Ilia State University
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
International School of Caucasian Studies

Negotiating Identities: The Effect of Russian In-Migration on LGBTQ+ Populations in Georgia and Armenia

CEERES Master's Thesis

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January, 2024
Tbilisi, Georgia

Field of Studies: Political Science

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Caucasus Studies in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: Ilia State University, Georgia

International Master's (IntM) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Glasgow, UK

Master of Arts in Social Sciences (MA) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Tartu, Estonia

Word count of the thesis: 24,537

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

[Alexandra Kuenning, 31 January 2024]

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Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking my interview participants for providing the thoughtful, insightful contributions that are the bedrock for this thesis. I appreciate everyone's willingness to take time out of their busy schedules and lives to speak with me and for their trust in the research I was conducting.

I also would like to thank my supervisors, who supported me throughout the entire process. To Heiko, thank you for believing in me even after my countless last-minute changes. To Mariam, thank you for constantly providing new avenues for research, always being open to a call, and overall, for having enough confidence in my work to recommend my workshop presentation.

Finally, I must thank all my friends and family for their unwavering support — without you, this thesis would never have come to fruition. To Callum, I will forever be grateful to you for letting me take over your life and flat as part of the writing process. Thank you for always having faith in me, even when I faltered. To my parents, Geoff and Pat, I would not be where I am today without you. Thank you for your unceasing encouragement and unconditional love.

Abstract

This research explores the effect of Russian in-migration following the invasion of Ukraine on LGBTQ+ populations in Georgia and Armenia. Using a small-n research design for data collection, in the form of semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ Georgians and LGBTQ+ Armenians currently residing in either Tbilisi or Yerevan, this thesis is also an attempt to contribute to the decolonialist literature of North-South migration whereby local populations, particularly those generally marginalised in research, are given a voice.

This research finds that the most critical effect stemming from the mass migration was related to increased economic pressures, whereby an already precarious population is made more insecure, leading to an increased outward migration and nihilism among the population. In addition, privilege, respect, and post-colonialism were all important considerations to take into account when examining whether there was space for collaboration or integration on the basis of a shared social identity, particularly among LGBTQ+ Georgians. While similar issues existed among LGBTQ+ Armenians, there was more openness to engaging with LGBTQ+ Russians due to a different history of conflict and the role of Armenian-Russian "bridge-makers."

***Keywords*:** LGBTQ+, queer, identity, migration, Georgia, Armenia, postcoloniality, privilege, integration, Russia

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Introduction

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia's neighbouring countries began to see a huge influx of Russian emigrants. Their reasons for leaving Russia included avoiding economic sanctions, fleeing Putin's increasing anti-LGBTQ+ crackdown, and escaping the draft. Armenia and Georgia became two of the most popular destinations, largely due to their visa-free entry: Russians citizens are entitled to stay for up to 180 days in Armenia and up to 360 days in Georgia without a visa (Kuleshova, et al. 2023). The statistics regarding the actual number of migrants in each country, especially those who have stayed over the past two years, are imprecise;[1] however, both countries now have thousands to hundreds of thousands of Russians residing in their territories, particularly in the capital cities of Yerevan and Tbilisi.

The effects have been enormous. Housing prices and rent have skyrocketed, and both economies have seen a rise in inflation; businesses have encountered the need to cater to a new demographic; and within academia, there has been a huge push to study the Russian migrants and to move any research being conducted within Russia to those migrants and refugees living outside of the country, due to interest in the new event as well as safety and ethical considerations. What has been largely forgotten, however, are the local populations and their views and experiences. It was this gap that ultimately led to the creation of this research project.

As the migration continued, I began forming a series of questions, which eventually became the basis of this thesis. Firstly, I was interested in looking at how a particular subgroup within a society, one that is already considered a minority and vulnerable in its own state, such as LGBTQ+ people in Georgia and Armenia, is affected by migration and whether there were any unique particularities in how such a host community dealt with and understood said migration. To add to this, I wanted to see whether there was an exclusion or inclusion specifically of LGBTQ+ Russians by local LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians based on a common social identity, or whether the history of Russia as an imperial, colonialist power with violent past in the region superseded such commonalities.

It is indisputable that, in some cases, certain personal and social identities can supersede others. For example, following World War II, LGBTQ+ people in mainland Europe did not view the previous wartime hostility as an obstacle to transnational organising. Indeed, in the words of

[1] An examination of the numbers will be detailed later in this thesis.

Nico Engelschman, President of Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum Nederland, a Dutch interest organisation for LGBTQ+ individuals, the war "awakened the burning desire in all people to bridge the borders of their own lands [and] to work together." (Rupp 2014, 31-32). To assist in doing so, the interment of homosexuals in Nazi concentration camps was highlighted by German organisations as a means to remove themselves from wartime enmity and to promote a sense of solidarity based on sexual identity (Ibid., 32). When beginning this research, one key question, therefore, was whether a similar sense of solidarity on the basis of sexual or gender identities existed or could exist among LGBTQ+ Armenians and Georgians with LGBTQ+ Russians.

To this end, I have sought a deeper understanding of the following questions in this research project:

- How does mass migration affect a vulnerable host community?
- Is there space for collaboration and integration on the basis of a shared social identity?
    - I.e. Do the vulnerabilities experienced by LGTBQ+ Russians foster a sense of solidarity with LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians?
- How do past or current conflict or post-colonial understandings affect the possibilities for collaboration and integration?
    - I.e Do the host LGTBQ+ communities in Georgia and Armenia perceive Russian LGTBQ+ communities through a post-imperial and post-colonial lens, and if so, how does this affect their inclusion or exclusion?
    - Are there similarities in how LGBTQ+ Armenians perceive LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis, and what possibilities exist for collaboration in this regard?

This thesis is structured in five chapters, beginning with one that focuses on the theoretical framework. This chapter is itself split into four further sub-chapters, the first of which defines the terms "LGBTQ+" and "Queer" as they will be used in this thesis. The second sub-chapter conceptualises identity, focusing on theories of social identity (such as LGBTQ+) and how ethnic and national identities interplay with other social identities. The third sub-chapter looks at the Russian migration as a case of North-South migration, or "lifestyle migration." Finally, the last section looks at the literature that has considered Russia as a colonialist, imperialist state and the former Soviet Union, including Georgia and Armenia as post-colonial states.

The second chapter provides a basic historical and contextual background, again separated into four sub-chapters. The first three focus on different historical time periods: namely the Russian

Empire, the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet period. The last sub-chapter provides an overview of LGBGTQ+ rights in the South Caucasus, focusing particularly on LGBTQ+ rights and progress in Georgia and Armenia.

The third chapter focuses on my methodology, outlining my methods, research participants, ethical considerations, and limitations.

The fourth focuses on my empirical findings and a discussion of the research results. The first sub-chapter in this section looks at how my research participants conceive of their own identities to better understand how identity changes or is understood in times of crises (such as during a mass influx of a potentially dangerous population). The second focuses on the direct economic effects of the mass migration, with a specific emphasis on how LGBTQ+ Armenians and Georgians are affected as opposed to the general population. It also looks at how LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians conceptualise privilege in regards to LGBTQ+ Russians as defined within the literature of North-South migration. The third section centres on how identity is negotiated within a post-colonial relationship, examining how the Russian migration is at times perceived within the bounds of such a relationship and the fears that can emerge based on such thinking. Finally, the fourth section tackles the question of whether integration, inclusion, and collaboration is occurring among LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians with LGBTQ+ Russians, as well as comparing such instances with experiences between LGBTQ+ Armenians and LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis.

Finally, I present my concluding thoughts, including areas for further research.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.1 Defining "LGBTQ+" and "Queer"

The main subjects of this research are LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians. As commonly understood, LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning, with the + sign representing the infinite variety of sexual orientations and gender identities that are not encompassed in the short acronym. While many variants on the term exist — LGBT(+), LGBTI(+), LGBTQIA(+) — not all concretely embrace the concept of "queer" or "queerness."

This is partly due to the fact that the word queer has had a divisive history. For decades, the word was linked with homophobic sentiments and considered an anti-LGBT slur. It was not until the 1980s that activists and community groups began reclaiming the word "queer" and since then, the term has become increasingly commonplace in the mainstream. Today, many millennials and younger — and even older — generations identify as queer due to the term's fluid nature and ability (at times) to act as a political statement. To understand the concept from a non-academic perspective, such as a number of my interviewees might, I look to Stonewall's (n.d.)[2] definition:

> Queer is a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT community (racism, sizeism, ableism etc). Although some LGBT people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 80s by the queer community who have embraced it.

In terms of more academic definitions, one can look to Eve Sedgewick, who saw the word "queer" as referring to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgewick 1993, 8). Similarly, Karma Lochrie defined the term as "a category marking the sexual as the site for a variety of cultural struggles" (Lochrie 1997, 181). To move away from a definition specifically based on sexuality, David Halperin argues that "queer" is "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant . . . it demarcates not a positivity but a positionality

[2] Based in the UK, Stonewall is the largest LGBTQ+ rights organisation in Europe.

vis-à-vis the normative" (Halperin 1995). All of these definitions, including the lay definition, emphasise the term's fluidity and its marked repudiation of the so-called norm.

Within academia, "queer" is often also used in the sense of "queer theory," a poststructuralist critical theory that emerged in the 1990s as a way to challenge essentialist views of gender and sexuality. This concept has further been expanded via the method of "queering," whereby topics of gender, sexuality, identity, and other systems of oppression and identity politics can be examined and deconstructed. A good example of this in relation to this thesis is Sevan Beukian's 2018 article "Queering Armenianness: Tarorinakelov Identities," in which he questions the commonly held belief that queerness and Armenianness are incompatible identities. Through analysing the work of Armenian activists and artists across the country and the diaspora, Beukian argues that there are emerging "queer 'counterpublic' spaces" that are creating alternative understandings of Armenianness outside of the prevalent (hetero)normative constructions, and that Armenian studies must seriously consider these deconstructions to empower a post-colonial, queer Armenian identity (Beukian 2018). It is important to note that labels, including LGBTQ+ and queer, can also be conceptualised as an identity, both personal and individual. In his discussion of "queering" an Armenian identity, Beukian illustrates how multiple identities — namely an LGBTQ+ identity and an ethnic identity, among others — are negotiated in the Armenian context. In doing so, Beukian focuses on identity negotiation, a term which will be defined and discussed in detail in the next section.

1.2 Conceptualising identity

The literature on identity is considerable and controversial. In this thesis, I will focus on identity construction and identity negotiation, as well as focusing on the specific conceptualisations of ethnic or national identity and social identities such as LGBTQ+ and queer.

According to Charles Tilly (1996, 7), identity is a "blurred but indispensable" concept, one he defines as "an actor's experience of a category, tie, role, network, group or organisation, coupled with a public representation of that experience; the public representation often takes the form of a shared story, a narrative." Brubaker and Cooper (2004, 33-35) further define identity through a variety of different understandings. Understood as a foundation of social or political action, they see that "identity" is often positioned as oppositional to "interest" in order to emphasise and conceptualise non-instrumental means of social and political action and therefore can be used to highlight how individual or collective actions can be governed by discrete self-understandings as opposed to more ubiquitous self-interests (Somers 1994 in

Brubaker and Cooper 2004, 33). Understood as a distinctively group occurrence, "identity" indicates an inherent "sameness" within a certain body of people, which is presumed to exhibit itself in solidarity, in shared mentalities, or in collective actions. (Brubaker and Cooper 2004, 34). Understood as a central idea of selfhood (whether individual or collective), "identity" is seen as "something allegedly deep, basic, abiding, or foundational." (ibid.). Understood as an artefact of social or political action, "identity" is used to highlight the "processual, interactive development of the kind of collective self-understanding, solidarity, or "groupness" that can make collective action possible" (ibid.). Finally, understood as the ephemeral product of "multiple and competing discourses," "identity" is able to call attention to the "unstable, multiple, fluctuating, and fragmented nature of the contemporary self" (ibid., 35).

Brubaker and Cooper further understand "identity" as "both a category of practice and a category of analysis" (ibid., 31). As a category of practice, identity is used in (some) everyday situations by the average "lay" person to make sense of themselves and their actions and by specific political entrepreneurs to persuade others to identify with one another and therefore to justify and organise collective actions (ibid.). As a category of analysis, the pair has outlined how both strong and weak conceptions of identity exist at the same time in the literature, affecting how the term is used in such analysis.

According to the pair, strong conceptions of "identity" are based on the "common sense" connotation of the term and emphasise a sense of sameness among people or over time. By using these conceptions in analysis, however, Brubaker and Cooper find some highly problematic assumptions. Firstly, they note that a strong conception of "identity" assumes that all people have, ought to have, or are searching for an "identity." The second assumption is that all groups (Brubaker and Cooper specifically single out certain kinds of group such as ethnic, racial, or national) have or should have an intrinsic identity. Thirdly, Brubaker and Cooper argue that there is an assumption that someone can possess an identity without realising it, and as a result, identity is something that can be uncovered or revealed and something that can also be mislabelled or misrecognised. Finally, they show how a strong notion of collective identity assumes there to be a strong notion of group homogeneity, whereby there is a high degree of groupness or sameness among group members, leading to clear boundaries between those within the group and those outside of it (Ibid).

On the other hand, weak conceptions of "identity" emphasise that identity is "multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented, constructed, negotiated, and so on." For Brubaker

and Cooper, this understanding is also deeply problematic, the term becoming so fluid that it is impossible to perform serious, analytical work (ibid., 38).

It is for these reasons that Brubaker and Cooper propose using terms other than "identity" within analyses, to avoid the pitfalls listed above. One suggestion is to use the term "identification," which does not assume that identifying (whether by choice or by a powerful third actor such as the state) equates to the bounded groupness and internal sameness sought by political entrepreneurs. While Brubaker and Cooper agree that identification — both of oneself and of others — is inseparable to a life within society, this cannot be said of "identity" in the strong sense defined above. (ibid., 41). Furthermore, both how one can identify oneself and how one can be defined by others is highly variable based on the context. Brubaker and Cooper distinguish between identifying oneself (or another person) through a relational mode of identification (e.x. a web of kinship) or through sharing a categorical attribute (e.x. ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) (ibid., 41-42). It is this latter form of identification (which takes place in a dialectical interplay between external and self-identification) (ibid., 42) that is the focus of this thesis.

Another term Brubaker and Cooper posit as an alternative to "identity" is "self-understanding." As defined by the authors, the phrase "self-understanding" focuses on an individual's perception of who they are and there they fit in society, and therefore how they should behave (ibid., 44). This term can be useful in its implication that based on the setting, a person can understand and experience themselves in terms of a web of connections — a grid of intersecting categories that differ in terms of intensity. As might be expected from its focus on the "self," this term really captures an individual's understanding of themself; on the flip side, it lacks the ability to capture how others might understand one's being, even though such external identifications can be decisive in shaping a personal self-understanding (ibid., 45). For example, being consistently labelled as various non-white ethnicities by strangers can help solidify a feeling of being an ethnic minority.

Brubaker and Cooper posit one last alternative set of terms, arguing that "commonality" and "connectedness" together are able to engender "groupness" (ibid., 47). The pair look to what Max Weber called "Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl," or a "feeling of belonging" that is influenced by a number of factors, including shared experiences and commonality as well as distinct events and how they become embedded within public narratives based on prevailing discursive frameworks (ibid.). As Brubaker separately outlines, groupness is a "contextually

fluctuating conceptual variable" that allows a researcher to account for moments of intense cohesion and solidarity without implicitly regarding such high degrees of "groupness" as "constant, enduring, or definitionally present" (Brubaker 2002, 168). Such a term of analysis is directly contrasted against what Brubaker terms "groupism," wherein certain categories or "groups" are seen to be innate; I will discuss this concept in more detail further on.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have used a weaker sense of the term "identity," understanding that it is a fluid construct. I found the term "identity," even with its drawbacks as listed by Brubaker and Cooper, to be the most recognizable for my research participants and the easiest to conceptualise within my interviews. When necessary to expand upon the term, I used the term "self-understanding," to emphasise the individual and that, for the purposes of this research, I wanted to know the particularities of each interviewee's understanding of themselves as an LGBTQ+ person in Georgia or Armenia.

It is now important to look more specifically at social identities, such as LGBTQ+ or queer. As Stets and Burke (2000) outline (in turn looking to Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell 1987 and McCall and Simmons 1978 and their conceptions of identity theory and social identity theory), the self is understood to be reflexive, meaning it can be an object *and* can categorise itself in reference to other social categories. Known interchangeably as self-categorisation or identification, this method is how an identity is produced (Stets and Burke 2000, 224).

According to Hogg and Abrams (1988), a social identity is "a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group." In turn, a social group is defined as "a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category" (Stets and Burke 2000, 225). Through what the pair call a "process of social comparison," people are sorted and labelled into "in-groups" and "out-groups," accentuating the similarities deemed to exist between oneself and members of the in-group and the disparities observed between oneself and members of the out-group (ibid.). It is important to note that these social categories only exist in relation to other, contrasting categories, which operate in a power hierarchy — therefore, the social category of LGBTQ+ exists as a contrast to a normative heterosexual identification.

For the purposes of this thesis, another important factor to consider is the conceptualisation of ethnic or national identities, often considered to be collective identities. To start, I look to Anthony Smith's (1992) definition of collective identity as "a sense of shared continuity on the

part of successive generations of a given unit of population, and to shared memories of earlier periods, events and personages in the history of the unit . . . [and] the collective belief in a common destiny of that unit and its culture" (Smith 1992, 58). To further conceptualise collective identity as it is tied to national identity, Alexander Wendt (1994) argues that nationalism may be "inherent to societies' self-conceptions as distinct groups" and that "the dependence of states on their societies may be such that they cultivate nationalist sentiments in order to solidify their corporate identities vis-a-vis each other" (Wendt 1994, 387).

It is crucial, however, to understand that ethnicity and nationalism are not real boundaries etched into the very nature of the world, but rather ways of talking about and experiencing the world, as well as a way to frame political claims (Brubaker 2004, 152). In terms of the nation and a collective national identity, Anderson (2009) and Wodak, et. al (2009), see a nation as both an "imagined community" and a mental construct that is established and conveyed in discourse. In other words, the national identity of individuals who perceive themselves as a part of a national collective is manifested by discursive practice and therefore shaped by "state, political, institutional, media and everyday social practices, and the material and social conditions" (Wodak, et. al 2009, 29). Identity narratives are often an important tool in ethnic projects, whereby the world is divided into "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis 2001, 61). Factors such as gender and sexuality can play a central role in the construction of specific ethnic polities; indeed, such differences mean that actors pursuing specific ethnic projects can sometimes use the same cultural resource to promote opposing political goals (ibid., 62). It is through this process that sexuality and ethnicity can be linked, such as how Beukian illustrates that being Armenian is equated with being heterosexual in the nation-building project.

When linking the processes of conceptualising identity to a factor of conflict, such as I do in this thesis, one must note the strength of border conflicts in terms of identificative power. As Lud'a Klusáková notes in her work on finding "connecting themes" between borders and cultural identities, border conflicts, which define the majority of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, impact identities over a *longue durée* — Klusáková questions, in fact, whether there can even be borders that do not create identities and, vice versa, whether there can be identities without frontiers (Klusáková 2007, 6).

It is also important to discuss exclusion and inclusion, terms that are not necessarily opposed to one another. For example, within Durkheimian functionalist thought, exclusion and inclusion are linked to each other; in other words, the exclusion of certain groups can help

stabilise society, with the inclusion of some groups reinforcing the exclusion of others (Woodward and Kohli 2001, 9). A large focus of this thesis will be on examining how inclusion and exclusion function among LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians with LGBTQ+ Russians.

Within migration studies, it is interesting to note that one effect of international migration is that said migrants bring the "national boundaries" of their countries within their consciousness, thus creating not only a diaspora, but a "nation beyond the homeland" (Seweryn 2007, 22). Thus, a cultural or ethnic identity often becomes stronger while abroad, as one's personal experience of being a foreigner leads to a shift from personal identity to social identity wherein the internalisation of collective identification occurs (ibid., 25). In addition, the bigger and more active the diasporic group, the better the chance for cultural maintenance (ibid., 36), again affecting the possibilities for inclusion or exclusion by the host society. In regards to LGBTQ+ Russians, this literature is useful in understanding how the salience of identity negotiation, discussed in further detail below, might change based on migration, and in turn, how this can be understood and recognised by LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians.

Identity negotiation, or how an individual navigates and understands the makeup of their different identities, is another crucial aspect to consider. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee's (2015, 2019) integrative identity negotiation (INN) theory — which draws its insights from a number of other prominent theories including social identity complexity theory (Brewer 1991, 2010), identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey 2005); and communication accommodation theory (Gallois, Ogay, and Giles 2005; Giles 2012) — focuses on the necessity of attending to multiple salient sociocultural identities within a diverse variety of social settings (Dorjee and Ting-Toomey 2020, 248). According to INN theory, the core dynamics behind a person's construction of their multiple identities is as follows:

> sociocultural group membership identities (e.g., cultural/ethnic and religious memberships), sociorelational role identities (e.g., political/institutional affiliations, community/family roles), and personal identities (e.g., unique attributes) are formed via symbolic communication with others. (ibid.)

In addition, INN theory understands that all individuals require identity security, with too much security leading to ethnocentrism and too little leading to a fear of outgroups (thereby leading back to the above discussion of exclusion and inclusion) (ibid.). Taking the framework of intergroup communication, it can be seen that contentious issues and exchanges generally involve negotiating between these interlaced social identities, which represent a variety of

group memberships and relationships. In particular, it can be observed that which of a person's identities or affiliations are made apparent depends on context (Paden 1970, 268 as cited in Banerjee, et al. 2021). To examine the question of collaboration and integration of LGTBQ+ Russians with LGBTQ+ Armenians and Georgians, it is therefore important to understand how each individual's identity is determined and the salience of one's LGBTQ+ identity as opposed to other social identities including ethnic or national ones.

Lastly, for the purposes of this thesis, it is important to discuss Brubaker's (2002) critique of "groupism," which he defines as a series of tendencies. The first of these is the tendency to take "discrete, bounded groups" as the rudimentary arrangements of social life, viewing them as both the primary figures of social conflicts and, critically, as the "fundamental units of social analysis" (Brubaker 2002, 164). Secondly, Brubaker sees "groupism" as the tendency to treat certain groups, such as ethnic groups or nations, as "substantial entities to which interests and agency" can be assigned (ibid.). The third tendency he outlines is that of "reifying such groups as if they were internally homogenous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes" (ibid.). Finally, Brubaker describes the tendency to depict the social and cultural world as a "multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial, or cultural blocs" (ibid.).

While Brubaker centres his argument on a discussion of race, ethnicity, and nationhood, his critique can be expanded to any form of "groupism," including groups based on gender and sexuality. For example, conceptualising an LGBTQ+ community wherein it is implied that all LGBTQ+ people must think along the same lines is just as problematic as treating an ethnic group, nation, or race as homogenous. As previously suggested, a person's sense of self or identity is largely derived from the social categories to which they belong; however, because each individual is composed of a distinct combination of these categories due to their unique personal history, each person therefore uniquely conceives of their own identity (Stets and Burke 2000, 225).

As this research will illustrate, a variety of opinions and experiences exist among LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians; it is a heterogeneous landscape. As Brubaker argues, by shifting attention away from groups and instead focusing on groupness, we can take account of, and potentially account for, moments of increased cohesion and collective solidarity, without "implicitly treating high levels of groupness as constant, enduring, or definitionally present" (ibid., 12), getting to the root of when and why such cohesion can occur or why it does not.

Finally, according to Buzan (1993), with societies as the new focus of the "security *problematique*," it is the issues surrounding identity and migration that fuel awareness of threats and risks given that societies are "fundamentally about identity" (Buzan 1993, 5). This linkage of identity with migration leads directly into the next subsection, focused on the peculiarities of the direction of migration engaged by Russians to the South Caucasus.

1.3 Conceptualising North-South migration

In most cases, when the topic of migration is discussed today, it is through South-to-North patterns, whereby refugees or economic migrants from the global South seek more fruitful lives in the global North. Less has been written about the opposite trend, wherein citizens of the global North relocate to the periphery. In particular, there are different risks associated with the direction of migration — from North to South, the risks are from strong and powerful societies towards weaker ones, in other words, threats of penetration, exploitation, and domination (Buzan 1993, 5).

Generally, trends of North-to-South migration have fallen into what Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly (2016) have coined "lifestyle migration," which describes the resettlement of "relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life" (Benson and O'Reilly 2016, 22). While such lifestyle migration in a postindustrial context has been studied since the 1980s, and intra-European lifestyle flows since the 1990s, a focus on lifestyle migration from the global North to the global South has really only flourished since the mid-2000s (Emard and Nelson 2021, 1040).

As one might expect from their roles in defining such migration trends, both Benson and O'Reilly have been critical in expanding the field. In her research, Benson (2014; 2015) has largely focused on the case of North Americans living in Boquete, Panama, to address how privilege and class are understood and remade following migration. Crucial to Benson's understanding of privilege in this context is the notion that migrants have the privilege to facilitate migration in the first place. Furthermore, when migration occurs, a shift in the social context can affect this privilege in novel ways. Therefore, Benson emphasises the importance of conceptualising such privilege as relative, rather than the absolute sense often presented. Furthermore, to truly understand how such privilege is transformed and understood within the new host country, the relative positions of power between the sending and receiving countries must be understood, particularly any imperialist or colonialist heritage that may have a greater

impact than the general historical conditions that naturally underwrite all forms of migration (Benson 2014). By comparing the case studies of North Americans in Panama with the British in rural France, Benson illustrates the power of postcoloniality. In this case, while the privilege of the British in rural France is largely influenced by differences in class, for the North Americans in Boquete, privilege is splintered among the ranks of class as well as race and ethnicity, the latter grouping stemming from a history of coloniality (Benson 2014).

In a similar strand of research, Sheila Croucher (2009) has looked at how American emigrants in Mexico fit the model of transnational immigration and how they reflect their privilege and power through their ambiguities of belonging. While Benson saw apologists among her North American interviewees in Boquette, and respondents who attempted to recognise their privilege, Croucher's research was generally more damning. Croucher makes the important point that while American immigrants largely feel a sense of welcome in Mexico, this is in stark contrast to the strong sense of alienation and marginalisation that millions of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, whether American citizens or not, experience in the United States (Croucher 2009, 146). Croucher focuses her research on analysing senses of identity and belonging among the American emigrants, finding that the majority of her respondents continued to express a deep attachment with and love for their country of origin. Croucher also explores the neocolonialist influences at work, citing the sociologist Erik Cohen, who maintained that "Though their contribution to those countries should not be belittled, [expatriates] are still a neo-colonial or imperialist phenomenon" (Cohen 1977, 5 in Croucher 2009, 150). Indeed, Croucher notes that the American migrants often make statements echoing the colonial discourses of an earlier era, for example, citing the love they have for the household maid who is "just like family" as white Americans once said about their African slaves (Croucher 2009, 158), or the implication that American migration has brought wealth and civilisation to what was formerly a 'backwards' state (Croucher 2009).

While the above two researchers largely focused on North American migrants to Latin and South America, similar strands of research have been conducted across the world. For example, Mari Korpela (2010) examined lifestyle migrants to Varanasi India who replicated colonial mentalities in their quest to find an "essentialised, 'authentic' Indian culture against which to define themselves" (Korpela 2010, 1312). In this scenario, it is the Westerner who decides what counts as an "authentic" India — similar veins of research have been conducted by Caroline Knowles (2005) in Hong Kong and Paul Green in Bali (2017) (Emard and Nelson 2020).

More recent research with a specific focus on migration from a former imperial nation to its former colony has been illustrated by María-Jesús Cabezón-Fernández (2023), who looks at the daily life experiences of Spanish migrants in Northern Algeria to analyse how their colonial imagination is reinforced or fractured. In line with other postcolonial scholars, Cabezón-Fernández argues that "transnational migrations have become a trigger for the spread of the colonial power through the transnationalization of the colonial imaginations towards the Global South, at a macro and micro level" (ibid., 3). Her research shows that in the everyday practices of the Spanish migrants, the colonial imagination of the "Other," particularly the "Other Moor," still holds sway, creating a lack of intimate relationships as expatriates stick to spaces inhabited by other expatriates.

While these researches all tackle slightly different regions and topics, one thing they all have in common is a focus on the migrants who relocated. As Emard and Nelson (2020) illustrate, there "remains a tendency in this scholarship to conduct interviews solely with migrants from the Global North and to avoid consideration of how 'locals' and labour migrants from neighbouring countries in the Global South experience and respond to this influx of privileged foreigners." For example, although both Benson and Croucher discuss the neo-colonialist overtones that exist within American conceptions of migration to Central America, their research was only conducted within the Western migrant communities.

An exception to this has been the recent research conducted by Lisa Åkesson (2022), who addresses the shifting post-colonialist power positions encountered by Portuguese migrants in Angola. Åkesson emphasises the differing definitions of the words migrant and expatriate, noting that Angolans in Luanda viewed the Portuguese not as migrants but as simply "the Portuguese," a term loaded with historical significance and of lingering postcolonial power relations (Åkesson 2022, 612). Åkesson attempts to balance her analysis by recording the reactions of both migrants and locals, noting, for example, the concern of young Angolans about the massive entrance of Portuguese into the labour market due to nepotism and other personal relations, and how Angolans perceive the Portuguese migration to be a continuity of the oppression and cultural eradication that occurred during colonialism (ibid., 615).

This lack of focus on the host communities is also present within the new research being published about the Russian migration to the Caucasus since February 2022. While an argument could be made that the Russian migrants are indeed a form of refugees — given that many of those leaving were politically oppressed, including LGBTQ+ individuals, human

rights activists, and journalists — there are still many similarities between this new migration and the lifestyle migration defined by Benson and O'Reilly above, as well as with the colonialist undertones discussed in this strand of migration research as also discussed above. For example, Kuleshova et al. (2022) conducted mixed-methods research, consisting of surveys and interviews, to analyse the economic decisions and adaptation practices of Russian migrants in Georgia and Armenia, with a particular focus on employment. In their research, Kuleshova et al. explicitly notes the similarities between the current migration and lifestyle migration, as defined by Benson and O'Reilly (2016), and the newer trend of "digital nomadism."

Similarly, Geiger and Syrakvash's recent paper on Russian and Belarusian IT specialists in Georgia orients itself around the migrant experience (2023). Their research bases itself on the concept of "transient spaces," as outlined by Bork-Hüfer et. al (2016) and Bork-Hüfer and Peth (2020), which acknowledges "aspects of resentment and resistance which facilitat[e] explanations as to why newcomers may not experience social welcome and exclusion" (Geiger and Syrakvash 2023) In their findings, Geiger and Syrakvash highlight how the surveyed IT experts did not seem interested in developing either deeper social ties or professional connections with local Georgians, nor were local IT stakeholders enthusiastic about associating with Russian IT specialists (ibid.), largely due to socio-political tensions and resentment.

Focusing more on the interconnections between class and hospitality, Mühlfried (2023) has explicitly drawn attention to the privilege of middle-class Russian migrants from St. Petersburg or Moscow, often with jobs in the IT sector, as opposed to other Russian citizens, such as North Caucasians. Mühlfried highlights how class and ethnic differences, though marked among the Russian migrants themselves, are neglected by media, academia, and the majority of Georgians, who instead all focus their attention on what Mühlfried terms the "cosmopolitan" Russian.

Throughout all this research, however, there is, once again, a specific focus on the migrants' experiences, with only slight reference to the experiences of the local populations coexisting with said migrants. In particular, little has been published in regards to how marginalised groups, such as North Caucasians, as illustrated by Mühlfried, or LGBTQ+ Russians, are perceived locally (as opposed to the mainstream conception of a Russian migrant). While investigating the experiences of migrants in their new locales is certainly important, there also should be equivalent work done to centre the voices of long-time locals. Therefore, this

dissertation looks to the seminal work of Emard and Nelson (2020) in creating an anticolonial approach to research lifestyle migration.

Emard and Nelson (2020, 1041-1042) propose three tenets of an anticolonial approach:

> 1) Historicize 'cheap' land and labour available to lifestyle migrants within the *longue dureé* of colonial histories and enduring colonial political economies of globalisation (e.g. debt-induced neoliberal restructuring), 2) approach the contemporary production of inequality in destination sites from a non-binary perspective that considers the range of experiences of diverse local residents, and 3) embrace methodologies that centre diverse local residents as knowers while building accountable, collaborative research with them.

For them, simply employing the vocabulary of colonialism is not enough — research must explicitly and thoroughly link the dynamics of race, privilege, and coloniality to a colonial system that is "both historical and contemporary in nature" (ibid., 1042). Such research must aim to decentre modern manifestations of the "colonial gaze" and transfer greater authority to research participants, given their historical marginalisation within what the pair term "colonial knowledge structures" (ibid.)

By focusing on the experiences of LGBTQ+ citizens in Georgia and Armenia, this research attempts to in some part close the gaps illustrated in both the North-South migration literature and more specifically, the literature coming out of the recent Russian migration. It also is an attempt to explore the diversity of both migrants and local residents, centering marginalised populations in both regards and centering their experiences within an anti-colonial framework.

1.4 Russia as a colonialist state

As has been made clear in the discussion above, North-South migration is often tied to postcolonialist and decolonialist theories, given the histories of the sending and receiving countries. Since the burgeoning of post-colonial studies in the 1980s, the majority of focus has been on the former Western colonies, separating the West from the non-West, the first world from the third world, the Global North from the Global South. In an example of how this conception has become the mainstream, Encyclopædia Britannica even defines postcolonialism as "the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of *Western colonialism*," (emphasis added). Lost within this maelstrom have been, among others, the voices of the

former Soviet republics, whose claims to a postcolonialist inheritance were largely ignored by media and Western politicians until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Russian state has long denied its colonialist heritage. Numerous arguments have been cited, from claiming that Russia was a land empire without a separate colonial state à la the British and French empires and that it is therefore difficult to separate the core and the colonial, to arguing that the Russian people themselves were colonised (Etkind 2015) with no blame able to be accounted for by the ancestors of the Russian Imperial state nor of the Soviet Union. Indeed, even scholars have argued against extending postcolonial terminology to the former Soviet states, alleging its limited value as "only a technique of literary criticism" (Velychenko 2004, 396; Koplatadze 2019, 472).

Certainly, literature and art have been two main areas where postcolonial and decolonial theories have made their mark in regards to the former Soviet states. Russian and Slavonic literary studies have plainly seen an application of postcolonial theory in regards to analysing the Russian Orientalism in the Caucasus found in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Indeed, such studies often reference Edward Said's *Orientalism* to underscore that such representations of the Russian Empire's non-Russian colonial subjects as "Other" and as being based in the "Orient" played a significant role in the establishment of Russia's own identity (Koplatadze 2019, 471). In classic Russian literature, the Caucasus was portrayed as a romantic place with hardened, bestial warriors and beautiful, obedient women just waiting to be rescued by a handsome Russian soldier — Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and Leo Tolstoy's *A Prisoner In The Caucasus* are perhaps the most famous examples. In the Soviet Union, perpetuated in film, Georgia was nicknamed "*Solnechnaia Gruziia*" or "Sunny Georgia," with an emphasis placed on the country's warm weather and sun and the joyful nature of the Georgian people (Vatcharadze 2020). In both cases, Georgians and the Georgian culture were patronisingly exoticised.

Armenians, on the other hand, were often labelled within Imperial Russia as the "Jews of the Caucasus," an essentializing trope whereby Armenians were stereotyped as "cunning, parsimonious outsiders" (Riegg 2016, 146) and generally perceived to be working as traders or merchants (ibid., 149), profiting for the sake of personal gain as opposed to benefitting due to the virtues of hard work. Later on, during the Soviet Union, Armenians were viewed, like the rest of the Caucasian peoples, as "people of the East," with an Orientalising lens placed on their actions (Johnson 2019, 129).

As these examples show, and as feminist and decolonialist theorist Madina Tlostanova argues in her seminal work *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet?*, there was a dark side to Russian imperialism and Soviet modernity, which was marked by "Orientalism, racism, othering, and forced assimilation" (Tlostanova 2018, 10). Progression under this model meant one thing for Russians and something entirely different for Armenians and Georgians (ibid.). As Benson, Croucher, and O'Reilly have shown in the section above, such aspects of post-colonialism linger into the modern day, affecting perceptions and understandings between the former coloniser and the formerly colonised. In particular, as Krzysztan (2022) highlights, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has activated "layers of memories" in the South Caucasus, whereby a threatening vision has emerged of a potential way to re-subjugate the region. This naturally has an effect in terms of the possibilities of integration and separation, as will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on empirical findings.

Chapter 2: Contextual Background

2.1 Historical context

Both Armenia and Georgia have long, historied pasts, with roots going back to feudal kingdoms in the early middle ages. For centuries, the Caucasus as a whole was caught between expanding empires: initially between the Byzantine and Persian Empires, later between the Ottoman and Persion ones, and finally between the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian. In 1783, Catherine the Great guaranteed Russian protection against any future military threats, a promise reinforced by the Treaty of Georgievsk, which would later provide the foundation for the full absorption of eastern Georgia into the Russian Empire in 1801, when Alexander I officially annexed Kartli-Kakheti (King 2008, 26-27). Similarly to the "civilising missions" expounded by the Western Empires in their colonial ventures, the tsar claimed the annexation was not to increase his profits or expand the empire, but rather to "establish in Georgia a government that can maintain justice, ensure the security of persons and of property, and give to everyone the protection of law" (ibid., 28). In 1828, Iran was forced to cede Eastern Armenia (comprising modern-day Armenia), as well as other territories in the Caucasus, to the Russian Empire (ibid., 51). Both Georgia and Armenia remained under Russian imperial rule until dissolution of the Russian Empire at the end of World War I. Following a brief period of independence — during which Armenia dealt with the immediate aftereffects of the Armenian Genocide — the territories were reincorporated within the newly formed Soviet Union in the early 1920s.

During the Soviet period, the South Caucasus as a whole saw a modernising mission enacted by the Soviet authorities. Both Armenia and Georgia saw tens of thousands persecuted during the Stalinist purges (JAMNews 2022), as well as the suppression of religion. In later years, the safeguarding of native languages became a point of contention. The three SSRs in the Caucasus were the only Soviet republics whose native languages — Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani — were officially recognised as sole state languages. In 1978, when Communist Party officials proposed constitutional amendments to declare Russian as a second state language, thereby elevating it to equal status, huge demonstrations were organised in Georgia, and all three countries eventually kept their original constitutions in regards to language.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both Georgia and Armenia reemerged as independent, democratic states. The 1990s were marked by conflict and tension between the new Georgian state and the former ASSR of Abkhazia and former AO of South Ossetia. Supported by Russia, the two territories gained *de facto* independence from Georgia with an

ensuing population exchange. In 2008, Russia again supported these territories, accusing Georgia of “aggression against South Ossetia” and engaging in a so-called “peace enforcement,” which soon became a five-day all-out war. Even today, around 20% of Georgia's officially recognized territory is deemed to be occupied by Russian forces.

Armenia faced a similar conflict with Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh,[3] formerly an autonomous oblast that was located within the Azerbaijani SSR, but which consisted of a majority Armenian population. In the 1990s, the conflict became a full-scale war, which was eventually won by the Armenian side. As in the Georgian case, a huge population displacement occurred. In the 2010s, the conflict reignited, and the large-scale Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 resulted in thousands of deaths as well as a significant victory by Azerbaijan. Cease-fire violations continued, and in December 2022, Azerbaijan began a blockade of the Lachin Corridor, the humanitarian corridor which connected Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and the outside world. In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched another large-scale military offensive, which resulted in the surrender of the territory’s authorities — the Republic of Artsakh was officially dissolved on 1 January 2024.[4]

2.2 An overview of LGBTQ+ rights in the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus as a whole is not well known for having a great degree of tolerance towards LGBTQ+ people. Azerbaijan, for example, has consistently been rated the worst country in Europe according to indices and rankings by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, Europe (ILGA-Europe), which evaluates European countries according to their respective legal and policy practices for LGBTQ+ people. No legislation exists in Azerbaijan recognizing LGBTQ+ people, rendering them invisible on the legislative and political domain (Kuenning 2019).

Armenia is only slightly better, having been ranked 47 out of 49 for the last five years by ILGA-Europe with an average overall score of 8%. While homosexuality was legalised in 2003 (Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia), little other legal protections have been enacted in regards to LGBTQ+ Armenians, and discrimination and homophobia is rampant throughout all

[3] The unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is also known as the Republic of Artsakh, the former being a Russian rendering of an Azeri word, while the latter is the ancient Armenian name for the region. While respondents used both terms, I use Nagorno-Karabakh outside of direct quotes as that is the term most recognised by academics and policy makers.
[4] Interviews were conducted during the blockade of the Lachin Corridor, before the outright military offensive by Azerbaijan.

aspects of society. For example, a nationwide survey conducted in 2015 found that 90% of Armenia's population was against LGBTQ+ people, and felt that legislative measures should be used to restrict their rights (Pink Armenia 2016; Kuenning 2022). Almost 94% viewed it as unacceptable for gay people to hold hands, and a further 97.5% found it unacceptable for gays or lesbians to kiss in public.[5] To compare, around 95% of those surveyed saw no issue with heterosexual couples holding hands in public, and only about 60% thought it unacceptable for heterosexual couples to kiss in public (Pink Armenia 2016; Kuenning 2022).

Since the 2018 anti-government demonstrations, commonly known as the "Velvet Revolution," Armenia has seen a surge in hate speech and hate crimes related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Pink Armenia 2018; Kuenning 2019). Nationalists frequently link "gender perversion" to "genocide," accusing LGBTQ+ Armenians of destroying the family and thus the nation (Kuenning 2019), the looming Azeri threat serving to exert further pressure on LGBTQ+ citizens to conform to a heterosexual lifestyle (Kuenning 2022). Violence against the community is also not uncommon, particularly in regards to the transgender population, and there is an unwillingness on the part of the authorities to pursue prosecution (Pilishvili 2020; Kuenning 2022). There have also been a number of notable cases of suicides by LGBTQ+ youth (Avetisyan 2022; Pink Armenia 2022; Barseghyan 2023).

Comparatively, Georgia has historically ranked much higher on the ILGA-Europe rankings, notably reaching a ranking of 22 and an overall score of 36% in 2015 (ILGA-Europe 2015). However, since then, Georgia has slowly fallen in the rankings — this year, it saw its lowest score in ten years, coming in at 35th place with an overall score of 25% (ILGA-Europe 2023).

In terms of legislation, Georgia is seemingly much more liberal as compared to the rest of the Caucasus, generally due to its Constitutional mandate to "ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union" (Constitution of Georgia 1995). The Soviet-era "anti-sodomy law" — which punished homosexual acts between men by a maximum of five years in prison with hard labour — was annulled in 2000 in order to meet the standards set by the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights (Szulc 2018; Kuenning 2019). Likewise, in 2006, Georgia updated its Labour Code to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Natsvlishvili, n.d.; Kuenning 2019), and in 2014, the government passed an anti-discrimination law banning all forms of discrimination, including on the grounds of sexual

[5] There was (and still is) little understanding of other sexual identities among the wider Armenian population.

orientation and gender identity (Sakellaraki 2014; Kuenning 2019). However, since 2015, the Georgian government has increasingly taken an anti-LGBTQ+ stand. In 2017, the ruling government coalition passed a constitutional amendment to define marriage as the "union of a woman and a man for the purpose of founding a family" (Constitution of Georgia 1995; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2016; Kuenning 2022); in 2022, the government's renewed human rights strategy document for 2023-2030 removed its commitment to "combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity" (Kincha 2023); and in May 2023, the pro-government party the European Socialists announced they would submit a bill to ban queer "propaganda," echoing Russia's 2013 gay propaganda law (Shoshiashvili and Fabbro 2023).

Homophobia is also rampant among the Georgian public. A 2019 study by the UNDP found that half of all female respondents and over 80% of male respondents would never have a homosexual friend. An even greater number stated that homosexual people should not be allowed to work with children and that it would be embarrassing to have a homosexual child (UNDP 2020, 15). Data collected in 2020 by the International Social Survey programme (ISSP) survey found that 84% of Georgian respondents viewed sexual relations between two adults of the same sex as always wrong (Babunashvili and Gilbreath 2021). While a 2022 study by the Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) has found that many homophobic views have decreased as compared to 2016 — In 2022, only 53% of respondents held the view that LGBTQ+ people should not be legally granted the right to assemble and express as opposed to 78% in 2016; the share of respondents who viewed the work of LGBTQ+ activists negatively decreased from around 75% in 2016 to around 57% in 2022; and the percentage of gay marriage opponents decreased from close to 89% in 2016 to a little under 75% in 2022 — the proportion of the population who thinks that "most gay men are pedophiles" increased by 7 percentage points, from only around 21% in 2016 to nearly 29% in 2022 (Civil.ge 2022).

On the other hand, Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus to have a visible conception of Pride. One of the biggest days for LGBTQ+ Georgians is 17 May, also known as the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOT). In 2013, around 50 LGBTQ+ activists were confronted by thousands of violent protesters led by Georgian Orthodox priests. After the mob broke through police lines, the authorities evacuated the LGBTQ+ demonstrators from the city centre. The following year, the Georgian Orthodox Church officially designated 17 May as "Family Purity Day," and in the following years, the holiday has been marked by hundreds of people flooding Rustaveli Avenue to protest "sodomy" and demand the protection of "family purity and morality" (OC Media 2019;

Kuenning 2019). Due to the increase in homophobic attitudes around this date, the first Tbilisi Pride week held in 2019 was scheduled for 18-23 June. While an international LGBTQ+ conference was successfully held with over 100 activists, CSO representatives, and European diplomats attending, the rest of the events were postponed due to the breakout of unrelated protests in Tbilisi against the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Tbilisi Pride March was eventually held on 8 July 2019; however, only 40 activists took part due to threats from far-right groups (Kuenning 2019). The next Pride March, held in 2021 (2020 Pride events were held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic), was cancelled after far-right groups stormed the headquarters of Tbilisi Pride and violently attacked a number of journalists. While the 2022 events also saw violent groups attempting to disrupt it, the Tbilisi Pride week was successful overall, ending with a Tbilisi Pride Fest (Georgia Today 2022). However, the most recent Pride week again saw backsliding in progress. While the international conference was once again held successfully, Tbilisi Pride Fest was cancelled after a couple thousand far-right protesters were able to break through police lines to attack the festival grounds (Fabbro, et al. 2023).

2.3 An overview of Russian migration to the South Caucasus

As noted in the introduction, the actual number of Russian citizens who have migrated to the South Caucasus since the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not precisely known. According to *EuroNews*, around 1.5 million Russians have crossed the Russia-Georgia border since the war began (Bolkvadze 2023); however, official data from Georgia's interior ministry lists 112,000 Russians as being in the country as of 1 November 2022 (Reuters 2023). In Armenia, over 650,000 citizens of the Russian Federation were recorded as having entered the country from January to August 2022; however, only around 40,000 have remained long-term (Sargsyan 2022). In both cases, however, the share of Russian citizens as compared to the total populations of each country — 2.8 million and 3.7 million in Armenia and Georgia respectively — is substantial.

The number of citizens entering each country has also not been stable. Indeed, the Russian migration to the South Caucasus has often been conceived of as a series of waves. The first wave began in February 2022, following the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to sociologists at After 24, who surveyed 900 Russians through online questionnaires and conducted more than 50 in-depth interviews, this first wave was largely made up of people with a high social capital who were both politically and civically active (НеМосква 2022). Two-thirds of these migrants were from either St. Petersburg or Moscow,

and almost everyone had a job that was easy to relocate with or that could be done remotely (ibid.). This wave also included a large number of LGBTQ+ Russians (Kollek 2023, Rypel 2023).

The next wave can be dated from 21 September 2022, when partial mobilisation was announced in Russia. This second wave was disproportionately made up of military-age men trying to escape conscription, among whom there was more variation in education and employment. These migrants were also less likely to have been engaged in activism or politically engaged back in Russia (НеМосква 2022).

According to research conducted by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) on Russian migrants in Georgia and Armenia, the majority of respondents were educated at a higher level than that of the Russian population overall (Krawatzek et. al 2023, 7). In addition, respondents generally had worked full-time before leaving Russia, with a sizable share employed in IT — 27 % in Georgia and 37 % in Armenia, respectively. Around 80% of respondents came from a city with a population over one million, with former residents of St. Petersburg and Moscow highly overrepresented (ibid., 8). Finally, the Russian migrants surveyed had substantially more liberal social attitudes as compared to the general Russian population, particularly in regards to the tolerance of same-sex relationships (ibid., 3).

Interestingly, this same report highlighted some differences between those migrants residing in Georgia and those in Armenia. For example, a higher proportion of respondents in Armenia left Russia in the immediate aftermath of the Ukrainian invasion, while in Georgia, there was a larger concentration of respondents who left Russia around the time that partial mobilisation was announced (ibid., 8). Russian respondents residing in Armenia were also more politically active prior to their emigration and were more likely to have reported their participation in protests related to the invasion of Ukraine (26% in Armenia as opposed to 11% in Georgia) (ibid., 3).

Another difference is in ethnic identity: those who self-identify as ethnic Russians make up around 89% of the Georgian sample while this share is only 69% in Armenia (Krawatzek et. al 2023, 7). There are a few likely reasons for this. For one, in the latter sample, around 8% of the respondents, though Russian citizens, are returnees to Armenia, and view themselves first and foremost as Armenians (ibid.). In addition, there have been numerous reports regarding the systematic denial of entry to North Caucasians (or those who resemble them based on various

physical, religious, and cultural attributes) by Georgian border guards (Kuzhev 2022; Mchedlishvili and Shoshiashvili 2022; Social Justice Center 2022).

In terms of effects, the most notable has been the increase in rental and housing prices. In Tbilisi, the cost of rental housing increased by 77% in 2022, according to TBC Capital (Tchania, et. al 2023). In Armenia, rental prices increased by 57% — in 2023, the average rent was over $950 USD, the highest in the region (Khayrutdinov, et. al 2023). There have been numerous reports of locals in both Tbilisi and Yerevan facing eviction due to these skyrocketing prices, with landlords preferring to rent to Russians they believe have more money (Avetisyan and Shoshiashvili 2022).

Both capital cities have become Russified to some extent, with Russian migrants filling the shops, restaurants, and streets of Tbilisi and Yerevan. At the same time, it is as if there are two parallel societies operating, wherein Russian migrants visit a certain set of businesses also visited, or even owned, by other Russian migrants, creating a bubble of sorts (Lomsadze 2023 and Ostiller 2023). In contrast to this, there has been a backlash by the local populations; in Tbilisi, for example, anti-Russian graffiti is highly prevalent, especially downtown (Neal 2023).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research design

In my research, I chose to focus specifically on LGTBQ+ Georgians and Armenians due to the similarities between the two countries in terms of the historical context and background and of the scale of migration. This provided a basis to compare situations and begin to determine where and why differences arose or similarities existed.

As outlined in my introduction, this research attempts to answer a number of questions, starting with how mass migration can impact a vulnerable host community. From there, I ask whether there is space for collaboration and integration between the migrants and subsections of the host communities given the principle of a shared social identity. In other words, do the vulnerabilities experienced by LGBTQ+ Russians engender any feelings of solidarity among LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians? Finally, I examine how conflict and post-colonial understandings can affect collaboration and integration, contrasting the case of LGBTQ+ Russians with that of LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis.

To best answer these questions, I used a small-n research design for data collection, in the form of semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ Georgians and LGBTQ+ Armenians currently residing in either Tbilisi or Yerevan. As Bertrand and Hughes (2005) have outlined, there are three main reasons why interviews are a useful method of data gathering. Firstly, they allow interviewees to direct the conversation and respond in their own-terms, using their own language and concepts. Secondly, interviewees can provide longer and more complex responses via a verbal discussion as opposed to other methods. Finally, interviews can assist in clarifying any ambiguities related to the data, as participants are engaged in a direct back-and-forth exchange, which would not be possible in written answers or via a survey (Bertrand and Hughes 2005, 74). Furthermore, interviews facilitate the building of relationships and the establishment of trust, which is often crucial for research tackling vulnerable groups, and can assist in creating productive partnerships that benefit both the researcher as well as the participant (Potter 2018).

In these interviews, participants were first asked questions about their identity(ies) and how such identifications have changed or come into conflict over the years. A next set of questions focused on the interviewee’s experiences as an LGBTQ+ person in their country of origin (Georgia or Armenia) and how tensions within the region — including the 2008 Russo-

Georgian War, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine — affected them. Finally, all participants were asked about any collaboration they have done with LGBTQ+ Russians, with LGBTQ+ Armenians being asked a further question about any collaboration with LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis in order to compare and contrast with a population similarly embroiled in conflict. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the participants were able to expand and steer the discussion to the issues they felt the most important; therefore, some interviewees were asked new questions not originally included in the general interview guideline.

Interviews were conducted both in-person and online. In the case of the former, spaces were carefully selected and vetted ahead of interviews. Generally, interviews were conducted on-campus at Ilia State University or in the offices of those respondents working for LGBTQ+ organisations. In some cases, an appropriate third-party, public space was needed, in which a priority was keeping a sense of privacy and security for the respondent. In these situations, a discussion between myself and the respondent was held to find a reasonable solution that worked for the both of us. For online calls, I used a secure platform associated with Glasgow University, which is both encrypted and compliant with GDPR. Online calls were necessary in addition to in-person interviews due to the lack of financial practicality in constantly travelling between Tbilisi and Yerevan as well as the personal preference of interviewees to maintain a sense of privacy and security. Each interview was estimated to last between 45 minutes to one hour, though in actuality, discussions ranged as long as 1 hour and 45 minutes.

The data gathered was analysed via inductive coding based on the ideas and themes presented in the interviews. According to an inductivist model, the researcher first collects the relevant data before then examining the facts to see what theory is suggested — the theory thus "emerges" from the data (Wengraf 2001). It is naturally suited to semi-structured interviews where part of the research focus is intended to be decided by the research participants who guide the discussion as it continues, based on their own experiences. To code the data gathered from the 12 interviews, I first read through all the interview transcripts twice to engage with the data and to begin to note which overarching themes and topics emerged. Based on these emerging linkages, I read through the interviews again, this time hand-coding them with coloured pens based on the following overarching themes derived from a combination of linked terms:

- Economic considerations and privilege

- Terms: economy, rent, prices, housing, privilege, expensive, cost of living, afford, gentrification, poverty
- Post-colonial/post-imperial attitudes
  - Terms: Russian language, belonging, occupation, colonialism, orientalism, influence, aggressor, brother nation, colony, space, conquered, arrogance
- Inclusion and exclusion
  - Terms: integration, collaboration, similarities, communication, values, common ground, community, cooperation, respect, help

These themes then became the basis for analysing my empirical findings based upon the relevant literature. In addition to looking at said literature, I also participated in an international workshop about Russian migration hosted by Ilia State University[6] during which I presented my research findings and was able to exchange ideas with colleagues engaged in similar research topics. Similar themes of post-colonialism and (neo)colonialism emerged in this exchange, as did the emergence of lifestyle migration literature as a valuable area for research.

Finally, it is important to express that this thesis aims to provide exploratory insights into the experiences of LGBTQ+ Armenians and Georgians in relation to the Russian migration; it is a qualitative study that does not intend to draw representational conclusions among a so-called LGBTQ+ Georgian community or LGBTQ+ Armenian community as a whole, avoiding the pitfalls of "groupism" as expounded by Brubaker.

3.2 Participants

The interview participants were initially recruited through LGBTQ+ NGOs operating in Georgia and Armenia, as the names and contact details of staff were available online. A further pool of Georgian and Armenian participants was recruited among drag performers through snowballing and word-of-mouth. In the end, a total of 12 LGBTQ+ Armenian and Georgian participants were interviewed (5 Georgians and 7 Armenians), out of a total of 45 contacted.[7] My criteria for participants was pretty loose; anyone who personally identified as LGBTQ+ and was public to some degree with that identity was a possible respondent. They also needed

[6] From 12-13 November 2023, Ilia University hosted the international workshop "Approaching the Exodus: Tensions and Cooperation in the Emerging Communities in the South Caucasus After the Start of the Russian Full-scale Invasion to Ukraine." For more details: https://soccult.iliauni.edu.ge/?p=2985&lang=en

[7] These 45 contacts included specific LGBTQ+ activists as well as general NGO or artistic collective emails.

to be able to speak English. In addition, two interviews were conducted with local Georgian experts, defined as those who worked on LGBTQ+ topics (whether as activists or academics), but who did not identify as LGBTQ+ themselves.

The majority of the participants were based in either Tbilisi or Yerevan, though some had experiences living abroad, either in Russia, Europe, or the U.S. Generally, they were also on the younger side, with an age range of between 20 and 40. All identified as LGBTQ+, with a range of both genders and sexual identities expressed.[8]

3.3 Ethical considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of this research and its focus on a vulnerable population, ethical considerations were a priority.

To start, it is important to discuss the process by which I, as the researcher, approached the issue of confidentiality with participants for this research. As Katja M. Guenther (2009) illustrates, using pseudonyms in social science research has become a standard in the field, with researchers just adding a sentence or footnote to make the reader aware that no real names were used. What is lacking, however, is a discussion regarding what Guenther terms the "politics of naming," wherein the the power dynamics inherent in the act of naming are recognised and the reader fully informed about how the author has reached the decision to name or not to name. Without such a discussion, Guenther highlights how "the reader is left with a limited understanding of how the researcher approached confidentiality, whether the decision to use pseudonyms was made by the researcher or respondents, and whether the researcher sought to engage respondents in discussing this topic" (Ibid, 416).

This lack of a discussion can lead to serious misrepresentations of the research participants. For example, Lahman et. al (2015) notes the example of a researcher who altered substantial amounts of information about a participant, including her name, nationality, profession, and academic credentials. This participant recalled feeling "stripped of who I was and not good enough. [It was as if the researcher was saying] here is what you should be" (Lahman et. al 2015, 447 in Shelton and Brooks 2021, 824). In particular, though this participant highlighted

[8] No explicitly transgender people were interviewed and no transgender-specific NGOs responded to contact requests; this is likely due to increased safety concerns.

her Latina heritage, she was given the pseudonym Eve Bronson, a name which does not reflect the identity of the participant (Lahman et. al 2015, 447 in Shelton and Brooks 2021, 825).

In this research, all participants were anonymised in the data collection and pseudonymised in any research publication, with the exception of certain prominent activists who maintain a public profile and who explicitly stated they wished to be named. There was no expectation that anyone would choose to be named, but such an option was left open in order to avoid patronising any participants and of perpetuating unequal power dynamics among Western researchers and their participants. All the participants were engaged in the decision whether to use a pseudonym or not. Many of the participants I spoke to take pride in their activism, and given that they act daily in these at-risk environments, I trusted they understood the risks of publicity.

For those who chose to use a pseudonym, I did my best to pick common names based on their country of origin and residence and which subscribed to their stated gender identity. It was important to balance between highlighting the vital aspects of their identity without revealing any sensitive or revealing data. Only a first name is given to those with a pseudonym.

In addition to considering the issue of naming participants, due to the potential of the research to deal with sensitive topics, details of support organisations were provided in the Plain Language Statement given to all participants. In addition, participants were notified ahead of time of the interview topic and, if requested, specific questions. Care was taken to pay attention to body language and the emotional well-being of respondents. Participants were notified that at any time they could stop the interview, that they could request that any part of the interview be kept off-record, and that they could remove themselves as research subjects, the latter two even after the interview had been completed.

Finally, personal data was only retained during the duration of my research in case of the need for further contact (ex. in case of a follow-up interview). Once the project was completed, all personal data was destroyed. Furthermore, in accordance with the University of Glasgow Research Data Management guidelines, research data was destroyed upon completion of the dissertation.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Glasgow's Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Sciences.

3.4 Limitations

There are several limitations to the data collected in this research worth expanding on. The biggest of these is the size of the sample gathered. As previously made clear, this research does not intend to draw representational conclusions on behalf of all LGBTQ+ Georgians or Armenians. A total sample size of 12 (split into five and seven respectively) is nowhere near large enough to be considered representative of the LGBTQ+ populations in either country.

Another limitation is related to language. All the interviews were conducted in English, meaning that only those with sufficient knowledge of the language could participate.[9] This clearly narrows the field of interviewees and skews the data in favour of more Western-oriented and well-educated participants. Similarly, my research focuses on LGBTQ+ Armenians residing in Yerevan and LGBTQ+ Georgians residing in Tbilisi. Again, this skews the data towards a more cosmopolitan population.

Finally, it must be discussed that this research was conducted over a short period of time and therefore there was a limitation in terms of gaining participants' trust. This affected who decided to speak with me, and how open and willing participants were in answering sensitive questions. There are many voices within the LGBTQ+ populations of Georgia and Armenia, including those within the transgender population, who are not presented within this research, harking back to the point that the data gathered cannot be considered representational.

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[9] Two possible respondents were interested in my research, but the lack of English on their part and lack of Georgian on mine made their participation impossible.

Chapter 4: Empirical Findings

4.1 Conceptualisations of identity

One of the underpinnings of this research was examining the identity of LGBTQ+ Armenians and LGBTQ+ Georgians as it is conceptualised among the research participants. This question was the basis for each interview to help understand the participants' life experiences as well as how this identity has been affected by the Russian migration and the influx of a new group of LGTBQ+ people into what is already a vulnerable and marginalised space. In addition, it is an important foundation for understanding how the participants negotiated their identity and understanding of Russian identity when deciding on inclusion or exclusion.

Firstly, it is important to note that a number of participants specifically chose to identify as "queer" due to the term's political connotations and its specificity in rejecting labels and norms, as outlined in the theoretical section on LGBTQ+ and queer definitions found above. For example, this is how Giorgi Tabagari, the founder of Tbilisi Pride, identified himself:

> I identify as a gay man, but I call myself queer because politically, I try to stay away from LGBTQI+ letters as much as possible and use queer as a term that also identifies myself and is politically important. To me it is a big part of strategic communication, underlining the fact that I belong to this group, which is not heteronormative, and in a wider spectrum of understanding. I have, interchangeably, both identities.

Araqs, an Armenian drag performer, also highlighted the ability of the term "queer" to encapsulate a sense of fluidity as well as a political meaning:

> I don't identify or feel as any of the genders, I feel both and none of the genders at the same time. It's been so complicated that I just say queer. It's kind of easier and it's also a political identity because a lot of people within the LGBTI community don't like identifying as queer or queer gender, they prefer to be cisgender gay male or something, so it's very much still present. Even within the community there's a bit of a divide.

Likewise, Tigran, the founder of an Armenian LGBT community-based NGO, chose a "queer" identity due to its inherent questioning of the norm:

> I identify as a queer, because it is important for me to question everything, like our life, the regime, I don't know, everything. I am gay. I have attractions to men, but I don't have attractions to genders. I think I am queer.

By choosing a "queer" identity, these respondents engaged with the multitude of definitions discussed in the theoretical overview above. While for some, such as Araqs, it was explicitly about fluidity in one's sexual and gender identity, for others, it was a political and activist-oriented choice. Indeed, both Miller et. al (2016) and Worthen (2023) have shown that "queer" is a term that refers to both a "highly politicised identity" tied to obligation of activism (Miller et al. 2016) and one that is inherently embedded in social movements which reject the mainstream "tropes" and mobilise for change (Worthen 2023).

As one might expect, therefore, a number of respondents also wished to specifically emphasise their political identities, including their role as activists. For example, Tamar Jakeli, a member of Tbilisi Pride and co-founder of the new Georgian Greens party, emphasised both her queer identity and her activist and political work, including mentioning her dream to be the first openly queer parliamentarian in Georgia:

> I would say being an activist is also an identity for me. I also try to bring a different definition to the word patriot. I talk a lot about how we should redefine patriotism and bring all these progressive values to it and clear it from nationalism and ethnic stuff and just make it more like when somebody is an active citizen and wants Georgia to be more progressive, and more pro-European, and so on, we should call these people patriots, and not those far-right and nationalists who want to see Georgia as some uniform place.

While different respondents conceived of activism in different manners — contrasting being publicly outspoken with simply supporting those who need help — this identification with activism and self-understanding of being an activist affects how the respondents relate to the Russian immigrants. For example, previous research has found a link between increased knowledge and political engagement. Following a similar line of thinking, it seems reasonable to suggest, as Louis et al. (2016) does, that greater knowledge could be a predictor of activism in its own right. Furthermore, previous research has shown that individuals may develop a "behavioural identity" as "the kind of person who engages in a particular action," which is therefore predictive of future actions and behaviours above other motivational factors (see Fielding, McDonald, and Louis 2008 and Turner-Zwinkels, van Zomeren, and Postmes 2015, cited in Louis et al. 2016, 244). To put this into the context of this study, the respondents who identified as having an activist identity are likely to include their activism as a factor when engaging with LGBTQ+ Russians, and are also likely to be more politically aware and engaged, also affecting their understanding and relationship to LGBTQ+ Russians. In particular, they

are likely to be highly aware of conversations like post-colonialism in regards to Russia and are likely to be well-informed in regards to Russia's war in Ukraine.

For example, drag artist and activist concentrating on a number of topics from environmental to urban, Mari Kanchaveli struggled to negotiate her identity as a human rights defender on a daily basis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

> When Ukraine started unfolding, and then I saw Bucha, I saw Irpin, I saw them bombing the maternity ward in Mariupol, the whole saga of Mariupol, I started catching myself that I would see a child run in the street who spoke Russian and I would say "Ew." And I would come home and I sit down and say that is not ok. It is wrong on so many levels. It's inhumane.
>
> [. . .]
>
> I'm struggling with it a lot. My whole life I've been preaching you can't hate a person just because they were born in a certain country, a certain colour, or a certain gender. And now I catch myself with this deep-rooted hatred towards Russians, which is making me hate myself, to be honest, quite a lot, actually.

Clearly, Mari was highly aware of what was going on in regards to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading her to have strong feelings towards Russian migrants in Georgia. This became a point of contention and struggle personally when such hatred butted against her long-held beliefs regarding human rights.

This is not to say that once an activist, always an activist, and that activism within one field will inherently lead to activism in another. As McDonald et. al (2014) found, there is the possibility for conflicting "in-group norms" when numerous identities are salient (cited in Louis et al. 2016, 259). As a direct example, Tamar explicitly noted such a conflict that occurred when she first became involved in activism through Green and leftist politics. Open about being queer, she faced conflict when other leftist activists wanted to prioritise class struggle, poverty, and workers' rights over LGBTQ+ issues, refusing to accept a more intersectional approach.

Acceptance of intersectionality was another important concept for a majority of my respondents. For cis-women in particular, identifying as a woman was crucial to their understanding of themselves, especially coming from societies with a patriarchal hegemony.

For example, Aida Marukyan, a board member at IGLYO[10] and member of the Armenian LBQ womxn's organisation Queer Sista Platform, wished to highlight her identity as a woman:

> About gender, I identify as a woman, and this is a very political choice because my socialisation was as a woman. Not by choice, but this is what happened. I decided to continue to present myself as a woman because generally gender doesn't change anything for me. I think that saying I am a woman and I am fighting for women's rights currently is the best way to be outspoken, be there, and to talk about the issues I've faced all through life.

Mari felt similarly in terms of having been socialised as a woman and therefore having to fight for her rights to a higher degree than a cisgender man, making this identity important to her.

> It's a very confusing topic because I am quite sure that if I was born in a country whose language has pronouns, I would use she/her. But Georgian doesn't have pronouns. I do identify as a woman but not because of a strong sense that I am a woman but because I had to fight a lot to be seen as an equal human being as a woman, so I don't give that up, it cost me a lot.

Intersectionality was very important for these cis-women, who are a minority in their states due to both their gender and their sexuality.

Ethnic belonging or identities were also mentioned, particularly among LGBTQ+ Armenians. For example, Keran, a member of an Armenian LGBTQ+ NGO and long-time activist, gave an Armenian identity as the first thing to come to mind when asked to describe her identities.

> I am Armenian. Of course, it is not my priority, but the first thing that came. Also feminist, non-binary, lesbian, everything combined. And also maybe, not radical, but maybe leftist. And also, for me, I can call part of my identity as also being an activist, but doing it in a less public way, like helping with or supporting queer people that I know or that need help in Armenia and beyond.

While other identities were mentioned in the above quote, this emphasis on a national or ethnic identity is important to consider as it suggests a strong salience in this regard, as opposed to possible other identities. Therefore, it is likely to have an effect on decision-making when

[10] The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex Youth and Student Organisation (more commonly known as IGLYO) is the world's largest network for LGBTQI young people and students.

dealing with other nationalities, particularly those considered to be in conflict with an Armenian identity.

Finally, for a number of respondents, it was also critical to emphasise their lack of an identity, or at least a lack of binding themselves to such a concept, whether in terms of a sexual or gender identity or an ethnic identity. For example, Aida felt society already had too many regulations put on people, creating an unhealthy atmosphere:

> For me, generally, giving a specific identification is setting a fake boundary for yourself. Society makes boundaries for us already so I don't like to put another one on me. When I'm saying boundaries, I mean the unhealthy ones, not the healthy boundaries that are necessary.

For Hayk, an Armenian drag performer who recently moved back to Armenia after spending his youth in Russia, ascribing to a national identity was troublesome, and brought up conflicting feelings.

> From time to time I do feel that I don't want to belong to some kind of nationality, because it brings to another thing which is stereotypes. Most people, when you define nationality, they think of an idea, of stereotypes. Sometimes I just want to be a human being from planet Earth. Most of the people also, when they get acquainted with me, say, "Oh, you don't look Armenian," and, "Yeah, I know. That's what my passport says, that I'm Armenian." I would really like to get to know my roots, but right now I don't have the chance.

Tamar also highlighted how she felt she was made up of a multitude of attributes, and to single one as being more important than another would be to reduce her identity.

> I talk about how I'm a family member, and a person with hobbies, somebody who likes hiking and playing guitar. I try to talk about myself as more than just an activist or more than just a queer person. It's quite important to me to not be reduced to just one label.

As this section shows, while research and media often refer to an LGBTQ+ community as a way to simplify concepts, in reality each of these research respondents is an individual, with unique perceptions of themselves. Often, there is a tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as the fundamental units of social analysis, in other words to engage in what Brubaker terms

"groupism." As discussed at large above, much of Brubaker's work has been to reframe this tendency of creating groups by which to base analysis and instead recognise that groupness is a contextually fluctuating, conceptual variable; to speak of an LGBTQ+ community in Georgia or Armenia is to over-simplify the dynamics occurring.

4.2 Economic considerations and privilege

When evaluating the impact of the Russian migration on LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians, by far the most noticeable and immediate effect has been in relation to the economy and the housing market. All 12 LGBTQ+ interviewees, as well as the experts I spoke to, mentioned economic problems or financial difficulties as an impact of the Russian migration. Interestingly, there was little reference to economic growth due to the migration, which has been the focus of many Western economists as well as local politicians. For example, Armenia's real GDP grew by 12.6% in 2022, the first growth in the double-digits since 2007 (Chervyakov and Gucci, 2023). In addition, due to a significant appreciation of the Armenian dram against the U.S. dollar, GDP per capita grew by 40% (ibid.). In both cases, the Russian migration was seen as a leading cause, due to their increased consumption domestically as well as focus on the I.T. sector. Likewise, Georgia's Prime Minister has attributed his nation's double-digit economic growth to the influx of Russian citizens, claiming the mass migration has created an opportunity for new infrastructure, services, and jobs (Kakachia and Kandelaki 2022). For my respondents, however, the focus was firmly on inflation and rising housing and rental costs.

While inflation affects all facets of Georgian and Armenian society, it is important to take into account that LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians are a highly vulnerable group, particularly when it comes to poverty and a lack of protection from the state, as Giorgi emphasised in his discussion with me. As noted in a number of interviews, as well as past research (Berjikian, 2016), many LGBTQ+ people are kicked out of the family home after coming out, forcing them to find alternative housing. With increased rents, this puts more LGBTQ+ people at risk of eviction, and without the family home to fall back on. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ people often have trouble finding employment, which further increases their precarious situation in regards to finances and housing.

This is particularly the case for the transgender population. As Mari outlined in our discussion, a lot of transgender youth are no longer able to afford living where they used to, leading to more dangerous situations.

> At the same price you can now only rent in the parts of town which are not safe for them. Vake, Rustaveli Avenue, Saburtalo, Vazha-Pshavela are so unreasonably expensive that now they have to rent in parts of town that are more dangerous.

In countries already prone to violence against transgender people (Civil.ge 2022; Avedian 2023), being forced to move into unsafe districts puts a greater strain on an already highly vulnerable population.

In some cases, LGBTQ+ people can no longer afford to stay in the capital cities at all. In being forced back home or to the outside regions, LGBTQ+ citizens not only must decide between going back into the closet or risking discrimination and domestic violence, they also face losing a sense of community support due to the predominance of LGBTQ+ NGOs and cultural centres in the capitals as opposed to the peripheral regions. This is particularly true in Armenia.

Another issue that arises due to the lack of housing and high prices is an increased motivation to emigrate abroad. For example, Tigran discussed how some of his own friends and family have had to move due to higher prices.

> The rent has become a few times higher than before. This is important because a lot of LGBT people don't have a place to live or a place to stay because they are refused by their families and while they used to live separately, now they can't. For example, my boyfriend decided to go to Sri Lanka because he couldn't find a place to stay.

Both Georgia and Armenia are already prone to outward migration by LGBTQ+ citizens — between 2011 and 2013 alone nearly 6,000 LGBTQ+ people left Armenia (Minasyan 2018). In addition, continued violence by far-right groups has demoralised LGBTQ+ Georgians, and the increases in economic pressures are not helping. For example, during an expert interview with Tata Burduli, Gender Programme Coordinator at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Tbilisi, we discussed the effect of the 2023 attack on Tbilisi PrideFest on local LGBTQ+ Georgians:

> After [Alt-Info ruined the Pride event] many queers posted that they don't feel any reason for staying here anymore. This was kind of the last straw [. . .] In a couple of days, some posted that, "Oh, this was my first reaction, and no, I'm not going to go just because this is what they want exactly." But the Russian influx of the capital and the

> increase of prices — therefore the economic crisis, but also the social and political crisis — definitely encouraged migration and nihilism in the queer population.

In the above quote, Tata links the rising far-right violence with the negative effects of the Russian migration's economic effects. Clearly, the economy is a field where there are specific repercussions on the LGBTQ+ population that put them at greater risk than the general host population, whether in terms of personal safety or simply in being able to have a sense of community based on one's identity.

Related to these direct economic effects is the concept of Russian "privilege" as understood by the local population. This concept of privilege has been well-documented by Benson (2014, 2015) in regards to lifestyle migration, as previously discussed above. In particular, Benson (2014, 47) argues that one of the basic doctrines of lifestyle migration is that "the people undertaking these forms of migration can be considered as relatively affluent," with their migration made possible due to the "position of privilege" occupied by said migrants in relation to the local population(s). For example, in her examination of British retirees in France, Benson (2014) concluded that while the local French live the way they do out of circumstance, British migrants instead choose to live in this style, a luxury afforded to them as retired migrants, and therefore granting them a position of privilege in the local society.

While many Russian migrants can be considered representatives of politically vulnerable groups — including political activists, journalists, human rights activists, LGBTQ+ — and may not be considered affluent in regards to their own native communities, they are still seen as having a form of privilege in their destinations. Indeed, though many migrants can simultaneously be conceived of as refugees in a sense, the current Russian migration has many features of the lifestyle migration outlined by Benson and O'Reilly. For example, take this statement by Araqs as to how they perceived the different waves of Russian migration to Armenia:

> The first wave were the people against the Putin regime and they were not okay with the war. And we welcomed them because we had no other choice. Then the second wave came, those were people who would say they're against the Putin regime, but they don't care about it. They just came because all these brands were closed in Russia now. They couldn't shop at Zara or Adidas, or they couldn't have Apple products anymore, or because the cost of living rose, so they came to Armenia. And the third

> wave was mostly men who were just running away from mobilisation, especially queer people and queer activists who were being chased in Russia.

Here, Araqs highlights that, in their opinion, many Russians emigrated simply to continue a certain *lifestyle* that was no longer possible in Russia due to Western sanctions. The name brands listed by Araqs are all expensive, hinting at the economic privilege these Russians have both in their country of origin, but also in their new host country.

Araqs also noted the apparent gap[11] between the average wages of Russians and Armenians, explicitly noting the fact that many Russian migrants are still working, or at least are perceived to be working, for international companies and therefore are receiving a higher salary than the local population:

> For a Russian person who relocated to Yerevan, who is working in an IT company, the price is alright because they are making thousands of dollars. But for the average Armenian person who is making maybe 300-500 dollars a month, they cannot afford a lot of things they used to be able to, which are not even luxury things, but basic things you need to live.

Similarly, Keran remarked on this disparity between Russian and Armenian salaries and the subsequent ability of the former to find apartments at the expense of the latter:

> I am a local and I can't find an apartment with my salary, but Russians can. I feel like soon, in two or three years, they will hire us for work, or I will rent apartments from them. I don't like that idea at all. There is so much in Armenia and I don't want this culture to be changed, especially by Russians.

Due to their higher wages, Russian migrants are able to represent middle-class customs and behaviours — renting a sizable flat in a good neighbourhood, visiting trendy (expensive) bars and restaurants, paying for housekeepers — that are often unattainable for locals (Kuleshova, et al. 2023). In enacting these behaviours, they are also promoting gentrification, a term itself often, though divisively, tied to (neo-)colonialism. For example, while Jackson (2009) argues that gentrification is just one strategy by which the historical colonisation of Indigenous peoples in Canada is continuing. Using what she terms the "settler city of Toronto" as a case in point, Jackson highlights how investment in private property is inherently tied to the "ethical

[11] See Mühlfried (2023) for a discussion of "white trash" Russians, i.e. financially-insecure Russians living a precarious life in Georgia.

contractions of land theft, exploitation, ongoing original accumulation, and displacement," which in turn forms the root of the homelessness and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples in Toronto (Jackson 2009, 42-43). Likewise, engaging in property investment in Georgia and Armenia is also inherently tied to a history of imperialism and colonialism. This is clear in the above quote by Keran who fears a future where Armenians are now renting from Russians and working for Russians, all while still living in Armenia; a situation very reminiscent of a colony. While these are issues that affect more than LGBTQ+ citizens, it is still important to emphasise that gentrification and the knock-on effects are highly relevant for LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians, as highlighted by the fact that all interviewees noted such effects.

While the above quotes focused on economic privilege as perceived by LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians, many respondents also noted a sense of emotional privilege on the side of the Russian population. In order to fully understand this concept, it is important to first get a sense of how some respondents acknowledged their own sense of privilege as compared to other LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians. For example, Mari describes her background as the following:

> I was born and raised in a family of doctors, which in Georgia doesn't mean rich, on the contrary, we had quite a lot of financial struggles. But it means that my parents never considered being queer an illness or a sin — we're not religious or anything — so there was quite a lot of privilege. Plus, I grew up in a very fancy neighbourhood which was safer. We might not have been rich, but the status was there, the surroundings were there. [. . .] If my background was not this privileged, my story would have been completely different. I would have much less liberty to express myself as an openly queer woman in Georgia. Privilege comes with safety, a lot of layers of safety.

Tamar conceived of her background and privilege similarly:

> I would say my life is kind of privileged compared to a lot of other queer people. I come from a middle-class family, I grew up in Tbilisi, in the capital, and I had all these study abroad experiences, even though actually I got scholarships everywhere I went, I pretty much paid nothing, but still. My family sent me to a private school and I learned English so I could take exams, get some scholarships. I worked for most of what I have, but also feel I am quite privileged to have experienced those things. I acknowledge my privilege, but I use my privilege to help others.

In both cases, it was important for the interviewee to mark their privilege and to emphasise that their experiences do not reflect that of all LGTBQ+ Georgians or Armenians. In addition, as Tamar highlighted, it was important for her to use her privilege to help others. By comparison, many respondents felt the Russian migrants are not *acknowledging* their privilege in the same manner. For example, the sense of the Russian migrants inhabiting a space of privilege is made more visible when compared to what Ukrainian refugees are currently facing and what both Georgian and Armenian citizens have faced in the past due to conflicts influenced by Russia. For a number of respondents then, there exists this sense that Russians should acknowledge said privilege, both in terms of economics, but also in terms of being able to freely leave their country of origin and find a prosperous home elsewhere. To not do so engendered feelings of anger and annoyance among respondents, such as Hayk, who stated in our discussion that:

> Sometimes I do get angry when I hear some people saying how much they miss their country and that they can't go back to Russia again to see their family, to see their home, to go to those places. I think to myself basically, how do you compare this and why do you have to complain about this when people are leaving their country or not even able to leave and are being killed, or having to leave their country, their cities, and their homes just because of some people killing them? They basically do the same thing, immigration, but the reasons are different and I just get angry thinking that they have a place too. I mean, of course, it's their emotions, but I do get angry when they think that they are in a bad place in their life. There are lots of people from the other side who face more difficulties with it. Those people from Russia who are saying they are missing their home, they don't have any words to speak.

For Koko, a Georgian performer, dancer, and artist, this lack of perspective limited the amount of empathy they had for Russian migrants:

> Some of [the Russians] refuse to talk about the situation at all, because it makes them very uncomfortable. They emphasise their mental health and that it is very heavy for them. But how can you be so selfish and egocentric to talk about your personal feelings when people actually lose their family members, when people are just deprived of everything to sustain themselves. So many people have lost their legs and they're injured until the end of their lives. How can you compare your personal struggles to those people? For me, it just lacks perspective [. . .] It's really hard to have empathy towards those people anymore. In my personal experience, when the majority of people are like that, I'm already tired of differentiating who are the people whose political views align with me and who do not. I'm just choosing not to engage at all.

As shown above, privilege is not always about economic privilege. Another conception of the privilege held by Russian migrants emerged in discussions with LGBTQ+ Armenians. While much of what has been discussed above has dealt with the more adverse effects of the Russian migration to the Caucasus, there was one more constructive change remarked upon by all but one of the LGTBQ+ Armenian respondents: the growing acceptance of diversity in the country. As Tigran outlined in our discussion,

> We can notice cultural diversity. We can see lots of colours in Armenia and this can make an effect on society because Armenia is very mono-ethnic and this can help society be more open and they can learn about new cultures. It is not about knowing Russia, it's not about knowing Russian culture, because our society really knows about Russia much more than we can imagine, but our society doesn't know about the underground life, about Russia's LGBT underground life or Russian LGBT culture.

As discussed above to some degree, Armenia is often described as a country where one's duty to the family and the nation is held above one's individuality. With the huge influx of a new, more diverse population, however, there has been a growing acceptance towards looking different in terms of alternative hairstyles and clothing. For example, Anoush, a bisexual Armenian woman currently working as a teacher, maintained that attitudes are changing within society due to the Russian migration:

> Before, if a young Armenian would wear that kind of clothing it would be frowned upon, but now many Armenians have changed their mind on this. They're ok with boys having different haircuts, different colourings, with earrings, with shorts. I think this can help make the situation more mild, to soften the situation, and to decrease the hatred among Armenians towards LGBT+ people.

Aida noted a similar growth in tolerance.

> Because of the immigration, people saw other people who may look differently. They can have colourful hair, they can wear baggy clothes, and they can have tattoos, piercings, and be different. They kind of get used to it. This is the positive side. There are some people from the community who physically look different and because of the immigration, when people see that it's ok, it's normal, that people look different, they become a bit more tolerant.

Mamikon Hovsepyan, the founder, former Executive Director, and current Communications Director of Pink Armenia, also saw these changes as a positive:

> They [Russians] brought diversity which is changing public perception in the country. To see people with colourful hair, with piercings, without assuming they are gay, lesbian, or not, or who cares. People learn how to interact with diverse people, which is one small positive thing.

While the above statements were generally favourable, two respondents still felt that there was a different rule for Russians than for Armenians, hearkening once more to the concept of privilege, in this case, the privilege of looking non-Armenian and therefore having the freedom to stray from the norm. For example, Keran noted how Russians and tourists received different reactions as opposed to someone labelled as Armenian.

> After they came, you can see guys in the street with coloured hair, with bright clothes. In Armenia, if it is Russians then it's fine, if it's tourists, fine, but if they know it's an Armenian guy, they will be embarrassed or say something. I can see that women maybe can now wear something more open confidently, but still, if you go to the market or places where older people are, they will say something. That happened to me two days ago.

Similarly, Hayk found it frustrating that there seemed to be a double standard based on whether one was perceived as being Armenian or Russian.

> When Armenians see people who look different, which means having piercings, tattoos, colourful hair, stuff like that, they immediately think this person is a visitor, they are not a local person. It happened multiple times this year that people in shops, in pharmacies, they started speaking with me in Russian and I answer them back in Armenian because Armenian queer people exist. People who live differently. I guess this is the part when I feel I want to make it visible that I am Armenian, that people like this with piercings, with long hair, with coloured hair, they exist and it shouldn't be only one formula of person who is considered Armenian, that there is diversity. It kind of became a stereotype that if you look different then you aren't local, which is ok, they tolerate it, but if it is an Armenian person looking different, it is unacceptable.

As discussed in the theoretical chapter focused on North-South migration, particularly as expounded by Benson (2014, 2015), privilege is inherently fragmented among aspects of class *as well as* race and ethnicity, all of which stem from a history of colonialism. This is the case in Armenia as well, where, as the above quotes illustrate, race or ethnicity plays a crucial role in delineating what is deemed acceptable to wear publicly.

While the above quotes differed a bit in terms of who could fully reap the benefits, all of the respondents highlighted that the Russian migration has created a change in society wherein the general Armenian population is seen to be more open to and more willing to interact with people who dress or who style their hair and makeup in a nontraditional manner. Such cultural diversity is a common effect of migration — migrants bring with them a whole series of new cultural products, clothing included. This is not always viewed as a positive, however, whereby such diversity and the introduction of new cultural items becomes a threat to the host community and the host culture. Indeed, this facet of migration will also come into play in the next sub-chapters discussing identity negotiation and integration or exclusion; yet, it is still important to see how the Russian migration, which has brought serious economic effects and created a discussion of privilege, is also conceived of, at least by LGBTQ+ Armenians, as having a "positive" side. It would be interesting to examine whether non-LGBTQ+ Armenians feel similarly in this regard.

Interestingly, no LGBTQ+ Georgian respondents noted any similar effects towards societal attitudes. This is likely due to the differing stages of the two LGBTQ+ populations. As discussed above in regards to context, Armenia is generally more homophobic as compared to Georgia, and has fewer legal protections. In addition, the emphasis of society and the government on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, combined with the historical echoes of the Armenian Genocide, have created strong pressure towards conformity in order to protect the nation-state. For these reasons, LGBTQ+ Armenians have made a conscious choice to avoid large, public spectacles such as Pride. Therefore, while an underground queer culture thrives, less is obvious on the surface. Comparatively, Georgia, as illustrated above, has a strong LGBTQ+ presence, both underground but also within the mainstream.

When discussing privilege in these contexts, it is also crucial to emphasise the importance of the corresponding power positions held by the sending (Russia) and receiving countries (Georgia and Armenia), which plays a role in any expectations regarding the standard of living available within the host country (Benson 2014, 50). Russia has historically held a position of power within the region, augmented by its role as an imperial power and coloniser, which naturally has affected how Russian migrants have been perceived and received by LGTBQ+ Georgians and Armenians. This discussion will be continued in the following section, which focuses more concretely on this concept.

4.3 Negotiating Identities — A post-colonial relationship?

As highlighted by Benson, although all migration is inherently moulded by historical conditions, colonial legacies in particular play a significant role in how migrants imagine their new destinations and how they live their corresponding lives in said locales (2014, 50). Given Georgia's and Armenia's historical relationship with Russia — the present nation seen as the heir of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire — there is naturally some tension between the local population, including LGBTQ+ citizens, and the Russian migrants. This apprehension was apparent among many of my respondents, including Koko, who felt there was a clear lack of political awareness on the part of the Russian migrants.

> Everywhere you go, you are faced with a lot of Russian-speaking people and a lot of people from Russia who do not really have that much understanding of the political situation. They have this unrealistic mindset and sometimes they are just so disrespectful towards locals. They don't understand that it is not ok to approach a local Georgian person and to start speaking in Russian right away. Some of them are not even aware that our territories are being occupied by Russia to this day [. . .] Not every Russian person is like that, but from my personal experience, they have this narrative that people outside Russia don't understand the political situation and how it is for Russian people who actually live there. Throughout the whole conversation it appears that those Russians who have this narrative are actually the ones who don't understand the situation at all. They don't know that 20 percent of our territories are still occupied by Russia. They don't know our situation with Abkhazia. They have no idea. They just do not know history at all. I'm not saying every single detail, but just the overall facts, which are so important to know. They just don't understand it's their responsibility as a civilised person in the 21st century to educate themselves on such important things. Then to have the audacity to go to a local Georgian person and tell them that they have no idea what it's like for the Russian person? Like, come on, seriously, it just kills me.

This deficiency on the part of Russian migrants is in contrast to the knowledge held by the respondents, harking back to the discussion on the interplay between increased knowledge and activist identities. In this case, Koko sees a failure on the part of Russian migrants for not understanding the region's history, and instead focusing on their own emotions and narratives (which in turn harks back to the discussion of Russian privilege as perceived by my respondents).

Connected to this concept of ignorance is the relationship between the local population and the Russian language. In Georgia in particular, language is a fraught topic. As noted by Mari during

our discussion, Russian is the language of a violent occupier, one commonly perceived to be occupying 20% of Georgian territory:

> For Georgians, Russians is not just a language, it's something they fear, especially if they are from Gori, from a region where when you hear that language you might actually get abducted. It's a traumatic experience.

Past research has found a strong link between language and how one determines their conception of another person (Joseph 2004, 3). *How* someone speaks and *what* someone speaks are a part of identifying others. Indeed, language has generally been considered crucial in the process of nation-building, wherein ethnicity and language are linked. In the case of the Caucasus, choosing what language to speak in what situation is a signifier of one's identity as well as one's general understanding of the local context. While many older generations are willing to speak Russian, having learned the language as part of the Soviet education curriculum, younger generations see the language as the language of the occupier. Much like how native Russian-speakers in Ukraine are learning Ukrainian in order to support a free, democratic Ukraine as opposed to feeling connected or identified with the country invading, many Georgians, especially within the younger and more activist portions of society, have specifically chosen to study Western languages like English. It is important to note the "historical baggage" and the post-colonial nature of the relationship between Georgians and Russians that is critical in the decision-making process. Just as Ákesson (2022) noted in relation to the Portuguese in Angola, who often featured attitudes that were racist and hierarchical in regards to language use, language is inherently tied to conceptions of class and social order.

For Armenian respondents, hearing Russian was a reminder of their experiences living in Russia. Being both an ethnic minority and a sexual minority, these respondents did not have particularly positive experiences, and the concept of Yerevan becoming more Russified is a daunting prospect. For example, Keran sometimes felt as if hearing Russian was a trigger of sorts:

> When I am in the shops or somewhere, I can only hear the Russian language, and it feels like I am in Moscow again, and in Moscow, I didn't feel great. I've been to Moscow three times, and I came back to Yerevan because I couldn't live there. It triggers in me this feeling that I don't belong again, but it's Yerevan this time.

Similarly, Hayk, who spent six years in Russia in their youth, now felt as if they didn't necessarily belong in Armenia, though it was their nation of origin.

> About Russians moving back here, sometimes I feel, when I go out to the streets, I feel that I still live in Russia because everybody looks Russian and they speak Russian, and I feel disconnected from Armenia. In my past job where I worked as a waiter, I know for sure if a person, if I, didn't know Russian or English, they would not hire me to work there. But now they hire a Russian person who doesn't speak Armenian or English, only Russian. For me, it doesn't make sense, it feels . . . not right.

Russia has historically been a popular destination for Armenian labour migrants. Indeed, every year, thousands of Armenians — estimates range from 80,000 to 300,000 — go to Russia for seasonal work, and in 2021, remittances from Russia amounted to nearly 5% of Armenia's GDP (Mejlumyan 2022). Yet Armenian migrants have often faced discrimination, if not blatant racism and violence, while living in Russia. In our discussion, Hayk gave this example from his time in Russia:

> Even though I've been to St. Petersburg and Moscow, people are still selective about who speaks Russian fluently and who doesn't, and who looks Russian and who doesn't. It was worse in my city, in my town, it's called Lipetsk, it's close to Belgograd, close to Ukraine. People were really rude about this, that I didn't look like them, and didn't speak Russian fluently. Kind of with mockery.

Once again, it is important to understand the historical context and existing post-colonial or even proto-neo-colonial relationship that exists between Russia and Armenia. In this case, it's interesting to look at Croucher's (2009) work related to lifestyle migration. One facet of North American migration to Mexico that her article addresses is the lack of Spanish language acquisition among the (often retired) migrants. She notes how the North American migrants put little effort into learning Spanish, instead remarking on the patience of the local Mexican population, who often revert to English, as their English is better than the migrants' Spanish (ibid.). As the above quote notes, when Hayk lived in Russia, they were mocked for not knowing Russian fluently; yet when these same Russians have migrated to the Caucasus, they continue to speak in Russian, assuming the locals will adapt, rather than taking it upon themselves to do so. Of course, it is not every Russian who refuses to learn nor is it every Georgian or Armenian who refuses to engage with the Russian language. Yet it is a sign of privilege and a sign of cultural arrogance for many respondents that Russians are able to make a conscious or even unconscious choice not to adapt to the language requirements. Indeed, though in Georgia a 2015 law stipulates that all businesses must display any signs or advertisements in Georgian at least as conspicuously as in any other language, and a further

law adopted in 2022 requires all businesses to offer their services in a state language (i.e. Georgian), these laws have been widely flouted by not only Russian-owned businesses, but also Georgian businesses attempting to attract a Russian clientele (Kucera 2023).

While the above discussion focused on "Russian" migrants as a whole, these same tensions also existed between the LGBTQ+ populations of both nations with LGBTQ+ Russians.

In his recent research conducted in Georgia, David Rypel (2023) found four patterns in the construction of Russian queers in relation to the queer collectivity. First was the understanding that Russians are Russians; in other words, LGBTQ+ Russians were grouped together with Russians as one polity that was problematic within the Georgian context. Second was the premise that queers are queers, while straights are Russian, whereby solidarity could be made with LGBTQ+ Russians, but not heterosexual Russians. Third was the concept that Russian queers are queer *Russians*, meaning that while they might be oppressed and have possible similarities on the basis of a shared sexual identity, LGBTQ+ Russians were tainted by the "imperialist" mindset. Language politics and the endangerment of specifically queer *Georgian* spaces was highlighted, as was the patronising attitude of LGBTQ+ Russians. Finally, there was the conviction that humans are humans — Rypel found this concept to be the rarest in his research (ibid.).

Within my own research, I found that the majority of my respondents engaged with the third of Rypel's concepts, that of Russian queers as queer *Russians*. An example raised in a number of interviews, including with both LGBTQ+ respondents and experts, as well as at the 2023 workshop at Ilia State University, was the so-called first Kiki Vogue Ball held in Georgia on 3 June 2023, which was "inspired" by the theme of orientalism. As Mari describes it:

> When there was this "vogue ball," it was met very badly by Georgians because, first of all, you are mostly Russian people coming to a country you are currently occupying and you're making the theme of your ball orientalism. How tone-deaf does one have to be to do that? [. . .] White colonialism and orientalism should not be the theme of your event when you are associated with a country who uses my ethnicity as a racial slur. There are people from my country in the Russian capital who are literally hunted by skinheads, and then you come to my country and say the theme is orientalism. Don't wear chokhas, don't wear traditional Georgian attire, you are not allowed to do that. You have years of amends to make before you do that.

Though organised by queer Russians, there was no better understanding among these migrants as opposed to heterosexual Russian migrants, of Georgia's post-colonialist stance. While some respondents did try to engage with the vogue ball and its participants, a lack of understanding on the part of the organiser as to why such a theme might be received poorly did little to bring the two LGBTQ+ dance and drag communities together.

Similarly, there was the same issue highlighted by Rypel (2023): certain spaces, including queer spaces, are being occupied or taken over by Russian citizens, sometimes at the expense of the local LGBTQ+ population. For example, Koko has found that they are now a minority at dance camps held in Georgia due to the Russian migration:

> For me, as a Georgian person, it is really hard to be in the minority. I do dance, and there are these dance camps I have to attend because they are really good for professional development. When I go there, I'm in Georgia, but as a Georgian person, I'm a minority. I was surrounded by Russians. I had just one Georgian friend there and that was it. I refused to speak in Russian for, like, four days, but then I understood that I have to communicate, so I had to start speaking in Russian. I speak fluent Russian, but I'm not going to speak Russian to you unless you have the same morals and the same understanding and the same values as I do. It got pretty hard, and it's just very irritating as well. I just want to go to my local bar and hear Georgian and not be addressed in Russian or not be surrounded by Russians all the time.

Though Koko is fluent in Russian, they strongly feel that they should not be forced to speak a language embroiled in a history of imperialism. As discussed above, language plays a big role in identity formation and negotiation. Furthermore, it is a privilege to be spoken to in your native tongue if that language is not indigenous to your new locale, doubly so if that language is associated with colonialism.

Mari also has had negative experiences related to language while spending time in LGBTQ+ bars in Tbilisi:

> I had this fight at Success. There were four people just laughing their asses off in Russian for 10 minutes straight, that was the only thing you could hear. And I could see the faces around, and I realised that at some point, someone would hit them with a beer bottle. So I intervened and I very clearly explained that they [needed to] change the language they were speaking, lower their voice, or leave the facility. And it took me 15 minutes of an altercation for them to go out. And when they went out, I went out, and one of them approached me and said, "This is a free country and I'm going to

> talk however I want." And I said, "Yes it is, and I fought very hard for this country to be so, please respect me." That is something they don't understand. Please respect the community that has welcomed you in their safe spaces. Those safe spaces didn't just fall from the sky, and when someone says that you are bringing stress there, please respect that.

As Mari emphasises in the above quote, it is thanks to activists like her and the other respondents in this thesis that LGBTQ+ Russians feel comfortable enough to be public and can enjoy public spaces such as LGBTQ+ bars and clubs. Though queer, Mari conceives of these patrons mainly as Russians, and as Russians who do not have respect for the country or the people who inhabit it.

The concept of a taking-over of space was best captured in the following quote by Tamar:

> I think most people have the same conflict I do, that we don't know exactly how to relate to Russian queers. We do take pity on them, but we also know that there is still part of the society that has oppressed us all this time. I would say here, for example at Mozaika and Success, at these bars, there is this tension. They come in such large numbers, it's not one or two poor Russians that need help. They come in big groups, they speak Russian, they are definitely better off than we are financially. Sometimes they are definitely not behaving in a sensitive manner, they will be taking over the space, and I don't think they are mindful enough when they come to our spaces. On Friday and Saturday, when normally in the past I would go to Mozaika a lot, recently, I sometimes do not because it is going to be full of Russians anyways. Do I really want to hear Russian-speaking people everywhere? Do I want to hang out with drunk Russians? Not so much. I've heard from so many other Georgians and queers, Georgian queers, that they are uncomfortable with the presence of so many Russians.

It is interesting to note here that Tamar explicitly differentiates between one or two "poor Russians" and the big groups that seem to permeate the Georgian LGBTQ+ space. McCluskey (2019) notes during her ethnographic fieldwork with locals and refugees in a small Swedish village that there is a clear code of conduct to be followed on the part of refugees, one that is "inherently hierarchical" in how it is performed. According to her observations, refugees had to always operate as "worthy" guests, whereby they had to "visibly demonstrate their suffering, be ready to mend their 'deficient' ways, and be loudly and constantly grateful for the refuge they are given by the good Swedish people" (McCluskey 2019, 76-77). There seems to be a similar sentiment within Tamar's statement, wherein it is acceptable and honourable to help

someone who is clearly struggling, but there is a limit to the hospitality when faced with what appears to be a large number of seemingly well-off migrants.

While the comments analysed above have focused on situations experienced by both LGBTQ+ Georgians and Armenians, there were some differences noted between the two countries. For example, Hayk saw a contrast in how Russians operated in Georgia versus Armenia:

> I feel a difference between Russians in Georgia and Russians in Armenia and how they treat [the local population] and how they behave in the country. It feels like in Georgia they live in fear; here, they feel like they are in their colony, which makes me sad. [. . .] People expect us to have things that we don't have — or that we're in progress to have, we are developing it, infrastructure, factories, stuff like that — and expect people to know Russian or expect people to act like brothers, brother nations. I guess that's the thing I don't like, that sense we are still in the Soviet Union and that we have to be together. Most Armenian people treat Russians as if we are brother nations, and I guess that's how they get more confident in this idea of Armenia being a brother nation to them.

Likewise, Aida felt the actions of the Russian migrants was due to their experience of being from a big country.

> They took a lot of space from the Armenian people. They use the resources that could be useful for the Armenian people. And I'm not being racist, but sometimes they just occupy some places because, and I think this is very cultural, when you are from a big country, you have this attitude that you can tell someone how to act and they actually do it.

Both of the above statements are very reminiscent of the neo-colonial experiences relayed by Benson (2014, 2015) and Croucher (2009) in regards to Latin America.

Related to the above discussion, a number of Armenian respondents, such as Mamikon who provided the following quote, noted that there is a misperception among the rest of the world that Armenia is an ally and friend to Russia.

> The world sees Armenia as a friend of Russia, which is not true, but Azerbaijani propaganda works well. They have more money than us, so it works better. In fact, it's the other way around. Azerbaijan is the best friend of Russia, but they show it is Armenia because we are under the political and economic influence of Russia. This government is trying to become more independent and more pro-European, but we still

> have the Russian army in the country, we have Russian oil, gas, electricity, everything, so it is really hard to be independent at the moment. Whenever Russia gets angry, they ask Aliyev to start shooting at us. That's why the world thinks we are best friends of Russia, and that has a negative impact.

The most important impact this misperception has created is a decrease in international support and funding, including towards LGBTQ+ issues.

As has been made clear in this section, post-colonialism plays a large role in many of my respondents' attitudes towards the Russian migrants, even when said migrants are LGBTQ+ themselves. The long imperialistic, colonialistic, and conflict-ridden history between Georgia and Russia was of particular importance to my Georgian respondents. While some Armenian respondents had similar fears that space might be lost to local LGBTQ+ people, there was less of an emphasis on explicit decolonial language. However, connections were still made between Russia as a powerful neighbour and as a former coloniser.

4.4 Negotiating Identities — Integration or separation

This last section ties the former sections together to examine the last of my research questions, namely whether there is space for collaboration and integration on the basis of a shared identity. There were a variety of opinions and experiences expressed in answer to this question. First, there were cases of separation, wherein LGBTQ+ Georgians or LGBTQ+ Armenians had little contact with LGBTQ+ Russians and there was often a sense of there being two different communities existing within the same locale. This was especially the case early on following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when the migrants themselves likely did not have a clear idea of how long they would be staying in their new host communities. For example, Aida noted the following:

> Currently, and last year also, the Russian community was mostly hanging out or sticking together. There was a small group of Russian LGBT people who knew each other and how to contact [each other]. Some of them were also engaged with the local community, some went to the community centres. But I would say they mostly created a small circle of a Russian LGBT community.

This echoes Rypel's (2023) finding that a parallel society exists in Georgia between LGBTQ+ Russians and LGBTQ+ Georgians; in other words, there are two communities that mirror each other but do not interact.

However, in my research, the most common response overall among respondents was a sense of collaboration, but with clear expectations in terms of how the Russian LGBTQ+ should behave in order to integrate or to receive assistance. For example, Tamar Jakeli gave the example of when she spoke at a panel organised by Russian queers living in Tbilisi. She experienced a bit of conflict, asking herself whether she should do it or not. In the end, she decided in favour and found the LGBTQ+ Russians to be quite respectful. They spoke English the entire time, and told stories that made it seem they were quite anti-Putin and that they had done work back in Russia to resist the Putin regime. Even with that positive experience, however, Tamar made it clear she was still conflicted and that she expected certain actions from LGTBQ+ Russians in Georgia in order to feel she could connect with them.

> I am conflicted about this whole thing. But, I would say if today I received a request from a Russian queer in danger who needs help, I would help them, or a request to speak about LGBT rights in Georgia, I would speak. When I spoke to [LGBTQ+ Russians] in December, I told them they need to be as active as they can, they need to be political, they have to go to demonstrations, they have to donate to Ukraine.

Giorgi Tabagari had a similar understanding of the situation and of the expectations placed on LGBTQ+ Russians in regards to their behaviour and actions.

> Somehow, there is this understanding that Russians have to prove that they are anti-government and there are a lot of dimensions the relationships have. I guess the queer community has it less, because probably there is a higher integration in that sense within the communities, but still it is not truly there.

As made clear in the above quote, however, Giorgi believed such expectations were less within the queer community due to a shared commonality — that of non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities. This is where the third response applies — that of collaboration on the basis of commonality, or as Rypel (2023) terms it, queers are queers. This was a response most commonly found among the LGBTQ+ Armenian respondents. For example, in our discussion, Araqs emphasised how queer people of multiple nationalities had a collective positioning upon which solidarity could be built:

> Now we are more mixed than a year ago, which I like. It's how it is supposed to be. Because Russian queer people and Armenian queer people, we openly position ourselves as anti-Azerbaijan, anti-Aliyev, anti-Putin, we're anti-war in Artsakh and in Ukraine, we're pro-peace, pro-democracy, pro-freedom of speech, and pro-existing and being queer. There is no animosity whatsoever between Armenian queer people and Ukrainian queer people and Russian queer people — we are all just civilians who are so traumatised and violated by our government. That is the common ground we find.

For these interviewees, the main focus was not about being Georgian or Russian or Armenian and Russian, but rather on the fact that everyone involved was an oppressed LGBTQ+ individual trying to avoid conflict and live a peaceful life. This shared commonality was transformed into a basis for solidarity in which one's queerness was not juxtaposed with an ethnicity or nationality.

Another important factor in regards to the possibility of collaboration was also LGBTQ+ Russian citizens who had Armenian or Georgian citizenship as well, thus being able to bridge possible gaps by appealing to both communities. Past research has shown such "bridge-makers" to be crucial in illustrating how identity can be negotiated to create a framework that allows for shared solidarity (Amer and Howarth 2017).

In the following, the importance of recognising who among LGBTQ+ Georgians or LGBTQ+ Armenians should be contacted in order to build trust among locals is exemplified. The example of a Russian-Armenian vogue dancer who managed to unite the drag population in Yerevan was given to me multiple times. At first, when he organised his first vogue ball in Armenia, not many Armenian queer people went. Instead of accepting this separation, however, he realised the importance of reaching out to local community members, including Araqs, and put in the groundwork to bridge the gaps between communities:

> For the second [vogue ball], he contacted me [Araqs] and he was like, "I know that Armenian queer people trust you, and I know that you work at [an LGBTQ+ NGO] and that you know the community. I want to integrate the Russian queer community with the Armenian queer community, but do it in a very respectful way where we respect your boundaries and your culture and what you went through." And that's when I started working with Armenian ballroom as an emcee. I started doing a lot of gigs, hosting and emceeing regarding ballroom, and a lot of Armenian queer people started also participating in ballroom.

Actions like these, which show respect for the local population, go a long way towards increasing the chances of collaboration between LGBTQ+ Armenians and LGBTQ+ Georgians with LGBTQ+ Russians.

To look at this concept of integration or separation from a slightly different angle and compare between situations, I separately asked my Armenian respondents about possible collaboration with LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis. Given the violent conflict that has existed for the last 30 years between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a simple hypothesis might be that there would be enmity between the populations, one that supersedes any connection based on sexual or gender identity. Rather, a focus would be on one's ethnic or national identity as opposed to one's sexual or gender identity. As seen above in relation to LGBTQ+ Georgians and LGBTQ+ Armenians with LGBTQ+ Russians, there were a multitude of ways in which possible collaboration and integration occurred as well as times of total separation. However, in the case of LGBTQ+ Armenians and LGBTQ+ Azerbaijans, the overwhelming response was one of common understanding on the basis of a shared background and a shared sense of victimhood. For example, Araqs stressed how everyone was a victim of Aliyev's regime, separating the regime from the nation:

> Growing up in Armenia, you never see a person from Azerbaijan. There is this divide of you are the victim and they are the perpetrator, which is true, but on a governmental regime level. When we say we are anti-Aliyev, we mean we are anti-Aliyev's regime. We are not anti-Azerbaijani queer people who are also against Aliyev's regime and who are also victims of Aliyev's regime.

In terms of specific meetings and collaboration, Araqs described a time when they got to meet two drag queens from Azerbaijan while emceeing a vogue ball in Georgia:

> It was a very weird bonding moment, but in the best sense of the word. We had so much in common. We all grew up in the same place on the map, in the same region, so as much as we hated, our cultures are very similar, especially the treatment against LGBT people, it's very similar.

In this case, however, it is important to note that neither side discussed the conflict, finding it easier instead to speak about other topics. Araqs also noted that they had heard stories from other queer people where LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis had acted in "weird" ways about the conflict. They further emphasised a point made throughout this work regarding individualism:

> You cannot expect every queer person to be the same, to have the same political view, and to be against the same regime. Most of them are, but not all of them. We have to take into consideration that there are also nationalist queer people and there are also a lot of right-wing queer people as well, in all the countries.

In another example, Keran discussed how her partner wrote an article with feminist peace-builders from Azerbaijan, allowing Keran to meet them at a camp. Initially, there was no mention of Nagorno-Karabakh, but towards the end of the camp, Keran brought the topic up, discussing the trauma she was sure both parties had felt. Indeed, she found such an open discussion brought joy to both herself and the Azerbaijani activists.

> I was never nationalistic, I'm not that kind of person who is proud to be part of some nation, but when I met them and talked, I saw so many similarities in our way of talking, our warmness, and touchiness; there were a lot of things that just clicked. That experience was stamped in my heart.

Similarly, Hayk was able to meet LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis at the 2023 Tbilisi Pride. Though Tbilisi Pride Fest was ultimately cancelled that year, the group bonded while staying together in Tbilisi and have kept in touch since through Instagram.

> That was not the first interaction [I've had] with Azerbaijani people, because I used to live in Russia, so I had the chance to meet some of them, but not queer people. It was kind of my first meeting as queer people to other queer people, which felt really amazing. There were also some Turkish members, and it was really nice to meet and have the chance to communicate. Georgia is a common area where we can meet — they can't come to Armenia and we can't go to Azerbaijan.

Throughout these responses, an emphasis was made on queerness, the fact that this was a common ground that collaboration could be based on. Aida took this concept a step further, seeing the fact that LGBTQ+ people naturally have queer values as therefore making them more open to criticising their governments, whether Azerbaijani or Russian.

> Generally, about the war, there is the truth that the Azerbaijani government is the aggressor, as we can now say about Russia. The queer community is more open to discuss the several sides of the war and they are open to seeing the truth, open to criticising their government. I mean they have queer values.

Similarly, many of these stories and cases feature specific instances of collaboration related to activism in some regard, whether peace-building or LGBTQ+. As has been stated previously

in this research, activism and political engagement and knowledge go hand in hand. Therefore, a hypothesis can be made that the LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis and LGBTQ+ Armenians meeting are better informed about each country's history and the conflict as a whole, and therefore less likely to engage with propaganda from either side. In this sense, bridges can be built on the basis of shared values. On the other hand, LGBTQ+ Armenians and Azerbaijanis who participate in the war or who stay in the closet and do not have the same awareness or political engagement may not have the same response. As was made clear by my interviewees, including Tigran who provides the following quote, there are many dangers involved in collaborating with LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis, limiting contact to only those able to seek refuge abroad.

> We don't have connections at all, because they can't connect with us. If their government knows about their connection with us, they can be killed. But we have international friends from Azerbaijan [. . .] I knew a person who used to have discussions with me. The Azerbaijani police killed her because of her connections with Armenia. I found out about that a few years after her death. Their government — I don't know how to explain their government. They even genocide their own society, not only others.

It is important to highlight the fact that all of these physical encounters occurred outside of either Armenia or Azerbaijan. According to Thomas de Waal, who studied relations in the Armenian-Azerbaijani village of Khojorni, Georgia, coexistence among these two ethnic populations was possible largely due to the fact the village was situated beyond "the mental conflict zone that is bounded by the frontiers of Armenia and Azerbaijan." This allowed the residents to "creatively ignore" the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and instead turn their attention towards all the things needed in their daily lives (de Waal 2013, 283). Georgia acted as a neutral zone in the above encounters as well, opening up space to focus on other aspects than the conflict occurring between the two nations.

Of the seven LGBTQ+ Armenians I interviewed, only one, Mamikon, listed a negative experience. In his account, he discussed a case where LGBTQ+ organisations cooperated with the Aliyev regime and were therefore removed from a regional network by the donors. While he still had hope that there were independent activists or groups working on these issues, their optimism had decreased after seeing female human rights defenders and formerly independent activists become involved in the closing of the Lachin Corridor in 2023, thereby supporting Aliyev's regime: "Everybody has lost their trust that any human rights defender can work or live in Azerbaijan."

There are a number of reasons why Armenian respondents might generally have been more open to collaborating with LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis as opposed to LGBTQ+ Russians. First and foremost is the nature of the interactions. The cooperation between LGBTQ+ Armenians and LGTBQ+ Azerbaijanis is always enacted within a neutral third party country due to the closed borders between the two states. In addition, it is always on a much smaller scale than that of the ongoing interactions between Armenians and Russians in Yerevan currently. There is no danger in being overrun by LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis as opposed to the prevalence of LGBTQ+ Russians currently inhabiting an already small space. While the fear of being invaded by Azerbaijan and Aliyev's regime certainly exists, there is a clear understanding that Aliyev has no love for LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, there is no sense of privilege among LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis, even those who have managed to flee the regime and live outside their homeland. Though LGBTQ+ Russians are oppressed by Putin, they still come from a relative place of privilege, and with their large numbers and, at times, sense of superiority, it is clear why they are received differently.

Conclusion

This research has sought to answer a number of questions, including how mass migration impacts a vulnerable host community; whether space exists for collaboration on the basis of a shared social identity; and how post-colonial understandings and conflict can affect the possibilities for such integration. In doing so, this thesis has covered a number of topics within the literature, including identity negotiation, North-South or lifestyle migration, and post-colonialism. It has also attempted to contribute to this literature by covering some of the gaps present, namely the lack of focus on vulnerable host communities such as the LGBTQ+ populations of Georgia and Armenia.

In my examination of the first question, I found that the economic effects stemming from the mass migration of Russian citizens to Tbilisi and Yerevan were concerning for the LGBTQ+ population. Already in a precarious situation locally, the increased economic pressures led to increased outward migration and nihilism among the population. In addition, there were strong feelings concerning the concept of privilege, whereby LGBTQ+ Armenians and Georgians noticed different potentials between local populations and the Russian migrants.

When examining whether space existed for collaboration or integration on the basis of a shared social identity — namely identifying as LGBTQ+ or queer — I found that privilege, respect, and post-colonialism were all important considerations taken into account. Less emphasis was put on a shared social identity, and instead respondents, especially LGBTQ+ Georgians, emphasised the lack of knowledge and lack of respect held by the Russian migrants, even those who identify as LGBTQ+. The example of the first Kiki Vogue Ball was critical.

While LGTBQ+ Armenians seemed more willing to engage with LGBTQ+ Russians, the same issues of postcolonialism lingered. However, unlike in the Georgian case, there were more examples of “bridge-makers” who could work between both populations, leading to true integration rather than the parallel society exemplified in the Georgian case. In addition, the Armenian respondents did not have the same history of recent conflict and occupation as the Georgian respondents, also helping to ease the way for collaboration.

Interestingly, almost all the Armenian respondents relayed favourable experiences in regards to working with or meeting LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis. Though there was a much more recent

and violent history of conflict, the Armenian respondents did not view LGBTQ+ Azerbaijanis with the same lens of colonialism or privilege as with the Russian migrants.

A number of further areas of study also emerged from the research. First and foremost are the topics raised in interviews that I did not have sufficient capabilities to devote time to. This includes the potential growth in HIV+ rates in the Caucasus region as a result of the Russian migration[12] and the loss of donor funding to the region and the resulting implications from this loss due to a new focus on Ukraine. Both of these topics are worth long-term study.

In addition, this research would benefit from a larger sample of participants to better represent the LGBTQ+ populations of both Georgia and Armenia. As discussed in the sub-chapter focused on limitations, this thesis in no way fully encapsulates the thoughts and experiences of LGBTQ+ Georgians or Armenians. It is my hope, however, that it offers some insight into how LGBTQ+ host societies navigate identity threats and in turn, can provide some notes for how incoming populations might view their actions against a historical and political backdrop.

[12] This topic was raised during an expert interview with Ana Aptsiauri, Project Coordinator and Legal Officer at Equality Movement.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
    - How would you define your identity(ies)?
- How would you describe what life is like as an LGBTQ+ person in Georgia? / Armenia?
- How has the Georgian state / the Armenian state responded to LGBTQ+ people and activism?
- Have you faced conflict between your sexual/gender identity and your national/religious/ethnic identity?
    - How has this changed over the years?
- How has the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected you? / How has the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh affected you?
    - Have you seen an impact on/within the LGBTQ+ community?
- Have you or would you collaborate with LGBTQ+ people from Russia? Ukraine? / Azerbaijan?
    - If yes, can you tell me how this has functioned?
    - When would you and when would you not? Justifications?