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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Safe Space Behind Revolving Doors: Opportunity Structures and the Multiple Layers of LGBTQ+ Business-Based Activism in a Hostile State*

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ABSTRACT: Despite LGBTQ+ employee resource groups having become a commonly recognized initiative in Slovakia, research conducted within these groups in the Central and Eastern European region so far has been lacking. Existing literature from the Global North indicates that the groups and their members aim for a great diversity of objectives. We propose to study LGBTQ+ employee resource groups not only as business-based initiatives driven by human resources development, but also as collective actions within the theoretical framework of modern social movements that emphasize opportunity structures and movement resources. The present case study sheds light on the different levels of objectives aimed at by employee resource groups' members, as they operate in specific organizational environments as well as in a country with widespread hetero/cis-sexism and growing political hostility. The case study indicates that it is the ability to operate at two institutional levels of opportunity structures that allows these groups to mitigate the costs of activism while at the same time allowing their engagement with the LGBTQ+ civil society in the country.

KEYWORDS: activism, employee resource groups, LGBTQ+, social movements, workplace

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1. Introduction

Throughout the last decade, a handful of LGBTQ+[†] employee resource groups (ERGs) have established themselves in Slovakia, mainly inside large, multinational companies. These workplace-activist groups have belatedly made their way into this Central European country both in spite of and because of its unwelcoming legislation and public opinion toward the LGBTQ+ community.

While the unwelcoming Slovak context can impose risks and only open very limited windows of opportunity for activists within the civil society, the environment inside international companies, whose parent enterprises are often situated in more LGBTQ+-friendly countries, can be a lot more favorable. Within company walls, ERG members still need to mobilize people and resources, but their strategies, purposes, opportunities, and constraints will most certainly differ from those in the broader civil society. With this in mind, we set out to study how Slovak ERG members perceive their role in fostering change regarding LGBTQ+ persons' rights and their political demands, relying on observations of public events, as well as a set of in-depth interviews with ERG members and members of the civil society sector.

According to Rod Githens (2009), LGBTQ+ ERGs foster change at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. In this study, we consider these different levels of the groups' actions, examining the development of their agendas, both inside and outside of their organizations. We rely on this framework, while adding a fourth level (the political) to examine the data collected in the interviews.

ERGs are groups of employee-activists, often organized around a common identity, who volunteer to spend additional unpaid time at their workplaces encouraging discussion, giving advice to employers, and promoting internal policy change (Raeburn 2004; Githens 2009). ERGs can be studied as units of the business sector and the workplace-equality social movements, and their presence in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been growing. In order to understand the positionality of these groups vis-a-vis the Slovak LGBTQ+ movements, we look at these initiatives through the theoretical perspective of "new social movements" (Melucci 1985; Flesher Fominaya 2020), which recognizes the various practices of everyday activism and self-expression as forms of personalized political resistance (Taylor and Raeburn 1995) that do not necessarily have to be directed solely toward the state.

We argue that, in CEE (and similar) contexts, workplace activists operate under multiple layers of often contradicting opportunity structures, and just as the lines between their personal, work, and volunteer lives are often blurred, they also actively engage to dim the lines separating their "in-company" mobilization from their overall contribution to the broader LGBTQ+ cluster of movements, by slowly attempting to transpose their internal corporate-culture and corporate-policy achievements—as well as material resources—onto society at large and the state.

2. New Social Movements, Multi-Institutional Politics, and LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Groups

When civil rights movements emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, they introduced a major change in the scholarship of social movements. Influential theories at that time—such as classical Marxism and resource mobilization—suddenly became insufficient, as none of these new mobilizations was

[†] The LGBTQ+ acronym contains a wide variety of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, generally standing for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender persons, intersex persons and queer persons.

fundamentally based on an economic or class-struggle logic. The conflicts that triggered these mobilizations and collective actions were not solely oriented toward instrumental political/economic change and the state. Instead, the conflicts triggering them involved the norms and codes of the social structure and how they favored or endangered the life and the self-expression of different social groups (Melucci 1985; Buechler 1995; Flesher Fominaya 2020). As these new movements were built upon cultural conflicts related to race, gender, or sexuality—which happened in a symbolic terrain, and entailed problems of identity, equality, individual self-realization, participation, and human rights (Habermas 1981), their primary action was consequently oriented toward transforming cultural patterns and gaining recognition for social identities (Bernstein 2009, 265).

In the LGBTQ+ movement, and other identity-centered movements, the slogan "'the personal is political' in part highlights the new centrality of everyday life and experiences as sites of political struggle and contestation" (Flesher Fominaya 2020, 31). This is what Verta Taylor and Nicole Raeburn (1995, 254) also call "personalized political resistance," contesting the traditional divide between the personal and the political. These movements do not separate individual change from collective action (Melucci 1985, 812). It is through individual, everyday life experiences and relations that activists socialize others into the new cultural patterns they wish to advance.

Because these movements happen mostly in the cultural sphere, one of the main debates around them is whether they would have any material and structural outcomes. Although their primary concern is social recognition, it does not mean that redistribution is not part of their agenda (especially considering that many instances of maldistribution are brought by misrecognition) (Fraser 1997). Likewise, although their motivating conflicts are, to some extent, detached from the state, this does not necessarily mean that they are "apolitical" or that they do not have structural effects on state policy. Theorists of new social movements reject the apolitical label by arguing that movements fighting on symbolic terrain are efficient in rendering unbalanced power relations visible (Buechler 1995), leading society and policymakers to stop reproducing the norms that allowed the existence of such imbalances; socializing new generations under new, defying notions; and ultimately pushing state policy toward reform.

Furthermore, politics can be understood in a more flexible, multi-institutional way, which presupposes that the sources of power are dispersed in society, located in many institutions (e.g., education, workplace, religion, family, etc.), each operating under different and, at times, contradictory institutional logics (Wulff, Bernstein, and Taylor 2015, 114). This means that one enters the realm of politics not only when interacting with agents of governments, but whenever one negotiates with any of these systems of authority. With this logic in mind, the scholarship of social movements (initially focused on conflicts in which the state was necessarily the target) also started to study how movements target other forms of authority, including firms and industries (De Bakker, Den Hond, King, & Weber 2013). One example of such movement collective actions are the so-called employee resource groups.

2.1 The Employee Resource Group As Collective Action

Employee resource groups (ERGs) dedicated to tackling hostile workplace environments and creating welcoming communities for LGBTQ+ employees, first emerged in the North American environment in the 1980s (Raeburn 2004). Drawing from the experience of already established affinity groups, such as those dedicated to women or people of color, the groups took up primarily the agenda of networking and lobbying for equal benefits for same-sex couples (Welbourne, Rolf, and Schlacher 2017). These initial lesbian and gay ERGs were formed as volunteering initiatives founded by the gay employees for other gay employees (Briscoe

and Safford 2010). The model of these groups spread further and extended its agenda vis-a-vis the political climate of the HIV pandemic and the conservative clampdown on workplace anti-discrimination protection in the USA (Raeburn 2004). Since the 1980s, these groups have established themselves all around the world as: *"formally sanctioned groups that organize around a shared identity or interest to organize programs, encourage discussion, seek organizational changes, advise their employers, and/or increase organizational effectiveness through addressing their shared interest"* (Githens 2009, 18). The above definition strongly implies that these groups no longer hold the position of the management's challenger, but have grown to fit into, and even to fulfill organizational objectives.

As the principles of human resource development grew to include the groups and their objectives, the recognition of the company management changed the resource allocation for these employee groups (Welbourne, Rolf, and Schlacher 2017). Their continuous inclusion can be traced back to shifts in managerial paradigms of the Global North's 1990s. Nikolas Rose (1999) for example draws our attention to what he calls the management of subjectivity - the need to make work pleasurable for the employees, as well as profitable for the employer. In order to do so, he argues, the business needs to align the goals of the company with the goals of the individual. Consequently, Thomas and Ely (1996) argue that former corporate diversity initiatives which were solely dedicated to increasing representation of minorities at the workplace failed. As a result, a new paradigm has been developed, one centered at identity-group membership and questions of how such identity can be harnessed by human resource development. What followed was a new need for minority-group employees to feel valued and safe in the workplace, by allowing them to "bring their authentic selves" to the workplace. In the same vein, Fleming (2009) has argued that the quest for "authenticity" has become the key tool of informal control, with the objective of reconciling the employees with the unpleasant reality of work, by redrawing the boundaries between working and non-working time, ultimately resulting in increased productivity. Burchiellaro (2023) wonders just how "authentic" or "natural" these initiatives are, if they require constant labor.

It has been previously argued that initiatives aimed at corporatisation and commercialisation of gay identities fall short of the emancipatory potential, as they can be subsumed under the sexual politics of neoliberalism (Duggan 2004). Peter Drucker (2015) has argued that the Global North has witnessed increased shrinking of non-commercial gathering spaces for LGBTQ+ persons, as they seek to carve out social spaces for themselves within neoliberalism, including within the corporate realm. Drucker hereby appeals to Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity, which she defines as: *"politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption"* (Duggan 2004, 50). The concept of homonormativity presupposes acceptance of LGBTQ+ employees, just "on our own terms".

What is more, the recognition of the organizational value of LGBTQ+ ERGs and their subsequent mimetic spread to different parts of the corporate world has been happening at the forefront of broader political developments fuelled by the World Economic Forum and the United Nations Free & Equal Campaign which resulted in the 2017 *UN LGBTI Standards of Conduct for Businesses* (Schadendorf 2021). Besides a variety of presented standards, such as creating a positive and affirmative environment for LGBTQ+ employees, the document also calls on companies as political actors to "Act in the public sphere". Here the standards suggest that companies should promote the desire of LGBTQ+ employees to create their own staff groups, engage in public advocacy or collective action on behalf of LGBTQ+ persons' rights (Tripathi, Radcliffe, and Houdart 2017). While the LGBTQ+ social movements have managed to create limited institutionalized leeways over

the corporations, as compared to the labor initiatives, it is safe to say certain impact has been achieved as a result of various pressures.

Oftentimes companies are perceived as black boxes where decision-making happens internally (or imperatively) top-down, assuming that such "acting in public sphere" is the grand idea of the management which is to be executed upon direction. But Burchiellaro (2023) further suggests to view activities similar to LGBTQ+ ERGs as diversity work. Drawing onto the work by Sara Ahmed (2017, 91), diversity work can be understood as *"[the] work we do when we are attempting to transform institutions (open them up for those who have been excluded), and second, the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution"*. According to Burchiellaro (2023), "diversity within organizations" can be also viewed as something that tends to be harnessed by corporations, constantly put to work in order to claim its value. Such perspectives open up to understanding of the work done by ERG members as one of constant negotiation for resources and impact.

Raeburn (2004) was the first to suggest that ERGs operate within their own institutional setting of the corporate environment, which provides them with a specific set of constraints and opportunities. We may thus employ the concept of "opportunity structures" - dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives or constraints for challengers to undertake collective action by influencing their perceptions of the chances of success or failure (Soule and King 2015). This concept, originally developed to describe the relationship between collective actions and the state (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 59), but it can also account for the incentives and constraints posed by the management inside a company (Soule 2012). Such perspective also allows us to look at the ERG members as organizational change agents, or as workplace-equality activists (Raeburn 2004) as we also consider their impact outside of the organization.

There are many elements inside corporations that can facilitate (or constrain, if absent) the work of ERGs. The presence of already established templates, for example—such as previous internal contestations from other excluded groups—can offer legitimacy. Organizational realignments—such as the arrival of a new CEO or a change in the composition of the board—can open significant windows of opportunity. Likewise, the availability of influential allies and of a diversity-embracing corporate culture can be facilitators. Depending on how favorable or unwelcoming their company environment is, workplace activists will then shape their strategies. According to Raeburn (2004), the strategy of "frame-blending" is common for ERG members. It describes how activists mix an ideology of ethics (which portrays the adoption of their new proposed policies as a matter of social justice) and an ideology of profits (which frames them as a money-making measure).

This plays into what Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully (1995, in Briscoe and Safford 2010) have described as "tempered radicalism"—a type of activism in which workers use their dual identity to "advocate for their interests without strongly violating the norms and rules of the organizations in which they work" (Briscoe and Safford 2010, 43). In companies with a more favorable structure of opportunities, tempered radicalism may be subtle; in less open environments, management may allow ERGs to exist, but end up pushing activists toward conservatism in their strategies and demands.

These strategies are employed as the groups aim to achieve a variety of goals. Recent research on LGBTQ+ ERGs highlights two sets of objectives in particular. First, scholarship has been focusing on the objective of LGBTQ+ ERGs to foster visibility for LGBTQ+ employees and their grievances, as well as the establishment of a welcoming and safe community of employees. This objective is commonly enshrined in activities such as awareness raising and educating as means of harassment and discrimination prevention, with the heterosexual and cisgender majority in mind as the target audience (McNulty, McPhail, Inversi, Dundon and Nechanska 2018). But Ciarán McFadden and Marian Crowley-Henry (2018) also emphasize socializing events, which

allow for networking and information exchange. The second set of objectives of LGBTQ+ ERGs is linked to the groups operating as platforms for the employees to share information on employee experiences, as well as platforms for spotlighting and acting on their grievances (Colgan and McKearney 2012; Githens and Aragon 2009).

The variety of activities of these collective actions translates into objectives of change at different levels. Githens (2009) thus argues that ERGs have been known to foster change at three levels: the level of the individual (e.g., by personal development); the level of the organization (e.g., via policy change and change in organizational culture); and the broader societal level (e.g., by challenging heteronormativity). Unfortunately, minority-focused ERGs, such as those dedicated to LGBTQ+ employees, have been studied so far predominantly in the North American and the Western European context. We believe that analyzing their recent emergence in Central and Eastern Europe can contribute to the understanding of how workplace activists operate under multiple conflicting opportunity structures. Based on the Slovak case study, we argue for the extension of Githens' levels of change, by adding the layer of political engagement, which is being attempted by the ERG members. Before moving on to discuss the case study, we offer an overview of the context and political opportunity structures available to the actors operating within the LGBTQ+ activist networks in Slovakia.

3. Political Heterosexism and the Struggles of the LGBTQ+ Movement in Slovakia

Slovakia is a country where LGBTQ+ people are somewhat legally protected from discrimination at the workplace, but where all-encompassing legal equality has not yet been achieved. Marked by religious and conservative backlash, Slovak public opinion regarding LGBTQ+ rights is sharply divided, and counter-movements are active and strong in the country. As a consequence, political elites shy away from making bold, significant efforts in favor of this group.

In 2004, in line with EU norms, Slovakia adopted anti-discrimination laws explicitly banning discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (and later gender identity) in areas such as employment, goods and services, education, health, and social security. Since 2013, hate crime and hate speech laws also include acts motivated by sexual orientation. On the other hand, the country does not recognize same-sex marriage or civil unions; same-sex couples are not allowed to adopt children; and "conversion therapies" have not been formally banned (ILGA Europe 2021). To make matters worse, in 2014, a constitutional amendment initiated by the Christian Democrats entered into force defining marriage as a "unique relationship between one man and one woman," further reinforcing that the Slovak Republic protects and promotes heterosexual marriage only (Maďarová 2015). Right after the passing of the constitutional amendment, the conservative group Alliance for the Family collected 400,000 signatures petitioning for a referendum to be held on whether Slovaks agreed with banning same-sex marriage, prohibiting adoption by same-sex couples, and excluding sex education from the school curriculum (Maďarová 2015; Guasti and Bustikova 2020). The referendum, held in February 2015, was not successful, as it failed to reach the required 50 percent threshold of eligible voters. Only 21.41 percent of Slovaks showed up to vote—around 90 percent of whom indeed voted "yes" to all three questions (Smrek 2015).

Despite the failure of the referendum, one should not assume that the grievances of Slovak LGBTQ+ persons are recognized by the public. 63 percent of Slovaks declare themselves to be Catholic (Pew Research Center 2018) and several of the organized initiatives against LGBTQ+ grievances in the country are directly connected

to the Catholic Church. A 2020 Pew Research Center report shows that only 44 percent of Slovaks say that homosexuality should be accepted by society. In a Eurobarometer of the previous year (2019), when asked whether LGB people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, 59 percent of Slovaks said they should not (the highest percentage among all EU countries). The same opinion was extended to transgender people, whose right to change documents to match their gender identity is opposed by 56 percent of Slovaks. Not surprisingly, almost half of the population—47 percent—also opposes same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center 2018) and over the past decade, support for registered partnership has never exceeded 50 percent (Guasti and Bustikova 2020, 237). Although a large portion of the population holds negative attitudes, events of overt homophobic physical violence do not happen that frequently in Slovakia. Still, an event such as a gunman opening fire in front of a LGBTQ+ nightclub in Bratislava on 12 October 2022, killing two patrons and wounding a barkeeper, showcases that hate speech and far-right radicalization find enough room to grow in the country.

LGBTQ+ activism in Slovakia, therefore, targets both state authorities and the general public. The umbrella organization Otherness Initiative (Iniciatíva Inakosť), the NGO Rainbow PRIDE Bratislava, and other organized groups share their expertise with government advisory bodies and lobby actively for legal recognition of same-sex couples and the gender identity of transgender people, while also carrying out cultural activities for the general public, like the Otherness Film Festival and the annual Pride parades. But over the past ten years, activist initiatives within the business sector have also been on the increase in Slovakia. In 2013, the non-governmental organization Diversity PRO was founded, uniting members of different ERGs, as well as other people working in businesses interested in fostering workplace equality. Not only does the group organize socializing and educational events, it also holds an annual LGBTI+ Business Forum, and engages with international initiatives such as the CEE non-governmental organization for workplace equality, East Meets West. Over the past decade, businesses themselves and people from the business sector have been actively involved in various initiatives of a philanthropic and awareness-raising nature. For example, in 2019, the Slovak Ministry of Culture refused to fund LGBTQ+-related events (including the annual Bratislava Rainbow Pride) despite positive reviews from the grant committee. Mobilizations against this political move of the Minister herself resulted in, among other things, an initiative of the business sector called For Colorful Culture. This initiative was later transformed into the Fund for the Support of the LGBT+ Community, run by the NGO Pontis and fueled by the philanthropy of the business sector. In 2022, after the terrorist attack, subsequent hostile political rhetoric led to the creation of the Our Lives Are at Stake initiative; it was launched by members of the Otherness Initiative, but in terms of labor and funding, it relies extensively on volunteers from the business sector (e.g., public relations and project management). Similar initiatives of the business sector are on the increase, and many of them can be credited to people also mobilizing themselves within LGBTQ+ ERGs, primarily based in the capital city, Bratislava. The present case study is centered on the work of these groups and the different levels of change their members aspire to foster.

4. Different Levels of Change within the Agenda of LGBTQ+ ERGs: A Slovak Case Study

The present case study draws data from 18 interviews conducted from 2021 to 2023 with members of 7 LGBTQ+ ERGs operating in two biggest cities of Slovakia - Bratislava and Košice. Additionally, 4 interviews were conducted with representatives of the non-governmental sector (i.e., Otherness Initiative, Pontis

Foundation, Our Lives Are at Stake and Diversity PRO). The viability of the company-based groups seems to be fleeting, with considerable levels of fluctuation among active members, which makes it difficult to provide accurate estimates of their numbers and membership. Extensive home-office regimes within the Slovakia-based branches of international corporations also led to several LGBTQ+ ERGs becoming inactive in 2022. Nevertheless, we assume that in 2021 there were approximately 5 to 10 active LGBTQ+ ERGs in Slovakia, with the majority of them being based in Bratislava, in international companies. The interview transcripts were anonymized on the level of individuals, including the identity of the company. The selected companies specialized in IT, communications, consumer goods and manufacturing. The majority of interviewees from the LGBTQ+ ERGs self-identified as women - heterosexual allies. For the purpose of this study, we refer to the ERGs as ERG1-7.

The interviews were collected in Slovak, Czech, and English languages and were transcribed verbatim and then coded in the MaxQDA software with the purpose of reflexive thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). With the use of the software functions, we were able to group the codes into clusters, allowing us to look at the three different levels of change described by Githens (2009)—individual, social, and organizational. Additional data was collected at six online and offline events dedicated to LGBTQ+ employees in businesses, organized in Bratislava during the same period between 2021 and 2023, including one organized in Belgrade—namely, the East Meets West Forum dedicated to workplace equality within the Central and Eastern European region. What we propose, based on the case study, is to recognize a fourth level of change attempted by the groups —the political level. At this level, LGBTQ+ ERGs operate while they recognize the hostile social and political conditions "outside" of the company, such as the heteronormative public policies of the state or the hostile anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric of the political elites.

4.1 Individual Level

On the individual level, employees volunteering in the ERGs seem to benefit from the engagement in diverse ways. The interviewed members spoke of various motivations that brought them to the group and that still sustain their interest. While not all interviewed ERG members self-identify as LGBTQ+ persons, for those who do, their personal identities and experiences draw them to the group, where they can meet other LGBTQ+ persons or like-minded allies. As Petra, a cis-heterosexual woman confirmed, the ability to socialize with like-minded co-workers is also important for allies: "[A]lso relationships-wise, [in an ERG] you will meet many people and some of them will remain in your circle of friends" (Petra, ERG2, May 2022). In ERG1, socializing seems to be a key objective of the group's agenda. In order to facilitate it, they have been organizing informal activities such as coffees, evening quizzes, or outdoor goulash cooking. The relevance of socializing became more salient to ERG members when its viability was severely limited during the COVID-19 pandemic. Luca from ERG2 described this experience: "before, we used to be an office group, a cool office group, and loads of people who would join, together we would go for lunch. And [now] the bonding of the group is gone. You can have virtual coffees, but it is not the same." (Luca, ERG2, April 2022).

The different motivations of the interviewed ERG members disclose other benefits of engaging within an LGBTQ+ ERG. Altogether, seven respondents described the desire to acquire new awareness and knowledge about LGBTQ+ persons' struggles, which was often fueled by the persons' social justice values. For example, a gay employee spoke of his lack of awareness prior to joining the group: "[G]radually the work at ERG taught me many things that I didn't even understand before, even though I'm part of the LGBTI community as such. But the truth is that I had not focused on it that thoroughly; I got sensitized" (Andrej, ERG1, January 2022).

Educating oneself on LGBTQ+ persons' struggles, gaining relevant knowledge, or understanding key concepts related to LGBTQ+ identities could be understood as a form of employee personal growth connected to social justice values. A member of the non-governmental organization Diversity PRO described this as the less obvious benefit of being engaged in an LGBTQ+ ERG at one's workplace: "I have also come across this, that those people seem to go and devote themselves to those parts of the [ERG's] agenda that they enjoy and in which they see their own development. So, there is this individual development, but in my opinion, it is not a visible thing" (Matej, Diversity PRO, March 2022).

But another benefit discussed by the interviewees was broader professional growth within the company or in connection to the employees' professional careers as they extended their professional network or learned new skills on the go. For example, Sasha, a trans woman working in an IT company, claimed the following:

> "Yeah, I do it for my career, too. It's not just out of my will, I actually see my visibility among the managers, that I'm actually so active. So, when I came with the various studies, or petitions, and similar things, they actually see that I am involved in this way. Also for [company name], I do all those trainings for the employees, and so on. They see it all as happening in my free time and I have 100% other things to do on top of that. [..] So, on the basis of this, the company included me among the top performers, which in turn brought me an increase in salary." (Sasha, ERG 5, July 2023)

While for employees such as Sasha, the rewards for their unpaid work are somewhat clear, not all interviewed ERG members framed their individual engagement as being rewarding within the company structures. For example, Mia, a heterosexual ally woman working in communications, framed her motivations in terms of social justice values, but affirmed the lack of recognition within her organization, emphasizing the volunteer nature of her engagement:

> "That is so very motivating for me, when I really see that we have helped someone to feel better, maybe not only in our work, but in general in their skin, that they feel better. But, you can't say… here I don't even get any financial reward for it, I don't have a career advancement for it, I don't even feel that our group is somehow popular in the company, that we would make ourselves visible through this." (Mia, ERG 7, September 2023)

4.2 Organizational Level

Managerial support loomed large as a key topic of our interviews, as all interviewees recognised the management as an ultimate ally of the groups. Nevertheless, while in some companies, support was visible at different levels of management (e.g. local management and the mother company), this was not a general rule. Speaking of the top management, Andrej from ERG1 claimed that, at the global level of their company, "the topic of diversity and inclusion is being pushed through." When discussing experiences of discrimination or microaggressions toward LGBTQ+ persons at the workplace, the interviewees of ERG 1, ERG 2 and ERG 3 almost unanimously agreed that, at the time of speaking, such experiences were not only rare, but almost impossible.

To an extent, the presence of an LGBTQ+ ERG within a company was perceived as a standard which should be achieved if a company wanted to present itself as an inclusive employer. But the group functioned also as a tool of harm prevention, as many of the interviewees spoke of the desire to create and sustain an inclusive

company culture, or a safe space for LGBTQ+ employees within the ERG group, but also within the workplace. Samo from ERG3 talked about their perspective: "For example, when you consider Slovakia, [company name] itself is a state within a state, because since we are an international company, the moment you cross the threshold and enter the office, the environment is completely different [...] Even the way people think is different" (Samo, ERG3, September 2022).

The data however indicates that managerial support should not be viewed as self-evident or limitless. Both ERG1 and ERG2 were interested in achieving benefits for same-sex couples, with only ERG2 being successful. In terms of benefits, the public healthcare system in Slovakia does not require employers to pay for employee healthcare insurance. Nevertheless, employees living with same-sex partners and their children do not have access to any form of legal union or shared adoption of the child; therefore, they are excluded from some protections and privileges available to heterosexual couples (e.g., maternity and paternity leave for both parents). ERG1 struggled to reach consensus with the management since the state's legal framework did not require the employers to provide such benefits. But other issues also loomed large for the ERG members, and the topic of trans employees' rights was particularly salient. As Matej from the non-governmental sector explained:

> I know, for example, that in some companies, access to toilets is an issue for those few trans people who dare to work there. So, this has been an issue. Or the change in employee's name within the company systems [when the person has not undergone legal transition] is extremely difficult in some companies. For others it is not that difficult, so we are left with the question "why" [does it work elsewhere]? (Matej, Diversity PRO, March 2022)

Organizational change thus can be difficult to achieve, or it can "trickle down" from the management. However, 7 ERG members from 5 companies spoke of instances where they encountered opposition to their agenda from the more local management or HR. For example, Matus from ERG 6 encountered people in local managerial positions who claimed that: "[...] we don't have time for that right now. This is politics and time has not yet come, because society is not ready." (Matus, ERG 6, July 2023).

Many of these demands and objectives were discussed by the interviewees from the ERGs and the NGOs with the help of what we came to understand as a frame-blending narrative, or strategy. This narrative argues for inclusion and non-discrimination of LGBTQ+ employees on both ethical and profit-based terms. Interviewee Pavol, member of ERG1, explained that workplace culture that allows employees to be their authentic (i.e., "outed") LGBTQ+ selves is beneficial for the company: "To put it in simpler terms, when people of the [LGBTQ+] community feel more comfortable to be themselves at the workplace, then they become more productive. So that is why it is important" (Pavol, ERG1, January 2022).

4.3 Societal Level

The key activities conducted by ERGs and their members stemmed from the need to raise awareness on LGBTQ+ persons, their needs and grievances within the workplace or more broadly in Slovakia. Members of all 7 ERGs claimed to be conducting trainings, sensitizing workshops or awareness raising lectures. These activities were often scheduled to coincide with "June Pride month" or memorable days, such as the International Transgender Day of Visibility on 31 March. By celebrating these days or by using the Pride flag

as a symbol for their awareness-raising activities, these groups aimed to normalize certain LGBTQ+ symbolism within the workplace. Nevertheless, not all LGBTQ+-related symbolism would be recognised as conducible within the Slovak workplace environment. Johanna of ERG 3 for example spoke about the clash between what she and her group considered appropriate in the Slovak context and what the mother company asked the group to do:

> "You [the management] don't understand the situation, you don't understand the landscape, you come here with something huge and the complete opposite happens. People will be even more against it, they will take a defensive stand against it, because that is what it is […]. Because I feel that [the mother company] would like us to do more in Slovakia [...], and why don't we do some drag queen parties, or why don't we have a huge banner and go to Pride or something? Because there will be no interest in it here, and on the contrary, people will turn against us. We simply have to build education and awareness, enlightenment, rather slowly." (Johanna, ERG 3, September 2022)

Although all ERGs offered certain awareness-raising activities, the topics and format seemed to differ. While ERG1 previously organized workshops on HIV prevention and queer history or the LGBTQ+ minority stress, ERG3 organized a discussion in the "living-book" format on coming out and a panel debate on parenting LGBTQ+ children.

The concept of allyship seemed significant to the majority of respondents, although only ERG 1, ERG 2 and ERG 3 organized an event or program dedicated solely to heterosexual and cisgender allies. The development of the "ally identity" among heterosexual and cisgender employees was also flagged as a desired objective by economist Jens Schadendorf at the East Meets West conference in Belgrade: "The allyship concept is so important, because it is much connected to real life, since when companies are talking about this concept, they are not talking to people who are just working there … they are also talking to people who are their family and friends" (East Meets West Belgrade, 16 September 2022). Many of the interviewees recognized the common experiences of LGBTQ+ persons living in Slovakia, whether it was the heterosexist political rhetoric or everyday encounters with discrimination or harassment. In this sense, the awareness-raising activities were devised with the objective to change the attitudes or behavior of their heterosexual and cisgender co-workers with a subsequent "spill-over" effect. In the same vein, ERG2 was unlike the other two groups, as it was founded not by the parent company or top management, but by Bratislava-based employees in 2015 as a contestation initiative. Luca talked about the incentives to start their group:

> The refugee crisis was an eye opener. […] And then of course, the anti-LGBT referendum was too hard to digest [pause] with the posters [pause] so that was triggering. [...] And the foreigners, we all thought we were in this really bad position back then, now it is a different story. (Luca, ERG2, April 2022)

4.4 Political Level

As already mentioned, ERG2 was founded as a grassroots initiative of Bratislava-based employees of an international company in a period of hostile heterosexist and anti-immigrant political rhetoric in the country. But the "outside" environment dominated by social exclusion and political hostility toward LGBTQ+ persons

was generally constantly on the minds of the interviewees coming from all 7 groups and the NGO sector. It also seems that the 2022 terrorist attack in the center of Bratislava managed to mobilize a number of companies with their LGBTQ+ ERGs at their forefront. Sandra, a member of the Our Lives Are At Stake initiative spoke about the businesses in the following way:

> "The will to work with that topic was, in my opinion, incomparable to what it was before [the terrorist attack]. According to what I know, [before] no one [from the companies] wanted to get involved, no one wanted to sponsor, actually the need for education was very low. That has changed now. And it is precisely those big players who seem to realize their responsibility and want to react, want to work on that topic. They are even willing to get advice [from NGOs], which is a big thing, because oftentimes you come across that those corporations are so conceited." (Sandra, Our Lives Are At Stake, June 2023)

Interviewees coming from ERGs and the NGO sector also spoke about the engagement of these groups with a variety of national and even international non-governmental organizations. Some of the organizations mentioned by interviewees were dedicated to the workplace environment or the business sector, such as the Slovak Diversity PRO or the international Workplace Pride and East Meets West. Nevertheless, cooperation between ERGs and these organizations has been generally limited to networking, awareness raising, or sharing good practices. A similar agenda has been followed by all 7 ERGs in terms of cooperation with Slovak LGBTQ+ NGOs engaged in awareness raising, lobbying, or service provision. It is very common for ERGs to invite expert speakers from these NGOs or, reciprocally, for ERG members to attend events of NGOs as expert speakers on workplace equality. What is more, a different kind of engagement happens via the ERGs and their companies' philanthropic activities. 4 of the 7 studied groups instigate or actively support management initiatives to donate financial or material resources to the Slovak LGBTQ+ NGOs. While ERG1 donates money directly to selected non-governmental initiatives (e.g., the Film Festival of Otherness), the company of ERG3 provides funding to the NGO Pontis' Fund for the Support of LGBT+ Community. Interviewee Lukas of Iniciatíva Inakosť shared their persuasion that such support is most welcome, since private donorship for LGBTQ+ initiatives is very uncommon in Slovakia and state funding is also unavailable.

The publicly most visible engagement of the groups with the Slovak LGBTQ+ NGOs is their presence (or desire to be present) at the Bratislava Rainbow Pride event. Of the studied ERGs, 4 actively attended Pride marches under the company banner as a collective, although other ERG members also declared the desire to do so one day. Luca of ERG2 spoke about the objective to rally as many employees, including the management:

> "And then we moved outside, we went to the Bratislava Pride. We were one of the only corporations in Slovakia to get thirty to forty people in the Pride, and to get the manager, the general director, so this was very encouraging. And we were able to sponsor these Pride flags and everybody, so for us, when you are a gay person and you see the flags and your company, it was quite nice." (Luca, ERG2, April 2022)

But his colleague Ivan from ERG2 also saw a different aspect to being present at the Bratislava march: "The attendance at Pride is one of the interesting effects. The company can promote itself that it really supports diversity, the company goes there and puts its name on it. And the employees, they have another proof that [the company] is serious about it" (Ivan, ERG2, March 2022).

However, since the 2022 terrorist attack, we have seen more engagement outside of the boundaries of companies or the employee community, and more towards the state. For example, several members of ERGs and other employees initiated a "corporate challenge" on the 2023 International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transpohobia, calling on the Slovak government to improve its protections towards LGBTQ+ persons:

> "Companies operating in Slovakia have been trying to create an inclusive workplace environment for a long time, but their efforts do not meet the reality of Slovak society. Social acceptance and legal status of LGBTI+ people in our country is among the worst in the European Union. Slovakia is one of the last EU countries where same-sex unions and rainbow families are not protected by the legal framework.[...] Therefore, the private sector has decided to come together and point out the discrimination and lack of legal protection compared to the heterosexual majority." (press release, 17 May 2023).

Since then, the number of companies adhering to the "corporate challenge" has been steadily increasing from the original 25. What also followed in October 2023 was a report initiated by some of the challengers on "the economic case for LGBT+ inclusion" in Slovakia. Published by the international NGO Open For Business, the report showcases a variety of arguments on certain legal protections of LGBTQ+ persons, arguing for example that skilled Slovak workers are leaving to work in more open societies, or that LGBTQ+ spending power is a significant contributor to economies (Perlov et al 2023).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study focused on LGBTQ+ ERGs as groups of volunteering employees with specific objectives - individual, social, organizational and political. While companies supporting political and social causes are oftentimes presented in the media as black boxes where decisions happen perchance at the top, with those at the bottom simply executing them, the present study shows a rather more entangled development. Many of these volunteering employees receive very little from their company for their diversity work, and can also experience opposition from the management or the HR where resources or concessions are needed. While there are not necessarily material rewards for such work, there certainly is motivation, which stems from the desire to create a different world, behind the glass doors, away from the hostile state. It however opens up the questions - what sort of "authentic queerness" is possible at the workplace and what the future holds for a state where workplaces promote (or even market) themselves as "safe" from the rest of the world.

Similar to other social movement organizations, the changes that LGBTQ+ ERGs attempt at the individual level are largely connected to the knowledge-sharing environments that these groups create. When LGBTQ+ people (and allies) get together—formally or informally—at their workplaces, they discuss among themselves key concepts related to LGBTQ+ identity, their personal experiences, and the implications of belonging to a minority group at the workplace. The responses from the interviewees point out that engaging in ERGs can serve to promote self-awareness and a shared sense of collective agency, while also offering tools for professional growth. Within the familiar, everyday context of their workplace, making sense of what it means to be an LGBTQ+ professional allows these activists to deploy their identity purposefully in trying to change corporate culture and company policies, all of this happening during their regular eight-hour shift.

At the organizational level, the interviews evidence a sort of "mismatch" between corporate culture and policies within Slovakia-based companies. On the one hand, many ERG members feel that a change in corporate culture is almost unnecessary, as a non-discriminatory and diversity-embracing culture already emanates from the high ranks. They describe the sharp difference they see between the environment their companies promote and the hostility that the Slovak state and society present. On the other hand, many ERGs have had to or still have to fight for policy reform and equal benefits within the Slovak branches of their companies, which shows that a diversity-embracing culture does not automatically translate into policy. Nevertheless, the key point is that, with a diversity-embracing culture, ERG members do not have to bear the costs of constantly coming up against hetero/cis-sexism; they have room to sit at the negotiating table and an opportunity to put forward their agenda. Compared to the civil society sector organizations, Slovak ERG members have at least one institutional layer in which their structure of opportunities is a favorable one. While the Slovak LGBTQ+ movement in general faces hostility and lack of resources, these diversity workers are mostly sheltered and encouraged by HR and the higher ranks of management—even with a special allocation of material and symbolic resources.

It is thus when ERGs decide to transfer these resources to the LGBTQ+ movement outside company walls that they step into the political level. Essentially, the changes they wish to promote at the political level are an extension of the ones promoted at the societal one, only with an increased degree of purposefulness and agency. The political level encompasses the work done by ERGs alongside other Slovak NGOs and activist groups, strategically targeting state policy and proactively occupying voids left by the state. The sponsoring and participation of ERGs in the Bratislava Rainbow Pride is a good example of their political endeavor. ERG members take company resources (both money and the symbolic power of the famous brands) out to the streets. They take what is achieved within the favorable opportunity structure of the company environment and carry it outside in hopes of adding leverage and shifting the scales of opportunities in the national context. To the organizations and initiatives of the LGBTQ+ movement in Slovakia who operate under severe lack of resources, this move is fairly significant. When the Slovak Ministry of Culture refused to fund LGBTQ+-related events in 2019, it was precisely the networking of NGOs and the business sector that occupied this void. At the political level, the Slovak ERGs that are the subject of this study have taken one step further in this direction by attempting to target state policy. Again, this opens up the question beyond the scope of this empirical study - of how the networks and resources of the Slovak LGBTQ+ social movements will develop if their key (and most powerful) "allies" happen to be corporations.

For now it seems that many new political initiatives will stem from this environment. Slovak ERGs operate under two institutional layers of contrasting opportunity structures. It is this factor that differentiates them from the Slovak LGBTQ+ social movement organizations, and is also precisely this factor that allows them to play a key role in the overall, national LGBTQ+ movements. Future research should also look more closely at the individual motivations, as well as the "push and pull" factors that bring employees to—and keep them within—these initiatives. The division of activism vs. paid labor also seems to be a key issue that impacts the fluctuation within these groups and can bring more clarity on the question of why individuals choose to engage in company-based ERGs rather than those of the civil society sector.

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