs represent together.

The structured part of the interview was divided into three sections: general information about the organization and its relation to LGBTQ+ rights, politicization, opportunities and challenges presented within the sociopolitical context in Slovakia for the organization, and modes of transnational solidarity for the respective organization. Most of the questions were descriptive and asked about the organization's activities and experiences on both national and transnational levels. A small part of the planned questions were also evaluative, for example, I asked each participant how they frame politicization, as there is no definitive consensus on the meaning of politicization, and outside of the academic discourse, it primarily has a negative association with topics being publicly framed as harmful for the political environment (Hooghe & Marks, 2012). I also asked participants to define solidarity,

as the broadness of the term invites different interpretations and results in varying answers across the participants.

I conducted a two-fold thematic analysis of the interviews. I understand thematic analysis as a method for ‘identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing and reporting themes found within a data set’ (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017 p. 2; Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, I evaluate interviews separately and focus on the frequent topics within each consecutive interview. The second part presents the analysis which compares and highlights commonalities, themes, points, and evaluations between the organizations. Both parts of the analysis are informed and reviewed with the existing scholarship on transnational solidarity and the available data, studies, policies within, and articles on the Slovak case. For the transcription of the interview, I used the Cockatoo Transcription Tool. I chose an inductive approach for the thematic analysis, as both the research operates with preliminary assumptions about politicization and transnational solidarity. The key assumption of the study is that the political environment in Slovakia obstructs the creation of a wider national solidarity, causing the organizations to seek some form of solidarity abroad. What type of solidarity they seek depends on the type of obstructions these organizations experience, therefore, questions asked in the interview to some extent reflect this assumption. While I asked respondents to define transnational solidarity and politicization, I implemented conceptualization of both variables from my theoretical framework, and I analyzed responses *vis a vis* the theoretical framework and the available scholarship about the Slovak case study.

## **Results**

### *Analysis of the responses of individual organizations*

The politicization of an issue does not necessarily succeed the polarization, nor does it have to result from direct political contestation of the issue. Stirring visibility around a human rights cause can be the catalyst for political contentiousness. Dergić et. al. (2021 p. 351) argue that ‘one consequence of the problematization and politicisation of...gender, sexuality, and religion is the further stigmatisation and marginalisation of already vulnerable groups’. The respondent from the first interviewed organization (SK01) recalls that the very first Pride organized in Bratislava in 2010 was also the first event that put LGBTQ+ rights at the forefront of political discourse in Slovakia. They note that their organization was founded to start activities ‘which were not done by anyone, or at least not in the quality and quantity in

which we desired to do so'. LGBTQ+ advocacy played a crucial role in the founding of the SK01 while focusing on education and the fight against homophobia.

Within the existence of the organization, they do not recall any major legislative changes that would alleviate the situation of LGBTQ+ people in Slovakia. However, the lack of legislative change does not invalidate LGBTQ+ rights activism nor does it insinuate that advocacy does not affect public consciousness around LGBTQ+ rights. The gap between the increasing political salience of the LGBTQ+ minority and the stagnation of improving the legislative situation and protection of queer people can be attributed to one of the challenges which organizations face in the Slovak context. The rising visibility of queer activism resulted in the polarization of society, which the participant from the SK01 evaluated as one of the biggest challenges in the national sphere. While there has been a minor yet consistent political support for LGBTQ+ rights, it mostly constitutes what they call 'virtue signaling'. Westra defines virtue signaling as an 'act of engaging in public moral discourse in order to enhance or preserve one's moral reputation' (Westra, 2021). The participants discuss how LGBTQ+ rights are mainly discussed as 'substitutional themes':

'The reason why I see the entire politicization [of LGBTQ+ rights] as a negative thing is because some questions or themes are used as a substitution. Society is then divided into two halves as a result of this substitution...And because of that, we ended up in a situation where [LGBTQ+] rights are used as a bad spell or a label.' (SK01)

The respondent from the second organization (SK02) attributes populism and rejection of scientific facts as the main challenge resulting from the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia. They discuss the advancement of Christian conservative narratives where homosexuality is viewed as a 'tendency', gendered terminology is being denied, and the existence of transgender people is misunderstood. Denial and objection to LGBTQ+ rights concerning the Christian conservative could be understood as 'threat perceptions', which Ayoub identifies as 'heightened' in cases where religion is historically embedded into the nation (Ayoub, 2014 p. 337). While these narratives are perpetuated mostly by specific political parties, there are political subjects and individuals even from conservative platforms that are willing to partake in a dialogue with their organization (SK02) and provide support for LGBTQ+ rights to a limited extent.

The respondent from the third organization (SK03) notes that the main challenge for LGBTQ+ advocacy lies in the lack of a ‘strong ecosystem of civil society’ and a ‘culture of constructive feedback’. In the first point, they talk about the overall Slovak civic sector being deprived of skills to lead and fund civil society organizations. The second challenge is rather sociocultural, as the public administration and political representatives are unable to take advantage of criticism:

‘There is no culture of constructive feedback in our society. If you tell someone that they are wrong they will not consider it as an opportunity for progress, but as a personal attack. As a result, it is difficult to communicate with public and state representatives after we tell them they are not doing what they should be doing.’  
(SK03)

The respondents from the fourth organization (SK04) view political challenges in Slovakia as a three-fold issue; inconsistency between the national and the EU and international laws, the lack of praxis of the law, and LGBTQ+ hate-motivated harassment. As an example of a violation of international law, they provide the 2014 constitutional amendment where the marriage is defined as a union between a man and a woman, ‘as we violate international law regarding queer rights’. Both the international and EU laws mainly address decriminalization and protection of LGBTQ+ people from discrimination (European Convention, 2000; United Nations, 2023). Similarly, they criticize the praxis through which medical treatments and surgeries are often necessitated, and medical recognition of gender reassignment is impeded by the medical staff. Transgender people have to prove they have a psychological disorder, a praxis that is considered inhumane, while the medical staff is often unwilling to cooperate and provide healthcare for transgender patients (Dúhový magazín, 2023). The policy guidelines for transitioning have become even more ambiguous as the Minister of Health canceled the previous directive which made gender reassignment surgery unnecessary for legal recognition of gender transition (Ministerstvo zdravotníctva Slovenskej republiky, 2024). The third challenge that constitutes hate speech and violence perpetuated against queer people they attribute as a result of the political environment:

‘We cannot expect that people will stop swearing on and attacking others when the political elites are spreading hate and lies and are searching for a public enemy’.  
(SK04)

### *Common Themes and Challenges between the Responding Organizations*

There have been several points of agreement between the respondents regarding challenges both in national and transnational contexts. The primary domestic challenge that all civil society organizations interviewed highlighted was the lack of resources at the national level. It is not only the financial resources that organizations have to consider, but also a set of social, financial, and political capital which the organization strives to accumulate. McCarthy and Zald (1977 p. 1213) highlight in their scrutiny of the resource mobilization theory the importance of the ‘variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements’. One respondent said that ‘in Slovakia, the resources are insufficient’ leading to competition for the national resources among the organizations and ‘privatization of certain themes’ by organizations (SK01). Another participant noted that ‘unstable and insufficient financing of activities’ constitutes the biggest challenge for LGBTQ+ activists. They claim that given the lack of resources, organizations are not rewarded for cooperation:

‘Organizations are not in any way rewarded for cooperation, instead, they compete for limited resources, therefore there are no synergic effects between them, and [the organizations] are not associating or gathering together for a common cause’. (SK03)

Financial support is one of the most common types of solidarity that all interviewed organizations pursue from abroad. Most of the interviews revealed that the underfinancing of the nongovernmental sector in Slovakia resulted in seeking subsidies and support from European Institutions and Funding programs or other organizations abroad. One respondent highlights that financial support from abroad constitutes the most important type of solidarity an organization can receive from abroad. Other organizations decided to almost fully depend on international resources due to the unstable and infrequent funding from the state.

Underfinancing of NGOs and CSOs is not only an administrative problem but arguably a political one. Government decisions to limit, cut or dismantle funding programs are more than often motivated by limiting and delegitimizing criticism of the political elites and the policies that they implement (Watson & Burles, 2018). An example of this would be

the new law proposal which changes the relationship between the non-governmental sector and the state and gives power to the Ministry of Interior to dismantle NGOs that receive funding from abroad (Silenská, 2024). The Slovak National Party (SNS, Slovenská národná strana) which created this proposal justifies the legislative amendment by claiming that nongovernmental organizations are becoming increasingly political and exerting influence over Slovak politics (Silenská, 2024). Some respondents (SLK02 and SLK03) mentioned the new legislative proposal as potentially obstructive to their work on the national level. SLK03 responds that the proposal would likely concern the majority of the nongovernmental sector in Slovakia, thus organizations would not have incentives to adapt their funding to the new legislation:

‘Even if the current legislation proposed by the SNS party were passed, it would not hinder [receiving funds] as half of Slovak organizations would be labeled as supported from abroad’.

Nongovernmental organizations in Slovakia generally rely on non-state funding, as in 2014 only 4% of overall contracts were publicly subsidized (Svidroňová & Vaceková, 2014). The analysis of the Slovak Ministry of Interior shows that the most commonly perceived obstacle to achieving the NGO’s goals according to civil sector workers is the lack of funding (Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic & The Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Development of the Civil Society, 2020 p. 478). The participants’ responses confirm that public funding of NGOs remains an obstacle and that organizations compensate for the lack of domestic resources by securing funds from the transnational sphere.

The participant from the SK03 argues that it is impossible to detach the financial issues of the civic sector from the political. They attribute part of the cause to the negative association with the LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia:

‘We are not receiving as many resources as we would want to, but considering what’s the theme behind our activism, we see that LGBTQ+ people don’t have it easy [in Slovakia], and as a result, our attempts to receive funds do not lead to massive support.’ (SK03)

Attempts to defund LGBTQ+ activism are observable beyond the nongovernmental sector. The minister of culture, Martina Šimkovičová, has publicly criticized several exhibitions intermediated by the Slovak National Gallery, depicting LGBTQ+ issues, and shut down photography exposition of LGBTQ+ people, a decision which resulted in a wave of criticism both from LGBTQ+ activists and artists in Slovakia (ta3, 2023). A similar decision was made in 2019 when a former minister of culture, Ľubica Laššáková declined to offer a grant to the Slovak Queer Film Festival despite the grant commission recommending to do so (Gehrerová, 2019). Seeking resources in a transnational sphere is a decision influenced by the negative politicization of the themes and work that LGBTQ+ organizations represent and the unwillingness of public representatives to fund projects, organizations, and events that concern LGBTQ+ rights.

The second common challenge that leads to seeking transnational solidarity is the absence of support for LGBTQ+ rights, and activism in Slovakia and the subsequent ‘burnout’ of activists. This finding supports the preliminary assumption that activists pursue transnational solidarity as a compensatory mechanism for its lack on the national level. Some participants argued that transnational solidarity in terms of networking, expressed support, or petitions has a lesser impact on the national sphere than financial and institutional support, nevertheless, all participants expressed that receiving transnational support motivates organizations to continue in their activism:

‘It is maybe interesting that our problems are the same but the solutions are different, so a person can at least share their frustration and tell themselves that yes, even in Poland Hungary it is bad - maybe in a different way, but the frustration can be shared among us.’ (SK03)

One participant claimed that transnational solidarity ‘makes one feel like they’re not alone in it sometimes’, while another organization’s respondent said it ‘provides oxygen when we’re under the water’ (SK02). The respondents from SK04 in contrast with other participants agreed together that solidarity presents one of the most potent advocacy tools, while it also helps avoid a sense of burnout among activists. This observation coincides with a point made by another participant who claims that many activists and workers in the nongovernmental sector ‘leave [their work] for commerce jobs’ due to the low wages and lack of career prospects that the CSO sector offers in Slovakia. The finding concurs with the



Ministry of Interior Analysis where understaffing was found to be the third most reported problem of NGOs in Slovakia (Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic & The Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Development of the Civil Society, 2020 p. 478). Another contributing factor to a sense of burnout is verbal attacks from political figures, whereas transnational solidarity serves as an ‘insurance against harassment’. The participant also highlighted that transnational solidarity helps to dampen the effects of the competitive environment among CSOs in Slovakia, which is also partially responsible for the understaffing and increasing shortage of people working in the non-governmental sector.

Additionally, to providing moral support for the activists, transnational solidarity can also create ‘bad PR’ and generate greater pressure against those who violate human rights, points out one respondent:

‘If international solidarity was lost, we could pack our bags and leave because we wouldn’t have anything else to do. We advocate and exert pressure on public institutions by using advocacy instruments, nevertheless, solidarity is the strongest advocacy tool that we have.’ (SK04)

Transnational Solidarity does not necessarily come only from the regional level. For example, all interviewed organizations are part of transnational networks of organizations working with LGBTQ+ rights. The SK02 participant said that cooperation only within the Visegrad Four countries (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) does not make sense since the state of LGBTQ+ rights is to some extent similar within this region. Instead, what the participant evaluates as a key determinant for the cooperation is the track record of the organization. Similarly, another responding organization noted the absence of regional cooperation within the V4 concerning their organization. However, the SK02 participant also pointed out that communicating issues beyond the region can sometimes pose a problem in explaining why certain things are problematized in Slovakia whereas in other countries these might not pose any issue within the public discourse of LGBTQ+ rights.

In general, transnational solidarity expressed by other than financial or institutional help activists maintain a sense of purpose and exert international pressure on the political actors. Activists use transnational platforms to inform other organizations and civil society abroad about the state of LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia to increase support for their cause. The

particular way in which the political discourse about LGBTQ+ rights plays a crucial role, as national actors have to explain why is their cause creating contentiousness within the particular national context. One participant evaluated this as an advantage in seeking solidarity abroad:

‘The entire world knows...how is the situation [around LGBTQ+ rights] evolving in Slovakia, so we don’t have to persuade donors and other organizations with which we want to cooperate to help us, as unfortunately, the reputation of Slovakia and the direction in which we are heading makes them want to stop us from being the next Hungary concerning LGBTQ+ people.’ (SK02)

It is not necessarily the politicization that conditions transnational solidarity, but the fact that there is a high level of polarization regarding LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia which results in the negative political discourse and obstruction of LGBTQ+ rights. In return, this leads to seeking solidarity abroad to compensate for its lack on the national level.

Transnational anti-LGBTQ+ movements were identified as a challenge both at a national and transnational level by most interviewed participants. One of the respondents talked about the ‘antigender movement’ as a global challenge that found success in Slovakia:

‘This entire movement that strongly attacks transgender people is, I believe, the biggest challenge, as it is both international and extremely well-financed...it constitutes something which we could never fight on an individual level in Slovakia. I believe that it is necessary to cooperate globally to fight it. This is extremely difficult in our circumstances in the nonprofit sector.’ (SK04)

Additionally, the respondent talks about how each country adopts this antigender rhetoric in its particular context, whereas ‘in Italy, they talk about ‘gender ideology’ as something brought there by bad migrants, while in Slovakia it comes from the West and in the United States it is a communist Russian plot’. Participant from the first interviewed organization talked about how the rising visibility of LGBTQ+ minorities was at first problematized by ultraconservative circles, and later by politicians and public figures who joined the opposition to LGBTQ+ activism and started using ‘gender and LGBT ideology’ as an argument against queer rights and gender equality. Scholarship on the use of ‘gender equality’ in the Slovak

context suggests that the term ‘gender ideology’ does not have a set meaning and often it accompanies criticism and opposition to LGBTQ+, women, and abortion rights (Ďurinová, 2015). Maďarová and Harďoš (2022) conceptualize anti-gender movement as a part of an illiberal turn in politics and a populist practice.

## **Discussion**

There are three ways in which the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights conditions the modes of transnational solidarity. First, it is through the politicization of resources that activists and organizations have to seek funding and subsidiaries abroad. Secondly, the civil society sector experiences exhaustion and burnout as a result of politicization of their work. In return, they seek support in the form of international pressure and medialization of the case. Finally, the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights and activism is informed by the international discourse and re-adopted to the local political environment. This leads to further expansion of transnational cooperation between activists as a response to the international antigender and anti-LGBTQ+ backlash.

The analysis and results demonstrate that financing of the civil society sector cannot be viewed outside of the political scope. As the interviews suggest resources available via public funding grants do not constitute sustainable means of financing organizations. As a consequence, activists pursue resources from other organizations and institutions abroad. However, increasing the visibility of the themes that the civic sector pursues also leads to challenging both themes, often in terms of limiting the civic sector. The politicization of activism enacts a cycle, through which underfinanced LGBTQ+ organizations seek solidarity in way of subsidies and resources from abroad, and political actors as a response contest civil society groups and activists by limiting resources and the civic sector through political means.

This finding partially builds upon the securitization theory, where public figures try to ‘securitize’ the political sphere and depoliticize the NGO sector to protect themselves from public scrutiny (Watson & Burles, 2018). It is also supported by the responses of the interviewed organizations, as all organizations made preliminary decisions to secure a substantial part of their resources on a European level. Simultaneously, there are demonstrable attempts to securitize the civic sector in Slovakia. The new law proposal

labeling and limiting nongovernmental organizations receiving funding from abroad is a prime example of the current government's attempt at securitization of the civic sector and the respondents have expressed their fear of accessing resources or dismantling of organizations as a result (Platforma pre demokraciu, 2024; Watson & Burles, 2018). Similarly, events and activities that tackle the lives of LGBTQ+ people are being increasingly defunded.

The second mode of transnational solidarity is through organizations seeking moral support from peers and institutions abroad. While such support does not necessarily produce measurable effects on the improvement of LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia, it prevents activists from becoming 'burnout'. Scholarship on the positive effects of solidarity on activists' mental health agrees with this finding from the results. A study on the effects of youth activism found that 'peer support and a sense of belonging act as salves to burnout', which concurs with the responses from the participants (Conner, Greytak, Evich, & Wray-Lake, 2023). A psychological study concerning Palestinian activists found a positive impact between the increase in perception of the experience of similar emotions and the feeling of burnout (Vandermeulen, Hasan Aslih, Shuman, & Halperin, 2022). As LGBTQ+ rights constitute a highly polarizing theme in Slovakia, activists have to expand on their search for solidarity beyond the national sphere.

Transnational solidarity has a positive effect on LGBTQ+ activism in two ways; first, it promotes a sense of belonging of local activists to a larger international network and it also generates more pressure on the antagonistic groups and public figures who obstruct LGBTQ+ rights. The interviews substantiated the assumption that CSOs in Slovakia heavily rely on European institutions and their legal framework to pressure public figures and political parties to promote LGBTQ+ rights. As Ayoub (2013) notes, European Integration provided new opportunities for the mobilization of LGBTQ+ activists on both horizontal and vertical levels. The EU framework is treated as a buffer for violation of human rights within the Member States and by referring to the EU law and legislation they stir international backlash against opposition to LGBTQ+ rights. It also provides a sense of relief as the interviewed participants consider the EU's support to be motivating and protective from burnout.

The third effect of politicization on transnational solidarity is the adoption of international backlash against LGBTQ+ rights to the local context. Similarly to activists who

seek solidarity within the transnational sphere, public figures, and anti-LGBTQ+ organizations rely on solidarity and support from international circles. Interviewed participants pointed out how the ‘antigender’ movement which found its support constitutes one of the primary challenges in improving LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia. The success of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments can be traced to multiple overlapping factors. Slovakia is predominantly a Catholic, conservative country with a highly polarized voting population with relatively low support for LGBTQ+ rights (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020). While such attributes do not produce backlash against queer people in isolation, they arguably provide a strong foundation for conservative groups to pursue their goals. Additionally, strong associations between conservative groups, public figures, and the Church provide opportunities for the groups to mobilize civil society and influence policymaking processes, an advantage that LGBTQ+ organizations lack in Slovakia (Elif Tektaş & Asuman Özgür Keysan, 2021).

An intriguing phenomenon pointed out by one of the respondents (SK04) was that the global backlash has been appropriated to the Slovak political environment. The politicization of LGBTQ+ rights, therefore, bears its unique form within the Slovak context and affects both the demands and communication of the LGBTQ+ organizations. The antigender movement often serves as a ‘floating signifier’, where its meaning varies across contexts and permits contradictory discourses to arise around the same terminology. This agrees with the SK04’s respondent’s complaint about how the backlash varies across countries in its identified root cause by the conservative groups (Nygren, Martinsson, & Mulinari, 2018). The responses to the rising salience of LGBTQ+ rights are not uniform across the transnational sphere but they are appropriated by each political environment. As the respondent from SK03 notes on the local aspect of queer activism, ‘the problems are the same, but the solutions are different’.

## **Conclusion**

The master thesis explores the relationship between the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia and the modes through which LGBTQ+ activists and civil society organizations (CSOs) seek transnational solidarity. Queer rights as well as activism constitute a subject of political scrutiny that culminates in societal divisions, political and legislative backlash, and overall polarization of the society. The findings of the study also point toward a

general concern of the nongovernmental sector in Slovakia, which is the politicization of CSO funding.

The organizations have adapted to the political environment by seeking transnational solidarity in multiple ways. As a result of the state's contraction and scarcity of public contracts and spending on the civil society sector, organizations pursue most of their resources at the transnational level. Nevertheless, nongovernmental organizations in general have been facing further restrictions and backlash against international funding, an issue that surpasses LGBTQ+ activism and affects the entire CSO sector in Slovakia. The study brings a novel perspective on this process as it conceptualizes the scarce public spending on CSOs as a cyclical issue, where organizations started to seek resources abroad as a result of a lack of public funding and are further motivated to do so due to subsequent politicization of international resources and political backlash that leads to executive and legislative obstructions on the CSOs.

LGBTQ+ organizations and activists condition their pursuit of transnational solidarity in a threefold manner. First, they seek resources abroad due to the aforementioned hindrances on public spending in the nongovernmental sector. A second way through which they pursue support is by compensation for the absence of national solidarity. This dampens the negative effects of political backlash, prevents a sense of burnout, and promotes a sense of unity with activist organizations beyond Slovakia. Additionally, if solidarity is conveyed through international institutions and the European level, it pressures public figures to be more wary of policies that impede LGBTQ+ rights. Finally, the global backlash against queer rights which was appropriated to the political environment in Slovakia necessitates cooperation among activists and institutions at a transnational level. The adaptiveness of the global anti-gender movement requires that the local activists and organizations also adopt their demands and communication and seek support with their specific demands beyond their borders.

In conclusion, the Slovak case study highlights the interconnectedness between transnational and national levels of activism and solidarity and builds upon scholarship that examines the connection between the two modes of activist mobilization. It reveals factors that influence organizations' strategies in pursuing transnational solidarity and analyzes both modes and effects of national politicization of LGBTQ+ rights on activism. The thematic

analysis revealed common struggles among civil society organizations that promote LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia and discovered an underlying political problematization of the entire Slovak NGO sector.

The study contains several indicators as well as constraints on both internal and external validity. It reveals several conditioning variables that affect transnational solidarity through the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews. It closely examines the crucial events, policies, and previous research on the case study of Slovakia to explain the particular way in which those variables condition the pursuit of transnational solidarity. The findings of the study partially build upon previous scholarship on the NGO sector, activism, and transnational solidarity, agreeing with the trend of securitization of the civic sector in Europe and the benefits of seeking transnational solidarity.

The limitation on both internal and external validity is two-fold: the small sample of interviewed organizations and the necessary anonymization of both respondents and the organizations partaken in the study. Given that Slovakia is a relatively small Member State, the CSO sector is also small with limited possibility to seek more respondents. LGBTQ+ people are not a monolithic group and their experiences vary significantly among the group but also from state to state. Hence, the results are likely to be reproduced in countries with similar political environment to Slovakia. Similarly, due to the high level of anonymization, the thematic analysis could not deeply engage with public reports and documents of the organizations to not reveal further details and potentially endanger the work or persons included in the study. Potential limitation on the study arises since interviews and some scholarship and articles used in the study are originally in Slovak. While the author speaks Slovak on the native level, the translations, and language-specific phrases had to be appropriated to the English language, potentially obscuring certain emotions or frustrations conveyed by the participants and articles used within the analysis. Future scholarship on transnational solidarity might, therefore, benefit from examining a case study with a larger setting and potentially utilizing mixed-method analysis to further ensure the validity of the study. Potential novel research on dissecting the effects on the behavior of CSOs due to the politicization of public spending on NGOs could reveal more variables that condition the activists' strategies in such a political environment.

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## Appendix

### *Questions for the Interview*

#### **1st part: General information about the organization**

What does your organization do?

- *Why did the organization start*



- *How does this relate to LGBTQ+ rights?*
- *How does it affect LGBTQ+ policies in Slovakia?*

### **2nd part: Politicisation, Opportunities and Challenges in Slovakia**

What are the challenges to your organization (related to LGBTQ+) and your work?

- *Political Landscape*
- *Politicization*

Do you think there is politicization of LGBTQ+ rights and activism in Slovakia? Does this affect your work in some way?

- *How does it affect their work*
- *How do they frame politicization*

### **3rd part: Transnational Solidarity**

What does transnational solidarity mean to you and your organization's cause?

- *Describe transnational solidarity*
- *How is it relevant to their organization*
- *What are the potential benefits of transnational solidarity/cooperation for your organization?*

Are there any organizations or activists abroad with whom you work?

- *Transnational cooperation*
- *Describe what organizations and what they do*
- *Who is a key transnational partner? Or key transnational cooperation? Why?*

Do you receive any type of funding, training, or personal staff from abroad? How does this help your organization?

- *Alternatively, is there something that could change about this type of transnational support?*

Do you experience challenges regarding your transnational cooperation? If yes, what type of challenges?

- *Challenges at home and how they affect transnational cooperation*

## *Slovenská verzia:*

### **1. časť: Základné informácie o organizácii**

- Čo je náplňou práce Vašej organizácie?
  - *Ako začala táto organizácia*
  - *Ako sa to týka práv LGBTQ+*
  - *Ako to ovplyvňuje politiku LGBTQ+ na Slovensku?*

### **2. časť: Politizácia, príležitosti a výzvy na Slovensku**

- Čo sú výzvy pre vašu organizáciu (týkajúce sa LGBTQ+ práv) a vašu prácu?
  - *Politické pozadie na Slovensku*
  - *Politizácia*
  
- Vnímate politizáciu práv LGBTQ+ ľudí a aktivizmu na Slovensku? Ovplyvňuje to vašu prácu, a ak áno, v akom smere?
  - *Ako to ovplyvňuje ich prácu*
  - *Ako vnímajú politizáciu/Ako si ju vysvetľujú*

### **3. časť: Medzinárodná (“transnacionálna”) solidarita**

- Čo pre vás a vašu prácu znamená solidarita z medzinárodného prostredia?
  - *Nechť ich vysvetliť medzinárodnú solidaritu*
  - *Ako je to relevantné pre ich organizáciu*
  - *Čo sú prípadné benefity medzinárodnej solidarity a spolupráce pre organizáciu?*
  
- S akými organizáciami alebo aktivistickými zoskupeniami v zahraničí spolupracujete?
  - *Medzinárodné spolupráce*
  - *Nechť ich vysvetliť o aké organizácie ide a čo robia*
  - *Ako táto spolupráca vyzerá*
  - *Kľúčový medzinárodný partner? Kľúčová medzinárodná spolupráca? Prečo?*

- Dostávate nejakú formu podpory, tréning alebo financovanie z medzinárodného prostredia? Ako to pomáha Vašej organizácii?
  - *Alternatívne, ak existuje niečo čo by sa na tejto spolupráci mohlo zmeniť*
  
- Existujú pre vás nejaké zábrany/výzvy ohľadom medzinárodnej spolupráce? Ak áno, o aké výzvy ide?
  - *Výzvy na Slovensku a ako ovplyvňujú medzinárodnú spoluprácu*