

# AFTER ENTRY INTO THE EU, HOMOPHOBIA WAS LET LOOSE

“End Euro Sodom!” What did the EU in fact have to do with the sudden outburst of homophobia that occurred in Poland and Latvia after the two countries became members in May of 2004? Conor O’Dwyer has done research on the backlash against the rights of sexual minorities in Catholic Poland and, together with his colleague Katrina Schwartz, has compared it to the more secular Latvia. Conor O’Dwyer and Katrina Schwarz are both professors of political science at the University of Florida.

“I was surprised that the backlash became so public, and at an official political level. Poland was always pointed to as a leader and the one most like the West, but this was an issue where politicians, kind of publicly, went against this idea of returning to Europe.”

Conor O’Dwyer’s research is primarily based on interviews with advocacy groups, anti-gay groups, and politicians in Poland – and with EU officials, as well.

O’Dwyer conducted the first interviews in 2007, while the former government was in power. He did the second round of interviews last summer, after spending a period of time as a guest researcher at CBEES. As he goes through the material, the effects of the change of government are noticeable.

“Among the advocacies, the tenor of the interviews was more positive this time, which is not surprising when you think of how openly homophobic the former government was. The sense I got – but I am really still going through this material – is that what you have now is a return to a sort of taboo status, to what some rights advocates call ‘the regime of silence’. According to the advocacy groups, the new government, while not so openly homophobic, was intentionally not implementing its requirements in terms of antidiscrimination policy.”

Latvia forbade Pride in both 2005 and 2006. In 2005, a court of law authorized the march, but in 2006 alternative meetings were arranged in its place. The meetings were not provided with police protection, and participants were assaulted with eggs and excrement by counter-demonstrators.

As a response to the international critique, Latvia’s minister of the interior, Dzintars Jaundžeikars,

insisted that he was not forced, “for the sake of a few, to give orders to oppress the entire Latvian people”. In Poland, on the eve of the sexual minorities’ Equality Parade 2005, the mayor of Warsaw Lech Kaczyński said: “I will prohibit the parade regardless of what I find in the organizer’s application. I see no reason to propagate gay culture.” The parade in 2004 was also banned by Kaczyński, just a few months after Poland had joined the EU.

During the years leading up to Poland’s EU membership, however, he had authorized the gay parades.

**In your research, there are many examples of restrictions of the rights of sexual minorities and also of homophobia at the highest political levels. Prior to EU membership, the EU certainly demanded that sexual minorities be protected by the labor code. But do you believe that the EU has lived up to its responsibility for gay rights in Poland and Latvia?**

“In the process before accession it would be fair to say that it was – although no doubt somewhat debated – not a pressing concern, even if the issue was raised. But I also think that it didn’t really become such a visible public issue in the new member-states until pretty much after or right around the time of the accession to the EU. By then the EU could no longer really do anything directly or use its maximum-impact tools anymore. The European parliament has issued very strong condemnations and there have been court cases in human rights, I also think there are more attempts to put indirect pressure on governments in Eastern Europe to support and fund rights organizations. But I wouldn’t say it’s a top concern.”

**Your interviews from Poland in 2007 show that two thirds of the activists thought that the European-level institutions do not have much influence in shaping Polish politics and policy on the issue of the rights of sexual minorities. You also spoke with persons within the EU Commission; what did they think about the EU’s role?**

“I interviewed them on the condition that they not be quoted, but generally the response of that type of European-level officials was that they were very upset about the situation and certainly did not approve or think that it was a trivial matter.”

**Does the timing of the outbreak of homophobia**

**indicate some kind of reaction to the EU forcing through a process of Europeanization as a condition of membership?**

“This is one of the questions that I am still thinking about, how much of it is a backlash against the EU. To word it very strongly, you might say that what happened with this issue is that society became resentful about the way the accession was conducted. It was seen as a process imposed from abroad and the question of gay rights became a question of expressing dissatisfaction with the whole EU project. And I think there is a certain element of truth to that; there are people who go to a gay parade with signs like ‘Put an end to Euro Sodom’. But that is probably not a representative snapshot of the public opinion. There was a fear of what would happen after accession that contributed to the very populist parties, such as the Polish Self Defense Party and League of Polish Families with their anti-gay politics. But the immediate results of accession, especially in terms of the economy, turned out to be much more positive. So I don’t think that resistance to gay rights is primarily a way of expressing disapproval of the EU, I think it runs deeper than that.”

O’Dwyer believes that the EU’s role in the breakout of homophobia in Poland and Latvia was to act like a sort of catalyst. The sexual minorities would have stepped forward sooner or later, and this would have stirred up reactions – the fact that the EU stood as a sort of guarantor of minority rights and as a financial resource while the application process was under way accelerated the development.

But both Poland’s and Latvia’s conceptions of the nation contain homophobic tendencies, which have made it difficult to engender sympathy for norms concerning equal rights. The legacy from the Communist era – in the Soviet Union, homosexuality was taboo and male homosexuality forbidden – is also important.

Poland’s national anti-gay discourse dates back to the interwar era, when Roman Dmowski, Poland’s chief nationalist ideologue, declared that Catholicism is the essence of Polishness. Catholicism set “true Poles” apart from the country’s various minorities. This notion still survives, in particular on the political right. Latvia’s nationalism is, on the other hand, coupled to a fear of being assimilated into the larger hegemonic powers, first Germany, then Soviet Russia, and now the EU. The consequence is that the self-suffi-

cient, hetero-normative family has become integral to national identity. Up until Pride 2005, ethnic tensions had dominated Latvian politics; homosexuality had received very little attention. But in connection with Pride, tensions found a new focus when Latvia’s so-called Preachers’ Party, despite its Russia-friendly profile, and despite its being religious in an anti-Russian and secular context, managed to unite with the Latvian ultra-nationalists in an anti-gay campaign.

**During the accession process, the EU established a lot of conditions. On the issue of sexual minority rights, in particular, it seems that conditionality as a tool for Europeanization is not very effective. Have you observed this in other research areas as well?**

“That’s interesting, and actually I am at the very early stages of a new project where I would like to pursue a comparison: minority policies not just for sexual but also for national minorities. So I can only venture to mention a part of what I have read so far. In a nutshell: the first wave of scholarship on the issue of national minorities suggested that the EU was extremely instrumental and pretty successful in liberalizing nationalist politics, but lately scholars question how much progress in implementation there has actually been after accession. The theory is that a lot of it consists, basically, of changes in the official policy, but that the actual implementation has very large gaps, also deliberate ones. Another example is the question of corruption in Romania and Bulgaria which is an ongoing problem, where I think the implementation of EU governance and norms has not been all that was hoped for.”

According to O’Dwyer, the EU’s conditionality is unique. It is fairly powerful, and has produced changes. In a wider perspective, however, outside the EU, the effectiveness of conditionality as a tool for fostering political reform is far more questionable.

“If you look at studies of conditionality attached to, for example, IMF loans, a lot of the literature expresses rather skeptical attitudes about what the conditionality accomplishes.”

“However, one argument that does show the importance of conditionality in the case of sexual minorities, is that homophobia was not visible before the countries’ membership. Conditionality is all about the consequences attached to taking a certain action, and if they didn’t take the action of being openly homophobic, then that would suggest that they were concerned about the consequences.”

The issue came to the surface with such force, and the debate was so openly homophobic, primarily because of instability in the countries’ party systems. O’Dwyer’s research (done in collaboration with his colleague Schwartz) shows that small parties have had disproportionately great influence.

“Because of under-institutionalized party systems you get a lot of new, often far-right, single-issue parties that can have much more voice in the process of forming government in Eastern Europe than they would in, for example, Germany or France. And the more unstable the governmental coalition, the more difficulties moderate voices have holding back extreme coalition members. Poland has had a pretty unstable

party system since the fall of Communism, and Latvia even more so. The Polish League of Family lost its place in the government and parliament in 2007. That does mean a decline in homophobic rhetoric, but because of the instability, the door is still open for other populist demagogues.

“While at CBEES I participated in a lot of conversations about political populism in Eastern Europe, which is one of the institute’s ongoing research projects. Given that many of the most vociferously anti-gay groups I was investigating in my own research came from the populist right, discussing these issues with Europeanists from such a wide array of disciplines was very helpful when thinking about my own questions.”

Since Poland and Latvia are now members, the ability of the EU to impose pressure from the outside, in order to force through changes, has drastically diminished. Instead, the EU must develop methods that are based on voluntarism. This is something that was neglected as a field of activity during Poland’s and Latvia’s application processes, O’Dwyer and Schwartz point out.

Still, compared with how it was in 2007, O’Dwyer believes that he sees an improvement in the Polish advocacy groups’ relations to the EU institutions.

“I am still going through the material, but my impression is that there is a strengthening of the organizations. They had matured, had become competitive in applying for grants through the EU. They were more professional and more oriented towards grants and projects.”

“I have become very interested in what impact NGOs and activist organizations from Western Europe have on changing attitudes of politicians and parts of the public. That was where I concentrated the focus of the interviews this time. I am also looking at the extent to which you see a strong, on-the-ground advocacy network in new member states and how much other EU member states and European institutions have been able to foster these.”

Not all activists are happy that Poland’s openly homophobic debate has now quieted down.

“Some activists actually thought that the League of Polish Families was the best thing that ever happened since it brought real visibility to the question. As one of the interviewees put it: ‘The current situation is just a return to the regime of silence which makes it difficult to change the status quo, and the status quo is not a very favorable one.’”

**tove stenqvist**

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**D**uring a seminar at CBEES, Joanna Mizielinska, lecturer in gender and queer studies at Warsaw School of Social Research, gives an account of problems associated with the application of queer theory in Poland.

When a theory that has sprung up in one cultural context is transferred into another such context, it runs the risk of being distorted. Queer becomes synonymous with either gay or lesbian, or is emptied of its subversive, confrontational contents because the concept is deprived of its sexuality – queer then becomes anything outside the norm. The fact that both queer theory and the gay movement originate in the U.S. gives rise to further problems. In Poland, queer theory runs the risk of being regarded as yet another import that has come in the wake of a globalization process machinated by the U.S.

“One aspect that one may include here is whether the gay movement in Poland falls into some kind of victim’s role, as they are pitied for lagging ‘behind’ the West. The East-West relationship complicates the issue of what attitude one should take towards the question of why the gay movement has not begun to be politically active until now”, says Mizielinska.

**In fact, Mizielinska** opposes adopting a linear description of the so-called development. Still, she discusses whether there must be an established gay movement in Poland before one can speak about queer. Or, in other words, whether homophobia must be overcome and homosexual be accepted in Polish society before one can bring up the fact that no sexual identities, not even the homosexual, are fixed, but are, rather, socially produced and must be constructed continuously in order not to collapse.

Another problem is that there



Joanna Mizielinska, lecturer in gender and queer studies at Warsaw School of Social Research

Queer theory has come to Eastern Europe from the U.S. Will homophobia now spread westward?

The paradox of belonging: easier to break rules when one has gained entrance than when one is knocking on the door.