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The everyday abnormal and the quest for normalcy: How Polish equality marches build protester resilience

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Abstract

Illiberal regimes and societies test resilience and provoke resistance, especially from targeted minority groups. But this abstraction can obscure the complexity of specific events and participants' emotional motivation. What are the emotional and cognitive responses of protest participants within illiberal contexts? This article investigates this question by focusing on LGBT-rights protest participants in contemporary Poland. Using testimony from in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants from 2019 equality marches, we identify emotional and cognitive responses that centre around a quest for normalcy. Illiberal politics in Poland, especially when contrasted with perceptions about LGBT acceptance in neighbouring countries, have made everyday life 'abnormal', whereby LGBT individuals fear increasing violence and feel unable to act normally. Protest participation opens a space where LGBT individuals and allies can feel normal. This experience of normalcy effectively claims recognition of one's 'normal' humanity. In turn, this builds resilience within participants to endure the deterring effects of everyday life and to continue their advocacy for LGBT rights.

Keywords: illiberalism, social movements, emotions, resistance, resilience, normalcy

*Whatever, you take the street, it's your demo, you play the queens,
Gaga and Cher... a feeling of pride, pride on behalf of the kids, who, besides
homophobic parents, living in such a city, they come, march and have fun.*
(Jolanta)

1 Introduction

This paper understands illiberal democracy as a regime system exhibiting majoritarian characteristics and a concomitant denigration of minority rights. When targeted at vulnerable minority groups, illiberal politics – especially when embodied in government and state institutions – dehumanise and traumatise. This is the case in Poland, where an illiberal government voices and fosters hostility to LGBT individuals, fuelling politicisation and polarisation about LGBT rights (ILGA, 2019; Taylor & Prentice, 2020). Within this peculiar context, what are the emotional and cognitive responses of LGBT-rights protest participants in Poland?

The emergence of illiberal democratic regimes, particularly within the European Union, has coincided with some of the largest protest mobilisations in the post-communist era. Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, with its policies and its rhetoric, has thrust pre-existing and emerging LGBT activism and protesters into a transformed context. This study explores and analyses protester emotions under these conditions and thereby contributes to the literature on a set of 'extreme cases' wherein protest participation is fundamentally shaped by strong politicisation of the issue area and broader illiberalisation of the political sphere.

This article's main contribution is to add to the literature on protester resilience and the emotional effect of protest participation within illiberal contexts. Resilience is the ability 'to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on various sources of strength and social resources to adapt and cope with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma' (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Given the persistent distress, amounting even to trauma, imposed on many LGBT individuals due to the growing illiberalism in Poland, resilience is precisely what is needed to continue LGBT rights advocacy.

Our study identifies the emotional and cognitive responses of participants in 2019 equality marches for LGBT rights in Poland and a quest for normalcy as their overlying narrative. Informed by anthropological literature on normalcy, the article explores how normalcy is used to articulate hope and aspiration for ordinary lives (Kelly, 2008; Jansen, 2015), unoppressed by illiberal governments or severe Catholic mores. In the interviewees' narratives, the quest for normalcy is identified with a clear temporal and geographical direction, progressing and moving towards the West, which accordingly denies Polish society's coevalness with the protesters' movement. Building on studies that examine Eastern bloc citizens' desire to join the imagined normality of the West, oftentimes linked to dreams of consumption (Fehervary, 2002; Galbraith, 2003; Plakans, 2009), the article reveals how participants wish for liberal democracy and a concomitant recognition of their 'normal' humanity in their own country. Illiberal politics, especially when contrasted with perceptions about LGBT acceptance in neighbouring countries, have made everyday life 'abnormal'; LGBT individuals fear increasing violence and societal radicalisation. Protest participation opens a space where LGBT individuals and allies can feel normal but also, just as importantly, where they can signal what they perceive to be normal to wider society, through partial self-censorship. They use the events to demonstrate their solidarity and act in ways they might otherwise suppress, such as holding hands or kissing. At protests, participants can escape the distresses of everyday lives and instead live out an imagined normality; they can directly challenge the hegemonic order in Poland. This builds resilience within participants to endure the deterring effects of everyday life and to continue their advocacy for LGBT rights. Relying on in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants from 2019 equality marches, we detect this division after identifying persistent themes in participants' emotional and cognitive experiences of protest.

2 Methods

This study is an outgrowth of the EU Horizon-2020 BRaVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation) project, which examined violent extremism and polarisation in ten EU countries. In recent years, journalistic commentary and scholarly analysis have occa-

sionally identified examples from Poland as representative of radicalising and polarising trends. Our research, situated at the micro-level, reveals protest participants' perceptions of and responses to these trends.

To identify the emotional and cognitive responses of LGBT-rights protest participants in contemporary Poland, we conducted eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants¹ from 2019 equality marches. In part, these interviews explored protester biographies that illuminated some mechanics of their protest mobilisation (e.g., prior activism and network embeddedness, consideration of movement strategy, action mobilisation). More importantly, the interviews focused on protesters' emotions before, during, and after participation in an equality march.

Interviewees were selected for their participation in 2019 equality march events in Warsaw (8 June 2019) and/or in Białystok (20 July 2019). This criterion ensured that testimony reflected the protest experience of equality marches both in Warsaw and other large cities and in more peripheral locales where the immediate, street-level conditions are not as welcoming for LGBT-rights protests. The Białystok march was unique, as it was the first time the event took place in a city considered a conservative stronghold. The march involved massive social unrest as opponents of LGBT rights mobilised counter-demonstrations to confront the equality march, including the archbishop of Białystok, Tadeusz Wojda, who called on inhabitants to defend the church and reject the demonstration's postulates. Interviewees also attended equality marches in other cities (e.g., Łódź, Poznań, and Wrocław), but they were asked specifically to reflect on participation in Warsaw and/or Białystok, as well as to reflect on the divergence (if any) between well-established events like the one in Warsaw and newer events in hostile contexts like Białystok.

Demographically, the interviewees' ages ranged from 26 to 40; though originally from settlements of varying sizes, most now live in large cities (in Poland or Germany); and most possess a higher education degree. Furthermore, interviewees included both members of the LGBT community and people who see themselves as allies. Some of the interviewees had organiser roles during the marches and extensive experience with activism, while others were new to the protests.

The temporal selection criterion – march participation in 2019 – ensured uniformity in the socio-political landscape. As the following section reviews, Poland in 2019 featured a politically polarised context characterised by the illiberal and autocratising agenda of the ruling government, and distinguished by singularly strong politicisation of LGBT-rights issues. Protester emotions in a polarised, autocratising context have been little explored in the budding social movement scholarship on emotions; hence, this paper's central contribution.

The results relate to research about protest participation within illiberal contexts, as well as protest activity motivated by the desire for recognition.² Rather than offering generalizable results,³ the more robust contribution of this study is its generation of case-specific insights about emotional and cognitive facets of LGBT-rights protest participation in contemporary Poland. Notwithstanding the case-specific design of the present study, LGBT pro-

¹ We have changed the name of interview participants and excluded any uniquely identifying information.

² Such as the American Civil Rights Movement, anti-apartheid activism, the Black Lives Matter movement.

³ Projects organised around large-scale surveys of protesters provide the most robust generalisable findings – for example, the 'Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation' (CCC) project.

test in Poland belongs to a set of ‘extreme cases’ wherein protest participation is fundamentally shaped by strong politicisation of the issue area and broader illiberalisation of the political sphere. The intense politicisation of LGBT-rights issues in Poland fits this mould.⁴

3 Context

Our study must be read alongside recognition of the *illiberal democracy* emerging in Poland. Initially coined by Fareed Zakaria (1997), the term describes dismantling of rule of law, a shift from constitutional liberalism towards increasing disregard for civil liberties, while keeping democratic procedures intact. Illiberalism could also be understood as a nationalist and majoritarian counter-hegemonic movement that rejects liberal democracy and globalisation, in Poland best represented by the EU (Grzebalska & Petó, 2018, p. 165). Moreover, Polish illiberalism includes devout Catholicism and conservatism, particularly involving LGBT (and abortion) issues. To a certain extent these elements are distinctive of Poland, but both further the denigration of minority rights that is essential to illiberalism.

Despite the increasingly repressive context surrounding protests, it would be counter-productive to contextualise Poland as being among more authoritarian regimes, such as those of China or Russia. Rather, Poland remains embedded in transnational institutions and the government endeavours to maintain the country’s good repute on the international stage. This pertains to protest activities, resistance, and resilience, as participants can presume they will not face extreme violence or persecution. This makes Poland a curious – but not atypical – case: the context is increasingly hostile, but the opportunity to protest is not closed or encumbered by the threat of direct state repression.

Regressive gender and LGBT equality policies have been observed in several countries in the EU and beyond, linked to rising illiberalism (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018). Poland is regularly listed among the least LGBT-friendly countries in the EU.⁵ According to a 2019 benchmarking tool on LGBT equality laws and policies (ILGA Europe, 2019), Poland ranked second to last among the EU countries. Polish LGBT people do not enjoy equal rights, as homosexual marriages or civil partnerships do not exist. At the same time, there are numerous cases of homophobic and transphobic violence every year (Melnychenko, 2020). Poland does not have sufficient instruments for prosecuting hate speech against LGBT persons, however, as the penal code (Journal of Laws, 1997) only covers crimes perpetrated on national, ethnic, racial or religious grounds. Advocacy groups, as well as the Polish Ombudsman’s office (Bodnar et al., 2010), regularly highlight the omission, but so far to no avail.

Recent years have borne witness to increasing discussion of Polish LGBT rights. A Google trend analysis for ‘LGBT’ (Figure 1), which displays how frequently the term has been searched for, reflects the sudden intensification in Poland. Similarly, the BRaVE project’s polarisation indicators (Taylor & Prentice, 2020) reveal that Polish society is highly

⁴ Other examples abound; for instance, Muslim-rights protests in India, LGBT-rights issues in Brazil, gender studies education in Hungary.

⁵ Several researchers have examined LGBT issues and contention in Poland. By focusing on the cognitive and emotional experience of equality march participants, this article adds to scholarship that unpacks the dynamics of LGBT protest in Poland (e.g., Peterson, Wahlström & Wennerhag, 2018). It is also informed by research that dilates on transnational and EU facets of LGBT contention (e.g. Ayobu, 2016, and O’Dwyer, 2018).

polarised and has the lowest societal resilience with regard to ‘gender/sex/orientation’ issues. In other words, Poland is uniquely unfit to cope with the intense politicisation of LGBT issues.

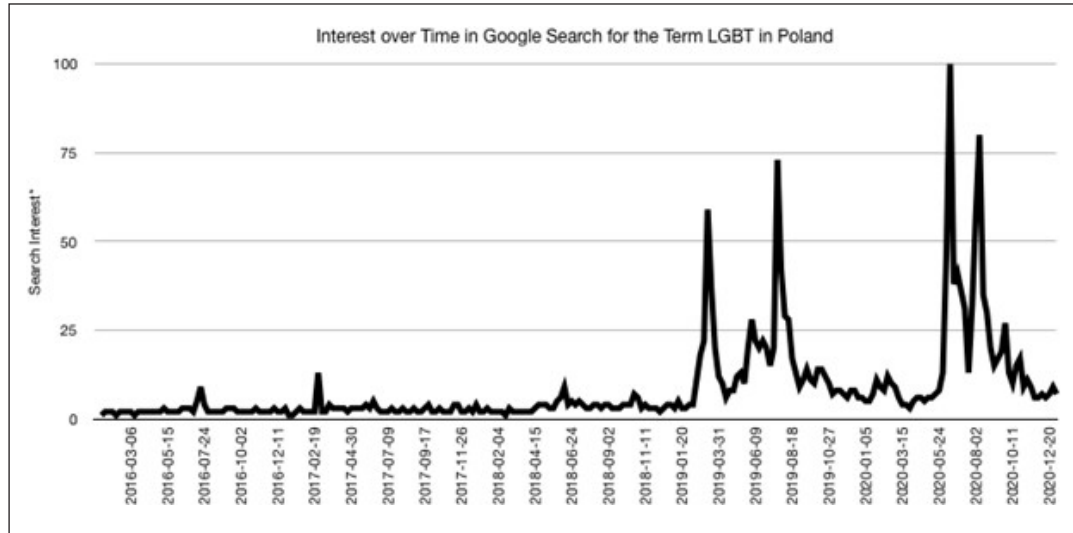


Figure 1. Google trend analysis for ‘LGBT’ in Poland.

Y-axis numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term.

A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular.

A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.

Entering a national election cycle, with parliamentary elections in October 2019 and presidential elections in June 2020, the PiS party used LGBT issues as a central theme in their campaign. Aided by the influential and notoriously conservative Catholic Church⁶ hierarchy, the party advanced the narrative of a choice between traditional, ‘pro-family’ values and the threat of ‘LGBT ideology’; this accelerated intense politicisation of LGBT rights in the political discourse. In this atmosphere, more than 80 municipalities in Poland proclaimed themselves LGBT-free zones in 2019. Leading PiS politicians were unambiguous in their public statements. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the PiS chairman, suggested that Warsaw mayor Rafał Trzaskowski’s support for LGBT rights was an attack on ‘Polish children and families’ (TokFM, 2019). During the presidential election campaign, President Andrzej Duda proclaimed that ‘LGBT are not people, it’s an ideology’ (Bartejka, 2020).

⁶ The Catholic Church in Poland is a central actor within a network of organisations and individuals that promote a slate of socially conservative policies. This network’s opposition to LGBT rights parallels its advocacy against gender-sensitive policymaking (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021).

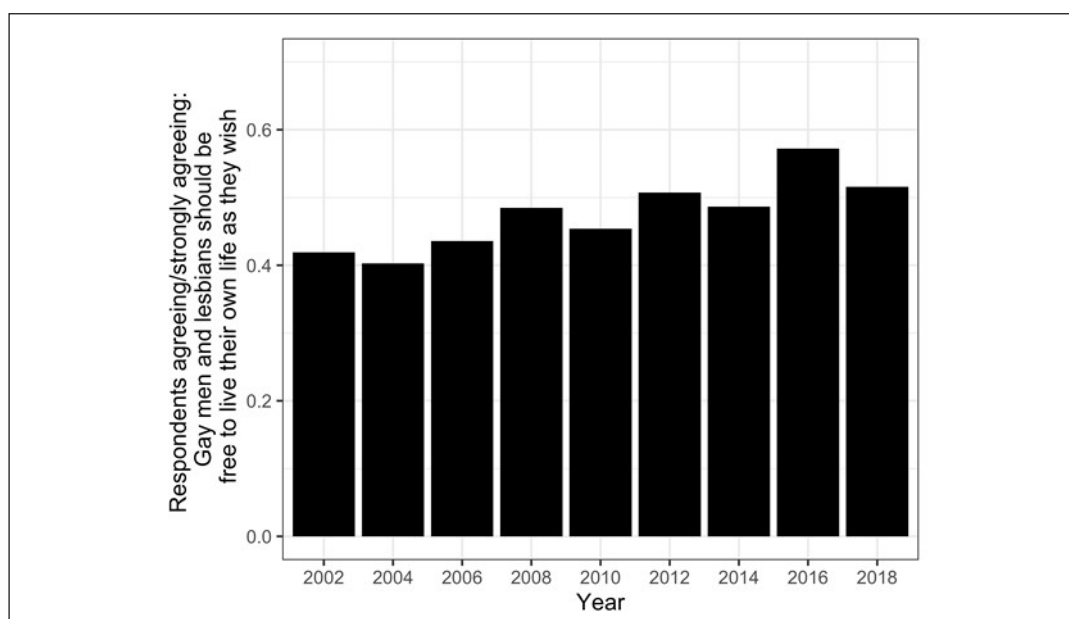


Figure 2. Longitudinal European Social Survey responses from Poland on acceptance of LGBT individuals (European Social Survey Cumulative File, 2020)

Despite conservative politicians' rhetoric, survey data, such as the European Social Survey (Figure 2), suggests increasing acceptance of LGBT rights. Looking at changes in attitudes in CEE countries from Eurobarometer surveys in 2015 and 2019, Poland is the only one to exhibit a significant increase in the social acceptance of LGBT people. Slovakia, Hungary, as well as the Czech Republic⁷ all recorded backsliding in this regard (Eurobarometer, 2015; 2019). The comparative lens thus reveals that Poland is an outlier in the region in terms of societal development.⁸ Increasing visibility and information availability have sheared away the opacity surrounding LGBT issues and compelled Poles to 'choose sides' in the polarised political environment. The scale of LGBT protest in Poland also reflects this politicised context: the Warsaw parade routinely draws tens of thousands of participants, dwarfing similar events in neighbouring countries. Moreover, Poland is exceptional for the diffusion of LGBT marches to smaller cities and towns. In sum, to examine LGBT protest in contemporary Poland is to examine a case of protest participation in an autocratising context in strongly politicised issue areas.

⁷ The Czech Republic remains the most accepting in the region.

⁸ Even though a deeper examination is beyond the scope of this article, these survey results also suggest that the processes at play might not be necessarily bound to the rise of the new illiberal regimes in Poland and Hungary only.

4 Trauma and pride

Longstanding conservatism (specifically, conservative Catholicism) combined with PiS invective against 'LGBT ideology' have rendered LGBT individuals and allies a vulnerable group. Interviewees attest to this vulnerability in the first part of this section. They describe encountering individual harassment as well as menacing opposition when publicly advocating for LGBT rights, which effects a measure of repression, discouraging demonstrative affiliation with the LGBT community. Protest participation is one highly visible instance of demonstrative affiliation. Yet, as the section continues, several interviewees conveyed a feeling of prolonged distress or even trauma, whether from participation in fraught protests or from a sustained attack on the 'normality' of LGBT rights (see following section). By referring to 'trauma', we do not mean to denote a psychodynamic or neuroscience conception of the phenomenon, but rather a species of 'political trauma', similar to Matthies-Boon's (2017) conception. This view conceives of trauma as potentially resulting from 'structural, continuous and ongoing' (ibid., p. 624) socio-political factors; the source of trauma is the 'experience of a shattering worldview' (ibid., p. 623), which is often prompted or intensified by violent socio-political context. However, as the last part of the section argues, this distress and trauma does not appear to have a demobilising effect; instead, protest participants emphasised affective commitments and moral emotions that ultimately imbued them with resilience against trauma and imparted a sense of pride.

First, interviewees described recent developments in Poland – socio-politically, but also criminally, referring to hate crimes against (perceived) LGBT individuals – as cause for alarm. A term that interviewees frequently used to describe the instrumentalization of the topic by the PiS party was '*nagonka*', meaning a hunt or violent persecution of people associated with LGBT. Augustyna, a married heterosexual woman, described her concerns for friends:

I have a lot of gay friends, either lesbian or gay. And I'm very frightened to see how they are coping with the situation in Poland and [in] what direction it is going in Poland; I'm very frightened and very scared as to what will happen.

Yet such perceptions generally formed part of the motivation for protesting; that is, part of their *action mobilisation*⁹ process. Pawel explained,

As the political situation in Poland deteriorated, I felt more of an obligation to go and join the march [...] changes in the political situation in the past year, increased attacks on the LGBT community by the government, I'm sure you heard what was going on in Poland. When I heard about the parade in Wrocław, I felt that I must join, also to a good friend of mine from Warsaw arrived only because of that, to show support. Many people came from other cities, simply to show their support.

This explanation suggests that the increasingly repressive socio-political environment and the elevated risk of being assaulted for perceived LGBT affiliation is grievance-forming

⁹ Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013, p. 895): 'Action mobilization is further broken down into four separate steps: people need to sympathize with the cause, need to know about the upcoming event, must want to participate and they must be able to participate'.

and mobilising rather than demobilising. This would corroborate the finding of Van Stelelenburg and Klandermans (2013, p. 892) that ‘emotions function as accelerators or amplifiers’, spurring individuals to act and making them more resolute in that action. To be sure, interviewees expressed ideological-, instrumental-, and identity-based motives (van Stelelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk, 2010) for protest participation, but affective commitment was central, propelling our interviewees to engage in solidary protest.

Participation in equality marches presents both the opportunity to demonstrate affiliation as well as the risk of exposure to group-based opposition. Here, a stark division emerges between established marches in cosmopolitan cities and new marches in more conservative, peripheral cities. The oldest march, initiated in 2001, takes place in Warsaw. Although the annual event has encountered various challenges in the past – from small-scale, violent counter-protest to (ultimately unenforced) municipal bans¹⁰ – by 2019 Warsaw’s equality march had become a massive ritual with tens of thousands of participants. Protesting in this environment is associated with no serious risk, possibly even becoming banal:

You just go there; there are people protesting, I mean like peacefully, laughing, singing, dancing. Mostly, it’s just walking, you know. It’s very boring in the end: you pass the streets you already know; you go through the centre of Warsaw. Sometimes you have some protesting groups, but they are usually very small and weak. You have thousands of people walking, so even if there are some clashes from time to time, they are really minor. [...] You don’t care and it’s totally not about them. (Janek)

Their size, annual persistence, relatively favourable local environment, and (recently) sponsorship from politicians and businesses make events like the one in Warsaw stable fixtures. Emotions as well as moods and reflexes that protesters restrain elsewhere for fear of abuse or harassment become unfettered within the space of the equality march. The weight of the daily suppression of certain behaviours lifts.

By contrast, in less accommodating local contexts, where the illiberal rhetoric of PiS finds greater traction, this emotional and behavioural weight lifts less – or even becomes heavier. Unlike the liberated carnival of the Warsaw event, marches like that which occurred in Białystok in 2019 engender confrontation that is acutely distressing or even traumatising to protest participants. There, on a sheerly tactical level, protest is more endangered; as Luiz explained, in comparison to Warsaw,

The number [of counter-protesters] was bigger than ours. Even 15 years ago the opposition against the march, against the pride parade in Warsaw, was smaller than that of its members. So it was something new: the scale and their aggressiveness was unexpected, and it didn’t meet my expectations, it crossed them, that the scale and number of the people was as it was.

Met by a numerically superior mass of counter-demonstrators, many socialised in the chanting and intimidation practices of football stadiums,¹¹ the equality march participants confronted a direct and immediate threat. This provoked cascades of reflexes and urges:

¹⁰ As mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński imposed a ban on the parade in 2004 and 2005.

¹¹ Cf. Pilkington et al. (2018, pp. 134–135).

It was very scary, I mean, I was not that scared in my life ever, really [...] if you see very pissed off dudes who are very dangerous dudes who want to beat whoever they find with rainbow flags, I wanted to go out as quickly as I could. [...] I was so devastated. I was so devastated. (Augustyna)

There were some fragments [of the march] when the music was playing, when we tried to dance or have fun, but all of it was really surrounded by fear. [...] Being in the city centre, twenty-first century, two in the afternoon on a Saturday and I can be attacked by some people just because I am in a march. Simply so absurd, impossible. Especially since this is a march in defence of human rights... and there was a helicopter flying over us, so low... the trees seemed like they were falling... really like during the war. (Maria)

Moreover, for people from such locales (as opposed to the participants who reside elsewhere), the trauma of participation can extend beyond the space of the march. Participants from elsewhere leave after the event, while locals can face continued contestation after the event. Zoja recalls the following from the day of the march in Białystok:

This was painful, and especially when we come back home and I realise that the kids in the family of my fiancée are celebrating because they won the – how do they call it, *tęczowy*, it's a fancy word in the mouths' of the kids, they say *tęczowy*, it's like those 'rainbow people', so when they say *tęczowy*, it's like, it seems like an attack: 'yay, yeah, we pushed the rainbow people back'. And I'm like, 'you know that I'm a rainbow person, that I was there...' And they were shocked: they were really surprised, like, 'why?! What's wrong with you?'

Outside of Poland's largest cities and longest-running LGBT events, participating in an equality march does not promise the same liberation, the same expressive freedom. Participants expose themselves to confrontation in a dissimilar way to when taking part in more established marches. Inevitably, this sort of exposure prompts participants to reconsider their participation.

Following marches, protesters reflect on their participation. Traumatizing experiences can discourage further participation, but even after events like the Białystok march, participants express a willingness to continue. Interviewees express anger that such aggressive counter-protest happens, both at marches in places like Białystok and Warsaw.

To be honest, I'm really pissed off. Like, I'm really angry that it happened – that counter-manifesters were so aggressive. This is my main emotion when I'm thinking about the march. And then, I have a fear: I fear that it will happen again; and to be honest, after the march last year, I was really hesitant to come to the next marches because I was not prepared for what was going to happen. For me, it was really... I had like... I needed a good two or three weeks to get myself together after this march because I never faced so much aggression. (Augustyna)

Both the disappointment associated with the confrontational parts of protests and the slow, simmering trauma of seemingly greater threats to the LGBT community can spur 'burnout' or 'lost commitment' – individual-level factors that drive declining participation (Zeller, 2020). Indeed, some interviewees, taking stock of their participation as well as attacks on LGBT individuals, expressed their intention to escape the dangers of LGBT life and activism in Poland:

The scope of violence grew really rapidly and the state is not really counting that in any way because they don't want to have those statistics. I'm very concerned, and I'm also concerned about my own safety in Poland. This is the reason why I have decided to stay in Berlin for the time being at least. I don't know how it is going to change, how it is going to evolve. [...] I mean, many straight people, for instance, were hanging rainbow flags from their apartment windows. Those windows were smashed, people would throw paint on those flags. People don't want to have their windows smashed, so they take their rainbow flags back [inside]. (Janek)

A cost is imposed on LGBT-rights activists and protest participants. It registers on material, physical, and emotional levels. However, most interviewees articulated defiance against these hindrances and dissuasions:

I'm proud. I'm proud. I'm deeply proud. And I know that many of my friends are proud of this thing that they know a person who was [in Białystok]. I'm very happy that I showed to my friends how it was to be there. [...] I'm more sure that we should organise such demonstrations in every possible part of this country because I think it would be much more effective than doing only gatherings in Warsaw, Krakow. (Luiz)

Participants consider the experience, juxtaposed with their moral emotions and affective commitments, and reaffirm their intent to protest. When asked about attending future equality marches, Maria's answer is typical:

One hundred per cent. Definitely. I decided already, even if I was really scared, I will go regardless. I have to win over my fear, because it's just fear, but they, people [LGBT] are scared even more.

The government's illiberal rhetoric has generated a more febrile environment for LGBT-rights protests. The politicisation of LGBT issues polarises public opinion, fosters radicalisation, and makes demonstrative affiliation, ordinarily and in states of exception, perceptibly more hazardous for the targeted group. But enduring moral emotions, convictions about supporting LGBT rights, affective commitments and solidarity with LGBT friends and acquaintances instils participants with resilience against routine and exceptional forms of strain. This confirms Klandermans's (1997, p. 97) assertion that affective commitment is predominantly driven by 'interactions with the organisations one is a member of. The more satisfactory their interactions are, the stronger the affective commitment'. This resilience, in turn, spurs further mobilisation and resistance.

5 Normalcy

One of the recurring tropes in the narratives of the interviewees was linked to 'normalcy'. It is worth unpacking what 'normal' stands for, as the repeated use of the term points to a link between moral emotions and the shock of the protest participants. Our discussion of normalcy relates to Bakhtin's (1984) reflections on carnival. Equality march participants can act out their natural behaviour; they become part of a collectivity freed from 'normal' or usual social strictures; and they can be renewed by the carnival-like experience. But Bakhtin (1984, p. 7) points out that 'carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it'. This is not the case with Poland's equality marches: there are

vociferous, castigating opponents outside the marches. With their marches, participants instead create a safe space to experience an idealised normalcy. This section explores how protesters use the latter term, revealing a sense of geographical and temporal dissonance in a polarised Poland. It identifies the moral shock of seeing inhabitants perceived as normal, ordinary citizens taking part in the counter-protests and examines how a quest for normalcy sometimes leads to a degree of self-censorship among the protesters.

Participants often cast equality marches in the mould of normalcy as both a condition of the marches and a strategic goal to pursue. Pawel, reflecting on the parade in Warsaw, said 'It's also not strictly an LGBT party, there are many families, supporters. Everyone who cares about Poland being normal'. Furthermore, at the march, 'we can meet each other, [show] that we're brave and that it can be normal'. For the interviewees, 'normal' translates into being able to show their support or belonging to the LGBT community without fear of being attacked or ostracised, an experience available through participation in marches. This experience of normality in marches is an act of resistance against the illiberalism espoused by the government and evident in societal radicalisation. A majoritarian conception of democracy and a rejection of liberal protections for minorities are the hallmarks of illiberalism. As elsewhere, illiberalism targets vulnerable minorities, such as LGBT persons in Poland, and effectively de-humanises them. PiS MP Przemysław Czarnek's comments exemplify this de-humanisation: 'Let's stop listening to these idiocies about human rights. [LGBT] people are not equal with normal people.' Thus, march participants' quest for normalcy is fundamentally about asserting their 'normal' humanity.

Unlike in English, where 'normal' is used to suggest that something conforms to a standard or is as expected, in most Slavic languages 'normal' has an additional, more positive, often aspirational meaning, denoting what life should be like; what should reasonably be expected. Fehervary (2002) wrote about how families in post-socialist Dunaújváros, Hungary heavily invested in kitchen and bathroom renovations before claiming that their homes were finally 'normal'. Residents of Sarajevo who yearned for a reliable state presence and the possibility to plan their future in the years after the war also hoped for things to be 'normal' again (Jansen, 2015). Simply put, normal stands for 'sanity'; normal stands for what 'ought to be' (ibid., pp. 38–39). In Jansen's framework, 'normality' has a clear temporal dimension, denoting predictable progression in people's lives, echoing a modernist understanding of time.

Among the protesters, 'abnormality' also finds its articulation within a sense of geographical and temporal displacement, with 'normality' perceived as ideals of equality and fair treatment that protesters associate with Western Europe and the twenty-first century. By extension, Poland, and particularly the counter-protesters at the marches, are discursively relegated into a different time¹² and space, highlighting the highly polarised context in which contention takes place. Tellingly, the sense of displacement is not only associated with Poland as such, but sometimes also in order to contrast the carefree parades in Warsaw and more contentious marches in regional towns.

When I was on this parade, it felt like a piece of London or a piece of New York was brought there to Białystok. This is [gesturing to indicate the LGBT parade], like, you know the future of de-

¹² For more on the denial of coevalness, or denying that others share their time with us, see Fabian (1983).

mocracy in Europe, and this [gesturing to the counter-protesters] is Białystok. Like at some point, it will be merged, but now it's like really, really far in terms of the views and opinions. (Zoja)

Warsaw lies where it lies, still it is a Western European capital... However, in Białystok, it's like 15 years ago in Warsaw – but still, it is an extremely conservative city, full of hate... (Luiz)

Another participant, Maria, identified a particularly distressing moment in Białystok: realizing that a large number of normal, ordinary people were taking part in the counter-protests. In her words: 'I didn't expect so many counter-demonstrators and that ordinary inhabitants would join them, that was completely shocking for me'.

There is a striking division in societal responses with regard to established marches in large cities and new marches in more peripheral locations. While in Warsaw counter-protests are mostly composed of right-wing activists, in Białystok the situation looked very different in 2019. Maria described how shocking it was to see 'grandmas holding grandkids who would make obscene gestures'. Again, a realisation that what she views as 'abnormality' does not only pertain to a small group of conservatives or hooligans had a strong effect on her experience of the protest.

Though a source of indignation, the quest for normalcy also seems to have a disciplining facet to it. According to Jolanta, an organiser of the Warsaw event, one of the aims of the marches is to show Poles that LGBT people are 'okay... and just want to live normally in this country'. Similarly, Augustyna said it is important to emphasize that 'LGBTQ people are not dangerous and they are normal people'. Interviewees highlighted that the marches in Poland have so far been more subdued (e.g., almost no nudity, very few drag queens) than their counterparts in Western Europe, underscoring their claim of normalcy and mutual recognition. Such emphasis on appearing 'normal' could be interpreted as tactical, with the participants maintaining forms of protest and appearance that they deem more palatable to wider society. The narratives of the interviewees thus reveal a contradiction, with the parades never being as free as the latter sometimes present them at other moments. In this manner, marching for normalcy imposes boundaries on what could otherwise be carnivalesque, autonomous zones of protest; the oppressive society and its expectations always lurk in the background.

6 Space and protest

Spatiality and visibility are inextricably connected to the interviewees' equality march experience. Marches open a safe space for participants, a rare opportunity to generate public and prefigurative association (Polletta, 1999). The sensation of dominating the streets is central in several accounts, especially for interviewees who identify as LGBT. Effecting the domination of a public space, even for a short period, endows marches with a regenerative potential to encourage further protest participation.

Untrammelled by the everyday restrictions on LGBT individuals' behaviour, the marches present an opportunity to demonstrate affiliation and to act on moral emotions and affective commitments (Jasper, 2018) without fear of violence. Being there together, being proud and standing strong and feeling safe were all characteristics of the protests that interlocutors emphasised as important elements of their experience. Several interviewees described a liberating effect; equality parades can often have the characteristics of a 'collective

coming out' (Valentine, 2003). While on normal days Jolanta expressed fear of publicly showing affection for her partner, she talked about the empowering feeling of being able to do openly so during the parade:

The power of being able to walk [in] your own city, the main street and in Warsaw it's always the main street, supported by people around you, feeling safe and you can do whatever you like. You can dance, you can shout, whatever. It's one day when the streets are ours. We are free to do anything. We can hold our hands, we can kiss in the street, nobody can do anything to us. And the dimension of getting to know other people. (Jolanta)

Several interviewees highlighted how important this might be, especially for LGBT youth:

You see those young people who are teenagers, who come from little towns. They go to Warsaw. They take from their backpacks all kinds of paraphernalia: rainbow clothes, make-up. You see that for them this is a true celebration of their identity, that this is the day in which once in a year they can be themselves, that they can find friends. (Janek)

Many protesters expressed unequivocal feelings of pleasure, even euphoria, fuelled by the feeling of togetherness and solidarity during the protest activities, the feeling of going 'wild' together¹³ (Pilkington, 2017). Protesters who described the parade in Warsaw all alluded to this aspect of their experience, sometimes expressed in terms of reverse power relations: during the parade, it is they who feel safe, who outnumber the counter-protesters, and have the power to ridicule them. For example, interviewees described how they would ironically 'greet' the counter-protesters or blow them kisses. Such empowerment speaks to the restorative, almost therapeutic effect of march participation: it is both a relief from the distress of suppressing one's identity and an invitation to express that identity within a community. This experience, in turn, bolsters individual resilience.

Marches not only offer a safe space for LGBT individuals and allies, but also increase the visibility of the LGBT community; the marches assert a claim to exist in public space that can otherwise be unwelcoming and alienating (Weeks, 1998). Some of the interviewees clearly recognised the events' dual effects; as Jolanta put it, they are both 'internal', tending to participants' emotional well-being, and 'external', having strategic importance for the movement. The latter facet seeks to achieve societal change through the increased visibility of the cause (Valentine, 1996; Wagner, 2013). In this sense, equality marches and pride parades are conspicuous events that advance the cause of an LGBT presence in the public space (Wahlstrom et al., 2018). Moreover, they can act as catalysts, clearly manifesting politicised and polarised issues. The 2019 march in Białystok is a case in point. According to several interviewees, the violence at the march prompted some neutral observers in Poland to rethink their positions, as the intensity of the event necessarily sparked emotional reactions, including outrage and shock, as noted previously.

¹³ Interestingly, while such emotions pertain to the LGBT protesters, the same description would often fit football hooligan groups, in this case standing on the other side of the barricade. One interviewee even explained that, as a football fan, he could not be easily intimidated by counter-protesters, as he was used to hooligan theatrics from the stadiums.

Crucially, however traumatising protest experiences might have been for the interviewees, as in instances like Białystok, they repeatedly expressed a strong resolve to participate in future marches. While the atmosphere of politicisation and the above-mentioned perceived ‘hunting’ of the LGBT community play a crucial role in this, the interviews clearly interpret the protests themselves as a source of mobilising power:

I took part in the demonstration defending Margot¹⁴ and it really opened me up to the issue of a protest as such. I felt that my disgust towards what’s happening is much stronger than if I just read about it. [...] Normally, you feel it’s sort of a simulation, a game happening elsewhere. But when you participate, it changes. (Kaz)

The immediacy and experience of emotional elevation as a result of participating provides strong impetus for further engagements in protests, generating resilience. This is especially significant considering the proliferation of LGBT marches throughout Poland in recent years. An organiser of the Warsaw parade suggested that many LGBT persons who can afford it attend several pride events in Europe and elsewhere, seeking the rush and excitement linked to the marches. With more and more marches in Poland, the feeling of togetherness and an actualised experience of a more tolerant society is available for more Poles than ever.

7 Perceptions of politics and society

While the equality marches serve individual and collective-strategic purposes, participants situate their protest activity within two broader spheres: politics and society. Popular opinion can drive political actors to adopt certain rhetoric and policy, just as political rhetoric and policy can stimulate changes of importance and opinion in society. Of great concern for LGBT advocates, apart from anti-LGBT policies, is that PiS’s illiberalism can nurture a hostile political environment that encourages or accommodates group-focused enmity (Heitmeyer, 2002). Dunin-Wasowicz (2016) observed such a pattern in a case involving a public artwork that revealed and perhaps stimulated polarisation between progressively liberalising publics and increasingly radical homophobic right-wing fringes. At several points, interviewees positioned themselves and the equality marches at this intersection of political and societal developments and considered the outlook for LGBT rights in Poland.

Since winning an outright parliamentary majority in 2015, the PiS government has legislatively pursued and rhetorically promoted an agenda that conspicuously includes Catholic social conservatism. Disapproval of LGBT rights and further restrictions on abortion are only the most notable example of this. One interviewee, Maria, noted the stark break with the liberal orientation of preceding governments, calling it ‘a completely different world’ and suggested that there has been a steady escalation in the socio-political furore surrounding LGBT issues. Anxiety and anger toward the PiS government is not an abstraction from equality marches but instead intrinsically linked to protest participation. An organiser of the Warsaw event sees increasing state support manifesting in counter-mobilisation against the equality marches:

¹⁴ A non-binary LGBT rights activist arrested and held in pre-trial detention by the police for attacking a truck displaying anti-LGBT propaganda.

We crowdfund for the speakers all year long, they [the counter-protesters] just have it [the funds]. Supported by the state! [...] Since 2015, we had less and less counter-protest; and now, boom! Also, it was surprising for me that they were well organised. With speakers and stuff [...] I see a huge difference in the character and size of the counter protests compared to past years. (Jolanta)

Ultimately, developments in the political sphere, both in policy and rhetoric, are evidently dispiriting. About this point there is little ambiguity. Yet interviewees frequently voiced optimism about societal developments related to LGBT issues. One participant from multiple marches summarised this contrast in sharp terms:

I think that it's getting better. I think that, finally, people are aware of these issues. And it's much more difficult to be as aggressive as it was years ago. Of course, you know, our government tends to believe that there is something like 'LGBT ideology' and 'gays are paedophiles' and things like that. It's awful and disgusting. [...] I think that nowadays mainstream people, mainstream voters tend to believe that 'maybe civil partnerships are okay', maybe these people aren't as bad as they tended to think years ago. I think that this homophobia is not as powerful as it was years ago. (Luiz)

Societal developments are interpreted more ambiguously, though: they are not an unqualified source of optimism. Considerable cause for concern arises from the threat of violence against LGBT individuals. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU-FRA) 2019 survey of LGBTI individuals reported that 15 per cent of the latter had experienced a physical or sexual assault in the last five years, including 8 per cent in the preceding year. Janek connected the level of violence to the state's wilful ignorance:

The scope of violence grew really rapidly and the state is not really counting that in any way because they don't want to have those statistics. I'm very concerned, and I'm also concerned about my own safety in Poland. This is the reason why I have decided to stay in Berlin for the time being at least.

In Janek's case, like two other interviewees, he had taken the opportunity to leave Poland, partially burdened by concerns for his and his partner's safety. This opens the question of whether the positive effect of equality march participation and optimism about societal development is enough to stave off lost commitment and instead generate resilience.¹⁵

However, for those who remain in Poland and remain engaged, protest participation may become a refuge for expression that is increasingly closed off in everyday life. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents to the EU-FRA survey said that prejudice and intolerance against LGBTI people had increased a lot (44 per cent) or a little (24 per cent). This perception, it seems, motivates some behavioural precautions. Pawel explained, 'You need to pay attention to what you're wearing, if you laugh in a wrong way, so for the first time we were surprised that really we need to pay attention. So, changes for the worse'. The survey data support this view, finding that 83 per cent of respondents often or always avoid holding hands with their same-sex partner in Poland.

¹⁵ NB: this study's interviewees reflect the demographics of equality march participants, including being relatively well off economically. Though plenty do not, many participants have the resources to emigrate; so the act of voicing opposition to increasing hostility against LGBT individuals often arises alongside consideration of the option to exit the arena of contention.

In every context, marches are an opportunity to show that being LGBT is ‘normal’ and ‘nothing scary’, as Pawel said, ‘and slowly society is beginning to understand that’. However, the pace and constancy of that development is far from certain – the marches are not part of a simple linear progression toward ever more acceptance. Interviewees frequently distinguished between discouraging political developments and encouraging societal development. On the one hand, PiS has secured its hold on national political power at least until late 2023 and continues implementing its anti-LGBT agenda. On the other hand, interviewees point to declining church attendance and faltering religious commitment (Koschalka, 2020) as a sign that equality for LGBT individuals is a matter of time. Of course, there is no clear division between politics and society: PiS wins elections through pluralities of votes, and their political power is rooted in a segment of society. Nevertheless, this *repeated narrative* among interviewees is intriguing, since the prospect of a long-term attitudinal shift toward LGBT acceptance seems meagre consolation – especially when the short-term political situation appears increasingly dire. PiS government action, moreover, may halt or reverse the secularising trends on which equality marchers’ optimism depends (Campbell, 2020). Equality marches then take on greater importance as acts of resistance and as one of the few group-based generators of resilience for LGBT individuals and supporters.

8 Conclusion

Our research offers two main contributions: it identifies the emotional and cognitive responses of participants in 2019 equality marches for LGBT rights in Poland, and it instantiates how vulnerable groups resist the dehumanisation of illiberal socio-politics and instead build resilience.

First, the interviews revealed ubiquitous perceptions of increasing political polarisation, an increase in the risk of violence against LGBT individuals, and the increasing salience of equality marches. In other words, there is a general intensification of LGBT issues in Poland which, beyond perception, is reflected in several independent surveys. Our interviewees repeatedly expressed moral outrage and shock over the resistance to LGBT rights in Poland. Within this context, marches have become crucial for building resilience among LGBT individuals and supporters.

Second, the resilience-building effect of marches centres on conceptions of normalcy. A divide emerges between protest days and the everyday (see Table 1): whereas everyday life is increasingly weighted with emotional, cognitive, and indeed sometimes physical burdens that deter advocacy and activism, protest days are characterised by feelings of liberation, happier normalcy, and pride that build resilience. *The everyday is distressingly abnormal; protest days offer the chance to ‘be normal’*. On the one hand, as our interviewees explained, the lack of rights and acceptance of LGBT individuals is ‘abnormal’; PiS and other hostile political actors (including the Polish Catholic Church) exacerbate this problem by dehumanising LGBT persons; and assault and harassment against LGBT individuals is rising. On the other hand, the marches offer opportunities to take over public space, assert the LGBT community’s right to exist in it, and resist the dehumanisation of illiberal socio-politics. Marches create safe spaces to demonstrate their affiliation and to act upon identity-based urges that they must otherwise suppress, such as holding hands or kissing. That public displays of affection can be made without fear and one can ‘be normal’ has a therapeutic

effect, especially during large events like Warsaw's parade. Thus, the quest for normalcy translates into claiming recognition of one's 'normal' humanity.

Table 1. Summary of study findings categorised by those elements that are *detering* or *resilience-building* in *everyday* and *protest* settings

	Detering	Resilience-building
Everyday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Abnormal' lack of LGBT rights • Hostile political actors in power • Increasing risk of assault and harassment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing tolerance and acceptance of LGBT individuals and rights
Protest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risks of violence from radicalised or emboldened counter-protesters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling 'normal' and exhibiting the normality of LGBT persons • Feeling liberated within the safe space created by the protest • Pride of demonstrating affiliation

Although our interviewees remain optimistic about wider societal developments, their accounts point to a bleaker, deteriorating everyday experience. The everyday threat of violence is a significant deterrent. Several interviewees have considered leaving or actually left the country in order to escape the daily, abnormal oppressive reality. The marches certainly have positive emotional effects and foster resilience among participants, but there is little hope of them generating immediate changes. Survey data reveal a steadily growing acceptance of LGBT individuals, but that is a remote consolation based on long-term prospects. Hence, people like our interviewees must contend with a wobbly balance between the encouraging normalcy provided by protest activity and the difficult abnormality they face in their everyday lives.

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