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## **“Why the Hell do you need Pride?”: Contemporary LGBT+ Activist Identity in Estonia**

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**Signature:** 

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## Table of Contents

<b>Author's Declaration</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Non-exclusive licence for making the thesis public</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
Motivation and Background	8
Research Puzzle	8
Research Questions	10
Thesis Layout	11
<b>Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Conceptualisation</b>	<b>12</b>
1.1 Defining LGBT+ and Queer	12
1.2 LGBT+ Activism	17
1.3 Queer Solidarity	20
<b>Chapter 2: Context and Historical Background</b>	<b>24</b>
2.1 Russian Imperial Rule	24
2.2 Interwar Period	26
2.3 Soviet Annexation and Stalinism	27
2.4 Khrushchev Era and The Thaw	28
2.5 Perestroika and Glasnost	29
2.6 Independent Estonia	31
2.7 Conclusions	34
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1 Research Design	35
3.2 Interviews	37
3.2.1 Participants and Fieldwork	37
3.2.2 Interview Design	39
3.2.3 Interviewees	41
3.2.4 Ethical Considerations	41
3.3 Legislation, Policy Paper, and Report Analysis	43
3.3.1 Legislation	43
3.3.2 Policy Papers and Reports	43
3.4 Limitations	44
<b>Chapter 4: Results and Discussions</b>	<b>47</b>
4.1 Definition of 'activist'	47
4.2 Identification with the 'activist' label	48

4.3 Opportunity for Activism	51
4.4 Divisions in the Estonian LGBT+ Community	58
4.5 Queer Solidarity and experience with other forms of activism	63
4.6 Co-operation with other European LGBT+ groups	65
4.7 Looking towards the future	68
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>74</b>
Activist Identity	74
Community Identity	75
Queer Solidarity	77
Future of LGBT+ activism in Estonia	77
Recommended research for the future	78
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>85</b>
Appendix 1: Interview Schedule	85
Appendix 2: Consent Form	86
Appendix 3: Plain Language Statement	88
Appendix 4: University of Glasgow Ethical Approval	91
Appendix 5: Jagiellonian University Ethical Approval	93

## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between members of the LGBT+ community in Estonia and activism, with a particular focus on identification with the 'activist' label. Additionally, this project investigates the presence of cooperation between the Estonian LGBT+ community, LGBT+ communities in other countries, and other socio-political organisations such as feminist and environmentalist groups. Previous literature in the field determined that the LGBT+ community in Estonia generally rejected the 'activist' label. It also suggested that the lack of collective identity within the group played a role in activism's struggle to thrive. Given that the most recent study of the topic is based on data that is over 10 years old, this thesis seeks to fill this gap and update the field of literature with contemporary findings. This research is possible because Estonia has seen significant changes over the past decade regarding LGBT+ activism, including an increased number of LGBT+ organisations, and the recent legalisation of same-sex marriage.

This work uses a combination of semi-structured interviews, legislation, and policy paper analysis to investigate changes in the attitudes of the LGBT+ community. Interviews were conducted with members of Estonian LGBT+ organisations, whilst policy papers examined were produced by European based rights groups. This data was then analysed in comparison with previous literature to understand how the attitudes of the LGBT+ community regarding activism have changed over time. Out with this comparison, this thesis also makes preliminary conclusions regarding instances of solidarity between the Estonian LGBT+ community and other social causes and highlights the next steps for Estonian LGBT+ activism. Using this methodology, this study concludes that perceptions of activism and the 'activist' label have become far more positive within the LGBT+ community in Estonia, with a strong collective identity now present. Furthermore, cooperation between Estonian LGBT+ organisations, LGBT+ organisations in neighbouring countries, and other socio-political activist groups is also present. Finally, this work makes tentative conclusions on the future of LGBT+ activism in Estonia, understanding that future activism will have a key focus on improving transgender rights in the country.

**Key words:** Estonia, LGBT, activism, identity, queer.

## Abstrakt

Niniejsza praca bada związek między członkami społeczności LGBT+ w Estonii a aktywizmem, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem identyfikacji z rolą „aktywisty”. Ponadto projekt ten zwraca uwagę na współpracę między estońską społecznością LGBT+, społecznościami LGBT+ w innych krajach oraz innymi organizacjami społeczno-politycznymi, takimi jak grupy feministyczne i ekologiczne. Wcześniejsza literatura w tej dziedzinie wykazała, że społeczność LGBT+ w Estonii generalnie odrzuca etykietę „aktywisty”. Sugeruje również, że brak wyraźnej tożsamości zbiorowej w tej grupie miał wpływ na rozwój tego ruchu. Biorąc pod uwagę, że najnowsze badania tego tematu opierają się na danych sprzed ponad 10 lat, niniejsza praca ma na celu wypełnienie tej luki i zaktualizowanie stanu wiedzy w tej dziedzinie. Badanie to było możliwe, ponieważ Estonia odnotowała znaczące zmiany w ciągu ostatniej dekady dotyczące aktywizmu LGBT+, w tym zwiększoną liczbę organizacji LGBT+ oraz niedawną legalizację małżeństw osób tej samej płci.

Praca zawiera analizy wywiadów częściowo ustrukturyzowanych, jak i badania ustawodawstwa i dokumentów programowych (polityk), w celu zbadania zmian w postawach społeczności LGBT+. Przeprowadzono wywiady z członkami estońskich organizacji LGBT+. Drugim komponentem badania była analiza polityk opracowanych przez europejskie organizacje zajmujące się prawami człowieka. Dane te zostały następnie porównane z wcześniejszą literaturą, aby zrozumieć, jak na przestrzeni czasu zmieniały się postawy społeczności LGBT+ wobec aktywizmu. Dzięki temu porównaniu niniejsza teza zawiera również wstępne wnioski dotyczące przypadków solidarności między estońską społecznością LGBT+ a innymi sprawami społecznymi oraz omawia kolejne kroki estońskiego aktywizmu LGBT+. Wykorzystując tę metodologię, w niniejszym badaniu stwierdzono, że postrzeganie aktywizmu i roli pojęcia „aktywisty” stało się znacznie bardziej pozytywnie postrzegane w społeczności LGBT+ w Estonii, przy czym obecnie występuje silna tożsamość zbiorowa. Ponadto zauważono również przypadki współpracy pomiędzy estońskimi organizacjami LGBT+, organizacjami LGBT+ w krajach sąsiednich oraz innymi grupami działaczy społeczno-politycznych. Wreszcie, praca ta zawiera wstępne wnioski na temat przyszłości aktywizmu LGBT+ w Estonii, uwzględniając fakt, że przyszły aktywizm będzie się koncentrował na poprawie praw osób transpłciowych w tym kraju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Estonia, LGBT, aktywizm, tożsamość, queer.

# Introduction

## **Motivation and Background**

The motivation for this study came from discovering a contradiction between my own observations of the LGBT+ community in Estonia, and the conclusions that had been made about the community within the contemporary literature on the matter. From my experience, the members of the queer community that I had engaged with were all intensely enthusiastic about bettering their rights within the country. Several spoke of protests attended, and others mentions their passion for other causes out with LGBT+ activism, such as environmentalism and feminism. Yet, upon reading the limited literature available on LGBT+ organisations in Estonia – primarily Katrin Tiidenberg and Airi-Alina Allaste’s work – I was confronted with the conclusion that queer activism within Estonia was almost non-existent, and furthermore, the idea of a LGBT+ collective identity in the country was incredibly weak as well. Tiidenberg and Allaste’s article “LGBT activism in Estonia: Identities, enactment and perceptions of LGBT people” was published in 2020, however the data used was collected around a decade ago between May 2012 and November 2013. Whilst I knew that my individual experiences could not reflect on the situation in the same way that empirical data could, the juxtaposition of what I was reading versus what I had experienced encouraged me to explore this topic within my thesis. The aim of my research is to build on Tiidenberg and Allaste’s conclusions and identify the changes that had been made over the 10 years that had elapsed since their data collection occurred.

## **Research Puzzle**

The research puzzle for this thesis is a combination of two empirical puzzles, the variation over time model and the contra expectations model. Whilst this research had initially planned to use only the contra expectations model, the unexpected political change in Estonia that occurred during the research period meant that the decision was made to also include the variation over time model.

The variation over time model is described by Day and Koivu as ‘when conditions of a political phenomenon seem stable but suddenly change’.<sup>1</sup> For this dissertation, the political change was the election of a centre-left coalition government and their rapid proposal and legalisation of same-sex marriage. The unexpected nature of this change was due to the fact that up until 2020, any discussion surrounding same-sex marriage was pushed to the periphery of politics. Whilst 2020 saw a move by the Greens, Social Democrats (SD) and Eesti 200 to push for marriage equality, the position of the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE) in government – and their attempt to make marriage an ‘exclusive heterosexual right’ – made any thought of the legalisation of same-sex marriage appear as a far-fetched dream.<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup> The run up to the March 2023 Riigikogu elections saw the promise of marriage equality return to the discussion, with the soon to be successful coalition of SD, Green and Eesti 200 parties all supporting the legalisation of same-sex marriage in their election campaigns. Less than four months after winning the election, the Reform Party-led coalition passed the same-sex marriage bill in parliament. Therefore, this dissertation plans to take this significant shift and investigate how it may have changed LGBT+ activists’ outlook on the situation in Estonia, and if it has impacted their hopes/wishes for Estonia in the future. The data collection for this project took place during March 2023, and whilst this was before the legalisation of same-sex marriage, the recent parliamentary election already held promise for the proposal and passing of the bill, and therefore had potential to influence participant responses.

Moving on to the original research puzzle, a contra expectations puzzle is when ‘a phenomenon occurs against the conventional wisdom or theoretical expectations’.<sup>4</sup> For this thesis, a contradiction was found between the conclusions made in previous literature on LGBT+ activism in Estonia, and my own observations from time spent in the country. Existing research discussing activism in Estonia – primarily Tiidenberg and Allaste’s aforementioned paper, alongside Michael LaSala and Elyse Revere’s “‘It Would Have Been Impossible

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Day and Kendra L. Koivu, “Finding the Question: A Puzzle-Based Approach to the Logic of Discovery”, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 15.3, 2019, 381.

<sup>2</sup> Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised, “Petitsioon perekonnaseaduse muutmiseks”, *Rahvaalgatus.ee*, <<https://rahvaalgatus.ee/initiatives/842dac27-bdda-45c3-bd95-407452b51c71>> [Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Raili Uibo, “*And I don’t know who we really are to each other*”: *Queers doing close relationships in Estonia*, (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2021), pp. 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> Day and Koivu, “Finding the Question”, 380.

Before:” Reflections on Current Gay Life in Estonia” – concluded that both the activist identity and the LGBT+ collective identity in Estonia were very weak.<sup>5 6</sup> With no desire to partake in activism or create a collective identity, it can then be assumed from these conclusions that LGBT+ activist events – such as pride parades and queer culture events – do not take place in Estonia, or at least do not do so on a large scale. However, this is simply not the case, with reality being that LGBT+ people in Estonia organise impressive displays of activism and collective identity, with the most illustrative example being the pride parades that take place in the country. In 2022, Tartu Pride debuted with over 1000 attendees, with the following year seeing Tallinn host the annual Baltic Pride. My time spent with LGBT+ groups in Estonia prior to the undertaking of this thesis also contradicted these conclusions, with several queer cultural events taking place in the three months I spent there.

Thus, this thesis aims to explore the existence of activist and collective identity within LGBT+ organisations in Estonia in order to understand if this has changed since the last period of data collection in 2013. With the most recent studies on the topic being over 10 years old – and with the finding of these studies contradicting my own observations – it is expected that a change will be present. Alongside this, the notion of solidarity between queer organisations and other rights groups will also be researched to better understand if LGBT+ activism in Estonia has grown from ‘resisting’ the activist label to being an intersectional, cross-border collective.<sup>7</sup> Finally, this thesis will also aim to explore what the next big political challenges for LGBT+ organisations in Estonia are and highlight their hopes for the future.

### **Research Questions**

Based on my initial findings, the research questions that guided this work were as follows:

**How do the members of the Estonian LGBT+ community understand the term ‘activist’?**

**Does that impact their identification with the label?**

**Does LGBT+ activism in Estonia support other causes and/or similar causes in different nations?**

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<sup>5</sup> Katrin Tiidenberg and Airi-Alina Allaste, “LGBT activism in Estonia: Identities, enactment and perceptions of LGBT people”, *Sexualities*, 23.3, 2020, 320.

<sup>6</sup> Michael C. LaSala and Elyse J. Revere, ““It Would Have Been Impossible Before:” Reflections on Current Gay Life in Estonia”, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58.3, 2011, 433-434.

<sup>7</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, “LGBT activism in Estonia”, 307.

**What are the political/rights developments in Estonia that LGBT+ activists would like to see in the future?**

### **Thesis Layout**

The layout of this thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 1 will discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework that forms the basis of the research. Chapter 2 will then present the contextual and historical background of LGBT+ rights and organisations in Estonia in order to allow for a greater understanding of how LGBT+ organisations in the country operate today. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology used for data collection, whilst Chapter 4 will be the results and discussion chapter, where the data collected the previous section will be analysed and comparisons made to previous conclusions made by Tiidenberg and Allaste, and LaSala and Revere. Finally, a conclusions section will highlight the findings made from this research, and discuss the potential for future research in this field.

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Conceptualisation

The theoretical framework for this thesis is centred around LGBT+ identity and activism. Whilst activism is a broad topic with an extensive field of literature, this work will look specifically at LGBT+ activism and the notion of queer solidarity, and the roles that they play within LGBT+ organisations in Estonia, and how they interplay with LGBT+ social and political identity within the country.

### 1.1 Defining LGBT+ and Queer

The main subject of this dissertation is the LGBT+ community. The standardised definition of LGBT is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, and this work uses the LGBT+ term to include these groups, plus all other people that don't subscribe to the cisgender, heterosexual and heteroromantic label. Historically, this term was not used until the nineties, and did not truly become widespread until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to the fact that gay organisations at that time were divided between gay men and lesbians, and did not address issues that were specific to transgender or bisexual individuals.<sup>8</sup> Two of the articles heavily referenced in this thesis – Tiidenberg and Allaste's and LaSala and Revere's works – use the LGBT term but without the 'plus'. However, the decision was made to use the LGBT+ acronym for this thesis as the LGBT term has been criticised for being antiquated in its exclusion of those who do not fit neatly into the subcategories represented.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the 'plus' is used in this work to expand the term and allow for additional identities, such as non-binary and asexual.

Since the foundation of the acronym there have been waves in both academic and social movements to separate the 'LGB' from the 'T+', which argue that it is inappropriate to study notions of sexuality alongside those of gender. Trans activist and author Susan Stryker has argued that the 'T' is often too easily detached from the LGBT+ acronym by homosexual and bisexual scholars, in order to make queer theory more 'palatable' for the heterosexual, cisgender majority.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the fact that disregarding transgender people and their

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<sup>8</sup> Marie-Amélie George, "Expanding LGBT", *Florida Law Review*, 73.2, 2021, 246.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10.2, 2004, 212-215.

experiences is inextricably rooted in transphobia, it is also harmful to the study of queer issues. As Chris Ashford and Alexander Maine note in their research on homosexuality, it is impossible to study sexuality without the notion of gender - and vice versa – as they are ‘intimately intertwined’.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that LGBT+ is one of many variations of the acronym that is in use today, with LGBTQ and LGBTQIA being two of the most common alternatives.<sup>12</sup> Some countries also have their own regional variants to reflect local indigenous beliefs, such as Canada where LGBTQ2S is used to include those who are two-spirit.<sup>13</sup> The reasoning for not including such terms in the thesis, and for using the LGBT+ are as follows. LGBTI as an acronym includes intersex individuals, however not all intersex people agree with their inclusion in the term. Intersex activist Emi Koyama argued that adding the ‘I’ to the LGBT term prevents intersex issues from getting the visibility they deserve, as they are often pushed aside for discussions on homosexual orientated issues, such as gay marriage.<sup>14</sup> In conclusion, they deem adding the ‘I’ to the LGBT acronym appropriate only if intersex issues are to be addressed and awareness to be raised.<sup>15</sup> In the data collection for this dissertation, intersex issues were not mentioned by participants, and subsequently do not feature in this research. Therefore, the decision was made to not use the LGBTI term, but rather the LGBT+ one.

Regarding the LGBTQ term, the decision to use LGBT+ over this term was based on understandings of what the ‘Q’ stands for. The American Psychiatric Association define the ‘Q’ as queer or questioning, and therefore many papers produced about the LGBTQ population used these terms interchangeably.<sup>16</sup> However, these terms can mean different things, depending on who is using them. For example, whilst queer is often used as an umbrella term to include anyone under the LGBT+ label, questioning exists to describe only those who are unsure of their sexuality or gender identity.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, whilst a lesbian may use the term queer to describe their sexuality, they are unlikely to use the questioning term in the same

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<sup>11</sup> Chris Ashford and Alexander Maine, “Introduction”, in *Research Handbook on Gender, Sexuality and the Law*, ed. by Chris Ashford and Alexander Maine, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2020), pp. 1-6.

<sup>12</sup> Marie-Amélie George, “Expanding LGBT”, 245.

<sup>13</sup> Sean Waite et al., “A systematic review and thematic synthesis of Canada’s LGBTQ2S+ employment, labour market and earnings literature”, *PLoS One*, 14.10, 2019, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Emi Koyama, “Adding the ‘I’: Does Intersex Belong in the LGBT Movement?”, *Intersex Initiative*, <<http://www.intersexinitiative.org/articles/lgbti.html>> [Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> July 2023].

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Kali Cyrus and Catherine Morrison, “Mental Health Facts on Questioning/Queer Populations”, *American Psychiatric Association*, 2019, 1.

<sup>17</sup> HRC Foundation, “Glossary of Terms”, *Human Rights Campaign*, <<https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>> [Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> July 2023]. See definitions of ‘queer’ and ‘questioning’.

sense. Thus, when it came to data collection and interviews, the LGBT+ label was used, which can encompass both queer and questioning in the 'plus' but does not cause the same level of confusion.

Aside from defining what is meant by the LGBT+ acronym, it is also important to emphasise that the LGBT+ label is both a collective and personal social identity. Said identities can bring together people who would not come into contact otherwise. This is particularly prevalent for this dissertation, as – which will be discussed later – several interview participants were not Estonian by nationality. As defined by Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier, collective identity is 'the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity'.<sup>18</sup> Ohad David and Daniel Bar-Tal then further break down the concept of collective identity, analysing the phenomenon at both the micro and macro level, and although their work focuses on the case study of national identity, the same framework can be applied to the LGBT+ identity as well. The micro level of identity is described as 'the ability of individuals to identify by name the collective in which they consider themselves to be members and to express some measure of emotional attachment indicating the extent of their desire to belong to this collective', which in the LGBT+ context would involve the acceptance and identification with their sexuality and/or gender identity, and having the desire to be around others in a similar situation.<sup>19</sup> David and Bar-Tal then define the macro level as when the individual identifies with the collective, and that other members of the collective hold similar beliefs and feelings, and act in a similar fashion.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the LGBT+ identity, this macro level is needed for any LGBT+ organisations to successfully exist, as all their members must be united around the same base beliefs. Therefore, with it understood that the LGBT+ label can create a collective identity, this dissertation will aim to see if such an identity exists in Estonia.

The LGBT+ label can also be conceptualised as a personal, individual identity, as although heteronormative society dictates who is considered the 'other', individuals still have the ability to identify with the label that best suits them. However, it is important to note that whilst this

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<sup>18</sup> Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier, "Collective Identity in social movement communities: Lesbian feminist mobilization", in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. by Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 104-129 (p. 105).

<sup>19</sup> Ohad David and Daniel Bar-Tal, "A Sociopsychological Conception of Collective Identity: The Case of National Identity as an Example", *Personality and Social Psychological Review*, 13.4, 2009, 358.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 361.

work acknowledges the individuality of all LGBT+ persons, the focus for this thesis will primarily consider the collective aspect of LGBT+ identity, as it discusses organisations and activist groups, both of which form as collectives. A person who is attracted to more than one gender may choose to identify with the bisexual, pansexual, or queer labels, and this decision is made by them personally and not pre-dictated by society. LGBT+ identities have also previously been conceptualised as ‘stage-based’, whereby the person internally identifies with a LGBT+ label, before sharing this identity with others (‘coming out’), and then living their life openly within this label.<sup>21</sup> Whilst this theory can be useful in discussing an individual’s queer journey, this work will not subscribe to this model, as it portrays the queer experience as linear, when in fact it can be incredibly complex.

Firstly, the term ‘coming out’ has been criticised by scholars such as Mary Lou Rasmussen deeming the in/out binary to be harmful to LGBT+ individuals, as it suggests that those who are ‘closeted’ are ashamed and in denial, when in actual fact there are many reasons as to why a person may choose to not openly share this information.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the perceived in/out binary that is pushed by the ‘coming out’ procedure suggests that a person ‘comes out’ just once and can then live their life openly is fraught with error. Due to the heteronormative nature of society, queer people must undergo the ‘coming out’ process constantly throughout their lives. For example, when a person starts a new job, they will have to mention their sexuality to their co-workers if they wish to discuss their partner/personal life, because the general assumption is heterosexuality. Finally, the idea of only having to ‘come out’ once is incompatible with the fluidity of sexuality, which has been explored extensively by Lisa Diamond, who explains sexuality in some people as flexible, with the ability to change over time or in relation to the circumstances that an individual is in.<sup>23</sup> In this instance, even if an individual identifies and ‘comes out’ as one label, they may change their identification later in life. Therefore, being queer is not a stage-based identity, because a person is never fully ‘clear’ of those stages. As such, when this dissertation discusses LGBT+ identities, these identities are assumed to be fluid and spectral.

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<sup>21</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, “LGBT activism in Estonia”.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Lou Rasmussen, “The Problem of Coming Out”, *Theory Into Practice*, 43.2, 2004, 144-146.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa M Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 1-16.

A final concept relating to LGBT+ identity that requires defining is the term 'queer'. Although once used as a derogatory name against LGBT+ people, the word has been reclaimed and is now often synonymous with the LGBT+ community. This dissertation will use the definition provided by the LGBT+ education group *Safe Zone*, which is:

Queer – (adj) used as an umbrella term to describe individuals who don't identify as straight. Also used to describe people who have non-normative gender identity or as a political affiliation. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, it is not embraced or used by all members of the LGBTQ community. The term queer can often be used interchangeably with LGBTQ.<sup>24</sup>

It should also be noted that within academia the term 'queer' is used prolifically, with 'queer theory' – which emerged as a recognised theoretical field in the 1990s – being used in almost all research regarding the LGBT+ community.<sup>25</sup> As a part of this academic field, this dissertation will use the term 'queer' interchangeably with LGBT+. Whilst my written report will include this term, it is important to note that in the interviews I avoided using this term and instead only used 'LGBT+'. This is because whilst queer is accepted as an alternative to LGBT+ in the English language, it can often have different connotations within different societies and languages. For example, the term “квир” to Russian speakers is seen as 'apolitical' and 'elitist', meaning that to the Russian-speaking LGBT+ community, the 'queer' term is perceived far more negatively than it is by English speakers.<sup>26</sup> Similar findings can be seen within Estonian speakers, where – although the term 'kväär' (queer) is increasingly popular amongst LGBT+ youth – older members of the community who struggle with 'sex-gender normativity' tend to avoid the label.<sup>27</sup> Considering the majority of people in Estonia speak either Estonian or Russian as a first language, these examples help justify not using the

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<sup>24</sup> Safe Zone Project, “Isn't “Queer” a Bad Word?”, *Safe Zone Project*, <<https://thesafezoneproject.com/faq/isnt-queer-a-bad-word/>> [Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> April 2023].

<sup>25</sup> Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*, (Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Katharina Wiedlack, Olenka Dmytryk and Syaivo, “Introduction to Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts on/from a Post-Soviet Perspective”, *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, 5, 2021, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Raili Marling and Rebeka Põldsam, “Affect and queer intimate entanglements in national-neoliberal Estonia”, *Sexualities*, Preprint, 2022.

term 'queer' within my interview questions, as it can be perceived differently based on the native language of the interviewee.

## **1.2 LGBT+ Activism**

Activism alone is described as 'single or repeated actions taken by individuals and groups in order to promote a cause', with such actions often being deliberate, and associated with a political or social agenda.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, one might assume that LGBT+ activism is simply an extension of this, with LGBT+ issues as the social agenda. However, queer activism becomes far more complex when it comes to the deliberate actions that often define activism. There is no doubt that people identifying as LGBT+ activists have partaken in traditional forms of activism; protests, campaigning, and petitions to name but a few. Whilst queer activism is often associated with the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s to 1970s, it would be naïve to assume that acts of gay activism did not exist before then. An early example of the defending of homosexuality can be seen in the works of Marquis Donatien de Sade, wrote novels denouncing the Catholic Church's condemnation of homosexual activity.<sup>29</sup> Whilst this act occurred long before ideas of LGBT+ activism existed, it can retrospectively be considered activism, due to the public stance taken against institutionalised homophobia. Up until the gay liberation movement in the 1960s, small gay-rights movements continued to work in 'discreet' ways that often involved little to no public protest or petitioning.<sup>30</sup> Therefore – as will be discussed later in this section – when considering activism, we must consider smaller acts of protest and understand that what can be defined as activism is often decided by the activist themselves.

Moving on to the event most often associated with LGBT+ activism, the liberation movement of the late 1960s to 1970s saw the Stonewall riots in Greenwich – later dubbed an uprising against ongoing police harassment – which went on to inspire a 'militant organisation' of

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<sup>28</sup> Klaus Boehnke and Maor Shani, "Activism", *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behaviour*, <<https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-political-behavior/i992.xml>> [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2023].

<sup>29</sup> Gert Hekma, "Sodomy, Effeminacy, Identity: Mobilisations for Same-sexual Loves and Practices before the Second World War", in *The Ashgate research companion to lesbian and gay activism*, ed. by David Paternotte and Manon Tremblay, (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffery Weeks, "Gay Liberation and its Legacies", in *The Ashgate research companion to lesbian and gay activism*, p. 46.

LGBT+ rights organisations across the globe.<sup>31</sup> The pride parades that have taken place globally every summer since Stonewall have changed in nature since their conception, with celebration now becoming the main theme. Whilst many Stonewall veterans were upset that the event did not lead to the revolution they desired, the continued progress of Pride events today continue to embody the revolutionary ideals that the original uprising pushed.<sup>32</sup> Despite the growing trend to dismiss Pride events as nothing more than extensive parties, parades around the world continue to embody political messages that have evolved over time since Stonewall. In the United States, parades in 2020 worked with the Black Lives Matter movement to focus on promoting better rights and protection for Black Trans people.<sup>33</sup> In Estonia, Pride parades have focused on the theme “How long can we wait?”, referring to the need to speed up the process of implementing equality in marriage and civil partnerships.<sup>34</sup> However, whilst these parades can easily be classed as activism with little dispute, the main debate surrounding LGBT+ activism comes from the ambiguity in definition of what constitutes an activist activity. In a country like Russia, a heterosexual couple holding hands and displaying affection would never be considered activist, yet a homosexual couple doing the same thing would be deemed as promoting ‘homopropaganda’ and likely jailed as political activists.<sup>35</sup>

In his seminal work *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner states that contemporary government and society across the globe are ran by heteronormative practice, with heterosexuality being the default.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, with homosexuality being pushed to fill the role of the ‘other’, what is constituted as ‘activism’ in the LGBT+ sense is decided upon by the heteronormative majority, and not those who are partaking in these actions. For example, someone living in a gender other than the one prescribed to them at birth can become politicised just by simply existing. Thus, certain practices that would not be considered activism when undertaken by the cisgender-heterosexual majority are then perceived as

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.

<sup>33</sup> Brock Colyar, “The City: Pride Was Always a Protest”, *New York Magazine*, 53.13, 2020, <<https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=glasuni&id=GALE%7CA650846911&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>> [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2023].

<sup>34</sup> Silver Tambur, “Pictures: Tartu Pride 2022”, *Estonian World*, <<https://estonianworld.com/life/pictures-tartu-pride-2022/>> [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2022].

<sup>35</sup> Cai Wilkinson, “Putting “Traditional Values” Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia”, *Journal of Human Rights*, 13.3, 2014, 366.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet”, *Social Text*, 29, 1991, 3-17.

activism by said majority when they are conducted by the LGBT+ minority. Hence, defining what is considered LGBT+ activism – especially when discussing the term in an academic sense – becomes increasingly complicated, as it boils down to individual perception. For this dissertation, the decision was made to give back agency to the members of the LGBT+ organisations, and thus in interviews they were asked to define what they believe activism to be. This work will therefore be based on several definitions that will be discussed further in the results section of the thesis. Although these definitions vary slightly, the main theme is that activism is public, and for actions to be considered activism they have to primarily take place in the public sphere. Furthermore, said acts must be out with the normal daily actions of the person, meaning for the LGBT+ people spoken to in this work, simply existing as a queer person does not count as activism. Additionally, almost all interviewees were aware that their definition of activism does not align with the general – or heteronormative – one.

Regarding previous research into LGBT+ activism in Estonia, the field of literature is notably restricted. Whilst there is a lot of queer-based research surrounding the former Soviet countries, Estonia is often under-researched, particularly when compared to its largest neighbour, Russia. Within research on LGBT+ people in Estonia, the study of LGBT+ activism is limited, with only a few papers published on the matter. Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa's work on the emergence of LGBT+ movements in Estonia – from the late Soviet Union to the early days of the country's independence – explores the 'social position' of LGBT+ communities during the transition to national sovereignty.<sup>37</sup> The activism discussed included the organisation of the "Sexual Minorities and Society" conference in 1990 and the advocacy of Kristel, the first trans person to seek gender recognition in independent Estonia.<sup>38</sup> As discussed by the authors, the main goals of Estonian queer activism at this time were decriminalisation and the building of a community for LGBT+ people, which had been unable to exist under the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> Whilst this work is incredibly important in understanding the history of queer activism in Estonia, it is firmly rooted in the time period in which its research is based. Although Kristel's activism and the move for greater trans rights are still relevant today, the position of LGBT+ people within an independent Estonia has been

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<sup>37</sup> Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa, "Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia", *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 2023, 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 7-9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8.

solidified, and homosexual activity long since decriminalised. Therefore, whilst the themes of Põldsam and Arumetsa's research remain relevant, this dissertation hopes to expand on them within a modern context.

Moving on from the early post-Soviet days, there has been more contemporary research into LGBT+ activism in Estonia, with key authors including the Katrin Tiidenberg and Airi-Alina Allaste, Michael LaSala and Elyse Revere, and most recently Raili Uibo. LaSala and Revere's paper concluded that there was very little community organisation within the LGBT+ population of Estonia, which was caused by strong preferences for individualism and privacy.<sup>40</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste also found a similar situation, stating that a 'weak collective identity' was present in the LGBT+ population.<sup>41</sup> However, whilst LaSala and Revere's paper did not predict future change in the situation, Tiidenberg and Allaste noted that the Registered Partnership Act has caused a slight shift in how LGBT+ activism in Estonia is orientated, and thus they were hopefully that a change to this 'weak identity' could appear.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Uibo's work "“And I don't know who we really are to each other”: Queers doing close relationships in Estonia" criticises both of the previous papers for their tendency to measure the presence of activism in Estonia against the 'Western pattern', which is problematic as it consistently places Estonia behind Western countries.<sup>43</sup> In an attempt to avoid the same issue raised by Uibo within this thesis, the decision was made to allow the interview participants to give their own definition of what activism is, with the hope that this would avoid any unconscious bias from myself. This dissertation takes great inspiration from Tiidenberg and Allaste's work, particularly from their method of asking LGBT+ *if* they identify as activists, rather than imposing the label on them, which is often all too easy to do. Whilst being inspired by this element of research, this dissertation hopes to expand on the previous study by also looking into the phenomenon of queer solidarity and how this interplays with identity and activism.

### **1.3 Queer Solidarity**

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<sup>40</sup> LaSala and Revere, "It Would Have Been Impossible Before", 427.

<sup>41</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, "LGBT activism in Estonia", 307.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Uibo, *And I don't know who we really are to each other*, p. 94.

This dissertation also makes reference to the idea of ‘queer solidarity’, the definition of which is just as broad and fluid as the definition of queer itself. Generally, ‘solidarity refers to networks of social relationships that involve mutual dependencies, responsibilities, and entitlements within a defined group of people or a community’.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the term ‘queer solidarity’ shares a similar sentiment whereby LGBT+ organisations experience these relationships within their own community. The term can also be used to describe a shared sense of community with other marginalised groups outside of the LGBT+ sphere. Due to the extensive nature of the term, this research looks at three instances of what queer solidarity can be labelled as in accordance with the Estonian context. These are: solidarity between different LGBT+ groups (for example a trans organisation working with a lesbian organisation), transnational solidarity (LGBT+ people/organisations from different countries working together) and finally cross-issue solidarity, whereby LGBT+ groups aid and work together with other organisations out with the LGBT+ sphere, such as environmental or human rights bodies. These categories were selected by myself as most appropriate to the context I was working in, however they are not Estonia-specific, and rather there are many examples of these three instances within queer communities across the globe.

Solidarity between different ‘factions’ of the LGBT+ community was most prolific during the early decades of the gay rights movement, when large, official meetings were difficult – and often illegal – to conduct. This persecution of queer people at the time meant that it was almost impossible to form a wide LGBT+ community, and thus most queer groups were small and orientated to one specific sexuality or identity. A key example of solidarity between different LGBT+ groups was seen between gay men and lesbian women who – although essentially being the sexual opposite of each other – often stuck together because of their ‘shared experiences of transgressive sexuality’.<sup>45</sup> Although often having their own separate groups, during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, it was lesbian groups who most often stepped up to help both the queer victims of the disease and wider society. When gay men had a mass exodus from donating blood during the crisis, lesbian organised ‘Blood Sisters’ groups

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<sup>44</sup> Johan J. De Deken et al., “Social Solidarity”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Pensions and Retirement Income*, ed. by Gordon L. Clark et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 142

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Wilkinson et al., “Solidarity beyond Sexuality: The Personal Communities of Gay Men”, *Sociology*, 46.6, 2012, 1162.

appeared en masse to donate blood to help AIDS victims and other patients alike.<sup>46</sup> The idea of queer solidarity between different groups was most present in Estonia during the 1990s, when – as argued by Põldsam and Arumetsa – the smaller queer communities were loosely linked together by lesbian organisations.<sup>47</sup> Whilst this type of queer solidarity became less prevalent as wider, more inclusive LGBT+ organisations began to form, it is still important to consider within LGBT+ activism today.

Transnational queer solidarity appeared a little later than cross-community solidarity and was predominantly founded once LGBT+ organisations were able to establish themselves in their home countries. A prime example of transnational queer solidarity was seen after the dissolution of the Soviet Union between the post-Soviet states and the so called ‘West’. Although this solidarity at the time aimed to facilitate the push for LGBT+ rights in the former Soviet states in a manner that has been described as ‘paternalistic’, contemporary movements push for a ‘deconstructing’ of Western hegemony within the global LGBT+ community.<sup>48</sup> More recently in Estonia, transnational queer solidarity has taken form in the concept of Baltic Pride, which sees collaboration between the three Baltic States in hosting annual pride events.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it is clear to see that within contemporary context, transnational queer solidarity has moved away from Western dominance over former Soviet states, and towards said states working together in a more local setting.

Unlike both cross-group and transnational queer solidarity, which have evolved in nature over the years, the final aspect of queer solidarity that this research looks at – cross-issue solidarity – has remained relatively unchanged. Whilst cross-issue solidarity is often dependent on what issues are present within a region, there have been topics that have always been at the forefront globally, primarily human rights and environmental concerns.<sup>50</sup> In Estonia specifically, cross-issue solidarity has historically focused on collaboration between LGBT+ and feminist groups, which Tiindenberga and Allaste have argued is a joint effort to ‘dismantle the

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<sup>46</sup> Beth Hutchison, “Lesbian Blood Drives as Community-Building Activism in the 1980s”, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 19.1, 2015, 117-118.

<sup>47</sup> Põldsam and Arumetsa, “Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia”, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Wiedlack, Dmytryk and Syaivo, “Introduction to Fucking Solidarity”, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Tiindenberga and Allaste, “LGBT activism in Estonia”, 318.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Wilkinson et al., “Solidarity beyond Sexuality”, 1167.

patriarchy’, since both groups object to patriarchal ideals.<sup>51</sup> Within my own research I expect to find a continuation of this trend, as well as evidence of LGBT+/environmentalism solidarity, as globally there has been an increase in collaboration between these groups.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, whilst there is extensive literature on LGBT+ activism and identity, research surrounding the phenomena in modern day Estonia is limited. Whilst both LaSala and Revere’s and Tiidenberg and Allaste’s works do well to explore the complications surrounding the activist identity and the potential blockers that stop Estonian LGBT+ members from identifying with the activist label, both contain data that is over a decade old, which – considering the recent improvements to LGBT+ rights in Estonia – means that some of their data is outdated. Whilst Uilo’s research is contemporary, LGBT+ activism is not the main focus of their work, and thus although their research is more current and prioritises an Estonian perspective over a Western one, it does not provide much extension to what is already present in the field. Thus, this dissertation aims to contribute to the current literature by focusing on the contemporary period and the current notions surrounding same-sex marriage which – considering the time frame – was never mentioned in previous literature. Aside from updating the field, this dissertation will also aim to take the notion of queer solidarity and discuss if and how it applies to the Estonian LGBT+ scene.

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<sup>51</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, “LGBT activism in Estonia”, 321.

<sup>52</sup> Lorraine Elliot, “History of the environmental movement”, *Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/environmentalism/History-of-the-environmental-movement>> [Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023].

## Chapter 2: Context and Historical Background

### 2.1 Russian Imperial Rule

Before delving into the methodology used in this thesis, it is important to explore the history of queer communities and their rights within Estonia, in order to better understand the situation in which the LGBT+ organisations stand today. The history of Estonia is complex, not least because of its near constant occupation between Russian imperial, Soviet, and Nazi forces. In this section I will walk through the history of LGBT+ rights in Estonia, beginning with their brief independence after the fall of the Russian Empire and ending with the current situation. Whilst this time period is broad and multifaceted, viewing it through an LGBT+ lens and focusing on moments that were key regarding queer rights, will allow this chapter to explore key events in the past 150 years of Estonian history, and the impact that these had on the LGBT+ population. This journey will allow for the greater understanding of the context that this research is placed in, and will help highlight a few of the several struggles that Estonian LGBT+ organisations face when operating.

Unlike their Baltic neighbours, Estonia was one of the first countries in Europe to legalise male homosexual practices, doing so during their brief period of independence in the interwar period.<sup>53</sup> Although not all forms of homosexuality were banned during Russian imperial rule, sodomy was outlawed by the 1845 Criminal Code, and remained illegal until the fall of the empire in 1917.<sup>54</sup> The fact that only sodomy was banned – and not all male

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<sup>53</sup> Dan Healy, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 175.

<sup>54</sup> Laura Engelstein, "Soviet Policy Toward Male Homosexuality: Its Origins and Historical Roots", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 29.2/3, 1995, 157.

homosexual acts – suggests that there were ways for gay men to avoid persecution, yet they would have undoubtedly still been seen as pariahs in society. According to Simon Karlinsky, homosexuality was seen by the poorer classes as a product of upper-class decadence and thus believed to not exist amongst the peasants and workers.<sup>55</sup> This is reflected within Estonian society at the time, where homosexuality was seen as a characteristic of upper classes and foreigners.<sup>56</sup> At this time Baltic Germans made up the majority of the nobility based in Estonia, and were believed to be the harbourers of homosexual activity, meaning that for the Estonian peasant classes, homosexuality was something non-existent within ethnic Estonians.<sup>57</sup> This idea was further promoted by the fact that any literature produced on homosexuality in Estonia during this period was written in either German or Russian, meaning that it ‘remained unattainable because of the language barrier.’<sup>58</sup> Thus, it can be understood that the denial of homosexual existence by Estonians at the time was primarily down to lack of visibility in Estonian-language media.

It is also important to note that at this time, ‘lesbianism was not a crime in tsarist law,’ or – in more accurate terms – unspoken of in both legislation and by general society.<sup>59</sup> This was not to say that lesbianism was accepted or even tolerated in European societies, but rather ‘unpublicised’, with officials fearing that any legislative move to ban lesbianism would draw attention to the sexuality, and encourage other women to engage in homosexual practice.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, whilst they were unaccepted by society lesbians and women partaking in same-sex sexual activity – unlike their male counterparts – were never persecuted in legislature by the Russian Empire on the Estonian land that it ruled over. Moving from sexuality and onto

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<sup>55</sup> Simon Karlinsky, “Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution”, in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. by Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr., (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 353.

<sup>56</sup> Rebeka Põldsam “Otsides kvääre lugusid sõdadevahelise Eesti ajakirjandusest: Eugeenika rollist homoseksuaalsust ja transsoolisust puudutavates aruteludes” *Mäetagused*, 76, 2020, 96.

<sup>57</sup> Heldur Palli, “Parish Registers and Revisions: Research Strategies in Estonian Historical Demography and Agrarian History”, *Social Science History*, 7.3, 1983, 291.

<sup>58</sup> Teet Veispak, “Homosexuality in Estonia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Ideological and Juridical Aspects”, in *Sexual Minorities and Society: the Changing Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. Papers presented to the international conference in Tallinn May 28-30, 1990*, ed. by Udo Parikas and Teet Veispak, (Tallinn: Institute of History, 1991), pp. 106-107.

<sup>59</sup> Laura Engelstein, “Soviet Policy Toward Male Homosexuality”, 157.

<sup>60</sup> Caroline Derry, “Lesbianism and the criminal law of England and Wales”, *The Open University: Open Learn*, <<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/law/lesbianism-and-the-criminal-law-england-and-wales>> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2023].

gender identity, the situation is even more complicated. During Russia's first colonial rule over Estonia, terms such as 'transsooline' (transgender) did not exist in the Estonian language, and thus – whilst transgender people as we would define them today undoubtedly existed – there is no written record of them.<sup>61</sup> In his work on the historical existence of gender non-confirming people in Estonia, Andreas Kalkun explains the “vaikus” (silence) surrounding these people as a product of Estonian peasant culture that dated back to the Swedish colonial rule, where they were allowed to exist because they were not seen as a threat to heteronormative gender roles.<sup>62</sup> This is the first of several examples within the history of the LGBT+ community in Estonia that we see the different sexualities and gender identities covered by the acronym being treated differently, and is one of the reasons that explains why – for the majority of Estonia's history – a united LGBT+ community has not been present.

## **2.2 Interwar Period**

Regarding male homosexuality, the situation rapidly changed in the interwar period, when Estonia had its first short-lived taste of independence, and the newfound Estonian government reversed the ban on sodomy, essentially legalising all homosexual activity within the country.<sup>63</sup> This move set Estonia apart from its neighbours at the time, especially from their fellow Baltic states, who – despite also achieving independence – retained the sodomy ban from the previous Russian Empire rule.<sup>64</sup> However, whilst the law changed to legalise homosexual activity, it should be noted that the opinions of society did not change as quickly, leading to people being punished for homosexual behaviour. A key example of this is given by Põldsam, who notes the mention in newspapers of soldiers who had been caught having homosexual relations, and how this continued to get them into trouble, regardless of the recent change in law.<sup>65</sup> This is due to the fact that – as argued by Teet Veispak – Estonia did not legalise homosexuality out of empathy with queer people, but rather as part of an

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<sup>61</sup> Rebeka Põldsam “Otsides kvääre lugusid sõdadevahelise Eesti ajakirjandusest”, 95.

<sup>62</sup> Andreas Kalkun, “Naiselikkus Mehelikkus ja Seksuaalsus Talupojakultuuris” in *Kapikused Valla: Arutlusi Homo-, Bi- ja Transseksuaalsusest* ed. by Brigitta Davidjants, (Tallinn: Eesti Gei Noored, 2010), pp. 19-22.

<sup>63</sup> Teet Veispak, “Homosexuality in Estonia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”, p. 108.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Rebeka Põldsam, “The representations of homosexuality in Estonian media from 1920ies and 30ies”, *Re-Writing the Past: the LGBT+ history of the Baltics. Abstracts*, <<https://www.lgbt.ee/post/re-writing-the-past-abstracts>> [Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023].

attempt to democratise the entire country as quick as possible.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, it is clear to understand why people continued to display homophobic behaviour, as the reforms to legalise male homosexuality had not been supported by the general public, but rather imposed from above.

During this brief period of independence there were also mentions in media of people who we would today consider transgender, however the language had once again not been developed to describe them, with the term 'meesnaiset' (translating to man-woman) being used in newspapers for the first time.<sup>67</sup> Whilst 'meesnaiset' was used to describe people who we would now regard as transgender women, there were several terms in Estonian to describe people who were assigned female at birth but wore traditionally male clothing, including 'naismees' and 'naispoiss'.<sup>68</sup> What complicated these terms even further is that they could be applied to both lesbians and transgender men, as whilst the later would wear men's clothing to fit into their correct gender, this term was also used to describe cisgender lesbians who would dress as men – whilst still identifying as women – as a way to disguise themselves and marry other women.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, it is evident that although language was finally being created to discuss the existence of transpeople, the understanding of gender non-conformation and its links to both sexuality and gender identity was still incredibly limited. Evidently – although finally being mentioned - discussions of gender non-conforming people at the time were still incredibly marginalised and confused, with Põldsam noting that articles regarding trans people at the time were either about the crimes they committed, or speculation on their gender and sexuality.<sup>70</sup> Thus, it is clear to see that even though legislation against queer people decreased in the interwar period, the perception of them as a whole was confused. Whilst in the countryside gender non-conforming people were left in peace, when they were mentioned in the media it was usually for spectacle and not genuine representation.

### **2.3 Soviet Annexation and Stalinism**

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<sup>66</sup> Teet Veispak, "Homosexuality in Estonia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century", p. 108.

<sup>67</sup> Rebeka Põldsam "Otsides kvääre lugusid sõdadevahelise Eesti ajakirjandusest", 95.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

After the annexation of Estonia in 1940 by the Soviet Union (and the following 1944 re-occupation after the Nazi invasion), LGBT+ people in Estonia were once again faced with legislation restricting their freedoms and criminalising their identity. The creation of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) saw the 1926 Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Criminal Code being implemented across the country, which – although having no laws explicitly against lesbianism – banned sexual relations between men. Whilst the original 1926 Criminal Code had not banned male homosexuality, Article 154a (later known as Article 121) was introduced by Stalin in 1934, meaning that when Estonia was annexed, this rule now applied to their people also.<sup>71</sup> This article outlawed sodomy (but not lesbianism) and made it punishable by a minimum of three – and up to five – years of hard labour in the GULAG system, which – considering the brutal conditions of some of the camps – proved to be incredibly harsh punishment.<sup>72</sup>

#### **2.4 Khrushchev Era and The Thaw**

After the death of Stalin in 1956, the Soviet Union experienced a thaw in policy that saw many of the Stalinist era laws reversed or reduced in severity. It also saw – from 1960 to 1961 – the changing of the criminal codes in all Soviet Socialist Republics, meaning that the ESSR now had its own penal code, and was not forced to follow that of the RSFSR.<sup>73</sup> The new code had to follow enforced guidelines set out by Moscow, meaning that sodomy was still to remain illegal, but the punishments given for committing the crime could be negotiated. It is once again at this point that Estonia’s liberalism in regards to homosexuality appears, with the Penal Code in the ESSR carrying one of the lowest sentences for sodomy cases, at a maximum sentence of only two years, which is considerably less than their neighbour Latvia, who maintained the five-year maximum penalty.<sup>74</sup> Thus, it is clear to see that even when forcibly annexed, Estonia was still able to maintain a level of open-mindedness that – although repressed by the ruling power – was made visible in legislation.

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<sup>71</sup> Simon Karlinsky, “Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture”, p. 361.

<sup>72</sup> Dan Healy, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, p. 167.

<sup>73</sup> Uladzimir Valodzin, “Criminal Prosecution of Homosexuals in the Soviet Union (1946-1991): Numbers and Discourses”, *EUI Working Papers HEC*, 2020, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Dan Healy, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, p. 177.

However, whilst slight improvements were made regarding legislation involving queer men, the post-Stalinist period marked the beginning of the official persecution against lesbians. Unlike sodomy – which was seen as a criminal activity – lesbianism was portrayed as a mental illness that was only curable through psychotherapy, with it being accompanied by the fear that it was harder to spot, as no one would ever question signs of affection between two women the same way that they would if it was two men.<sup>75</sup> If a woman was caught engaging in homosexual acts, she faced the possibility of what is now recognised as medical conversion therapy, and would often be force-fed ‘libido-deadening’ medication.<sup>76</sup> The difference between the treatment of gay men and lesbians in the ESSR would suggest that gender stereotypes had a vital role to play in the perception of homosexuality. With men (who held sexual agency) it was a choice that was made and thus treated like a crime, whereas women (who were perceived as holding no sexual agency) were only attracted to lesbianism because of a mental deficiency which could – of course – be aided by the intervention of men. Whilst the laws against sodomy allowed for regional flexibility, the medical persecution against lesbians was never written into legislation, meaning that – if they wished to do so – the officials in charge of the ESSR could continue their approach of being more tolerant of queer activity than the other Soviet Socialist Republics.

## **2.5 Perestroika and Glasnost**

The late Brezhnev years into Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika era welcomed massive change for both Estonia and its LGBT+ population. The newfound freedom given to the country to express their political discontent meant that Estonia was able to stage mass protests against the Soviet Union for the first time since the illegal occupation took place. For example, protests over the ‘Phosphorite War’ were seen as the first time in decades that Estonians gathered en masse to stand against the Soviet Union and to protect their country.<sup>77</sup> Whilst the environmental nature of these protests acted as a blanket to allow demonstrators to test out the newly declared openness within the ESSR, they were still undoubtedly political in nature, as the actions they were protesting against were undertaken

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<sup>75</sup> Boris Danielbek, *Половые извращения и уголовная ответственность: Учебное пособие*, (Volgograd: Research Institute of Higher School of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR, 1972), p. 104.

<sup>76</sup> Dan Healy, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, p. 107.

<sup>77</sup> Henri Vogt, *Between Utopia and disillusionment: a narrative of the political transformation in Eastern Europe*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), pp. 21-22.

by the political elite in Moscow, and not local authorities. These protests helped kick-start a four-year long movement that pushed for greater Estonian autonomy, and eventual independence.

Just as this era gave Estonia the ability to petition for its independence, it also gave the LGBT+ people living in the country greater visibility than they had previously had. The 'openness' in discussion that came with glasnost meant that Estonian media began discussing the LGBT+ community and issues that they faced.<sup>78</sup> Due to the timing of glasnost and the fact that it had not been allowed to be discussed before, many of the conversations centring the queer community focused on the AIDS pandemic, even though Estonia did not record its first AIDS case until 1988, well after the disease had caused widespread hysteria in the West.<sup>79</sup> Although the level of panic in Estonia surrounding AIDS did not reach the peak that it had in the West, the negative media attention still had damning effects on the queer community, and – according to LGBT+ activists at the time – was one of the key arguments used against the community in the debates surrounding the decriminalisation of homosexuality.<sup>80</sup>

However, whilst this sudden interest by the media in queer people weaponised the AIDS pandemic against them, newspapers and magazines also proved a vessel that could be used for good, and for the first time LGBT+ people themselves were given a platform to have their works published; for example, Lilian Kotter, who published articles defending gay rights.<sup>81</sup> Greater presence in the media also afforded queer people the chance to begin creating groups and organisations tailored to their sexual and gender identities. The growth in cooperation between queer individuals began a little before the perestroika era, when – in the 1970s – it became increasingly common for lesbians and gay men to marry, in order to protect one another from legal and medical persecution.<sup>82</sup> These marriages of convenience

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<sup>78</sup> Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa, "Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia", 4.

<sup>79</sup> Kaja-Triin Laisaar et al., "Estonia at the Threshold of the Fourth Decade of the AIDS Era in Europe", *AIDS Research and Human Retroviruses*, 27.8, 2011, 843.

<sup>80</sup> Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa, "Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia", 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Dan Healy, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, p. 113.

were small scale however, and were not comparable to the scale of LGBT+ co-operation within organisations that we see today. Moving into the perestroika era, the greater freedom of press and the ability to gather in larger groups opened up new opportunities for queer people to coordinate the creation of LGBT+ specific organisations. After analysing the archives of some of Estonia's first queer organisations, Taavi Koppel concluded that the beginning of each group came from a newspaper advert, and that the communities often built themselves from there.<sup>83</sup> Thus, it is clear to see the massive improvement that was made to the lives of LGBT+ people during the perestroika and glasnost era, as they finally became visible to the public (this was particularly true of lesbians and transpeople), and also were able to harness new media freedom to finally organise into the LGBT+ organisations that we are now familiar with today.

However, it is important to remember that even in this period of great change and openness, male homosexuality remained criminalised, and lesbianism was still seen as a medical condition akin to female hysteria. From 1985 to 1990, 23 men in the ESSR were prosecuted for homosexual relations, a number comparable to those arrested over 5-year periods from the 1960s and 1970s, thus showing that very little change had occurred when regarding legislation of homosexual activity.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, whilst this period saw great change in the emergence of LGBT+ organisations – due to the fact that they were allowed to operate for the first time without immediate fear of being shut down – the discrimination that gays and lesbians faced because of their sexuality still remained the same.

## **2.6 Independent Estonia**

After Estonia restored its independence in 1991, homosexuality was finally legalised in 1992, and the LGBT+ organisations in the country were finally able to flourish.<sup>85</sup> Once again proving that Estonia was the trailblazer of the Baltic region when it came to LGBT+ rights, the first queer organisation to be formed in the region was the Estonian Lesbian Union (later

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<sup>83</sup> Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa, "Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia", 3.

<sup>84</sup> Uladzimir Valodzin, "Criminal Prosecution of Homosexuals in the Soviet Union (1946-1991)", 7-11.

<sup>85</sup> Heidi Kurvinen, "Homosexual Representations in Estonian Printed Media during the Late 1980s and Early 1990s", in *Beyond the Pink Curtain: Everyday life of LGBT people in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Judit Takács and Roman Kuhar, (Ljubljana: Mirovni Institut, 2007), pp. 291.

changed to LesBi Union to also include bisexual women).<sup>86</sup> Other groups – such as the Estonian Gay League and the transgender organisation Gendy – joined soon after, with Turovski and Izmailova arguing that it was only in the early noughties that LGBT+ groups were able to solidify themselves within Estonian society.<sup>87 88</sup> This was due to the fact that the 1990s were spent undergoing economic and political transitions to solidify Estonia into the democratic, capitalist country that it aimed to be, and although queer people were now given more freedom, their dialogue was not one that was prioritised at this time.

With the Estonian Parliament recently passing its gay marriage bill – allowing same-sex couples equal marriage and adoption rights – the future of LGBT+ rights in Estonia is looking very positive. Whilst the issues surrounding the implementation of the previous Registered Partnership Act drew criticism from both academia and the participants interviews for this thesis, the rapid pace in which the same-sex marriage bill was passed suggests that this bill will be far more successful.<sup>89</sup> However, whilst LGBT+ rights in Estonia are very quickly improving, that is not to say they are perfect, and in reality (as with all countries) there is still room for growth. According to the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe), Estonia ranks 17<sup>th</sup> out of the 27 EU countries regarding LGBT+ rights, which – although placing it above the other Baltic states – is far lower than its Nordic neighbour, with Finland ranking 5<sup>th</sup>.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, whilst Estonia's policy makers have attempted to re-define the country's public image as more Nordic they continue to remain more aligned with the Baltics when regarding the civil liberties of queer people, which can be seen in the IGLA-Europe's Rainbow Europe ranking.<sup>91 92</sup> These scores

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<sup>86</sup> Mattias Turovski and Züleyxa Izmailova, "A Cliffhanger for LGBT+ Rights in Estonia", *Green European Journal*, 2021, 1.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Stella Borthwick, "LGBT+ aktivism 1990ndatel - intervjuu Eesti Gayliidu eestvedaja Aare Raudsepaga", *Eesti LGBT Ajalooveeb*, <<https://tlulgbt.wixsite.com/ajalooveeb/post/lgbt-aktivism-1990ndatel-intervjuu-eesti-gayliidu-asutaja-aare-raudsepaga?fbclid=IwAR0QcD5UcNc2wqLjGS5IIBed8vKZakkd1YFB0MAT3XTQ1NGG-ls9FgHVpBM>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023].

<sup>89</sup> Mattias Turovski and Züleyxa Izmailova, "A Cliffhanger for LGBT+ Rights in Estonia", *Green European Journal*, June 2021, 3-4.

<sup>90</sup> European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, "Country Ranking", *Rainbow Europe*, <<http://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking#eu>> [Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023].

<sup>91</sup> Mikko Lagerspetz, "How Many Nordic Countries?: Possibilities and Limits of Geopolitical Identity Construction", *Cooperation and Conflict*, 38.1, 2003, 49.

<sup>92</sup> ILGA-Europe, "Country Ranking", *Rainbow Europe*, <<https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

were given at the start of 2023, before Estonia's legalisation of same-sex marriage on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2023. However, because the score is determined from 73 different criteria, Estonia gaining a few additional criteria from the same-sex marriage bill will not drastically change their score, and they will still be around at least 25% below Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland. In this ranking, Estonia scores 36%, compared to other Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden, who score 70% and 68% respectively.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, with Estonia's recent continued consolidation of LGBT+ rights, there is every chance it could continue to progress upwards in the ranking.

Although there has been stagnation in regards to the progression of LGBT+ rights in Estonia, the picture concerning LGBT+ organisations could not be more different, with the existence of said groups being far more fluid and open to change. This is best exemplified in the fact that the Estonian Lesbian Union (the first queer organisation to exist in independent Estonia) has ceased to exist as of present, nor do either of the two groups who filled the gap left by the Estonian Lesbian Union when they disbanded – LesBi Union and Mea Culpa – continue operations.<sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup> This issue is not one just relegated to lesbian/sapphic organisations however, with Michael LaSala and Elyse Revere noting that the Estonian Gay League collapsed after being 'largely unsuccessful', and that by the early 2010s there were no 'consistently active' LGBT+ organisations in Estonia.<sup>96</sup> The lack of longevity when it comes to the Estonian LGBT+ organisations of the past twenty years is a complex topic and often explained through many different phenomena by activists and researchers alike. One explanation given by Tiidenberg and Allaste is the lack of funding that these groups receive, which in turn demotivates the organisers and leads to the disbanding of groups.<sup>97</sup> This would have been a very probable explanation for LGBT+ organisations who disbanded in the late noughties, considering Estonia (alongside the rest of Europe) was hit very badly by the financial crisis and thus would be severely lacking in the ability to fund NGOs and political organisations. This combined with the fact that so many LGBT+ groups blossomed from the freedom that

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> MTÜ MeaCulpa, "Naisorganisatsioonid", *gay.ee*, <<http://gay.ee/index.php?id=382>>, accessed via Wayback Machine, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20060106161709/http://www.gay.ee/?id=212&lang=est>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023].

<sup>95</sup> Katrin Tiidenberg and Airi-Alina Allaste, "LGBT activism in Estonia", 309.

<sup>96</sup> Michael C. LaSala and Elyse J. Revere, "'It Would Have Been Impossible Before': Reflections on Current Gay Life in Estonia", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58.3, 428.

<sup>97</sup> Katrin Tiidenberg and Airi-Alina Allaste, "LGBT activism in Estonia", 309.

independence and the liberal ideas of the new millennium brought meant that queer organisations faced fierce competition when it came to resources and funding, meaning that several often went without. Other reasons for the mass turnover of LGBT+ organisations in the early 2000s was their inability to form a united front, which is best highlighted from various failed attempted to form cooperation between gays and lesbians, such as the Estonian Gay and Lesbian Association. This group – along with several others – struggled to succeed because of the lack of women drawn to them, and thus ended up as other male-dominated organisations.<sup>98</sup> This individualist nature of the different factions of the LGBT+ community combined with the lack of funding in the area ensured an ongoing cycle of new groups being created, only to disband shortly after.

Regarding the LGBT+ scene in Estonia today, the main difference from the early 2000s is that there are now queer organisations that are inclusive of all sexualities and genders, and who have also now existed for an extensive period of time, thus breaking the standard that LGBT+ groups in Estonia are often short lived. Eesti LGBT Ühing (Estonian LGBT Association) is a key example of this, having existed for over 15 years and providing community and support for all members of the Estonian queer community, including trans and non-binary people.<sup>99</sup> Another example is the Festheart film festival – supported by the LGBT NGO SevenBow – which has run every year since 2017 and showcases LGBT+ films from across the globe, in both Rakvere and Tartu.<sup>100</sup> The continued existence of these organisations – plus the creation of other intersectional groups such as Peemoti Keskus and Q-Space – suggests that the LGBT+ scene in Estonia has evolved, and that an overarching queer community identity has begun to form.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

By exploring the history of Estonia through milestones regarding LGBT+ rights, it is clear to see just how far the country has come since its first colonisation by the Russian Empire. Although tracing the progress of queer rights and activism is often a difficult task – due to the lack of visibility of LGBT+ people in historical discourse – it is evident that Estonia, when

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<sup>98</sup> MTÜ Eesti Gayliit, “Segaorganisatsioonid”, *gay.ee*, <<http://gay.ee/index.php?id=384>> , accessed via Wayback Machine, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20051217185501/http://gay.ee:80/index.php?id=384>> [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2023].

<sup>99</sup> “Eesti LGBT Ühingu teetähised”, *Eesti LGBT Ühing*, <<https://www.lgbt.ee/ajalugu>> [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2023].

<sup>100</sup> “Meist”, *Festheart: LGBT+ Film Festival Estonia*, <<https://festheart.ee/meist/>> [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2023].

regarding LGBT+ rights, has always been ahead of its neighbours. In the early twentieth century Estonia showcased liberal views towards queer people when it decriminalised sodomy after gaining its first brief period of independence, and even when facing decades of occupation by the Soviet Union, the country was able – when given the chance – to remain more liberal in this regard, as was seen by the lower sentence for sodomy convictions. Although Estonia has now legalised same-sex marriage, and is therefore still more progressive than its Baltic neighbours, there is still room for improvement within the country, especially regarding lesser addressed issues such as transgender rights. Regarding the main focus of this dissertation, LGBT+ organisations in Estonia have blossomed from complete non-existence during the Soviet Union to having multiple long-lasting, united groups today. Although these groups no doubt exist, this thesis will aim to explore their identification with the activist label, and how they view the situation of their community within Estonia today.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### **3.1 Research Design**

The research conducted for this dissertation used qualitative data gathering in the form of semi-structured interviews with members of LGBT+ organisations in Estonia. In these interviews participants were asked questions referring to their identity with the ‘activist’ label, and also for their opinions on how their respective LGBT+ organisations operate, and how said organisations are viewed by both the government and public. As a conclusion to the interviews the participants were also asked to share their thoughts on what their hopes are for LGBT+ rights in the future, and what they would like the government to introduce in terms of policy. With questions being semi-structured the participants were given space to expand on areas they felt important, and therefore some topics that were not originally asked about - such as international politics and comparison to other countries – were also discussed.

In addition to analysing data from semi-structured interviews, the research also included analysis of Estonian legislation and policy papers and reports produced by organisations such as ILGA-Europe, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (EUAFR), and Transgender Europe. Data from these reports was used alongside participant answers to

compare the individual experience of the participant to the wider trend within the country. Whilst all interviewee responses were valid in representing their experience, the use of outside data showcased how many of their individual experiences were in line with nationwide trends, thus helping increase the validity of the research.

As discussed in previous chapters, the research surrounding LGBT+ organisations in Estonia is limited, and any literature touching upon their association with the activist label even more so. The three papers currently published on the topic are – although insightful – outdated in their findings, as the latest publication (Tiidenberg and Allaste’s paper) uses data gathered over ten years ago.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, the research for this paper aims to add to the database and update conclusions made over the past thirty years. This research will also be the first work to explore the presence of queer solidarity within Estonian LGBT+ organisations, and whether this phenomenon exists between queer organisations and other rights groups.

This thesis uses a small-n research design for its data collection, in the form of semi-structured interviews. These interviews contained ten set questions under three main topics: Identification with the activist label, queer solidarity, and assessment of the current political and social situation in Estonia. Interviews were chosen as the research method for the paper for several reasons. Firstly, all three previous works written on the subject used interviews as their main form of data collection, and in order to expand this already researched topic and allow for cross-comparison from the prior research, it was deemed that the research method should be similar to previous papers. Secondly, as LGBT+ people are considered a protected group, discussion involving their identity and experiences can be considered sensitive information. This is particularly true in the sense that if data gathering was conducted improperly and anonymity was breached, the participants could face discrimination because of their sexuality and/or gender identity. As argued by Laura Dempsey, when researching sensitive topics such as LGBT+ issues, interviews are the ideal method of data collection, as they provide a safe space for participants to share their stories,

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<sup>101</sup> As mentioned in the Literature Review, the three articles discussing LGBT+ organisations in Estonia since the 1990s are: Tiidenberg and Allaste’s, “LGBT activism in Estonia: Identities, enactment and perceptions of LGBT people”, Põldsam and Arumetsa’s “Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia”, and LaSala and Revere’s ““It Would Have Been Impossible Before:” Reflections on Current Gay Life in Estonia”.

which may not occur if presented in focus group or survey-based research.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the nature of the research and the comfort of the participant also played a role in deciding the research method used. Finally, considering the population of Estonia sits at around 1.3 million, the LGBT+ population of the country is also considerably small, and thus larger forms of data gathering such as surveys and focus groups would have been difficult to conduct considering the number of people needed for these methods in order to produce a representative result. Whilst small-n studies are generally seen as 'less stable' than large-n studies, focusing on a small number of participants will allow them far more space to expand on their thoughts and therefore often produce more in-depth research.<sup>103</sup> Whilst the results of this interview research do not claim to be representative of all LGBT+ people living in Estonia, interviews allowed for an in-depth snapshot into the every-day lives of queer people, and explored their own personal identification with the 'activist' label. The comparison of these results with data collected by ILGA-Europe, EUAFR and Transgender Europe will highlight whether or not the opinions and experiences discussed by interview participants are in line with both nationwide and European-wide trends.

## **3.2 Interviews**

### **3.2.1 Participants and Fieldwork**

The target group for the interviews were members of the LGBT+ community who were active in at least one queer organisation. Other than being over the age of 18 (for ethical purposes), no other age limit was set for recruiting participants. The main reason for this was the already small size of the LGBT+ community in Estonia, but it was also decided that implementing an age bracket would negatively impact the representation of the queer community within the data collection. Due to ethical risk associated with my research, identifying data such as age was not recorded, and thus whilst all participants confirmed to being over 18, no data was gathered in reference to their exact age. Whilst all participants were residing in Estonia and participating in these organisations, not all were Estonian by

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<sup>102</sup> Laura Dempsey et al., "Sensitive Interviewing in Qualitative Methods", *Research in Nursing and Health*, 39.6, 2016, 480.

<sup>103</sup> John Gerring and Craig Thomas, "Comparability: A Key Issue in Research Design", *The Committee on Concept and Methods Working Paper Series*, 4 (October), 2005, 11.

nationality. The decision was made to not discriminate against non-citizens, as the diversity of the LGBT+ community allowed for discussions surrounding activism to be particularly nuanced, particularly when participants compared the situation in Estonia to that of their home country. Once again – due to ethical constraints – the nationality of participants was not recorded, however some participants mentioned in their interviews their non-Estonian country of origin. Whilst this information was redacted in the official transcriptions of the data, the mention of them being non-Estonian in general was preserved, as it was deemed worthy for discussion and does not breach participant anonymity. Therefore, this paper does not claim to speak for all LGBT+ Estonian people, but rather focuses on delivering a snapshot of the experiences of queer people living in Estonia, regardless of their nationality.

It is also important to note that participants were recruited through Estonian LGBT+ organisations, namely FestHeart, Q-Space and Peemoti Keskus. However due to the small size of the LGBT+ population in the country, several interviewees participated in events held by other organisations – such as Tartu LGBT and Eesti LGBT Ühing – as well. The decision to recruit through these organisations was made as it was deemed the safest way to recruit participants, as it would minimise any harassment risk for the recruiter. As LGBT+ people are considered a vulnerable group, contacting them initially through an organisation would be most comfortable, and would allow for me to prove myself as a legitimate researcher. However, whilst recruiting through organisations proved to be the safest option for both researcher and participant, it also presented some bias in participant selection that deserves discussion.

Firstly, the majority of organisations contacted were based in either Tallinn, Tartu, or Narva, the three most populous cities/towns in Estonia. Out of the organisations who sent forward participants to be interviewed, only one – FestHeart – was located in a smaller town (Rakvere). Whilst this does not guarantee that all participants interviewed were from these three municipalities, all lived within or near to these cities at the time of interview, thus meaning that the experience of LGBT+ people living in rural areas of Estonia has not been properly represented in this research. According to Nick McGlynn, queer people residing in rural areas face challenges that those in urban areas avoid and are far more likely to live a constricted and secretive life, thus meaning that they are unlikely to partake in activism or

view themselves as activists.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, this dissertation cannot claim to represent LGBT+ people from all areas of Estonia, and instead – due to the way in which participants were recruited – ended up focusing more on the urban experience of queer people living in Estonia.

Secondly, recruiting participants through LGBT+ organisations meant that several of the participants interviewed ended up being salient members of said organisations. Whilst this did not negate their importance to the study, it did mean that they participated in (and organised) more events than most, thus giving them greater opportunity to participate in activism and therefore identify as activists. Although this had potential to skew the research data, as is shown in the results section, the answers given by those in important positions within organisations roughly matched those given by participants less involved within the specific organisations.

### **3.2.2 Interview Design**

After participants were contacted through the named organisations, they were offered to arrange an interview time with the researcher. Interviews looked to be no more than 45 minutes long but could be ended at any time if the participant so wished. The location and time of the interview was set by the interviewee, which was decided based on research into sensitive topic interviewing, which suggested always giving agency to the participant regarding where and when interviews occurred.<sup>105</sup> Considering the interviews had the potential to involve sensitive and/or private information, it was of highest priority that the participants felt safe and comfortable when being interviewed. Due to this, interviews took place in LGBT+ ran centres and within University of Tartu buildings, whilst others were conducted online, both for participant safety and ease. As per the guidelines set out by the University of Glasgow ethics committee, the online interviews took place over Microsoft Teams, and all recordings and transcripts were kept in password locked folders on an encrypted device. All interviews took place in March 2023, and therefore information

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<sup>104</sup> Nick McGlynn, “Slippery geographies of the urban and the rural: Public sector LGBT equalities work in the shadow of the ‘Gay Capital’”, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 57, 2018, 66.

<sup>105</sup> Laura Dempsey et al., “Sensitive Interviewing in Qualitative Methods”, 481.

gathered is reflective only up until this time. This is important to remember considering the Estonian government passed a bill to legalise same-sex marriage in June 2023.

Before interviews were conducted, potential interviewees were sent Plain Language Statements (Appendix 3) and a copy of the Interview Schedule (Appendix 1), which outlined the general questions that the interview would be based around.<sup>106</sup> These documents were originally written in English by myself, but translated versions in both Estonian and Russian were offered to participants, as well as interpreters offered for both of these languages for when it came to the interviews. Although Estonian is the only official language of Estonia, Russian is a recognised minority language; 27.5% of Estonia's population are 'foreign origin', and from this percentage over 70% are of Russian origin.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, several of the organisations I contacted to recruit participants – such as Peemoti Keskus and Eesti LGBT Ühing – operate and offer services in Russian, alongside Estonian and English. Therefore, the decision was made to offer Russian translations and interpreter in addition to Estonian ones. However – when given the option – all participants decided to proceed in English and without an interpreter.

The interview questions in their entirety can be seen in Appendix 1, so I will not go into depth discussing all questions in this section, however I will outline the three main topics that the interview questions aimed to create discussion about. The first section looked to focus on the participants' definition of activism and asked whether or not they felt they identified with this label. The second section looked at the idea of queer solidarity and therefore asked participants questions about potential divisions in the LGBT+ community, and also about any co-operation between LGBT+ groups they were involved with and other rights-based groups such as feminist and human rights groups. Finally, the third section asked about the political and societal perception of LGBT+ groups (and their activism) in Estonia, and also encouraged participants to discuss how safe they felt within society and what the government could do to better their lives. This section aimed to link back to the focus on activism, as people who don't feel safe in the country – or those who feel that the government is already doing all they can to support them – would have less reason to

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<sup>106</sup> Please see Appendices 1 and 2 for Participant Information Sheet and Interview Schedule.

<sup>107</sup> Statistics Estonia: Population Census, "Native Origin", *Estonia Counts 2021*, <<https://rahvaloendus.ee/en/results/native-origin>> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2023].

participate in activism, either because they felt too unsafe to do so, or because they felt that no change was needed. Whilst the questions were organised into these three sections in the Interview Schedule, during the actual interviews some questions were raised at different times or skipped altogether, depending on answers already given by the participants. It should be noted that interviewees were able to refuse answers to questions that they did not feel comfortable with, and were also invited to raise any issues at the end of the set questions that they felt had not yet been addressed.

Whilst the meetings (both in-person and online) with the participants lasted between 30 to 50 minutes, the parts of interviews that were recorded for data collection were between 14 and 29 minutes long. All interviews were auto transcribed via recording mechanisms, however I was careful to check the transcriptions alongside the audio and fix any errors in the text. In some quotations from the interviews, square brackets ([ ]) have occasionally been used to make small grammatical edits to the text to improve comprehension.

### **3.2.3 Interviewees**

For data collection, the number of eventual interviewees totalled at four, out of a total of ten who were originally contacted. Whilst this number is disappointing considering the number of people who initially expressed interest, it is not an uncommon theme for researchers looking to collect data on LGBT+ people in Estonia. In their paper reflecting on queer life in Estonia LaSala and Revere aimed to interview thirty participants, but only ended up with a total of six interviewees.<sup>108</sup> On a similar note – although their research was more history based – Põldsam and Arumetsa interviewed five participants, and whilst Tiidenberg and Allaste managed to interview more – at a total of fifteen – this is still considered a small number compared to other qualitative based research, especially when regarding the fact that the researchers spent a year and a half conducting their studies.<sup>109</sup> <sup>110</sup> Considering my data gathering period was only a month long, and that this is my first experience of interviewing for the purpose of conducting an in-depth research piece, I do not think that my low number of participants makes my data redundant. However, with the

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<sup>108</sup> LaSala and Revere, “It Would Have Been Impossible Before”, 429.

<sup>109</sup> Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa, “Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia”, 13.

<sup>110</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, “LGBT activism in Estonia”, 312.

acknowledgement that four interviews are not substantial enough data to base this thesis on, I made the decision to expand my data collection to include content analysis of legislation and policy papers, the methods of which are explained below.

### **3.2.4 Ethical Considerations**

As previously outlined, ethical considerations were a priority of this study, considering the sensitivity of the data collected, and the potential vulnerability of the LGBT+ community. Ethical approval for this thesis was granted by both the University of Glasgow's Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Sciences (Appendix 4), and Jagiellonian University's Commission for Research Ethics for the Institute of European Studies (Appendix 5).

Data was placed into password protected documents that were then uploaded on an encrypted external hard drive. After submission of this dissertation the data will be stored for ten years and then destroyed, as per the University of Glasgow's guidelines. Based on these suggestions, data will be destroyed on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2033. For the extended period of storage, the information will be uploaded to *Enlighten: Research Data*, which the university recommend for long term data retention. Participants were informed of their rights to request the deletion of data at any time within this ten-year period should they wish to withdraw their consent. Any personal data that had been kept for communication purposes during the research period – such as participant email addresses and names – was destroyed upon completion of the thesis.

Regarding other information about participants, no information other than answers given in the interviews were collected. Aspects such names, gender, age, and nationality were not collected in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. In line with guidance from the University of Glasgow ethics committee – combined with the fact that LGBT+ people are considered a vulnerable group – it was important that no information that could be used to identify the participants was collected. Considering the LGBT+ population in Estonia is already small, the decision was made to collect no personal information in an attempt to make anonymity as secure as possible. Therefore, no conclusions can be made about how factors as gender and location could potentially impact the interviewees relationship with

activism. When quoting directly from the interviews, participants will be referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2 etc.

Finally, because my participants were from the LGBT+ community, extra considerations were put in place to ensure their wellbeing after the interviews had concluded. On their Participant Information Sheets interviewees were given the contact details to various LGBT+ and mental wellbeing support groups that could help them if any upset occurred during or after the interviews. It was made sure that the selection of groups included help that could be offered in Estonian, Russian and English, depending on the participants' preferences. Participants were also encouraged to contact myself or my supervisor if they had any concerns, and check-ins were also conducted with the participants after the interviews to make sure that they had no further questions or concerns. After the dissertation has been handed in and defended, participants will also be given the opportunity to read it, in order for them to see how their thoughts have been presented.

### **3.3 Legislation, Policy Paper, and Report Analysis**

As four interviews were not enough to base reliable research on, content analysis of the following legislation and reports was conducted to increase the validity of my research by helping compare the answers given in my interviews with other data gathered on the topic, as well as positioning said answers within larger nationwide and European-wide narratives. Analysis consisted of reading through the reports and picking out information pertinent to Estonia, as well as using the European-wide data to understand how Estonia's LGBT+ situation fits into the larger European picture.

#### **3.3.1 Legislation**

Legislation analysis was used to understand the legality of activism and mass gatherings in Estonia, as well as any restrictions in place for such events. For this both the Estonian Constitution (Section 47) and the Law Enforcement Act (Chapter 4, Subchapter 2) were examined to better understand the legal framework of activism within the country.

#### **3.3.2 Policy Papers and Reports**

For this analysis, works produced by three different organisations were used: ILGA-Europe, the EUFAR, and Transgender Europe. The EUFAR is an agency of the European Union, whilst ILGA-Europe and Transgender Europe are NGOs that are substantially funded by the EU. Both NGOs are also supported by organisations from across Europe, including LGBT+ organisations from Estonia such as Eesti LGBT Ühing. EUFAR's report titled "EU LGBTI Survey II: A long way to go for LGBTI Equality" as well as their case study on Estonia was compared with interview answers and used in discussions of LGBT+ safety in the country. ILGA-Europe's policy paper giving recommendations to the Estonian government on proposed improvements was used alongside interview answers to discuss the future of LGBT+ rights and activism in Estonia, whilst Transgender Europe's report focused on the experiences of trans people and helped aid the discussion of transphobia that was raised by several interview participants.

### **3.4 Limitations**

First and foremost, in the notion of 'practicing reflexivity', it is important to note my positionality as a scholar.<sup>111</sup> As a Scottish woman who has only ever lived in Estonia for short periods of time, it would be impossible to claim any deep understanding of Estonian society, nor the history or politics which have shaped the country into the nation it is today. Whilst I find home within the global LGBT+ community, I also recognise that my experiences as a lesbian will vary widely from the queer people living in Estonia that I was able to interview, despite our shared status as a sexual minority. Although my positionality will always come with an internalised bias – and therefore some limitation – I believe that my ability to form a reflexive approach and be self-aware of my bias helped me to ensure that my work on this project was still a worthy contribution to the field.

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<sup>111</sup> Jack L. Amoureux and Brent J. Steele, "Introduction", in *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique, and Practice*, ed. by Jack L. Amoureux and Brent J. Steele, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 4.

As previously discussed, I believe the main limitation of my research is that the sample size for data collection was very small. Whilst I do not think this invalidates my research, it does make it less representative of the entire LGBT+ population of Estonia, even if this population itself is small. One of the key reasons for this small sample size was the unavailability of people when it came to arranging interviews, even with several months' notice of when interviews would be taking place and the ability to choose when and where the interviews were held. Several of my contacts responded eagerly and showed great interest in being interviewed, only to stop replying to emails shortly before the interview date. A key reason given by many people for their inability to be interviewed was lack of time, most often attributed to work or education commitments. Even with the people I was able to interview, two gave up their lunch break to meet with me and another had me meet them at their place of work, clearly highlighting how work commitments were a serious obstacle to recruiting participants. Upon reflection there are a few resolutions that could have been put in place to help alleviate this issue. A practical approach would have been to arrange a survey that could have been circulated alongside invitations to interview and would encourage those who did not have time to arrange an interview to still give a response. I think this would have generated more data, however I do not believe it would have increased interview numbers, and in fact may have decreased willingness to be interviewed if participants viewed filling out a survey as a more preferable option than setting aside time for an interview. It also would not be possible to guarantee that a survey would generate more responses, as people's preference to not partake in data gathering would remain even with the method switched. Therefore, I believe my decision to use interviews as a data gathering technique was the best decision for my research, as even though I had low participant numbers, the information collected from said interviews was rich and thought-provoking. I recognised that four interviews were not a substantial enough number to base a master's thesis off of, and therefore I made the aforementioned decision to include data analysis of legislation and policy papers too.

Another limitation – and one that I have previously touched upon – is the fact that all organisations involved in the research were primarily based in Tallinn and Tartu, with only one (FestHeart) having been founded in the smaller town of Rakvere. Whilst I cannot include information on where my participants lived, the fact that the organisations were mainly

based in larger cities means that my research cannot be deemed representative of the rural experience of LGBT+ people living in Estonia. Although it was not possible to expand on this within the scope of this project, it is hoped that this study could help enable future comparison work between the experiences of LGBT+ people living in both urban and rural areas of the country.

The strict ethical standards that my thesis was obligated to meet also may have limited the ability of my research to be compared to previous data collected in the field. For example, both LaSala and Revere and Tiidenberg and Allaste collected additional data from participants, such as their age, location, and occupation. Due to the firm guidelines data collection had to follow, I could not collect and publish any of this information as – due to the vulnerable nature of my participant group – it was deemed too high risk. Whilst it would have been beneficial to have this data in order to compare it to previous research, I believe that the guaranteed anonymity and safety of the participants was far more important than any extra data would have been.

A final limitation to my research was the fact that I am not a native Estonian or Russian speaker, and I feel that this had potential to limit my ability to recruit interviewees. When emailing organisations to enquire about participants for my research I made sure to emphasise the fact that I could provide a translator for both Estonian and Russian speakers who did not feel comfortable being interviewed in English. I also pre-translated the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms into both languages and made them available for the organisations to view in the emails I exchanged with them. Whilst I believe that I made all the correct measures to minimise the negative impact that a language barrier may have had, it is important to acknowledge its existence and the potential impact it may have had.

## Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

### **4.1 Definition of 'activist'**

Before looking at the participant responses regarding their identification with the activist label, it is important to understand just what each person means by the term 'activist'. In the first section of the interviews, the participants were asked how they would define an 'activist', and what one would have to do to be considered one. Whilst Participant 1 defined an activist as '[a person] taking any action for social change', both Participant 3 and Participant 4 noted the importance of public presence within their definitions. Participant 3 did not consider themselves an activist because:

I don't speak out publicly and [I'm] not a public person. I just do as I see fit...I haven't been the main spokesperson or anything of that sort, [I've] just been a participant.

From their definition, the public – and leadership – aspects of activism are what they see as its defining features. Although acknowledging that some activists within the Estonian LGBT+ scene work anonymously, Participant 4 also agrees with the value placed on public presence, stating:

Especially in our culture it [activism] is also connected doing it in public...you do it like with your own face, and you do it in public and you take all the goods and bads that are coming with this stuff.

Participants 3 and 4 also agree on the 'voluntary' nature of activism. Participant 3 does not consider themselves an activist because – when speaking about the organisation they are involved with – '[they] work there, essentially'. On the other hand, Participant 4 classifies themselves as an activist because they are 'voluntarily working in [the] LGBTQ+ field', rather than being paid to do so.

Finally, Participant 2's definition of activism relates back to the idea of self-image versus perceived image, which was discussed prior in Chapter 2. Rather than present their own view, the participant discusses how the Estonian public would define activism:

Estonians in general aren't very keen on expressing the public opinions. So just anything, making anything publicly which is connected to social or political issues. will be considered as kind of activism.

The perception of Estonian society in relation the LGBT+ community will be discussed in a later section; however, it is interesting to note that even when prompted to give their own definition, Participant 2 defaulted to how they believed they were seen by society. Whilst it is their opinion and not based on concrete evidence, the belief that Estonians in general are not keen on speaking out in public is a stereotype that has been discussed in previous literature on the topic, with Tiidenberg and Allaste noting a 'well-established and internalised discourse of passivity, introversion and individuality' amongst Estonians.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, "LGBT+ activism in Estonia", 308.

## **4.2 Identification with the 'activist' label**

As activist identity was the main research topic within this dissertation, the first question that began all the interviews was indicative of this: 'Do you consider yourself an activist?'. Out of the four interviews conducted, one participant (Participant 4) claimed a strong identification with the activist label, whilst the other three (Participants 1, 2, and 3) presented a more complex view, not completely claiming the label, but not outright rejecting it either.

Beginning with Participant 4, they highlighted a strong association with the 'activist' label, and considered themselves a public figure, heading several different LGBT+ orientated projects and organisations. As previously stated, Participant 4 based their definition of activism off two main qualities: voluntarism and public presence. As they cover both these bases in several of their roles, it is easy to understand why Participant 4 has a very strong association with the activist label.

Moving on to Participants 1 and 2, they shared a similar sentiment in how they identified with the activist label, which stemmed from them both having moved to Estonia from different countries.<sup>113</sup> For Participant 1, they considered themselves an activist in their home country, but not so much in Estonia. One of the key reasons for this was the oppressive nature of the government in their home country, which meant that protest was frequent and taken very seriously by both protestors and the government. Aside from this difference, the main reason for Participant 1 no longer identifying with the activist label was because of the lack of time that they had to dedicate to the cause:

I used to consider myself as an activist...like politically I was active and everything, but then I came to Estonia, and I was also a bit active here for LGBT rights. But then the work. I have two jobs now, so I cannot be that active. So recently I don't consider myself as an activist. I'm trying to do my best, but yeah, I cannot consider myself as an activist because I am not taking any action for social change.

Participant 1's reluctance to identify as an activist because of their commitment to work is an aspect of Estonian LGBT+ activist culture that has not been explored within current

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<sup>113</sup> Whilst both participants mentioned their country of origin in the interviews, due to the identifying nature of this information the decision has been made to not mention the specific country, but rather just refer to their origin as 'out with Estonia'.

literature. Whilst both Tiidenberg and Allaste, and LaSala and Revere's works regarded Estonian political culture as a factor preventing greater LGBT+ activism, the field has not yet acknowledged the time commitment that activism takes, and the impact this may have on people's perception of activism. As previously discussed, work/university commitments and the time constraints that these cause were reasons given by several potential participants as to why they could no longer partake in interviews. Due to the limited nature of this study, a definitive conclusion regarding the impact that time commitment has on activist participation cannot be formed. However, further research into the presence of this phenomenon is greatly encouraged, as it may aid in expanding the preliminary finding of this study. These commitments understandably take precedence over any activities that could be considered activism, and therefore hinder people's ability to be present in LGBT+ activist spheres, even when they have an activist background and a desire to participate.

Being non-Estonian also impacted how Participant 2 felt about their relationship with activism, as they felt that their origin meant that they were seen differently to Estonian activists:

We, like [I] mean, people of **[redacted]** origin [are] in difficult situations, since it seems like nothing we can do is quite enough. So there isn't like a level of activeness that will be sufficient.

Here we can see the interplay of two external factors – place of origin and the opinion of Estonians – and how they impact identification with the activist label. Whilst Estonia is a small country, it does have a diverse population, especially in university cities such as Tallinn and Tartu, and thus it would be a worthwhile future endeavour to consider researching how non-ethnic Estonians relate to LGBT+ activism in the country, and if this differs to how Estonians themselves associate with the term.

Participant 2 also asserted that if it were not for their origin, they would be seen as an activist by Estonians, which was highlighted by their quotation in section 4.1, where they stated that for Estonians anything 'connected to social or political issues will be considered as [a] kind of activism'.

The loose understanding of activism that is stereotypical of the Estonian people has been discussed in previous literature, with many of Tiidenberg and Allaste's interviewees stating

that the lack of understanding as to what activism truly is has led them to being identified as activists, even if they do not see themselves that way. For example, one of their participants stated that simply showing up at events held by LGBT+ groups is ‘perceived as activism’, with another adding that they had been labelled both an activist and ‘troublemaker’ for simply ‘speaking up in a couple places’.<sup>114</sup>

The impact of the opinion of the Estonian public can also be seen in Participant 3’s answer to the question surrounding their activist identity. Unlike Participants 1 and 2, who have some uncertainty surrounding their position, Participant 3 is very firm in the fact that they do not identify as an activist:

I don't think I do not consider myself to be an activist mostly because of interest. I do things...that could be considered activism. But I don't do them because I want to be an activist, but it's more like I want to do these things.

However, even with the certainty surrounding their answer, Participant 3 is still aware of the general Estonian point of view, stating that ‘if you make noise’ this is seen as both activism and ‘disturbing the peace’. This highlights the fact that they too understand that their actions may be seen as activism by the wider public, even if they themselves do not identify with this label.

From the first question of the interviews, it is already clear to see that the attitudes of members of the LGBT+ community in Estonia have changed since the most recently published 2020 study.<sup>115</sup> Firstly, where Tiidenberg and Allaste’s study concluded that activists ‘resist’ identifying with the activist label, the interviews given for this study paint a very different story.<sup>116</sup> Aside from Participant 3, who firmly did not identify with the activist label, all other participants held some level of recognition with the label. Whilst Participant 4 was the most outright with their acceptance of the term, Participant 1 expressed a desire to regain their activist identity but felt unable to do so because of work commitments. The fact that Participant 1 had this desire, alongside the fact that they acknowledged their past association with the activist label, shows that – unlike participants in previous studies – they

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<sup>114</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, “LGBT+ activism in Estonia”, 316-317.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Most recent study’ refers to Tiidenberg and Allaste’s “LGBT+ activism in Estonia”.

<sup>116</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste’s “LGBT+ activism in Estonia”, 307.

were not 'resisting' the activist label, but instead actively wishing to be able to identify with it once more.

Participant 2 also did not show any evidence of 'resisting' association with the activist label, and instead their conflict regarding the term stemmed from how the Estonian public would classify them, versus how they saw themselves. Whilst this outside pressure led to uncertainty regarding this activist label, said uncertainty stemmed from the perception of Participant 2 by the Estonian people, and not their own self-perception. Therefore, it can be understood that – regarding the participants in this study – there has been a general move away from the blanket rejection of the activist label. Whilst there is still a lot of internal debate surrounding the term, there is a greater resonance amongst the interviewees with the 'activist' title.

#### **4.3 Opportunity for Activism**

Identifying as an activist can also be impacted by the opportunity that LGBT+ people have to participate in activism. In the previous section it was discussed how work commitment and lack of time was often highlighted as barriers to participating in activist movements, and this section will now aim to explore possibility of restrictions to activist endeavours, by looking at both participant responses, Estonian government policy towards things such as protests and rallies, and reports produced by NGOs. To begin, when regarding Estonian legislation that could have an impact on activism, Section 47 of the Estonian Constitution enshrines citizens' rights to peacefully assembly 'without prior permission'.<sup>117</sup> In addition to this the Law Enforcement Act lays out the rules for large public meetings, gathering and events, which for LGBT+ activists would include things such as protests and Pride Parades.<sup>118</sup> Section 64 of said Act states that any person that is legally in Estonia can be the named organiser for such events, whilst Section 67 discusses the process of notifying the local government of said events.<sup>119</sup> From analysing these sections, it is clear to see that Estonian law is not a barrier

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<sup>117</sup> *The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia 1992*, (c. 2) (Tallinn: Riigikogu), p.5.

<sup>118</sup> *Law Enforcement Act 2011*, (c.4, subchapter 2, division 1) (Tallinn: Riigikogu), p. 27.

As outlined in the Act, meetings, gatherings, and events are categorised as different things. Gathering can refer to either a meeting or event, however a meeting is defined as 'people being together in a public place for a joint purpose of forming or expressing their opinions' whilst an event is 'an entertainment event, competition, performance, commercial event or other similar event where people are together and which takes place in a public place and is aimed at the public but which is not a meeting'.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, (c.4, subchapter 2, division 2), pp. 27-29.

when it comes to people organising and participating in displays of activism. Allowing all people to legally organise meetings such as protests permits for the non-Estonian members of the LGBT+ community to be just as involved as native members, whilst the lenient rules surrounding the planning of events means that only a minimum of four days' notice is required for events that require traffic reconsideration or those that involve the usage of stages/tents. Being able to organise an event quickly and without having to dedicate months of consideration to governmental restrictions makes it easier for people with less time to organise and partake in events. Therefore, legal boundaries in Estonia do not act as a barrier to legal activism, but rather encourage it.

Another factor that could act as a barrier to participating in LGBT+ based activism is safety, primarily how safe people in Estonia feel being openly queer in public. This could include things such as holding their partners hand, or dressing in a way that is in alignment with their gender identity. Although individual perceptions can differ, it is no doubt that Estonian attitudes towards LGBT+ people in general have improved significantly over the past ten years. Regarding the acceptance of homosexuality, results from 2023 indicate that 56% of Estonians accept homosexuality, compared to 2012, when the number was only 38%.<sup>120</sup> This increase in support also extends to the approval of same-sex marriage and greater legal protections for LGBT+ people when it comes to discrimination in education, provision of goods and services, and health services.<sup>121</sup> However, even though this data is indicative of more positive attitudes towards queer people, by analysing interview responses and reports produced by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (EUAFR), there is still significant evidence to suggest that some members of the Estonian LGBT+ community feel unsafe within the country.

Beginning with the data published by the EUAFR in their report from 2020 on LGBT+ rights in Europe, 64% of Estonian respondents selected 'often' or 'always' when asked the question 'Do you avoid holding hands in public with a same-sex partner for fear of being assaulted,

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<sup>120</sup> Egert Rünne, "Attitudes towards LGBT topics in Estonia", *Estonian Human Rights Centre*, <<https://humanrights.ee/en/topics-main/equal-treatment/attitudes-towards-lgbt-topics-estonia/>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> June 2023].

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

threatened or harassed?'.<sup>122</sup> Other responses within the survey that indicate a lack of safety felt by members of the LGBT+ community include 42% of respondents stating that they were harassed at least once in the year prior to the survey, whilst only 7% of people attacked reported said violence to the police.<sup>123</sup> This level of harassment alongside an obvious reluctance to report such events to the police clearly displays why some LGBT+ people in Estonia would not feel safe, both in and around the public, but also in the presence of law enforcement.

Another more recent report that highlighted the violence experienced by queer people in Estonia was the 2022 update of Trans Murder Monitoring, which was produced by Transgender Europe through funding from the EU. This report highlighted the fact that in 2022 Estonia recorded its first ever murder case of a transperson, making them one of the ten European countries to report a murder for that year.<sup>124</sup> This discussion will be expanded in section 4.7, where the future of trans-rights in Estonia will be considered, however it was important to mention in this section on LGBT+ safety, as it is a clear example of the safety issues that the queer community in Estonia continue to face.

Whilst the initial EUAFR report on LGBT+ rights in Europe was published in 2020 – with data collection taking place a year prior – the issues that LGBT+ people in Estonia face in regards to their safety continued to be raised by participants within my interviews. In order to compare with the EUAFR results, participants were asked “Do you feel safe as an LGBT+ person in Estonia?” and were then asked to further expand on the answer they gave. For Participant 1, they had encountered verbal harassment both by politicians and the public, and therefore they did not feel very safe, stating:

I witnessed, for example, two or three years ago there was this like protests in the city centre of Tartu and some conservative - by Conservative Party I mean EKRE and Isamaa – they were, like they tried to attack...also I have heard from the association that I am involved with right now that some people they just like throwing like some slurs at them, like in in front of the building, like [at] the

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<sup>122</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *EU LGBTI Survey II: A long way to go for LGBTI Equality*, (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020), p. 26.

<sup>123</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *A long way to go for LGBTI Equality: Country data – Estonia*, (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020), p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> Transgender Europe, “TMM Update, Trans Day of Remembrance 2022”, *Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide*, <<https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-tdor-2022/>> [Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

centre, [the] LGBT Association Centre...I think my concern is more about maybe hate speech.

In addition to discussing encounters with harassment and hate speech, Participant 1 also raised the issue of policing, which had also been an issue highlighted in the EUAFR paper:

In Estonia there is this problem that people don't bother to report such crimes. They [are] perceived as something small and you don't just you don't just call the police and just report them. You cannot even just go and check the numbers of hate speech happening in Estonia. I'm guessing that the number might be quite high, actually.

From Participant 1's answers it is evident that the problems highlighted by the EUAFR paper in regard to LGBT+ safety in Estonia are still felt by some members of the community today. Participant 1's experience with abuse from political parties suggests that homophobia and transphobia are promoted in the country through elected officials and the platform that they are given. Although Estonia's government has become undoubtedly more LGBT+ friendly since the most recent election, the ongoing presence of EKRE – as the second most popular political party – and their far-right ideology continues to cause hostility towards the queer community.<sup>125</sup> Whilst the majority of Estonians do not express homophobic attitudes, the amplification of the latter by far-right politicians and consequent media reports provide greater visibility of this hate speech, which in turn can make LGBT+ people wary. Although improving over the last decade, homophobic attitudes are also reported to be more prevalent within certain echelons of society – including the Russian speaking community and older generations – therefore meaning that LGBT+ people within these communities may face more discrimination based on this.<sup>126</sup>

Additionally, as mentioned by Participant 1, the lack of reporting to the police also makes LGBT+ hate crimes harder to keep track of, and they are likely to be far more prolific than any official police records show. The low visibility of crimes against queer people means that they may not be perceived as a problem that requires political attention and/or interference, and thus the cycle of hate is allowed to continue. Whilst the EUAFR and Participant 1's

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<sup>125</sup> "Riigikogu elections 2023: Voting and election result", *Valimised*, <<https://rk2023.valimised.ee/en/election-result/index.html>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

<sup>126</sup> Egert Rünne, "Attitudes towards LGBT topics in Estonia".

statements highlight the ongoing presence of harassment against LGBT+ people in Estonia, it is important to note that not every participant within the study shared these views. For example, Participant 2 felt very secure as an LGBT+ person in the country, stating 'Estonia generally, everywhere is safe in terms of LGBT', whilst Participant 3 presented a more middling ground of both views, with them stating that they felt safe within their organisation and at home, but not elsewhere, generally keeping a 'low-profile' to avoid garnering attention. They also stated:

I also have friends that just, you know, LGBT+ couples [who] hold hands in public and such. Which, you know, it gets a few stares. But Estonians are mostly too quiet in a way to like say anything but yeah. I feel that it could be safer, but it's mostly just my paranoia.

Participant 3's response highlights another aspect of discrimination that LGBT+ people face, which are microaggressions, as showcased by the staring at same-sex couples holding hands. Whilst acts of harassment and hate speech in Estonia appear to be peddled by the right-wing majority, microaggressions tend to be more widespread across populations, as many microaggressions are born out of ignorance and not necessarily targeted aggression.<sup>127</sup> Microaggressions were first researched in regards to racism, however the term has now been expanded to include behaviour displayed towards other minorities such as the LGBT+ community.<sup>128</sup> According to Derald Wing Sue, staring at same-sex couples is a common form of microaggression directed towards queer people, alongside the likes of assuming heterosexuality/being cisgender and the use of words such as 'gay' and 'queer' in a negative way.<sup>129</sup> The presence of microaggressions against the LGBT+ society in Estonia is important to note as they can challenge the safety of queer people by making them feel uncomfortable or different. However, because they are often brushed aside as unimportant, microaggressions are very rarely dealt with, and considering the non-reporting of

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<sup>127</sup> Nadra Nittle, *Recognizing Microaggressions*, (New York: Enslow Publishing, LLC: 2019), p. 10.

This novel describes racial microaggressions as 'brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated'. LGBT+ microaggressions can be described in the same way by replacing 'people of colour' with LGBT+ people and 'white people' with straight/cisgender people.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>129</sup> Derald Wing Sue, "Microaggressions: More Than Just Race", *Psychology Today*, <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>> [Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023].

harassment that is prevalent within the LGBT+ community, it is assumed that microaggressions go completely unchecked as well.

Thus, the safety of LGBT+ people in Estonia can also be considered as a factor that limits the opportunity for participating in activism. However, it is important to emphasise that as with all communities, the LGBT+ community is not homogenous and therefore not every queer person in Estonia will experience harassment or microaggressions that will make them question their safety. It is also important to remember that Estonian society as a whole has become far more accepting towards LGBT+ people in the past decade, and thus there is anticipation that this upward trend continues in the future.

A potential third and final factor that may act as a roadblock to LGBT+ participating in activism is lack of education and complacency with the current situation, which had been previously raised by LaSala and Revere when they looked to explore the reasoning for a lack of an LGBT+ political movement in Estonia.<sup>130</sup> For Participant 4, lack of education amongst the LGBT+ community in Estonia on activism and its necessity in helping gain more rights was a key reason as to why so many queer people in Estonia did not associate themselves with the activist label:

I think that our own community needs this kind of education and also, they need some kind of education about activism because they have to – from my point of view – they have to realize that all these freedoms that they have at the moment they have, we have them because somebody in previous 30 years have done something. Any government doesn't think themselves that 'ohh we should. I don't know, have some kind of civil partnership stuff'. There must be some activist or some organizations who are really pushing this topic. So, if I see in our community people who say like why the hell do you need the pride.... and I was trying to explain...that, you know, this is this is not something that comes itself. Somebody has worked for them.

From this quote it is clear that Participant 4 does not believe that LGBT+ people in Estonia are fully aware of why activism is important, nor why it is needed in current society. For Participant 4, activism appears to be the only way to push LGBT+ topics into the political

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<sup>130</sup> LaSala and Revere, "It Would Have Been Impossible Before", 433.

sphere, however it is clear that others in the community do not share this belief. It is difficult to determine if Participant 4's suggestion on implementing education on the benefits of social activism would indeed encourage greater activist participation in Estonia. Whilst discussing the potential benefits of participating in activism is likely to promote knowledge of the cause, it is unlikely to encourage people to protest for change if they are already content with their lives. LaSala and Revere discovered in their research that several members of the gay community were unwilling to participate in activism because 'things were now more satisfactory for gays and lesbians in Estonia'.<sup>131</sup> Considering that said research was conducted over 10 years ago and that LGBT+ rights in Estonia have only improved since then, it is understandable why some members of the queer community do not see an immediate need for activism in the country.

Thus, it is evident that – aside from the previously mentioned time commitment – there are other factors that can act as a roadblock to members of the LGBT+ community participating in activism. Estonian law protects peoples' right to protest and makes arranging protest events accessible, and thus cannot be considered a roadblock to activism. However, the lack of safety felt by LGBT+ people in Estonia through the presence of violence, verbal abuse, and microaggressions can be considered a barricade blocking a greater participation in activism. Whilst not all members of the LGBT+ community in Estonia will experience a targeted hate crime, the knowledge that such hate exists is enough alone to make someone reconsider any public activism that would make them a more visible target. Although there is not enough evidence to suggest that lack of education on activism is a barrier to activism participation, lack of interest in activism due to complacency with the current social and political situation is a theme that has been previously explored within literature on LGBT+ communities in Estonia. Thus, education on the ways that activism could lead to even greater rights within the country might persuade some people to take up the activist cause.

#### **4.4 Divisions in the Estonian LGBT+ community**

One of the key conclusions made by the current field of literature surrounding the LGBT+ community in Estonia is that activism struggles to take root in the country because the queer

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 430-431.

community itself is so divided. LaSala and Revere focused on the individualist nature of Estonian culture and concluded that the community lacked charismatic leaders who could 'unite' the small LGBT+ communities in the country into a larger movement.<sup>132</sup> In their more recent publication Tiidenberg and Allaste see the division in the community along the lines of gender. Queer women felt distant from their male counterparts because of a 'double burden' that had them deal with both homophobia and misogyny, whereas gay men felt isolated because of their history of discrimination that was often far more violent than that faced by lesbians.<sup>133</sup> This attitude from both sides that each had it 'worse' than the other prevented an Estonian wide LGBT+ community from forming, as the differences seemingly overshadowed the need for a common ground.

The research gathered for this dissertation presents a much more positive view regarding divisions in the LGBT+ community, with all participants agreeing that the Estonian LGBT+ community is fairly unified and inclusive, even with some smaller divisions that were mentioned.

For Participant 2, the unity of the LGBT+ community was very obvious, with them stating:

I would say that the LGBTQ+ community is probably one of the most inclusive communities that we have here because they're usually very, very inclusive.

Considering that Participant 2 had previously stated how they felt slightly alienated by Estonian society because of their non-Estonian origin, their emphasis on the inclusivity of the LGBT+ society suggests that – regarding nationality and language spoken – there is not a division within the LGBT+ community along these lines. Whilst this is just the opinion of one person, the fact the biggest LGBT+ organisations in Estonia – such as Eesti LGBT Ühing and Peemoti Keskus – operate multilingually in Estonian, Russian, and English helps support the idea that the LGBT+ community in Estonia is not divided by ethnicity or nationality. Peemoti Keskus specifically state that their mission is to amplify the voices of not only LGBT+ people, but also those of 'immigrants and people with different native languages', thus highlighting how their inclusiveness is not just by chance, but is rather an integral part of their organisation.<sup>134</sup> From a personal perspective, as a non-Estonian speaking foreigner coming

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 433-434.

<sup>133</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste's "LGBT+ activism in Estonia", 316.

<sup>134</sup> "Meist", *Peemoti Keskus*, <<https://peemot.ee/>> [Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

into Estonian LGBT+ spaces, I was welcomed with open arms and treated the same as locals who had been attending said groups for an extended period of time.

Participant 3 also supported the idea of the Estonian LGBT+ community being unified and inclusive, discussing both the languages supported by organisations, but also the diversity in location of said organisations:

[the community] [has] become more unified in the like recent years. It used to be very Tallinn centric and more like the only the Estonian speaking LGBT community but [now] at least one organisation also deals with Russian-speaking Estonian citizens that are LGBT and here [in Tartu] we have like, three or four sort of groups or NGOs working as well...there are more people working now and kind of unifying some groups that used to be like, not dealt with at all.

From Participant 3's answer, the progression in the unification of the LGBT+ community in Estonia – regarding both diversity in location and language – can be seen as a recent phenomenon. Whilst LGBT+ groups were once concentrated in Tallinn, several of the new organisations mentioned in this work – such as Peemoti Keskus and Tartu Pride – were founded in Tartu and help to highlight the ongoing diversification of location regarding LGBT+ groups. The success of Estonian LGBT+ groups in breaking regional fractions and uniting nationally is highlighted by the recent announcement of Tartu hosting the Baltic Pride event in 2024, making it the first non-capital city of the Baltic states to do so.<sup>135</sup> Whilst a rural/urban dichotomy still exists within queer spaces in Estonia – with almost all LGBT+ groups being based in cities – the fact that said spaces have now spread out with the capital and into smaller cities and towns proves the growing unification of the movement.

However, whilst it is clear that the LGBT+ scene in Estonia does not face too many regional divides, some divisions still persist in the community. One point of contention within the community that had been most prominent in previous research was the gender division, and the inability of gay men and lesbians to form a joint organisation. Whilst none of my interview participants mentioned it when asked about division within the LGBT+ community, Participant 1 did mention that although they believed that the Estonian queer community

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<sup>135</sup> Marili Vihamm, "Euroopa kultuuripealinn toob järgmise aasta LGBT+ festivali pidustused Tartusse", *Tartu 2024*, <<https://tartu2024.ee/uudised/euroopa-kultuuripealinn-toob-jargmise-aasta-lgbt-festivali-pidustused-tartusse>> [Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

was unified with ‘no discrimination or exclusion’, they had heard complaints within the community that ‘the number of males [in LGBT+ groups] are quite low’. The lack of males participating in queer activism is an observation that has been recorded in previous literature, with Tiidenberg and Allaste stating that women were consistently ‘more active in LGBT circles’ than their male counterparts, and therefore the comment made by one of Participant 1’s acquaintances does not come as a surprise.<sup>136</sup>

Gendered division within political movements has been the subject of research for decades, with the contemporary consensus being that whilst the activism engagement is equal between men and women, men are more likely to participate in confrontational activism, and women non-confrontational.<sup>137</sup> The closing of the gender gap in protest participation, alongside the fact that none of the other interviewees raised the issue as a prominent cause for division within the community suggests that gender division – although potentially still present – is not as prominent as it once was. It is also important to note that many people within the LGBT+ community do not ascribe to the gender binary, and therefore making too many conclusions based on gender can be unhelpful and unnecessary.

Out of all interviewees, Participant 4 gave the most informative insight into possible divisions within the LGBT+ community. Rather than paint the queer community as a morally homogenous group, Participant 4 explained how – as with all communities – there were divisions along the lines of cultural and political beliefs:

So, I can say we also have some gays who are very right radical, who are part of the right radical party...we have still unfortunately some kind of transphobia and so on. Also with pride...we have some people in the gay community, who are not just against the pride but who are actually really like, come to say to fight against you, to say like, why do you do it and so on.

From this it is clear to see that whilst there may not be divisions strong enough to break the community apart, there is diversity within the community regarding political alignment, with said alignment often impacting how members of the community behave. However, whilst

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<sup>136</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste’s “LGBT+ activism in Estonia”, 316.

<sup>137</sup> Kyle Dodson, “Gendered Activism: A Cross-national View on Gender Differences in Protest Activity”, *Social Currents*, 2.4, 2015, 377-392.

Participant 4 sees transphobia as a pertinent issue that requires resolving, the other diversity in opinions formed in the community does not surprise them:

I want to say that I think it's actually quite normal because, you know, gay communities...it's just a bunch of people and we all have our different backgrounds. We all have our different stories. We all have different educational background.

Participant 4's response helps open the discussion to the fact that LGBT+ communities globally are not homogenous, and should not be treated as such, especially in academic research. Due to the heteronormative beliefs that penetrate deep into our politics and society it is often assumed by the straight-cis majority that – as 'the other' – LGBT+ people form a standardised group characterised only by their sexuality and/or gender identity. Therefore, people in the Estonian LGBT+ community presenting different political leanings and having differing views on events such as pride parades should not be seen as massive division within the community, and rather should be seen as an indicator of how diverse the queer community is. However, bearing this in mind, different political beliefs cannot be seen as an excuse for transphobia, and the inclusion/exclusion of trans people from the queer community can be seen as a major divide. Whilst all transphobia is bad, the fact that all major LGBT+ organisations discussed in this dissertation actively support trans people is a positive sign that said transphobic beliefs are not the dominant narrative within the community.

Thus, from my research it can be suggested that the divisions that once resulted in a 'weak collective identity' amongst the LGBT+ population in Estonia have gradually begun to disappear over the past decade.<sup>138</sup> Whilst groups that represented only factions of the community – such as lesbian organisations and gay men organisations – once dominated the queer scene in Estonia, these groups have now given way to inclusive associations who provide spaces for all members of the LGBT+ community. Although the gender imbalance was mentioned briefly in Participant 1's interview, the fact that it was not seen as a dominant source of division by the majority of interviewees indicates that the 'gender-based

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 307.

problems' that made themselves dominant in LGBT+ activist discourse in Tiidenberg and Allaste's research are no longer a key source of division in the community.<sup>139</sup> Whilst political alignments differ across the LGBT+ community, this has generally been accepted by informants as a normal phenomenon, because the queer community is a social group, and it would be unfeasible to expect all members of the community to share the same political views. What may present itself as a division both now and in the future is the transphobic attitudes that – as discussed by Participant 4 – are held by some members of the LGBT+ community in Estonia. Although this division is worrisome, it is unfortunately a theme that has become prominent in queer spaces across the globe, with examples of such activity being present from Botswana and South Africa to the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>140 141 142</sup> Therefore, whilst this division is present within the Estonian queer community, this issue is not exclusive to them, meaning that it has to be tackled at a global scale and not just nationally within the Estonian LGBT+ groups.

#### **4.5 Queer Solidarity and experience with other forms of activism**

Within the interviews participants were asked two questions pertaining to queer solidarity and their involvement in other types of activism. These questions were: 'Do you have experience with any other kind of activism?' and 'Have your groups supported any other causes out with the LGBT+ sphere?'. In response to the first question, Participants 1 and 2 discussed their involvement in previous activism work in their home countries. For Participant 1 the oppressive nature of the government in their home state meant that a lot of their past activism was 'more complex', and rather than just focusing on one issue was 'just against the government' in general. This is a sentiment that Participant 2 also shared, with their country of origin also having an autocratic government regime. For them activism there was very public, with them stating that they would partake in both large

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<sup>139</sup> *ibid*, 316.

<sup>140</sup> Nyx McLean and Thurlo Cicero, "Interrogating Transphobia within the LGBTQI+ Community", *Gender IT.org*, <<https://genderit.org/articles/interrogating-transphobia-within-lgbtqia-community>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

<sup>141</sup> Logan Graves, "A Look at Transphobia Within the LGBTQ community", *LGBTQ+ Victory Institute*, <<https://victoryinstitute.org/a-look-at-transphobia-within-the-lgbtq-community/>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

<sup>142</sup> Robert Mendick, "Arts Council boss withdraws funding from 'anti-trans' gay-rights charity", *The Telegraph*, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/12/03/arts-council-boss-called-gay-rights-charity-anti-trans-film/>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

'demonstrations' and organise smaller 'protests'. In this case both activities were once again against the government as a whole, and not just rooting for one individual cause.

Participant 4 also indicated that they had been involved with other causes out with the LGBT+ sphere, but rather than on an individual basis have done so as a representative of their LGBT+ organisation. For them it was very evident that the LGBT+ community had support from other organisations, namely student organisations and the feminist organisation Feministeerium. However, Participant 4 expressed mixed feelings about moments of co-operation between the different activist groups:

a very good example [of cooperation] is...in 2019 when our right radicals in the government, they wanted to make this referendum to change the Estonian constitution and put there the marriage stuff.<sup>143</sup> Then you know it. It really for us, for the co-operation. It's so weird. But I have to say that for our co-operation, it really like was very good thing because, you know, in one point we all find like something common to fight for. So yeah, I think it's the same that if we have something to solve, then we can do it. Then it's working.

From this statement it is clear to see that although cooperation between the LGBT+ organisations and other activist groups is incredibly important in forming a network of support, it also tends to be bittersweet, as it often occurs when the rights of one of the groups are threatened. Whilst this cooperation works best when there is something to be fought for, it is entirely not spontaneous, with Participant 4 explaining the creation of an activist committee to facilitate collaboration between different activist collectives:

We have in Estonia like one board...like it used to be every month, but now during COVID and so on it's not so. But it is coming back. We have monthly meetings with different organizations. We don't have there at the moment the environment but we have there the students and the students organisations we have there Human Rights Centre, we have there Feministerium, which is like this feminist organisation and yeah, we have like a monthly meetings where we discuss different things and do some cooperation projects and so on.

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<sup>143</sup> Here Participant 4 is referring to the movement by EKRE (as part of the former coalition government) to hold a referendum in an attempt to redefine marriage in the Estonian constitution as that only between a man and a woman.

The existence of this board that Participant 4 is a member of is clear evidence that queer solidarity within the LGBT+ community in Estonia is not only just very much present, but also forms a rather permanent part of several LGBT+ organisations' activities.

The presence of partnerships between the LGBT+ community and other activist groups was also brought up by Participants 1 and 2, who – although not mentioning the activist board – confirmed the existence of cooperation between queer organisations and those focused on both the environment and feminism. For Participant 1 the solidarity between LGBT+ groups and feminist movements was only natural, with them stating:

If you ask me, it's kinda like the feminist activism is also kind of, like, interrelated with LGBT actors, and because like, since feminism is all about equality, like sex and gender and sexual orientation and everything. So that's kind of related, actually, I can consider myself as a feminist activist as well, maybe more than LGBT activist.

Participant 2 also briefly mentioned the collaboration with feminist groups, stating that within LGBT+ spheres feminist activism is 'definitely' present, and 'sometimes environmental activism'. Overall, Participant 2 viewed queer solidarity and other cooperation between various activist groups as a constant factor, stating 'in Estonia, these like different communities are pretty much connected'.

The perceived strong bond between LGBT+ organisations and feminist groups that Participant 1 discusses has been previously mentioned within the field of literature, with Tiidenberg and Allaste describing collaboration between queer and feminist bodies in Estonia as 'the blend of feminist and LGBT goals into a larger agenda of dismantling the patriarchy'.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, it is clear to see that the queer solidarity displayed towards the feminist community is something with past roots in the Estonian LGBT+ sphere that continues to be relevant today.

Whilst the Green Party in Estonia have historically been the friendliest LGBT+ political group, Estonian queer solidarity regarding environmentalism is a phenomenon that has not yet been explored within literature.<sup>145</sup> Whilst works on the general topic of queer solidarity have

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<sup>144</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste's "LGBT+ activism in Estonia", 321.

<sup>145</sup> Mattias Turovski and Züleyxa Izmailova, "A Cliffhanger for LGBT+ Rights in Estonia".

mentioned cooperation between LGBT+ people and environmentalist causes in the past, these articles have primarily been focused on American and British queer groups, and none mention similar instances in Estonia.<sup>146</sup> Therefore, whilst Participant 2 and 4's mention of such collaboration suggests a growing movement of solidarity between the two causes, it is definitely a topic that requires more in-depth research in order to come to valid conclusions.

#### **4.6 Co-operation with other European LGBT+ groups**

Within the same vein as queer solidarity, the research conducted also looked to see if there was any cooperation between Estonian LGBT+ organisations and those from other countries. Although this was not a question laid out in the initial Interview Schedule (see Appendix 1), as a follow up to answers given by some of the interviewees I decided to ask about collaboration out with Estonia's borders, and thus the question was posed to both Participant 3 and 4. For Participant 3, they had previously mentioned that the organisation that they were a member of received funding from an initiative funded by the governments of different European countries. However, even though this funding came from international sources, when asked about any international cooperation from the LGBT+ community of Estonia Participant 3 stated that they themselves have 'never done anything outside of Estonia'.

Participant 4 also described their experience with cross-country collaboration within the LGBT+ sphere, stating:

I think that and we have quite good relations if we are talking about some political cooperation or some kind of European projects and stuff. If you're talking about some policy projects in EU then yeah, there are some connections that are working very well. But if you are talking about organizing some kind of events or do some like stuff for the community, which is not policy, then then it's not so strong.

From this we can see that Participant 4 sees international collaboration between the Estonian LGBT+ sphere and other queer organisations as primarily rooted in politics and policy. Although Participant 4 did not mention specifics, analysis of European policy proposals gives greater insight into the role of Estonian LGBT+ groups at an international

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<sup>146</sup> Jennifer Wilkinson et al., "Solidarity beyond Sexuality", 1167.

level. European collaboration can be seen through Estonian participation in European Union funded LGBT+ projects, such as ILGA-Europe. Estonian LGBT+ organisations – primarily Eesti LGBT Ühing – are contributing members of ILGA-Europe, who provide the EU with policy proposals directed at improving LGBT+ rights in Europe and beyond.<sup>147 148</sup> The most recent policy proposal produced by IGLA-Europe that Estonian organisations contributed towards was titled “EU LGBTI Strategy 2020-2024”, and focused on promoting intersectionality within policy, advancing trans and intersex rights, and promoting LGBT+ human rights out with the borders of the EU.<sup>149</sup> Aside from IGLA-Europe, Estonian participation in wider EU sponsored LGBT+ groups can be seen through the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Youth and Student Organisation (IGLYO) and Transgender Europe, thus highlighting how – at least on a political level – Estonian LGBT+ organisations engage with other European queer groups.<sup>150</sup>

Although highlighting strong connections when it came to politics and policy making, Participant 4’s previous statement also suggests that cross-country cooperation out with the political sphere was not very common. However, this lack of collaboration did not surprise them, as they saw it as the standard way in which all LGBT+ organisations cooperate:

But also, I think that actually it's [lack of non-political cooperation] quite normal because you know it's always of course the cooperation. So international cooperation is very important, but in the other hand we are still quite much focused for our own community in Estonia, which is actually quite logical because like again, if you if you take an example, the Baltic Pride in Tallinn, then of course

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<sup>147</sup> European Commission, “Protecting LGBTI rights and equality and combatting discrimination in Europe, ILGA-Europe 2020”, *European Commission: Funding and tender opportunities*, <<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-details/31076817/899411/REC>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

<sup>148</sup> ILGA-Europe, “EU LGBTI Strategy 2020-2024: Key EU legislative and policy initiatives for LGBTI rights in Europe and beyond – Proposal by IGLA-Europe”, *ILGA-Europe*, April 2020, <<https://www.ilga-europe.org/policy-paper/eu-lgbti-strategy-2020-2024-key-eu-legislative-and-policy-initiatives-for-lgbti-rights-in-europe-and-beyond-proposal-by-ilga-europe/>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> European Commission, “EU funding of LGBTIQ equality”, *European Commission*, <[https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-equality/eu-funding-lgbtq-equality\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-equality/eu-funding-lgbtq-equality_en)> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

we really hope that there will be much international pride, but like the first target is of course our own community.

The desire for Estonian LGBT+ groups to focus on their own community before looking at European-wide cooperation is understandable as – considering most LGBT+ organisations are NGOs – their time and money are limited. However, the role that Estonia plays in hosting and promoting Baltic Pride should not be undermined either. As the most LGBT+ friendly of the three host countries, Estonia is now also the first country out of the three to host it in a non-capital city, with Tartu set to host the event in 2024.<sup>151</sup> Considering that Estonia is now the first of the Baltic states to legalise gay marriage, this cross-border community cooperation with both Latvia and Lithuania could increase pressure on the governments of these states to reconsider their stance on same-sex marriage. Therefore, whilst Estonian LGBT+ groups may have a tendency to focus on their own community before looking out with their country, their impact at the wider European level should not be understated.

#### **4.7 Looking towards the future**

This last section of the results will discuss the issues that will be at the forefront of the LGBT+ activist agenda in the near future, by analysing both participant responses and NGO reports. It is important to highlight that whilst not all participants identified themselves as currently engaged activists, all had opinions on what political changes they would like to see in the country regarding the LGBT+ community, and thus all had ideas on potential focus areas for Estonian activist groups.

As previously stated, the interviews for this paper took place before the recent legalisation of same-sex marriages in Estonia. This legalisation happened very quickly from the new government being elected on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2023, to the bill being passed by the Riigikogu on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023. Before this change, the last piece of major legislation impacting queer lives in Estonia was the Registered Partnership Act, which – although being passed in 2014 –

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<sup>151</sup> ILGA-Europe, “Country Ranking”, *Rainbow Europe*, <<https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023].

faced a series of problems when implemented, with provisions needed to ‘coherently implement’ the remaining unratified for years.<sup>152</sup> Bearing that in mind, a goal highlighted by all participant interviews was to move past the ‘frozen’ state that LGBT+ rights were currently in, with the main hope for this resolution being the legalisation of same-sex marriage.<sup>153</sup> Beginning with Participant 1, regarding the future of LGBT+ rights in Estonia, their main concern was what they viewed as the stagnation of queer rights, and the lengths that LGBT+ had to go to in order to achieve the same rights as heterosexual couples:

I think the process is quite frozen at the moment. For example the since they decriminalized almost sexuality in Estonia...OK, there was this like really fast progress because they wanted to be in the European Union... and then at one point it kind of stopped, it's kind of frozen... OK in Estonia in general, like when we compared to other post-Soviet republics, it's so much better, but still...you cannot get married. You have to go and get married in a different country like where it's legal and then you have to come back here and you have to go to court and like, it's a hideous process.

It is evident that – at the time of interview – Participant 1 saw the situation of LGBT+ rights in Estonia as stuck, with LGBT+ people having to go through far more tribulation in order to achieve even near the same level of rights that heterosexual people were granted. Their answer also highlights the point that whilst Estonia is more advanced than its land neighbours when regarding LGBT+ rights, that does still not excuse any shortcomings they may have and should not be used as an excuse as to why queer people in the country do not have equal, protected rights. As to why such slow progress was made within LGBT+ rights, Participant 1 believed it was the disinterested attitudes of the politicians:

The politicians and policy makers, they just say that, OK, like what? They don't need to get married. You know, they can just live together. Like, why do they wanna get married? Like it's a free country. So, they don't see the problem.

Lack of interest from politicians was also an issue that was highlighted by Participant 4. Although tentatively hopeful about the new liberal coalition government, they stated that

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<sup>152</sup> Mattias Turovski and Züleyxa Izmailova, “A Cliffhanger for LGBT+ Rights in Estonia”, 3-4.

<sup>153</sup> The term ‘frozen’ is used by Participant 1 to describe their view on the current situation in Estonia at the time of interview.

not having any politician in parliament who spoke up for the LGBT+ community and their needs was a 'huge problem'. With this disinterest by politicians being highlighted as a key issue, it is easy to comprehend why – as previously discussed – Estonian LGBT+ organisations focus more on their own communities rather than looking for European-wide representation. If the organisations feel that the government has no one to represent and look after their interests, then they are understandably going to put all their focus on looking after their fellow queer people, as no one else will do so.

Returning to the idea of a 'frozen' situation in Estonia (at the time of the interviews), Participant 4 gives key insight as to why such a stagnant situation can cause distrust in the government, even if the government is liberal and promising new changes. In regard to the ineffectiveness of the Civil Partnership law, Participant 4 stated:

The problem was they took the law, but they have to also change some other smaller laws because at the moment the Partnership Law in Estonia, we have it, but it's not working...it was [initially passed] in 2014 it was like sorry, but fucking almost 10 years ago. And next eight years basically what they say that yes, we are trying to find some kind of cooperation and we are working with this in Parliament, but they don't have any results. So, the question is like come on, it's eight years and you can't do this job. So, it's we hope that maybe now and that the new government will finally do it. But of course, you never know... So you see that's the thing with politicians you know. Because if I'm working in that like in company in private company and if I get some kind of task to do and if I say that I will do it then sorry, but I can't wait eight years to do it I have to do it.

From this quote from Participant 4, the exasperation felt by the LGBT+ community at the government's inability to provide rights that they had promised (and initially even passed) is incredibly clear. As evidenced from Participant 4's comment on how that sort of wait time for a task would not be permissible in any other job, the unsuccessfulness of the Civil Partnership law caused massive loss of respect for politicians, as well as an ongoing distrust of their ability to successfully implement policy.

It is important to note that the 'frozen' or 'non-improving' state of LGBT+ rights in Estonia before the legalisation of same-sex marriage was not just an issue raised by members of the Estonian LGBT+ community, but also by larger NGOs as well. In their 2022 report on queer

rights in Estonia, ILGA-Europe noted the flawed nature of the Registered Partnership Act, as well as stating that the country showed a ‘lack of significant progress in achieving LGBT+ rights equality over the past years’.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, the theme for Tartu Pride in 2022 was “How long can we wait?”, which – according to joint organiser Eesti LGBT Ühing – was a statement about the lack of progress made to LGBT+ rights in Estonia over the last couple of decades.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, it is evident that the annoyance showcased at the slow progression of rights in Estonia is not exclusive to my interviewees, but is also a position adopted by the wider Estonian LGBT+ community.

Unlike Participant 4, Participant 3 had more hope for the implementation of same-sex marriages, stating that with the new liberal government, there was a ‘strong possibility’ of legalisation, which of course turned out to be right. Participant 2 also praised the composition of the new government, stating that it was ‘the best coalition’ that could have formed. However, they were also critical of the perceived slow progress that the country had made in the past decade, stating that ‘Before that [new coalition government] I think that it was not sufficient, and Estonia could have done better. Especially since it is associating itself with like, the Nordic countries’. Thus, it is clear to see that whilst participants remained hopeful about the new coalition government, the memory of the false and delayed promises made by the previous governments left them hesitant to invest full faith into them and their promise of equal marriage rights. Regarding the legalisation of the same-sex marriages, the research for this dissertation took place at a pivotal time for Estonia. Whilst this work was able to explore the attitudes of some of the Estonian LGBT+ community before the move towards legalisation, further research within the community now that the bill has passed is necessary to see if and how opinions have changed.

A final area of focus for LGBT+ organisations looking towards the future is the strengthening of trans rights within the country. Whilst marriage equality was the primary goal for many participants at the time of interview, the fact that this has now been achieved would suggest that trans rights are now at the forefront for queer activists in Estonia. According to

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<sup>154</sup> ILGA Europe, “Estonia”, *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex People in Estonia Covering the Period of January to December 2022*, <<https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/2023/estonia.pdf>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2023].

<sup>155</sup> “Kaua võib? Pride-marss toimub tänavu Tartus”, *Eesti LGBT Ühing*, <<https://www.lgbt.ee/post/kaua-voib-pride-marss-toimub-tanavu-tartus>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2023].

Transgender Europe's ranking for 2023, Estonia currently scores generally high, meeting 15 out of 30 requirements, sitting above both Baltic states, as well as the likes of UK and Ireland.<sup>156</sup> However, even with such a high ranking, Estonia's score itself only sits at 50%, meaning that significant progress can still be made. One of the key suggestions made by both NGO reports and participant answers was the implementation of a self-ID law that would make it easier for trans people in Estonia to change their legal gender. Such laws have already been passed in the likes of Malta, Denmark, and Scotland, and allow for trans and non-binary people to change their gender marker on official documents without having to obtain a psychiatric diagnosis.<sup>157</sup> Speaking on trans rights, Participant 3 endorsed the idea of self-ID, stating:

I feel that trans topic doesn't get enough attention and they [politicians] definitely don't know enough themselves that it kind of just gets on, it's on the back burner. You know, no one talks about it. No one really deals with it. So, I'm hoping that if we bring enough attention to it, and they're open to like, self-ID becoming a thing, but it's kind of like, it's a dream. It's likely not going to happen.

As well as Participant 3's desire for a self-ID bill, this quote also highlights the fact that even though Participant 3 stated that they did not fully identify with the activist label, they still speak for a wider activist community when they state 'if **we** bring enough attention to it', suggesting that (at least regarding trans-rights), they feel part of the wider collective that is aiming to make political change. Self-ID as a solution to improving trans rights in Estonia was also recommended by ILGA-Europe, with them stating that it would help end abusive requirements such as medical diagnosis and age restrictions.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, Participant 3's wish for a self-identification policy within Estonia is not just their opinion, but rather is backed by human rights organisations at an international level.

Participant 4 also spoke on how the furthering of trans rights should be an area of focus for activist groups going forward, stating that trans issues in Estonia are often far more unexplored and misunderstood than homosexuality, because 'being gay is maybe a little bit

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<sup>156</sup> Transgender Europe, "Trans Rights Map", *Trans Rights Map: Europe and Central Asia 2023*, <<https://transrightsmap.tgeu.org/home/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2023].

<sup>157</sup> Openly/Thomas Reuters Foundation, "What are trans self-ID laws and what impact do they have?", *GayTimes*, <<https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/what-are-trans-self-id-laws-and-what-impact-do-they-have/>> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2023].

<sup>158</sup> ILGA Europe, "Estonia".

easier to understand for some people than being trans'. To resolve this issue and the ongoing presence of transphobia, Participant 4 suggested 'educating people about human rights, about LGBT rights', and also expressed that the LGBT+ community should not be exempt from this education, particularly those who do not identify as trans.

The need for education on trans rights and issues in Estonia was most recently exposed after the aforementioned murder of Black transwoman Sabrina Houston in Tallinn in July of 2022. Whilst it is impossible to say why Sabrina was murdered – with Transgender Europe noting an increasing intersect between racism and transphobia – what can be analysed in the media response to her death.<sup>159</sup> According to the cooperation officer at Eesti LGBT Ühing, the Estonian media repeatedly misgendered Sabrina in the initial reporting of her death, with articles confirming her trans identity only being published several weeks after the initial incident.<sup>160</sup> Whilst this mistake is more likely to be a display of ignorance rather than malicious intent, the misgendering of trans people by media outlets still facilitates transphobia, as it sets the precedence that this kind of misgendering is okay. Therefore, Participant 4's suggestion of education on trans issues and rights as a solution to transphobia within the country could be successful, as it would help eliminate ignorance surrounding misgendering and other forms of microaggressions.

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<sup>159</sup> Transgender Europe, "TMM Update, Trans Day of Remembrance 2022".

<sup>160</sup> Aili Vahtla, "Foreigner murdered in Tallinn in early July identified as trans Black woman", *ERR News*, <<https://news.err.ee/1608667837/foreigner-murdered-in-tallinn-in-early-july-identified-as-trans-black-woman>> [Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> July 2023].

## Conclusions

Whilst this thesis had a limited number of interview participants, analysing interview data alongside existing data from reports and policy papers has allowed for emphatic conclusions to be made. Through comparison to previous research on LGBT+ activism in Estonia, these results help to highlight how said activism has developed since the last major data collection almost ten years ago.

This thesis sought to investigate three key research questions, which looked at notions of activist identity and queer solidarity within the LGBT+ community in Estonia, as well as exploring the current political aims of the community. These questions were: How do the members of the Estonian LGBT+ community understand the term 'activist', and does that impact their identification with the label? Does LGBT+ activism in Estonia support other causes and/or similar causes in different nations? What are the political/rights developments in Estonia that LGBT+ activists would like to see in the future?

This section will discuss the major conclusions made from these three questions, as well as recommending areas for future research.

### **Activist Identity**

Through interviewing members of the Estonian LGBT+ community, it became clear that their identity as activists was perceived through two lenses: their own, and that of the Estonian public. Regarding their own definition, interviewees asserted that activism was classified by its public presence and deliberate and voluntary nature. Thus, if an activity did not take place within the public, or if it was done with a financial incentive, then it could not be considered activism. Participants were also acutely aware of how activism was viewed by the Estonian public, where anything perceived to be connected to a political or social issue is seen as activism, regardless of the action's intent.

Whilst only one participant was outright in their identification, the label was not outright rejected by the other three. Rather, one participant previously identified as an activist, but no longer did so because of inactivity, whilst the remaining two participants understood that – although not identifying as activists themselves – they were considered activists by the general public and did not express having an issue with this.

Therefore, it can be suggested that attitudes regarding the activist label have changed since Tiidenberg and Allaste's data collection period, when LGBT+ members were said to have 'resisted' the activist identity because of negative connotations surrounding the term. Whilst not all participants personally identified with the label, none of them were offended if they were perceived by others as activists, which was not the case with Tiidenberg and Allaste's participants, some of whom 'balked' at the label.<sup>161</sup>

Considering that the opinions of the Estonian public appear as a prominent aspect in discussions of LGBT+ activist identity, it would be helpful for future research to explore in greater depth how the general public define and view activism, as this may have also changed over the past decade.

Within discussions on activist identity, conclusions were also made about potential factors that block access to participating in activism. Whilst concerns surrounding safety is a blocker

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<sup>161</sup> Tiidenberg and Allaste, "LGBT Activism in Estonia", 316.

that has been verified through reports produced by the likes of ILGA-Europe, other potential blocking factors that were raised by participants – such as lack of free time and work commitments – have not yet been subject to research. Although my research was able to raise the issue, it could not confirm any solid conclusions as a small, preliminary study. Therefore, it would also be beneficial for future research to look at factors preventing LGBT+ people from participating in activism.

### **Community Identity**

The formation of a community identity was highlighted through my research as an area that has developed substantially since the previous round of data collection in 2012-2013.

Divisions on the basis of gender were prominent from the nineties up until Tiidenberg and Allaste's research, with the LGBT+ sphere dominated by gay/bisexual men, lesbian/bisexual women, and transgender people forming their own separate groups, as opposed to larger, all-inclusive organisations. Based on my research the situation has significantly changed, with the most prominent organisations on the scene (Eesti LGBT Ühing, Peemoti Keskus, and Q-Space) catering to all those who identify within the LGBT+ community. Furthermore, interviewees did not identify gender as a divisive factor when it came to activism and participation within the community.

Difference in political opinions was identified by participants as causing some small divisions within the LGBT+ community. However – as highlighted by interview responses – identity based groups such as the LGBT+ community are not homogenous and should not be expected to act as such. Therefore, minor political differences cannot be considered a factor hindering the development of a community identity.

The ongoing success of all-encompassing LGBT+ organisations that aim to represent the whole community, alongside participant responses – which view that community as inclusive – suggest that the lack of community identity found in previous research is no longer an issue for LGBT+ people in Estonia.

In addition to being more inclusive towards all sexualities and gender identities, my research also highlighted how the space that LGBT+ organisations operate in has expanded out with

its historical centre in Tallinn, and into smaller cities and towns such as Tartu (with Peemoti Kekus and Tartu LGBT) and Rakvere (FestHeart), thus making themselves more accessible to people living outside the capital. Whilst the reach of LGBT+ organisations in Estonia has clearly expanded over the past decade, the idea of urban versus rural when it comes to LGBT+ resources in Estonia was not the main focus of this thesis, and thus definitive conclusions cannot be made it regards to this.

An area of concern that was raised by participants was the presence of transphobia within the LGBT+ community, which – if allowed to increase – could present new divisions amongst the queer community. Although not a prominent issue in Estonia just now, transphobia within LGBT+ communities has become a regular occurrence in countries such as the UK and the USA. Whilst this thesis was able to dedicate some of its discussion to trans people in Estonia, as it was not the main focus of the study, it would be unrealistic to present conclusions based on this alone. Therefore, future research into trans communities in Estonia and the issues they face would be particularly useful, as there is not currently any contemporary study of Estonia that focuses specifically on transgender people.

### **Queer Solidarity**

Regarding queer solidarity, this thesis set out to explore the possibility of relationships between LGBT+ organisations in Estonia, LGBT+ organisations outside of the country, and non-LGBT+ activist groups. From both participant responses and the involvement of Estonians in wider European LGBT+ organisations, it is evident that LGBT+ groups in Estonia have strong connections to projects outside of their own country. Baltic Pride in particular has allowed for Estonia to take a leading role in the region, holding the annual Pride parade for two consecutive years and being the first country to have a non-capital city as the host. Although the legalisation of same-sex marriage has only just occurred at the time of writing this thesis, this will undoubtedly increase Estonia's position as the most-LGBT+ friendly of the Baltic region.

Participant interviews also confirmed the existence of collaboration between Estonian LGBT+ organisations and other activist organisations within the country, particularly those centred around feminist and environmental concerns. The formation of an activist board where each

group can rely on the others for support is a key example of how queer solidarity exists within Estonia. Whilst this thesis was able to confirm the presence of queer solidarity within the LGBT+ community in Estonia, further research dedicated to the phenomenon would be incredibly useful in exploring the ways these groups work together, and also how members from the other activist groups view said collaboration.

### **Future of LGBT+ activism in Estonia**

As this research was conducted prior to the proposal and passing of same-sex marriage in Estonia, the main contemporary goal of LGBT+ activism that several participants discussed was successful implementation of the Registered Partnerships Act and/or legalisation of gay marriage. Now that this legalisation has occurred and these goals achieved, the focus of LGBT+ activism in Estonia is likely to shift and centre on the bettering of trans rights in the country, as this was an issue that was also raised by several participants. Although it is uncertain what these improvements would look like, suggestions from participants included education in schools on LGBT+ rights, and the implementation of a self-ID procedure, like that already present in other EU countries such as Spain and Denmark. This law simplifies the process of changing one's legal gender, removing the need for a psychiatric diagnosis, which can be harmful to trans people, especially when there are long waiting times to receive one.

### **Recommended Research for the Future**

Although I believe my thesis presented some interesting conclusions, this work was conducted on a small scale, and further research into certain aspects raised within my research would help in developing the field further. Firstly - as aforementioned – the research period for this thesis took place at a poignant period in Estonian LGBT+ history. Whilst able to discuss the future of activism in Estonia through the answers of participants, this work cannot say how successful the implementation of the new same-sex marriage bill will be, nor can it comment on the future of trans rights in the country. Therefore, future research focused on the new marriage bill is highly recommended and would allow for a continuation from where this dissertation concluded.

Furthermore, whilst this thesis aimed to set up a preliminary discussion on the future of trans rights in Estonia, no definitive conclusions could be made. Therefore, research focusing

specifically on the trans community in Estonia would be beneficial, as it would further highlight the next steps for activists in the country.

Finally – due to the limited number of respondents – further research looking into the changing attitudes of LGBT+ people in Estonia towards the activist label would aid in confirming the findings of this study. Continued study of the LGBT+ community in Estonia and their relationships with activism is recommended over the next few decades because – as this thesis aimed to highlight – these relationships can change significantly over time.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

**Please note that these questions are just guidelines for myself (interviewer) and for the interviewee if they wish to prepare beforehand. The interview itself will be semi-structured so extra questions may be asked if they come naturally in the discussion. You are never required to answer a question and they can be skipped if you don't feel comfortable answering them.**

- 1) Identification with the activist label
  - Do you consider yourself an activist? Why/why not?
  - How would you define your idea of an activist? What does someone need to do to be considered an activist?
  - Have you always considered yourself this or has it changed in recent years?
  - How do you think the activist label is perceived by the public here?
- 2) Queer solidarity
  - Have you worked with other LGBT+ organisations out with Estonia? (EU/Baltic/other country groups?)

- Do you think there are divisions within the Estonian LGBT+ community? (For example: different political views, discrimination/exclusion of certain groups of people etc)
  - Do you have experience with any other kind of activism? (For example: environmental activism, feminist activism).
  - Do the LGBT+ organisation(s) that you are a part of partake in other forms of activism? (For example: environmental activism, feminist activism).
- 3) Current political/social situation of Estonia
- Do you feel safe in Estonia as a member of the LGBT+ community?
  - Are there areas you feel more/less safe in? (specific towns/cities, at home etc)
  - Do you feel the Estonian government is doing enough for LGBT+ people? If not, what would you change?
  - Would you say Estonian politics has become more or less LGBT+ friendly in the past 10 years?
  - Do you feel represented by any political party in particular?

## **Appendix 2: Consent Form**

**Title of Project:** LGBT+ Activism in Estonia

**Name of Researcher:** Rebecca Shaw

**Supervisors:** Heiko Pääbo and Agnieszka Sadecka

### **Please tick as appropriate**

- Yes  No  I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- Yes  No  I confirm that I am over the age of 18 at the time of the interview.
- Yes  No  I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- Yes  No  I consent to interviews being audio-recorded if taking place **in person**. If taking place **online** visual recording will also occur, but I understand that at my request, my camera can be turned off before the recording begins so that my image is not recorded.
- Yes  No  I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.
- Yes  No  I understand that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee; for example in the event of disclosure of harm or danger to participants or others.
- Yes  No  I understand that confidentiality may also be impossible to guarantee because of the small sample size of participants.

### **I agree that:**

- Yes  No  All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- Yes  No  The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- Yes  No  The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research. Research data will be securely stored by the university for 10 years and then destroyed.
- Yes  No  The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- Yes  No  I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

Yes  No  Other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Yes  No  Other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Yes  No  I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant ..... Signature .....

Date .....

Name of Researcher .....Signature .....

Date .....

### **Appendix 3: Plain Language Statement**

This Plain Language Statement is in English. If you require a translated version into either Estonian or Russian, please contact the researcher at: [2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk)

See vorm on inglise keeles. Kui vajate eestikeelset tõlkeversiooni, võtke ühendust uurijaga: [2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk)

Этот документ на английском языке. Если вам нужна русскоязычная версия, пожалуйста, свяжитесь с исследователем по: [2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk)

#### **1. Study title and Researcher Details**

**Study Title:** LGBTQ+ Activism in Estonia.

**Researcher Details:**

- University: University of Glasgow
- School: College of Social Sciences
- Principal Investigator: Rebecca Shaw ([2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk))
- Supervisors: Heiko Pääbo ([Heiko.Paabo@ut.ee](mailto:Heiko.Paabo@ut.ee)) and Agnieszka Sadecka ([agnieszka.sadecka@uj.edu.pl](mailto:agnieszka.sadecka@uj.edu.pl))
- Degree: International Masters in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear to you, or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

#### **3. What is the purpose of the study?**

My project aims to look at members of the LGBT+ community in Estonia and how they identify with the activist label. It will also look to gain a greater understanding of LGBT+ attitudes towards contemporary Estonian politics, and whether or not queer solidarity is present within these communities too. The study will comprise of interviews made over an approximately month-long period. Only one interview will be conducted per participant.

#### **4. Why have I been chosen?**

Participants have been chosen based on their involvement in the LGBT+ community within Estonia. All participants are 18+ and able to provide their own full consent. Including yourself, around 8-10 participants have been selected for interviews. Participant recruitment has been aided by Estonian LGBT+ organisations. These are Tartu LGBT, Peemoti Keskus, FestHeart, Q-Space Estonia and Estonian LGBT Association.

## **5. Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in the research. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. This includes when the interview is being conducted, and if you decide to withdraw the interview and all other data will be destroyed immediately. There will be no negative consequences as a result of refusing to participate or withdrawing from the study. Participation/non-participation will in no way impact the relationship you have with the organisation that you represent/were recruited from.

## **6. What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to take part an interview will be conducted between yourself and the researcher. The interview can last as long as you wish, although the estimated time is 30-45 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed afterwards. The researcher's native language is English, however the interviews can be conducted in Estonian or Russian via a translator if you are not comfortable giving answers in English. If an interpreter is requested, this person will be bound to the same confidentiality as the researcher.

There are no expected risks to partaking in this research. You are free to choose the location of the interview (within the boundaries of Estonia), and it is also possible to conduct the interview online via Microsoft Teams if this is preferred. If at any point of the interview you feel unsafe for whatever reason, the interview can be stopped immediately.

The interviews will be semi-structured and will look to cover three main areas: identification with the activist label, queer solidarity/involvement with other activism groups, and the current political/social situation in Estonia. The interview schedule that contains example questions for each section can be requested for viewing before the interview takes place.

## **7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by a randomised ID number and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. As it is a small research group other identifying factors will also be removed to prevent participant identification. These are gender and age. As sexual identity is important to the research being undertaken, if you mention your sexual identity in the interview, you will be asked if you wish to have this kept in, or if you would prefer for it to be switched to a more anonymised term. For example, if you identify as 'a gay man', this could be changed to 'member of the LGBT+ community'. If you would rather any mention of your sexuality be redacted this will also be possible.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

Due to the nature of the study and the small sample size, please note that it may be impossible to guarantee complete confidentiality.

## **8. What will happen to the results of the research study?**

Data from the interview will be stored electronically at the University of Glasgow. All data will be encrypted and password protected. As per university guidelines the data will be stored for 10 years then destroyed by being deleted from the electronic storage. Data will be stored on Enlighten: Research Data which the university recommends for long term data storage. Due to the size of audio files, only transcripts will be uploaded to this storage, and all audio files of the interviews will be destroyed. The results of the data will be published in the dissertation, which is to be submitted in August 2023. After the dissertation has been submitted data within it will not be able to be changed. If required - within the 10-year period in which data is stored for - the data may then also be used in further research papers. As with the dissertation, you will never be identified in any report or published data. At your request, consent can be withdrawn, and your data destroyed at that time. By using Enlighten: Research Data, I will be able to access the data even after graduation, and therefore be able to edit/delete the information per your request. Please note that if you wish to destroy your data after the submission of the dissertation (August 2023) your data will be removed from the stored data but will not be able to be removed from the dissertation.

#### **10. Who has reviewed the study?**

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Glasgow's School of Social Sciences' Ethics Committee.

#### **11. Contact for Further Information**

Should you require any further information, please contact Rebecca Shaw (researcher) at [2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2317938s@student.gla.ac.uk).

If you (participants) have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research project you can contact the School of Social Sciences Ethics Officer - Gerda Reith. Email: [socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk).

Please find below contact information if you require emotional support regarding the topics discussed within the interview, or if you feel distressed at any time during or after the research process.

For LGBT+ specific support the main support organisation is Eesti LGBT Ühing, whose contacts for support can be found here - <https://www.lgbt.ee/kontakt>. Support is available in both Estonian and Russian.

If an immediate helpline is needed there are two key options for participants:

- 1) Eluliin: This is an **emergency contact line** for use in a crisis. The contacts are (+372) 655 8088 (Estonian) and (+372) 655 5688 (Russian).
- 2) Emotional Support Helpline: This is for anyone to talk about everyday life and worries. It does not need to be an emergency to contact this line. Support is available in Estonian, Russian, and English. The contact number is (+372) 116 123.

It should be noted that neither of these helplines specialise in LGBT+ support, but can offer immediate emotional support to those who require it.

## Appendix 4: University of Glasgow Ethical Approval



Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

College of Social Sciences

Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

### Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application  Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2023/007/IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Rebecca Shaw

Project Title: LGBTQ+ Activism in Estonia

**Application Status: Fully Approved**

Date of Review: 03/03/2023

Start Date of Approval 03/03/2023 End Date of Approval 31/08/2023

**NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.**

### Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. **Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.**

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

**Approval Subject to Amendments** means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

**Amendments Subject to SEF** should be submitted to ethics administrator.

**If your application is rejected** a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

REVIEWER MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE
The application now has addressed all the suggested ethical issues. It is now fully approved. Good luck with this research!	
REVIEWER MINOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE
ADDITIONAL REVIEWER COMMENTS	APPLICANT RESPONSE

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Please retain this notification for future reference. If you have any enquiries,  
please email [School ethics email address](#)

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University of Glasgow  
College of Social Sciences  
Glasgow G12 8QQ  
The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

E-mail: [School ethics email address](#)

## **Appendix 5: Jagiellonian University Ethical Approval**

Ethics in Research Commission  
Institute of European Studies  
Jagiellonian University in Kraków



Kraków, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2023

### **APPROVAL DECISION**

*LGBTQ+ Activism in Estonia*

The Ethics in Research Commission of the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, having assessed the scope and consequences of research undertaken within the project *LGBTQ+ Activism in Estonia* submitted by Ms. Rebecca Shaw, hereby declares that the project meets the standards of ethical research as adopted by the Institute of European Studies.

The Commission finds that the applicant have considered thoroughly the ethical dilemmas that may be involved in their research and safeguarded adequate protection of all potential participants as well as their personal data.

Members of the Commission:

Dr. hab. Jacek Kołodziej, prof. UJ (Chair)

Dr. Ewa Kamarad

Dr. Joanna Orzechowska-Waślawska

Dr. Przemysław Tacik

On behalf of the Commission,

Dr. Przemysław Tacik

Secretary of the Commission

