



# COMING OUT TO HUNGARY



**Team Let's Get Beyond Taboos!**

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## Introduction

Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender (LGBT) people in Hungary experience discrimination on different levels - mostly through lack of visibility and education of the general population concerning sexual diversity and understanding. While Ireland and other member states of the European Union are increasingly supporting the LGBT rights movement, Hungary remains a rather conservative country with a homophobic atmosphere. Our aim is to find out whether there are discernable overlaps or differences between the personal, social and political dimension regarding the discrimination of LGBT people.

Let's Get Beyond Taboos! is an initiative started by students of the Freie Universität Berlin, who are enrolled in the Eastern European Studies master program with a focus on politics and history of eastern Europe.

To gain an overview about the situation of LGBT-people in Hungary, Let's Get Beyond Taboos! visited Budapest in April 2015 and conducted interviews with members and activists of the LGBT-community, like Szimposiön or Háttér Társaság, as well as with representatives of politics, science, media and the church.

This brochure's aim is to provide you with information about the situation of LGBT people in Hungary. We will begin with delivering some concise background information about the latest developments concerning the situation of LGBT people in Hungary. Further information can be found in the reports of the FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights). In the main part of the brochure we present our interview results, subdivided into the personal, social and political dimensions. In the last part you will find additional information about the panel discussion on 9th July 2015, like main questions and information about our guests.



Let's Get Beyond Taboos!

## Background

### Amidst the European progress/ Current developments.

The UK and Luxembourg passed marriage equality laws in 2014 following nine other countries in the EU, while Ireland recently became the first country in the world in which the opening of marriage for homosexuals was determined by a referendum. The clear „Yes“ vote in the referendum on the same-sex marriage shows how strongly the idea of endowing people from the LGBT community with the same rights is supported by the electorate. In Dublin and many other cities, the streets were filled with people fighting for liberalization and social change – a movement that has sparked a lively debate in Europe and resulted in the legalization of registered partnerships in Andorra, Croatia, Estonia and Malta.

Regardless of such liberal developments, human rights defenders in some countries such as Hungary signaled developments which risk violating basic human rights. In accordance with the EU law, the principle of equal treatment is a fundamental value of the European Union, which ensures both the respect for human dignity and the full and equal participation in economic, cultural and social life. Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights

of the European Union prohibits “discrimination on grounds of sex [...] or sexual orientation.”

By signing the Charter as part of its accession to the EU in 2004, the Hungarian state has pledged to unconditionally comply with that principle. But with the inauguration of the current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2010, further attempts against discrimination of homosexuals came to an abrupt end. In 2013 the protection of the family has been expressly limited to heterosexual couples through a constitutional amendment. The increasing discrimination against LGBT people is being driven primarily by the far-right party Jobbik. In April 2012 Jobbik introduced two parliamentary bills, according to which homosexuals making their sexuality recognizable in public can be punished by up to eight years in prison. Furthermore, the bills included a ban on gay bars and clubs, meetings and festivals similar to the „Christopher Street Day“ parades, as well as the positive representation of gays and lesbians in the media. Such populist rhetoric has had a considerable impact on the public opinion so that the social acceptance for any distinct sexual orientation has noticeably begun to decline. According to a report of the “European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights” (FRA), respondents in Hungary report the highest levels of both same-sex couples avoiding holding hands in public and even avoiding certain locations for fear of being assaulted or harassed (81%).

The clear „Yes“ vote in the Irish referendum on same-sex marriage signaled that social change can be achieved by participating in campaigns for social justice. In this sense, we aim to remove consisting taboos about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT), who's legal and social equality can especially be reached by an increased visibility and representation in society.

## Personal Dimension

### Family, Friends, Society.

We posed 11 questions regarding the consequences of being gay in Hungary and how being gay affects the lives of the people on a personal level. Our interest was focused on finding out how people who are gay perceive their situation, what experiences they had made so far, whether they feel that they are an accepted part of society and what, in their opinion, would be a good way to further improve the acceptance of gay people in the Hungarian society.

The group of interviewees was composed of only gay men who currently live in Budapest. This fact has to be taken into account when interpreting the answers given to us during the interview process. However, the fact that we managed to get interviewees with rather different backgrounds, aged between 20 and 50, helped us to avoid the danger of getting an overly biased view on the topic.

One group of questions revolved around the way the interviewees perceived the issue of homosexuality. The answers differed in many ways according to the different backgrounds of the people, but there were common aspects in all answers. Most of the interviewees started to realize that they are gay around the age of 15. Their perception on the issue of homosexuality during that age was influenced by the dominant educational view that homosexuality is “something bad”. This fact often made it hard for them to

accept their own sexual identity and many felt lost. We heard many stories describing how energized and relieved they felt when they finally met other gay people and realized that they are not alone. Most of the people had their coming out around the age of 18. Normally they would prefer to tell it to their closest friend first before they would involve an extended group of friends they trust. Families handle the issue of homosexuality in different ways. There are as many “liberal” families as “conservative” ones. Nevertheless there is a generation factor. In general, a decision is made not to tell the grandparents that their grandchild is gay, because they would not accept it. The possibility to open up to the own family is crucial. However the decision whether to tell everybody in the family or not is often influenced by the fear that the own family could be stigmatized. Interviewees with a rural background often live a double life and try to keep up appearances when they travel back home from Budapest.

Another group of questions aimed at finding out how well gay people are integrated into society and how the LGBT community is perceived in Hungary. In general there is a consensus that Hungary is still a very conservative country. LGBT topics became more visible in the last years but there is still no profound discussion in Hungarian society. Most participants feel that they would have to face negative consequences if they decided to live out their homosexuality. Some of them even come up with elaborated tactics how to discuss their sexual orientation during a job interview for example. All interviewees feel pressured by society to live in a heterosexual relationship. The perception of same-sex couples is improving; nevertheless heterosexual relationships are



Meeting with: Kulka János

still favored, which is heavily affecting the discourse about the topics of family/marriage/adoption of children.

The last group of questions revolved around possibilities to improve the situation of gay people in Hungary. One point that has been mentioned a lot was education. Most people agreed that it is of utmost importance to teach and to inform pupils as early as possible about LGBT topics. The Hungarian educational system is in parts very homophobic. Homophobia can be found at all levels of education from middle schools to universities. Another point mentioned equally often is concerning the legal equality of same-sex relationships and of homosexuals in general. The last point stressed the fact that LGBT topics have to become more visible and that they have to be discussed more evenly. Lately negative statements given by the political leadership of Hungary have influenced the discussion in a bad way. In conclusion, the answers indicate that progress was made during the past 15

years, but Hungary remains a very conservative country.

There are two groups fighting either for or against LGBT positions while the vast majority of society takes a rather indifferent stance. There is a consensus that the best way to tackle the indifference is by addressing LGBT topics early on in schools, increasing the visibility of those topics in the public discourse, and improving the perception of them.

*„One of the most dangerous things in Hungary that happens now is that people don't act because they are afraid of being punished or being rejected...so instead of doing anything they do nothing. It's like a self censoring and that's terrible. And I think it's the same situation in the gay community so they hide. One of the most important reasons I chose to come out is to show some kind of bravery or to show that you don't have to be afraid.“*

*(János Kulka)*



## Social Dimension

### Media, church and public visibility.

With questions regarding the social dimension we wanted to find out which role the church in Hungary plays and how people deal with members of the LGBT community. Furthermore we focused on the way how LGBT people are portrayed in the public and in the media.

The acceptance of LGBT people in the public seems to be influenced not only by the media. There is also a significant difference in acceptance between the metropolitan areas and the more rural parts of Hungary. The aspect of anonymity plays a big part in the way how LGBT people live their public lives. Nevertheless, the visibility of same-sex couples in the public sphere is very low even in the cities. A reason for this is mainly the fear of verbal attacks and humiliation. Physical attacks seem to be the exception, but they occur often enough to influence the behavior of LGBT people. On the other hand, there are places like gay-bars or clubs - often visited by heterosexual people - where free expression of personality and sexual orientation is possible.

Special actions of the LGBT-community are mostly ignored in the public, but the general presence of the topic in the media is increasing. One of the most popular activities is the Budapest Pride, which gets extensive coverage in the media. Fur-

thermore, the way members of the LGBT community are depicted in the media also depends on the kind of media. State owned media is quite conservative. Even a kiss between two men in the TV soap "Glee" was cut out on public TV channels. New media on the other hand is more open towards the topic of homosexuality. The coverage is more favorable and regular than in state owned media, but it is often influenced by market share aspects. Transgender people are used for generating scandalous headlines and the sexual orientation is a main topic when judging people.

For the acceptance of LGBT people in public, the personal experience with LGBT people is also a key factor. Most people are indifferent towards the topic of LGBT until come into contact with LGBT people upon which there is a chance of developing a more positive attitude towards the LGBT topic.

A key finding of our interviews is that the church, especially the Catholic Church, plays an important role regarding the public acceptance of LGBT people. The notion that homosexuality is a sin is heavily influenced by the churches stance on this

position. Although the influence of the church through church services is important, the main influence of the church on society seems to be created through the connection between church and state. For example, a lot of schools are now under the supervision of the church. Although the option to choose between ethics and religion classes in school exists, a lot of pupils participate in religion classes. The education in those classes is openly homophobic most of the time.



Interview with: Urbán József

## Social Dimension

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Although many people who call themselves religious don't attend mass regularly, the opinion and statements of the pope still have a big influence on public thinking. There are more and more dignitaries in the Catholic Church who adopt a more liberal and inclusive view on LGBT topics, yet homosexuality still remains a difficult topic for the Hungarian Catholic Church. One of our interviewees used a metaphor of language to explain his perception on the isolation of homosexuals. "Homosexuals have their own language, which only works in their community and that's why these people are isolated and not understood". But in his opinion the church should actively participate in the process of trying to include those people in society by accepting their otherness.

The main results of the interviews dealing with the social dimension show that church, media and politics have a high influence on the way the society is dealing with members of the LGBT-community.

*„It's very interesting to talk about this issue because LGBT people are 3 to 10%*

*of society. And it's a minority question, a minority problem. And you could say, that it's not so important, because it affects only a small part of society and it's given too much attention in society and in political life. But I think, that somehow this question, which affects a small minority of our society, somehow this issue let emerge very important issues on society. In church I think that it's absolutely true. If you in the church learn how to accept LGBT people not on the way "yes we accept these abnormal people and we are very good Christians to accept them", but accept them as that they are part of reality and we are also abnormal, everyone is abnormal, acceptance should mean accepting the abnormality in each of us. I think if the church learns this through the issue of homosexuality I think, it would be an enormous step forward to a better and more just society."*

**(Urbán József)**



Parliament

## Political Dimension

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### Agenda, development and Europe.

On the political level we aimed at figuring out essential key factors that influence and explain the political agenda in Hungary dealing with LGBT people and their rights. Therefore, we focused on the country's political development within a European context as well as on the decision making process influenced by different topics like family and marriage.

Some interviews confirmed our assumption that LGBT people in Hungary develop a stronger European identity if they experience discrimination because of their sexual orientation. It happens because Europe is associated with open-mindedness and a more liberal attitude and thus represents an alternative for LGBT people who seek

to compensate for a lack of belonging to Hungarian society when politics appear to be homophobic and unhelpful. According to the claim that Hungary is going to provincialize itself within the European Union through illiberal tendencies many interview partners acknowledged this development by mentioning censorship of LGBT-friendly content on TV, the numerous homophobic statements from politicians and the growing gap between society and politics regarding the attitude towards LGBT people. The answers given indicate that there is a real danger to the freedom of expression in Hungary which is especially perceived by LGBT people.

## Political Dimension

However, opinions on provincialization were strongly polarized as others emphasized that Hungary is only returning to its Christian roots and Viktor Orbán's understanding of "illiberal democracy" simply means "conservative". Furthermore, there is a consensus that Budapest will always keep its special role as a cosmopolitan metropolis which tends to be a home for people with different sexual orientations and identities. Nevertheless, LGBT people seem to fall behind when national identity meets traditional values. Developing a European identity as a means to cope with exclusion at home shouldn't be a preferable solution. To raise awareness of LGBT rights in Europe means to improve the situation of LGBT people in every single European country. One could argue that every state is different and national identities cannot be mutualized. But regarding LGBT rights the EU made a clear commitment – Hungary as well. And surprisingly no interview partner responded negatively when asked to describe Hungary's future social and political development, if LGBT people became socially and politically wholly accepted so that they could live their lives freely and self-determined regardless of their sexual orientation. So we tried to understand what precisely triggers a homophobic development in Hungary.

commonly shared ideas of what family and marriage mean if gender is not considered. There is agreement between the interviewees that it is about love, long-term monogamous relationships and the presence of at least one child. Referring to the immense diversity of social reality which always differs from ideals and which was not denied in one single interview, we see as an overall result that the political definition of family, especially in Hungary, is inconsequential. Some argue that full rights should only be given to people embracing traditional ways of life. But this only makes sense if heteronormativity is the keynote. This has to be recognized.

Furthermore, the interviews emphasize that sexual diversity should not be considered as a private affair. It must be politically addressed. Otherwise LGBT people remain invisible in everyday life or become more and more socially marginalized because they are perceived as unacceptable. We also note that Hungarian politicians instrumentalize LGBT issues to gain votes. Of course this is not a unique phenomenon which is only characteristic of Hungary. It happens everywhere – also in Western Europe – and the case of Russian anti-LGBT propaganda laws is still one of the most extreme. Hungary is still not as homophobic as Russia on the political level. However, several interviewees voiced concern about intensifying ties between the government and the Catholic Church which lead to disproportionate political influence, especially in the field of education where homophobia is reproduced through politically tolerated disinformation.



Interview with: Szőnyi Szilárd

*"If there is no awareness of the discrimination of homosexuals in education, there will consequently never be a change.*

*A respecting education policy could induce a positive development. And it also takes a happy society to achieve more acceptance. In a bad-tempered kind of society minorities are always in a bad situation.*

*Nowadays people in Hungary are in a really bad mood."*

**(Dr. Bárándy Gergely, MSZP, translated from Hungarian into English)**

## Discussion

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### Discussion on 9th July 2015.

#### Two Main Questions.

Conservative groups insist that, the context of society is based on national traditions. How far is Hungary lagging behind the developments in Ireland, where modern and traditional views seem to converge?

Many religious people support the view, that homosexuality is socially mediated and thus can be „learned“. Would you support this thesis? And which role does the Catholic Church then play in propagating homophobic views?

#### Schiffer András

- Politician, Lawyer
- Member of Parliament for the LMP Party
- President of the LMP Party
- Studied politics and law at Loránd-Eötvös-University Budapest

#### Ungár Klára

- Politician, Economist
- Founding member of Fidesz (left the party in 1993)
- Now the President of the SZEMA Party (Szabad Emberek Magyarorszáért)
- Studied economics at the Karl Marx University of Economic Sciences (now the Corvinus University of Budapest)

#### Ceglédi Zoltán

- Political analyst

#### Milanovich Dominika

- Sport psychologist
- Studied Gender Studies at European Central University
- Part of the organization-team of Budapest Pride
- About herself: feminist and participate of a half-marathon

## Guests on 9th July 2015

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