

Gender, Place & Culture

A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: 0966-369X (Print) 1360-0524 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

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To cite this article: Judit Takács & Ivett Szalma (2019): Democracy deficit and homophobic divergence in 21st century Europe, Gender, Place & Culture, DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2018.1563523](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1563523)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1563523>



Published online: 08 Jul 2019.



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Democracy deficit and homophobic divergence in 21st century Europe

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ABSTRACT

In the present study we focus on the relationship between democracy deficit and homophobic divergence within 21st century European societies. Our main research question is about how social attitudes towards lesbians and gays changed in the examined time period (between 2002 and 2016), and whether there are any signs of convergence regarding these issues in different parts of Europe, characterized by different welfare regimes, a quarter of a century after the political system changes in the countries formerly often referred to as the “Eastern Bloc”.

The empirical base of the study is a dataset including all eight rounds of the European Social Survey, focusing especially on a key variable measuring the agreement level with the statement that *gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish*. For data analyses descriptive statistics and explanatory models were constructed by applying multilevel mixed effect linear regression models. Our results show that there are still significant differences between different parts of Europe regarding social attitudes towards gays and lesbians. However, based on our results we would recommend a more refined division than the East–West dichotomy within Europe.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 March 2018

Accepted 12 December 2018

KEYWORDS

Democracy deficit;
European Social Survey;
homophobia; multilevel
mixed effects models;
social attitudes

Introduction

This article focuses on factors potentially influencing changes in social attitudes towards gays and lesbians in 21st century European societies. We interpret homophobic attitudes as a litmus test for democracy and tolerance, and sexual minority rights as contributing to the well-being of all citizens, irrespectively of their sexual orientation – an approach originally applied by Kon (2010) to Russia.

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[NOTE: Authors want no acknowledgements]

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We refer to the term homophobia in an interpretational framework, which is more intimately connected to heteronormativity than to the concept of homosexuality, carrying several denotations and connotations of behaviour, identity, performance and history, thus homophobia is not seen as a “homosexual only” issue but as a broader one, which can affect lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer and other people (LGBTQ+). Consequently rather than focusing on a specific individual-level form of irrational fear, being largely disconnected from its specific socio-cultural surroundings, we approach homophobia as a specific subset of genderphobia (i.e. the institutionalized and often internalized fear of breaking gender norms) mainly because social rejection of gays, lesbians, queers and non-heteronormatively acting others seems to be part of a broader gender belief system characterized by (hetero)normatively appropriate and usually quite distinct paths of women and men in society.

According to previous research the least “disapproval of homosexuality” is found in European countries with legislation permitting same-gender partners to marry and/or to adopt children (van den Akker, van der Ploeg and Scheepers 2013); the level of supportive attitudes varied in accordance with the current national legislation: countries having already adapted their laws, or in the stage of doing so, received firm support according to their respective public opinions. (We have already emphasized our discontent with the choice and wording of such recurring variables like the one about the “justification of homosexuality” in the European Values Study: unfortunately researchers rarely have the chance to influence the construction and wording of survey variables they use, while in many cases it would be instructive to be able to reconstruct the meaning attribution processes and assumptions on the basis of which the questionnaires were developed. See: Takács and Szalma 2013.)

The existence of legal institutions such as registered partnership and/or marriage as well as joint adoption rights for same-gender partners can prove to be important not only at the interpersonal level of those who want to marry, register a partnership or raise children together but also in broader social contexts. For example, in the case of *Oliari and Others v. Italy*, resulting in a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights stating that the absence of a legal framework recognizing same-sex relationships violates the right to respect for private and family life, as provided by Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights, the applicants submitted empirical evidence showing that “lack of recognition of same-sex couples in a given state corresponded to a lower degree of social acceptance of homosexuality” (ECHR 2015: 28). They also argued that “by simply deferring normative choices to the national authorities, the Court would fail to take account of the fact that certain national choices were in fact based on prevailing

discriminatory attitudes against homosexuals, rather than the outcome of a genuine democratic process guided by the consideration of what is strictly necessary in a democratic society" (ECHR 2015, 28). We believe that the functioning of legal institutions enabling same-sex partnerships and parenting can have longer-term socialization effects too, as direct personal encounters with manifestations of LGBTQ+ "modes of existence" (Bech 1997) in public space can help to familiarize these experiences as ordinary facts of everyday life – similar to increased media exposure of gay and lesbian characters being a potential mechanism contributing to the increasing support of LGBTQ+ rights especially among younger people (Garretson 2015).

At the same time, however, it can also be pointed out that rights claims articulated through appeals to full community membership and citizenship might carry a burden of compromise (Bell and Binnie 2000), especially if social boundaries are inserted between the good citizen insiders and the outsider bad citizens, and if the "*good citizens*" somehow always tend to model gender-conventional heterosexual lives (Seidman 2002). Several authors refer to Europe as a "privileged space for LGBT rights" (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014, 233): in this context sexual orientation has become a protected category with anti-discrimination rights attachments especially in the transnational legal regime of the European Union, where "anti-gay laws" are seen as incompatible with "European values" (Stychin 2004, 962). However, these "European values" were shaped by the founding members and the old EU members states, and late-comers, including the post-socialist applicants received them as part of a ready-made package deal, which at first sight seemed to be for many mainly about previously unexperienced consumption and career opportunities. This passive receiver role can be seen as rooted in a homogenizing Western European collective attitude about Eastern Europe being a "second-class, dispensable periphery" (Marciniak 2009, 188), a "less civilised, less economically advanced pole" (Gal and Kligman 2000, 6) and the like. Robert Kulpa insightfully describes this relationship "as a didactical and cultural hegemonic relation of power, where the CEE [Central Eastern Europe] figures as an object of West/European pedagogy. [...] the CEE is somehow 'European enough' to be 'taken care of', but 'not yet Western' so as to be allowed into the 'First World' club" (Kulpa 2014, 432).

Post-socialist societies have been characterized by specific dynamics of re-traditionalizing gender regimes (Gal and Kligman 2000) and the mixing of late modern commodification with nationalism leading to the emergence of "hybridized cultures, an often uncanny material and emotional architecture that mixes enduring socialist realities with the welcome arrival of western goods, images and new models of desirable identities" (Marciniak 2009, 178). In this context social acceptance of gays and lesbians can equally be portrayed as a desirable European (or Western) value by local LGBT communities

in their rights attainment process, and at the same time as an undesirable “foreign import” by nationalists who try to evict homosexuals and homosexuality from at least their nation (Moss 2014).

It should be noted that collectively homogenizing Western attitudes are readily available not only in post-socialist specific contexts: the functioning of what Puar (2007) describes as homonationalism can also be seen elsewhere (see, for example, Murray on Canadian nationalist discourses, highlighting the opposition of the “civilized” Canadian society respecting sexual diversity and the refugees’ “uncivilized” home countries characterized by their rampant homophobia – Murray 2014, 22). On the other hand, the uncritical application of homonationalism as a conceptual framework can be tricky in post-socialist CEE and elsewhere (Zanghellini 2012), especially if we take into consideration several of its interpretational dimensions, including references to “a historical shift in the production of nation-states from the insistence on heteronormativity to the increasing inclusion of homonormativity” (Puar 2013, 26) as well as “gay racism or another way to critique the ‘conservatisation’ of gay and lesbian identities” (Puar 2013, 25). While “gay racism” is primarily pictured by Puar as intimately connected to Islamophobia, in CEE there are also other racialized and sexualized Others that deserve attention especially in local contexts with long histories of Anti-Semitism and social exclusion practices targeting the Roma.

Besides warnings about the realistic possibility that “critics of homonationalism erase local CEE queer experience and ignore CEE in their analysis, which focuses instead on (Western) Europe and its colonial/Oriental other” (Moss 2014, 213), it can also be instructive to have a closer look at homonormativity, defined by Lisa Duggan as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising [...] a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 2003, 50). However, Duggan herself adds that “I am riffing here on the term heteronormativity, introduced by Michael Warner. I don’t mean the terms to be parallel: there is no structure of gay life, no matter how conservative or normalizing, that might compare with the institutions promoting and sustaining heterosexual coupling” (2003, 94), acknowledging the widespread social disadvantages one can potentially face even if trying to conduct a “semi-structured gay life”.

Additionally, we can witness a recent spread of anti-gender mobilizations in different parts of Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), triggered by concrete policy proposals such as the introduction of same-sex marriage in France or as a preventive measure to avoid the implementation of such policies in the future as happened, for instance, in Croatia or most recently in Romania. However, as Kuhar and Paternotte observe “despite the fact that some differences can be accredited to the historical and political contexts of

post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the East-West divide does not offer a particularly useful analytical lens" here (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018:8).

This is the first study, using a unique pooled sample of the first eight ESS rounds, with the main goal to present systematically gained empirical evidence about changes in social attitudes regarding the social acceptance of gay men and lesbian women in different parts of Europe during the last decade, where the political spectrum can span liberal, conservative or even "illiberal" democracies (Pap 2017). We are especially interested in whether more than a quarter of a century after the political system changes that started around 1989–1990 in – now post-socialist – Central and Eastern Europe there are any signs of convergence within Europe, and whether previously homophobic landscapes can change and provide more opportunities to leading a harassment-free, peaceful life for LGBTQ+ people.

Methods

Data

The source of our empirical findings is data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a large-scale longitudinal survey research programme, using multistage probabilistic sampling (Source: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). The ESS is a repeat cross-sectional survey administered every two years since 2002. Until the eighth ESS wave conducted in 2016 the core module included only one general acceptance question about the agreement level with the statement that *gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish* (where freedom of lifestyle is meant as being free/entitled to live as gays and lesbians).

The regression analysis is based on the ESS1-8 cumulative data file, including 334,209 respondents' data from 30 countries that had participated in at least two of the first eight rounds of the ESS: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and Ukraine. This pooled sample enables us to observe how attitudes changed during the 2002–2016 period in Europe by involving survey years in the model.

Variables

Our dependent variable measured the agreement level with the statements that *gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish* on a one-to-five scale, where the score of five meant strong agreement, while the score of one meant strong disagreement.

Our independent variables included basic demographic and other sociological features such as the respondents' gender, age, highest level of education, religiosity measured in two dimensions (belonging to a religious denomination; frequency of attendance at religious services), satisfaction with democracy, belonging to specific country-groups and the Democracy Index (DI) as an external variable. The DI, first produced in 2006, is based on 60 indicators grouped into five categories, including political pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture (EIU 2018, 63). We decided to use the median values of the Democracy Index for the given country according to the 2006 and 2016 indices. Additionally we also used an ESS-round variable showing the number of the relevant ESS round (between 1 and 8): this variable can indicate how homophobic views changed over time between the different survey rounds if all other variables included in a given model are controlled for.

As we assumed that there are dependences among individuals not just within a country, but that individuals have more similar attitudes towards gays and lesbians within certain country-groups than in the whole sample, we have also introduced a country-group indicator, assigning each of the 30 examined countries into one of six country-groups, using a combination of previous categorizations applied by Vitali et al. (2009) and Sobotka (2013) as a starting point. This way we have created the following country-groups: Liberal Welfare countries (Belgium, France, Ireland, Netherlands, United Kingdom), Social Democratic Welfare countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden), Conservative Welfare countries (Austria, Germany, Luxemburg, Switzerland), and Southern European Familialistic Welfare countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain). Then we have added two post-socialist country-groups: one with countries that have legislation in place to provide some form of civil partnership for same-sex couples (Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia) and one without any forms of civil partnership for same-sex couples (Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Russian Federation, Ukraine). Table 1 provides a detailed description of all independent variables.

Analytical strategy

Following a multilevel approach, our analyses took into account the hierarchical data structure (individuals clustered in countries, and due to the longitudinal feature of the data countries also clustered in time) by using a multilevel (three-level) linear model. Applying multilevel models has the advantage of recognizing the partial interdependence of individuals within the same group – or citizens within the same country and countries within time in our case. Multilevel models are useful for analysing data characterized by a complex variance structure, where this complexity of variance is

Table 1. Description of independent variables.

Independent variables			
Variable	Scale range	%	N
Individual-level variables			
Gender	Male	46.5	155,375
	Female	53.5	178,834
Age	continuous variable		334,209
Highest level of education	ISCED I. – less than lower secondary	7.51	25,103
	ISCED II. – lower secondary	14.07	47,027
	ISCED IIIb. – lower tier upper secondary	14.69	49,110
	ISCED IIIa. – upper tier upper secondary	16.22	54,219
	ISCED IV. – advanced vocational	9.21	30,790
	ISCED Va. – lower tertiary education	7.54	25,192
	ISCED Vab. – higher tertiary education	8.92	29,805
	Other	21.83	72,963
	Yes	60.5	202,515
	No	39.5	131,694
	Every day	1.21	4,057
Attendance at religious services	More than once a week	2.46	8,224
	Once a week	11.06	36,827
	At least once a month	10.45	25,712
	Only on special holy days	20.24	4,757
	Less often	20.46	14,821
	Never	34.15	114,138
Satisfactions with democracy (measured on an 11-point scale, where 0 meant “extremely dissatisfied”, and 10 meant “extremely satisfied”)	Not at all satisfied (0, 1)	15.24	50,936
	Not very satisfied (2, 3)	19.27	64,415
	Rather satisfied (4, 5, 6)	16.79	56,101
	Very satisfied (7, 8)	25.95	86,740
	Not at all satisfied (9, 10)	19.41	64,867
	Refusal, do not know	3.34	11,150
Country-level variables			
Country-groups	Liberal	23.5	78,537
	Social democratic	16.77	56,062
	Conservative	13.96	46,667
	Southern European familialistic	14.36	48,005
	Post-socialist with legal institutions	15.35	51,305
	Post-socialist without legal institutions	16.05	53,633
	Democracy Index	continuous variable	334,209

Source: European Social Survey pooled dataset, including 1–8 rounds (2002–2016).

caused by individual observations being nested in groups. During data analyses the total variation in the dependent variable is decomposed into within-group variance and between-group variance, while the sources of variation can be studied simultaneously. Therefore, at this stage of our analysis we introduced not only an individual-level, but also a country-level outcome variable into our models (for detailed technical information on multilevel models see: Snijders and Bosker 1999).

We applied several models starting from the less complex (two-level intercept models) in order to check the robustness of the models and to choose

the best fit. At the end of the model processing we found that the three levels (individual-level, country-level and time level) random slope model (RSM) can provide the most realistic picture of the reality. There is interest both in how country statistics (e.g. means of public attitudes in the given country) fluctuate and in how public attitude scores increase and decrease over the years. To this end we allow the slope to vary across individuals and be predicted by other covariates. In our case, we choose the satisfaction with democracy to vary among countries and over time because in this variable we found considerable difference by country and over time, as well. (First, we just allowed the democracy variable to vary across countries. Later we found that the models work better if we let the democracy variable vary over time, as well. Due to limited space, we do not present all of our models here but we can share them on request.)

However, a recently published methodology paper (Wright 2017) drew attention to the limits of this method. The main recommendation is to have as many time points as is feasible because the RSM can be unreliable with fewer than six time points and is particularly likely to be poor with three or four time points. In our analysis, we have eight time points in accordance with the eight ESS rounds. The paper's second core message for RSM users is that analysts should not restrict themselves to only one method and if the RSM methods produce estimates that are very different from the ordinary least square (OLS) estimates, the RSM method is likely to be unreliable. In order to reduce uncertainty in the analysis we have run OLS estimations, which yielded similar results.

We estimated five models. The first model (A) included all the individual-level characteristics as explanatory variables. Then we added our country-level variables step by step. In model B we added ESS round as a continuous variable in order to test the changes in attitudes over time. In our next model (C) we included the different country-group variables. In model D we introduced an external Democracy Index. Finally in Model E we have run a moderational (or interaction effect) analysis to determine how the relationship between time and country-groups deepens. An interaction effect is the simultaneous effect of two or more independent variables on the dependent variable in which their joint effect is significantly greater (or significantly less) than the sum of the parts.

Research hypotheses

On the basis of previous research findings we had the following assumptions about the effects of gender, age, education level and religiosity, on homophobic attitudes at the individual level. These are to be tested within Model A:

- *H1.1: Women, younger people, those with higher level of education are less homophobic than men, older people, those with lower level of education, and living in smaller settlements.*
- *H1.2: Concerning religiosity we assume that membership of certain churches or denominations can have more significant influence on manifesting homophobic views than not belonging to any denomination. Additionally we also assume that people who attend religious services more frequently than others will have increased homophobic attitudes.*
- *H1.3. We expect that those people who are more satisfied with the way democracy works in the given country are less homophobic.*

We have also formulated a set of hypotheses regarding the factors influencing country-level differences in homophobic attitudes:

- *H2.1. We expect that social acceptance of gay men and lesbian women is becoming increasingly widespread over time (even within such a historically short period as between 2002 and 2016). – This is to be tested in Model B.*
- *H2.2: We expect that belonging to a specific country-group has effect on attitudes towards gays and lesbians (since the democratic tradition, economic development, and gender norms differ not just among countries but even across country-groups). Based on these contextual backgrounds we expect that countries belonging to social-democratic and liberal country-groups are less homophobic than countries belonging to the post-socialist country-groups. – This is to be tested in Model C.*
- *H2.3: We suppose that the higher the Democracy Index values the more tolerant attitudes are towards gay and lesbians. – This is to be tested in Model D.*

Our last hypothesis concerning the interaction effects between country-groups and time is to be tested in model E:

- *H3: We expect that social acceptance of gays and lesbians does not increase equally within all country-groups during the examined period. We suppose that the highest increase can be observed in the Southern-European countries since in this period a lot of institutionalization occurred in the region providing legal framework for same-sex unions. Within the liberal and social-democratic country-groups these changes happened earlier, while the lowest levels of social acceptance can be expected in the post-socialist country-group without any legal institutions for same-sex unions.*

Results

Let us discuss very briefly the descriptive results from the latest ESS round. In 2016 among the 22 examined countries, there was only one with a

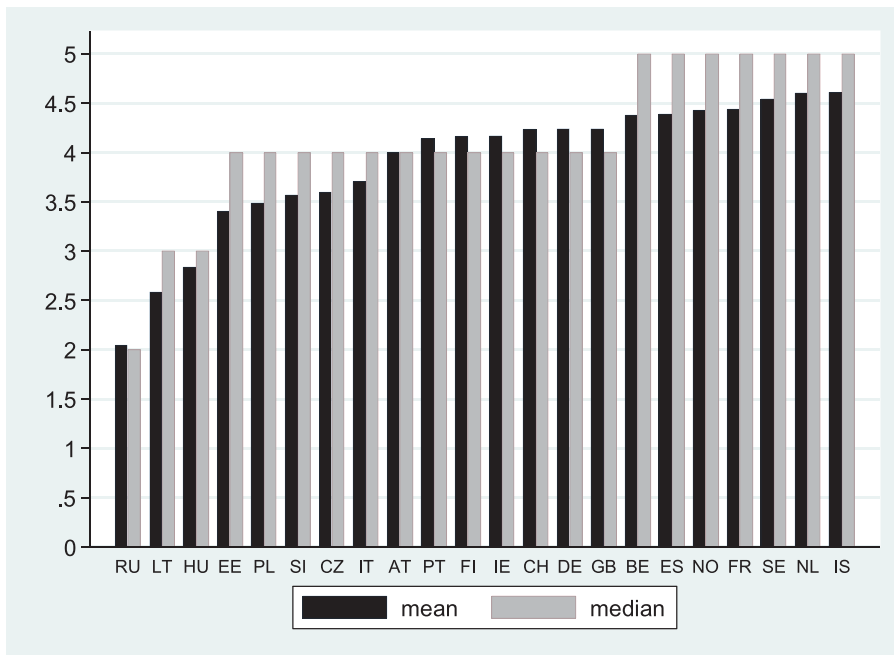


Figure 1. Social acceptance of gay men and lesbian women in 22 European countries Mean and median values by countries.

Source: ESS 8th round, including data from all of the countries that participated in this round.

median value of two: Russia, which means that the majority of Russian respondents disagreed with the statement that *gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish*; while in two other countries, Hungary and Lithuania, the median values were three, expressing neither agreement or disagreement. At the same time, Belgium, Spain, Norway, France, Sweden, the Netherlands and Iceland were characterized by a median value of five, reflecting much higher levels of general social acceptance towards gays and lesbians. Figure 1 gives an overview of the mean and median values of our dependent variable in the eighth ESS round.

We also present findings from the analysis of repeated measurements of attitudes towards gays and lesbians that were pooled from all of the eight existing rounds of ESS. Results of the multivariate analyses are summarized in Table 2 (where positive coefficients indicate more positive attitudes than the reference category, while negative values indicate more negative attitudes than the reference category; and the * indicates that the results are significant at a certain level).

In Model A the individual-level basic demographic features have the expected significant effects: women, younger and higher educated people are more likely to be supportive. Regarding religiosity, those who do not belong to any religious denomination and do not attend religious services frequently tend to express higher levels of acceptance towards lesbians and

Table 2. Results of the multivariate analysis.

Variables	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E
Gender	Ref. 0.19***	Ref. 0.19***	Ref. 0.19***	Ref. 0.19***	Ref. 0.19***
Age	Female continuous variable	Ref. 0.19***	Ref. 0.19***	Ref. 0.19***	Ref. 0.19***
Highest level of education	ISCED I. less than lower secondary ISCED II. lower secondary ISCED IIIb. – lower tier upper secondary ISCED IIIa. – upper tier upper secondary ISCED IV. – advanced vocational ISCED Va. – lower tertiary education, ISCED Vb. – higher tertiary education Other	Ref. 0.19*** –0.01*** –0.35*** –0.16*** –0.11*** Ref. –0.002 0.08** 0.13*** –0.03*	Ref. 0.19*** –0.01*** –0.35*** –0.16*** –0.11*** Ref. –0.003 0.08** 0.13*** –0.04**	Ref. 0.19*** –0.01*** –0.35*** –0.16*** –0.11*** Ref. –0.003 0.08** 0.13*** –0.04**	Ref. 0.19*** –0.01*** –0.35*** –0.16*** –0.11*** Ref. –0.003 0.08** 0.13*** –0.04**
Belonging to a denomination	Yes No	Ref. 0.05***	Ref. 0.05***	Ref. 0.05***	Ref. 0.05***
Attendance at religious services	Every day More than once a week Once a week At least once a month Only on special holy days Less often Never	Ref. 0.05*** –0.23*** –0.44*** –0.18*** –0.09*** –0.03*** –0.03***	Ref. 0.05*** –0.23*** –0.44*** –0.18*** –0.09*** –0.03*** –0.03***	Ref. 0.05*** –0.23*** –0.44*** –0.18*** –0.09*** –0.03*** –0.03***	Ref. 0.05*** –0.23*** –0.44*** –0.18*** –0.09*** –0.03*** –0.03***
Satisfaction with democracy	Not at all satisfied Not very satisfied neither dissatisfied nor satisfied Rather satisfied Very satisfied Refusal, do not know	Ref. –0.08*** –0.05*** –0.06*** Ref. 0.04*** –0.24***	Ref. –0.08*** –0.04*** –0.06*** Ref. 0.04*** –0.24***	Ref. –0.08*** –0.05*** –0.06*** Ref. 0.04*** –0.25***	Ref. –0.08*** –0.05*** –0.06*** Ref. 0.04*** –0.25***
Country-level variables					
ESS round	continuous variable	0.04***	0.04***	0.04***	0.04***
Country-groups	Liberal welfare Social democratic welfare Conservative welfare Southern European familialistic welfare Post-socialist with legal institutions Post-socialist without legal institutions Social democratic welfare	Ref. 0.02 –0.37*** –0.42*** –0.93*** –1.41***	Ref. 0.02 –0.37*** –0.42*** –0.93*** –1.41***	Ref. 0.18 –0.37*** –0.33*** –0.78*** –1.12***	Ref. –0.28* –0.26 –0.51*** –0.54*** –1.58*** 0.01

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Variables	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E
Country-groups*ESS round					
Conservative welfare					−0.02
Southern European familialistic welfare					0.03 *
Post-socialist with legal institutions					0.04 **
Post-socialist without legal institutions					−0.09 ***
continuous variable				0.17 ***	0.17 ***
Democracy Index				2.92 ***	2.82 ***
Cons	3.94 ***	3.76 ***	4.32 ***		
Variance (Residual)	1.085	1.085	1.085	1.085	1.085
Country-level	0.0005	0.0005	0.0005	0.0004	0.0004
	0.312	0.312	0.072	0.046	0.04
ESS round level	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002
	0.087	0.081	0.0423	0.0429	0.0345
N	334,209	334,209	334,209	334,209	334,209
n1	30	30	30	30	30
n2	186	186	186	186	186
Log likelihood	−488521	−488504	−488413	−488408	488388

Source: European Social Survey pooled dataset, including 1–8 rounds (2002–2016).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

gays than others. At the same time, respondents having higher levels of satisfaction with democracy are less likely to manifest homophobic views. These results can confirm our H1.1-3 hypotheses, and are also in line with the extensive international research highlighting the relationship of public attitudes towards gays and lesbians with basic demographic variables such as gender, age, education and religiosity (including Larsen et al. 1983, Herek, 1984, 2002, 2004; Agnew et al. 1993, Steffens and Wagner 2004; Andersen and Fetner 2008; Štulhofer and Rimac 2009, Adamczyk and Pitts 2009, Gerhards 2010, Schwartz 2010; Takács and Szalma 2011, 2013; Takács et al. 2016; van den Akker, van der Ploeg and Scheepers 2013, Doebler 2015, Ayoub and Garretson 2017).

In model B we controlled for all individual-level variables, while we introduced the ESS round variable. We can see that there is a positive trend over time even in short-term periods: between 2002 and 2016 the examined societies became increasingly tolerant so we can confirm our H2.1 hypothesis.

In model C we added the country-group variables to map the attitudes over different European welfare regimes, and found significant differences among them as we expected. Respondents who live in Liberal or Social democratic welfare states expressed the most open-minded attitudes, followed by respondents from Conservative welfare states and Southern European familialistic societies, while the least tolerant among all of the country-groups were respondents from post-socialist countries. However, there is significant difference even within this region: respondents living in post-socialist countries without any institutionalized framework of same-sex partnerships seem to be the least tolerant according to the country-groups.

In our next model (D), where we added our external Democracy Index (DI), we found that respondents in countries with higher DI scores tend to express higher levels of acceptance towards lesbian women and gay men than others.

In our last model (E) we controlled for all of the variables, which were added to our model so far plus we added an interaction effect to deepen our understanding about how the social acceptance towards gays and lesbians has changed over time in the different country-groups. In our previous (C and D) models Southern European respondents had lower levels of acceptance towards gays and lesbians than the reference category, and the whole sample showed increasingly tolerant trends over time; regarding the interaction effect, as seen in Figure 2, by 2016 respondents from the Southern European familialistic welfare states overtook those from the Conservative welfare countries and almost caught up with those from the Social democratic welfare states. Thus regarding their attitudes towards gays and lesbians converging views could be observed in these country-groups. At the same time the post-socialist country-group without legal recognition of same-sex unions became less and less tolerant towards gays and lesbians

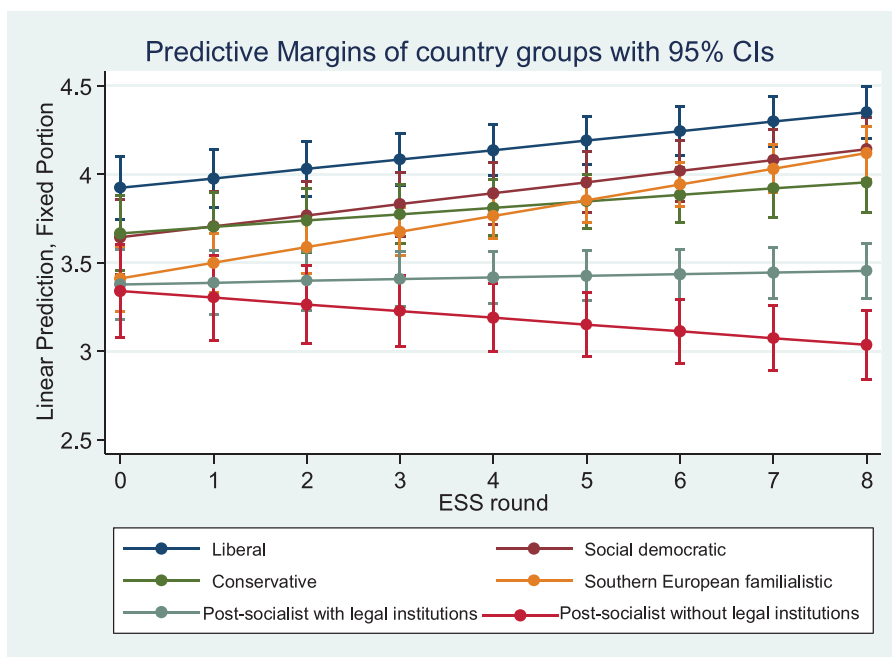


Figure 2. Social acceptance of gay men and lesbian women according to country-groups. Results of the country groups and time interaction effect analysis (based on model F). Source: European Social Survey pooled data including 1–8 rounds.

over time, and views within the two post-socialist county-groups do not seem to converge either.

Conclusion

The presented results show that there are increasing levels of social acceptance towards lesbian women and gay men in Europe as a whole. However, on the basis of examining individual and country-level indicators in a large-scale survey database, including more than 300,000 respondents from 30 countries we had the opportunity to refine this picture, and point out that not all of the examined European countries follow this trend.

Democratic transition does not run smoothly, nor is it fast. Dahrendorf seems to have been right, when referring to sixty years being barely enough to “transform the constitution and the economy from fair-weather into all-weather institutions which can withstand the storms generated within and without” (Dahrendorf 1990, 92–93). Thus it can be expected that even more than a quarter century after the political system changes in the former “Eastern bloc”, there are still significant differences within Europe regarding the expressed levels of homophobia.

Previous empirical results, especially those indicating the decreasing social distance measured towards – in most cases only imagined – homosexual

neighbours from the 1990s, suggested that homophobia is not necessarily an inherent component of the mental construction of “Eastern-Europeanness” (Takács and Szalma 2013). In fact, we could see that this tendency continued in a not too spectacular way in some post-socialist countries, with a few important exceptions (such as Russia). Additionally, developments in the Southern European societies can support the assumption that homophobic attitudes can most probably be *unlearned* in time, especially if this process can be supported with policy-developments strengthening same-sex partnership and parenting rights. At the same time individual cases – such as the “democratic decline” characterizing the “illiberal democracy” of present-day Hungary (Pap 2017) – can question the link between improvement of attitudes and the democratization process, often envisioned as a linear development.

We should also note that the decade when democratic transition began in the post-socialist countries overlapped with the period when legal institutions for same-sex partners started to be introduced in the countries belonging to our liberal and social democratic country-groups. In 1989 Denmark was the first country in the world to introduce registered partnership for same-sex couples – a legal institution that soon started to receive harsh internal criticism, emphasizing the paradoxical nature of Northern European gay and lesbian organizations spending too “much energy in obtaining an extinct ritual that many straights won’t even touch with a barge pole” (Lützen 1998, 239), reflecting the nurturing of “bourgeois dreams, wanting to be as unobtrusive as possible” (Lützen 1998, 241).

These arguments, similar to more recent criticism targeting homonormativity and homonationalism, presuppose a Weberian ideal type homosexuality as a radical force to challenge power (Lützen 1998, 241): as if being queer would mean to be in a constant standby position to contend with social injustices one after the other; while our impression is that many people, irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender expression, prefer to follow a much less adventurous (and probably much less tiring) life trajectory: a social existence that is inconspicuous by choice and that allows leading a life without external attributions of deviance or unwanted salience. When non-LGBTQ+ others start to see and accept this desire in LGBTQ+ others (and *vice versa*), it can be seen as part of a harmonization process that can be reflected in social attitudes, defined here as “normative statements about the social order rather than as subjective expressions of individual likes or dislikes” (Voas, 2013).

We believe that the examined large-scale survey results mirror Europe-wide harmonization tendencies of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ lives, but on the basis of our dataset we cannot provide any causal explanation for these changes. However, we can refer to how other studies approached issues of norm diffusion and/or re-socialization into new social norms.

At the most general level the key explanatory force seems to be the human ability to learn and adapt. For example, DeMartini (1985) focussed on political socialization as a linkage between generations, instead of relying on classic cultural theories arguing for a certain degree of generational discontinuity, while according to Mishler and Rose institutional theories can offer more insight “given their emphasis on experiential learning and their assumption that adult citizens can rationally adapt to the new institutions and circumstances as they confront them” (Mishler and Rose 2007, 831).

Others focused specifically on the learning and acculturation experiences of East-European migrants in Western Europe in relation to homophobia, and found the liberating effects of disengagement from the homophobic religious, media, and political rhetoric often characterizing their countries of origin, together with greater visibility of sexual diversity; and, in particular, inter-personal contacts with gays and lesbians (Mole et al. 2017). Additionally, researchers observed that the “longer Eastern European migrants have lived in Western Europe, the more similar their attitudes become to those in that region, and the less like those in Eastern Europe” (Fitzgerald et al. 2014, 338). However, it was also pointed out that the process of acculturation can take a considerable amount of time.

In a recent American study the authors also emphasized the importance of contact with gays and lesbians, but via the media. Ayoub and Garretson convincingly argue about the relationship between the liberalization of (especially younger people’s) attitudes toward gays and lesbians and “a national climate allowing for the free transmission of minority viewpoints” especially in the post-1990 media (2017, 1080).

These results can reinforce the importance of the social factors that we examined as country-level indicators of homophobia such as the existence of a sufficiently functioning democratic social environment, including access to legal institutions providing partnership and parenting rights for same-sex partners as well as a certain level of social visibility for non-heteronormative modes of existence. It will take time to put Igor Kon’s (2010) argument on improved sexual minority rights being potentially beneficial to all citizens into practice, and also to learn from each other.

Our study had several limitations. A main one derives from the ESS design, as attitudes towards gays and lesbians could only be measured by a single item throughout the first seven ESS rounds. However, in the eighth round they introduced two additional items to the ESS core questionnaire. The new items – measuring the agreement levels with the following statements: “If a close family member was a gay man or a lesbian, I would feel ashamed” and “Gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples” (Kuyper 2015) – will make it possible to measure new aspects of social acceptance of gays and lesbians in more

complex ways in future research. Additional limitations can be linked with the choice of external indicators, and the difficulty to measure the quality of democratic functioning across Europe.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to a better understanding of changing social attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women in different parts of Europe during the last decade. We believe that examining and interpreting attitudinal features of larger populations in different European contexts can be useful for policy-makers and others when arguing for, planning or introducing legal and policy changes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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