Participatory Design with the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ Community: Localized Responses to Systemic Homophobia

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Research shows that Bulgaria is among the least LGBTQ+ friendly countries in the European Union, with members of the community facing discrimination, hostility, and violence both in their everyday lives and on a systemic level. The environment of suppression and stigma has also had an effect on the volume of local research into LGBTQ+ issues. This project's goal is to fit into that research gap by providing a perspective on the problems faced by Bulgarian LGBTQ+ people and the plausible, practical solutions they would like to see or be part of on a local level. Participants focused on solutions that would create a space for queer community and expression, provide support and information where it is needed, and grow stronger community bonds. Some of those solutions were technological (such as an informational application and a community forum), others focused on interpersonal connection (such as an LGBTQ+ book club), and yet others on direct action (distributing counterpropaganda).

SAMMANFATTNING

Forskning visar att Bulgarien är bland de minst hbtq-vänliga länderna i EU, med medlemmar av samhället som utsätts för diskriminering, fientlighet och våld både i sin vardag och på systemnivå. De miljö av förtryck och stigma har också haft en effekt på volymen av lokal forskning om HBTQ+-frågor. Detta projektets mål är att passa in i denna forskningsklyfta genom att ge ett perspektiv på problemen som bulgariska HBTQ+ står inför människor och de rimliga, praktiska lösningar de skulle vilja se eller vara en del av på lokal nivå. Deltagarna fokuserade på lösningar som skulle skapa ett utrymme för queergemenskap och uttryck, ge stöd och information där det behövs och stärka gemenskapsbanden. Några av dessa lösningar var tekniska (som en informativ ansökan och ett communityforum), andra fokuserade på interpersonell koppling (som en HBTQ + bokklubb), och ytterligare andra om direkta åtgärder (distribution av kontrapropaganda).

CCS Concepts: • **Social and professional topics** → **Sexual orientation**; **Cultural characteristics**; • **Human-centered computing**;

Additional Key Words and Phrases: LGBTQ+, participatory design, Bulgaria, online workshop, interview

Nyckelord: HBTQ+, deltagande design, Bulgarien, online workshop, intervju

1 INTRODUCTION

In a study from 2018, Bulgaria was ranked 24th out of 28 EU member states on a measure of the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights in each of the countries, reportedly being only 24% of the way to equality [39]. In 2021, that number dropped

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down to 20% [40]. A major factor in Bulgaria's failure to legally support LGBTQ+ equality is that "sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression" does not figure in the penal code as a possible hate crime motive, leaving an already marginalised community even more vulnerable to violence. Moreover, Bulgaria was in the top three EU countries where politicians feel comfortable in publicly speaking out against LGBTQ+ people, further normalising hate speech and discrimination on the basis of sexuality and gender [25]. In these circumstances, a paradox is created: local research and action addressing homophobia is more needed than ever, yet the hostile climate makes it harder and harder to do. Pushing queer studies and community consciousness to the margins along with LGBTQ+ people themselves forms a vicious cycle which becomes increasingly difficult to break.

This project aims to research the most acute issues faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Bulgaria and outline some possible ways to address them, both using technology and otherwise. It falls into the domain of participatory design and community-centred solutions, emphasising the inclusion of community members in the design process. The main question this work endeavours to ask and answer is what problem and solution spaces Bulgarian LGBTQ+ participants identify and focus on when it comes to addressing systemic homophobia in the country and their community-specific needs and goals. Based on the literature review [23, 32, 34], the expectation going in was that participants in the project would focus on practical technological solutions such as social platforms and community resource websites which address community-specific issues (e.g. access to some sectors of society), normalise LGBTQ+ identity and expression, and facilitate community building. In order to find an answer to the central question, it was necessary to identify the main problems and concerns Bulgarian LGBTQ+ people are dealing with and care about, as well as the main types and directions of solutions imagined by the community and the ways in which they want to see their problems as Bulgarian LGBTQ+ people addressed. Viewing the multifaceted subject of homophobia through the lens of PD meant narrowing the solution space to plausible technological and non-technological ideas and solutions suggested and wanted by the community, laying ground for further academic and community action directed by those affected by the issues at hand.

The project intends to be of interest or utility to the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ community above all else. However, it may also provide insights into LGBTQ+ people's needs and potentially lead into further work related to implementing technological (and other) solutions together with those affected. Moreover, there is arguably a research gap when it comes to the most important pain points for LGBTQ+ individuals in Eastern Europe specifically, especially from their own perspective and told in their own words; a significant portion of similar studies focus mostly on the United States [17, 32, 33]. Since these voices are already suppressed and rarely break into the mainstream political discourse in countries such as Bulgaria, it is worth attempting to initiate a more serious discussion of LGBTQ+ rights that prioritises the views and needs of those who are actually in the crossfire. While LGBTQ+ research and PD projects with LGBTQ+ communities exist, it is much rarer to see these address Eastern Europe and especially Bulgaria, and it appears that to date, no participatory design initiatives have been conducted in this rather specific context. As mentioned, there are many similar papers addressing trans people in the US [32], rural LGBTQ+ individuals (again in the US) [33, 34], and others; as an LGBTQ+ person and a Bulgarian, the author wishes to see this done for this country and community as well. The stigma attached to anything LGBTQ+ rights-related in Bulgaria is incredibly strong and normalised [5, 25], meaning that the volume of relevant research is not large. This project cannot lay a practical foundation for LGBTQ+ organising, community cohesion, and the fight for human rights in and of itself – that is an almost insurmountable, staggeringly complex task. Unfortunately, even a purely informative, theoretical view of the issues at hand and the solutions desired by the community does not really exist yet. Hopefully, the present work can count towards such an overview.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Participatory design and the LGBTQ+ community

McWilliams [42] formulates the following principles for performing PD research from a queer theory perspective: "(a) the heterosexual matrix permeates all aspects of culture; (b) all humans are (gender and sexually) variant; and (c) reject the progress narrative." Queer theory provides a framework for, above all, questioning established narratives and social norms around heterosexuality and what makes a life valuable and complete [42], and so is an appropriate tool to apply to a PD context; it can not only inform the communication between facilitator and participant and interrogate the systems under which both operate, but also illuminate the social context and its pressures that are inescapable for any queer person (Bulgarian or not). Relating the experiences of the participants and the ideas they generate in the design workshops to broader queer theory could be a valuable way of positioning them amidst an established queer epistemology. McWilliams [42] claims that queer theory has to do with more than describing how heteronormativity moulds lives; it ought to challenge and disrupt that process as well. Participatory design can play a role in this deconstruction by establishing a base of not only potential design solutions to problems faced by LGBTQ+ people, but also reporting on how they experience and process those problems in their everyday lives. In highly heteronormative and traditionalist societies, existing as a queer person is an act of disruption in and of itself, and turns into an act of rebellion when that person is open about who they are [30].

The 2020 paper by Haimson et al. [32] discusses the methods and outcomes of the participatory design sessions the authors conducted with 21 trans people from the US. Many of the issues they point out could translate easily to the situation of LGBTQ+ Bulgarian residents, such as access to society, difficulty with finding healthcare, employment, housing, lack of respect, and violence on the part of both extremists and the police. The success of Hollaback (the online social platform for sharing stories of street harassment) gives some hope for similar solutions when it comes to the rampant discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ people in Bulgaria. Drawing on Dimond et al. [23], this project aims to empower participants to identify and voice issues of discrimination and call for solutions, aquire knowledge about the political and social climate around LGBTQ+ matters in Bulgaria and the situation community members find themselves in, collaborate on possible (technological) solutions to the identified issues, and contribute to positive social change and normalisation of LGBTQ+ rights as inextricable from human rights.

Two 2018 papers by Bødker et al. [2, 11] discuss the ways in which PD can matter and bring about real-world positive change. Both papers emphasise the importance of putting the community one is working with first and thinking ahead towards ways in which PD initiatives can be sustained in the long-term to benefit that community. Iversen and Dindler [41] focus on this point, splitting the sustainability of PD projects into four components: "maintaining, scaling, replicating and evolving." On the other hand, Björgvinsson et al. [4] focus on the specifics of PD with marginalised communities – especially relevant in this case. They note that participatory design has now moved beyond the workplace and entered other spheres of life, and discuss the ways it interacts with politics, public issues, and democracy – and LGBTQ+ rights issues are more than relevant in these contexts. Therefore, this project aspires to highlight the most acute issues faced by LGBTQ+ people in Bulgaria and outline some ways of addressing these problems that come from within the community itself. It is imperative to include community members in the design of any possible solutions, as LGBTQ+ voices are rarely heard in the context of a traditionalist, largely conservative society and government.

DeVito et al. [17] found that values held by their LGBTQ+ participants revolved around solidarity, empowerment, organising around an identity that could be stigmatised, and providing space for in-group diversity. The same paper states that "Access to LGBTQ+ spaces on social platforms results in positive health outcomes, increased resistance to

victimisation, and friendships with other LGBTQ+ people among LGBTQ+ youth." These clear benefits from organising within the community/ movement were a driving factor for this project. Even though there is no explicit aim to design a social platform, it is reasonable to think that such benefits can emerge from community participation itself, not from the specific kind of online environment where a space is hosted.

2.2 The state of LGBTQ+ rights in Bulgaria

In October 2021, days after a petition with 8000 signatures demanding hate crime laws be updated was submitted, a presidential candidate forcibly broke into a meeting at the LGBTQ+ NGO Rainbow Hub with around 10 of his supporters. The attackers destroyed the space and assaulted one of the NGO employees, shouting "Go ahead, call the police" as they did so [35, 38]. As a result of the attack, the housing association in the building evicted Rainbow Hub, citing "disturbances" and the general unhappiness of the residents who had the NGO as their neighbour [37] (an unsurprising development given that roughly 65% of Bulgarians are uncomfortable with LGBTQ+ neighbours [5, 25]). The presidential candidate primarily responsible for the assault was eventually charged, but due to the gap in hate crime legislation [35], his charge boils down to so-called "hooliganism." In February 2022, the attacker stated he is confident there will be "no evidence" to convict him [49].

Organised LGBTQ+ activism or even visibility is often met with aggression in Bulgaria. There are numerous examples that illustrate the degree to which homophobia in the country is endemic and accepted (something which, in the author's opinion, is crucial to understand before seeing its impact on participants). Every year, a "counter-protest" takes place simultaneously with Sofia Pride, consisting mostly of far-right nationalists from the VMRO and Vuzrazhdane (meaning Revival) parties and their supporters [10, 13]. The justification behind the event usually consists of "save the children" rhetoric and claims about the destruction of the traditional family and Bulgarian orthodox values, which are platformed uncritically by major Bulgarian news organisations [13]. The motivations of the counter-protests stand unchallenged in the media, usually being presented in the same way they were stated by organisers [10]. The situation is similar and sometimes more dire in other major cities such as coastal Burgas, where the anti-Pride protest attendance was in the hundreds, as opposed to the roughly 30 people in 2021's Burgas Pride. The counter-protesters chanted homophobic slurs at the parade, largely unbothered by the strengthened police presence [3]. Just the previous year (2020), young people protested in Burgas against the inaction following a brutal homophobic attack in Bulgaria's second biggest city, Plovdiv; counter-protestors showed up to burn the pro-LGBTQ+ brochures handed out by the teenagers [9]. Besides that attack by football fans [8], Plovdiv had seen at least one other major organised outburst of homophobic violence that same year, this time by students who picked out peers who "looked gay" and physically assaulted them [44].

In the midst of increasingly common violence, public opinion has shifted in the political and social spheres in recent years, echoing the rise of far-right sentiment in other countries (such as the USA, Poland, and Hungary). Notably, far-right parties, specifically Vuzrazhdane, organised a copycat demonstration after the fashion of America's January 6th riot and tried to enter the Parliament building - despite the party having won a non-negligible number of seats in the latest election [26, 27, 43]. The rise of Vuzrazhdane and other far-right parties such as VMRO, lead by staunchly and openly homophobic figures, further complicates the LGBTQ+ rights situation in Bulgaria, as shown by recent research on the topic.

2.3 Public support, the hate crime emergency, and recommended action

There is no clearer and quicker way to see the depth of the problem than taking a look at the few available recent statistics for the country, which is why a short summary of them is included here. Between 2012 and 2018, attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people in Bulgaria have worsened, with the number of respondents opposing their right to live their life as

they wish soaring to a quarter of the population. This number had previously been decreasing since 2008, with a low of 18%. The biggest increase in people who indicated disagreement was seen in the two largest cities, Sofia (the capital) and Plovdiv; men and older people were more likely to disagree [5]. There was also a decline in the confidence of those who do agree that LGBTQ+ people should have a right to live as they see fit, with more people choosing to "agree" rather than "strongly agree" with the statement - the opposite to what the data showed in the 2008-2012 period [5, 25].

At the same time, LGBTQ+ people who have suffered a hate crime are met with the least sympathy out of all vulnerable groups (less than racial/ ethnic minorities, disabled people, etc.) [25, 31], and respondents report a relative unwillingness to help a hypothetical LGBTQ+ individual who is being attacked. Women, small town residents, and those with higher education were more likely to regard LGBTQ+ victims of hate crimes sympathetically [5]. On an 11-point scale measuring the likelihood that they would try to assist the victim, respondents had an average of 5.38 if it was a gay man, 5.77 if it was a lesbian, and only 4.82 if it was a trans person, indicating an especially high level of vulnerability to being attacked or assaulted for Bulgarian trans individuals [5]. There are no scores in the study reflecting the attitudes towards bisexual, pansexual, nonbinary, or any other identities.

Another measure used to evaluate attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people is how much discomfort respondents would feel if they had an LGBTQ+ neighbour. Once again the highest number of people said they would be uncomfortable with a trans neighbour - 68%. If their neighbour was a gay man, 66% would feel uncomfortable; 65% if they were a lesbian; and 63% if bisexual. As with the Call It Hate study, men indicated discomfort more often than women, and discomfort was higher among those living in the two largest cities. Moreover, the older the respondent, the more uncomfortable they would be with an LGBTQ+ neighbour, also consistent with the other data [5, 25].

A concerning 31% of LGBT respondents were physically/ sexually assaulted or threatened within the last 5 years, but only 14% reported the crime to police [25]. There is no official police record of how many anti-LGBTQ+ crimes have been reported. LGBTQ+ people are reluctant to report violence or threats due to fear of secondary victimisation by the police, a homophobic reaction by the officer who takes their statement, and a general lack of trust in public institutions [24]. This is exemplified by the fact that in studies done by two NGOs, none of the 58 total participants who had all been victim to anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes actually reported the incident to the police, citing discomfort, fear of the police, and doubt that their case will be taken seriously [19].

The same two NGOs collected information about these crimes in 2017, painting a grim picture of the scale and severity of the problem. At least 78 cases were reported to them in the year 2017 [5, 29], coming out to a staggering average of one hate crime occurring every 4.7 days. It is also important to keep in mind that this data came from just this one reporting system, so it is likely that it underrepresents the actual extent of the issue. The most common hate crime scene was school: 60% occurred in an educational institution (once again this may not be fully representative) [29]. Gay men were most commonly affected, and most of the incidents were threats of violence, followed by hate speech. Property damage, threats, stalking, physical violence and one attempted murder were also reported [19].

Hate crimes targeting LGBTQ+ individuals are usually classified as "disorderly behaviour" due to the lack of legislation supporting sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as motives that turn an assault into a hate crime. There has been a single case where anti-gay sentiment was recognised by the court as the motive for the crime: Mihail Stoyanov's murder in a Sofia park back in 2008 [24].

Only around 50% of respondents support higher sentences for anti-LGBT hate crimes (the lowest rate of support for increasing the sentence for a crime). Once again women were more likely than men to support tougher sentencing, and residents of the capital were least likely to support any increase in the severity of hate crime sentences (no matter the motive) [5].

The 2019 Call It Hate report on Bulgaria [5] ends on a list of recommended actions to be taken to alleviate what amounts to an emergency situation. A short overview of the list is included for the sake of comparison with the changes participants in the workshops want to see. There is significant overlap between the two, as will be shown later on. The report recommends introducing gender identity and gender expression as protected categories in anti-discrimination law, as well as new hate crime legislation into the Bulgarian Penal Code encompassing sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression within the list of motives that constitute aggravating factors. In relation to this, collecting data about hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people is also suggested, as well as conducting an annual survey on LGBTQ+ topics (including hate crimes) in order to track tendencies. Acting on the data would include providing police officers and other government employees with sensitivity training to increase their awareness regarding hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people and how to support the victims. Finally, the report recommends the Bulgarian government recognise LGBTQ+ NGOs as partners in the process of increasing awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and encouraging tolerance and acceptance in society, and aim to counteract negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people in a systemic way [5].

2.4 LGBTQ+ research, cultural events, and support

There are several projects going on in Bulgaria which concern LGBTQ+ rights, although their number is quite limited. A few NGOs which concern themselves with equality operate in Sofia: Rainbow Hub, the GLAS (Gays and Lesbians Accepted in Society) Foundation [28], and the Deystvie organisation (which provides free legal aid to LGBTQ+ individuals) [18]. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee is not specifically an LGBTQ+ focused organisation, but its activities do include equal rights campaigning [14].

When it comes to academic research, it is difficult to find many major LGBTQ+ focused studies done within Bulgarian institutions; often, LGBTQ+ topics are included in broader research about hate crimes, discrimination, and harmful stereotyping instead. These more general studies support the conclusions from the Call It Hate report that there is a serious and deep-rooted issue in Bulgaria when it comes to accepting or even coexisting with the racialised or queer Other [5, 15, 21, 29, 48].

Two notable LGBTQ+ works from recent years are that of Delcheva [16] and Dimitrova [22]. Delcheva focuses on the contradictory nature of speaking about one's trans body, drawing on a number of philosophical theories (from essentialism to poststructuralism), and concludes that transgender people are suspended between being unable to talk about their bodies and being compelled to do so [16]. Dimitrova takes a sociocultural approach to the experience of being othered and interrogates issues of gender and identity, using G. Nikiforov's novel "Body under the dress" as a jumping off point [22].

Outside the country, young Bulgarian researchers are working on shedding light upon what usually remains unspoken in Bulgarian academia. For instance, two thesis projects are ongoing at British universities at the time of writing (and were recruiting in the same Facebook group as this one). One is investigating the difference in how LGBTQ+ people who have left the country experience prejudice in discrimination where they currently live as opposed to back in Bulgaria. The other is collecting Bulgarian LGBTQ+ people's coming out stories through interviews, painting a picture of what it is like to live openly as yourself in the country.

In the social sphere, there are few events and projects that are even related to the LGBTQ+ experience. The most recent and prominent of them is The Other Bulgarian Women/ Bulgaria in Trans, which reimagined the iconic portraits of Bulgarian women by revered painter Vladimir Dimitrov to feature trans women dressed in traditional Bulgarian garb. The project was the subject of strong social media and real-life backlash, including but not limited to a group of men showing up at the exhibition to intimidate patrons [20, 36].

3 METHOD

This section describes in detail the participatory design method used in the project. The two main parts of the process were the workshops and the interviews, both conducted online due to both pandemic concerns and participants not all residing in the same country. Workshops took place over three weeks, each corresponding to one phase (identifying issues, imagining solutions, narrowing the focus). After their conclusion, interviews were conducted with those participants who agreed, a process that spanned approximately an additional two weeks. Thematic analysis was used in interpreting the results.

3.1 Challenges of online PD

Cerna and Müller [12] discuss the intricacies of conducting participatory design activities online instead of in real life. They outline difficulties and barriers such as the need for participants to have access to personal devices, various applications, an internet connection, and computer skills in order to be in an online workshop, event or community, or the common connection issues that happen with Zoom. They recommend having alternative channels of communication and more than one way for the participants to interact both with the facilitator and with each other (in this case, that role was fulfilled by a dedicated Facebook group and Facebook PM).

Zhang et al. [50] also write of the challenges of online participatory design workshops, but from the perspective of the participants' understanding and communication. They note that the most critical aspect of this kind of online work is to ensure a good understanding of any contents and tools, as well as between participants. They also mention difficulties with scheduling. It was imperative to provide clear instructions in more than one form (verbal and written), multiple opportunities to participate and to ask questions, and straightforward conduct rules. The same paper reports a negative impact on teamwork and communication compared to offline PD workshops, noting that it is therefore important to ensure good comprehension, have contingencies in mind, and make sure participants feel accepted regardless of diversity and connectivity [50]. Some of the measures that were implemented in this regard over the course of this project included the lack of pressure to use a camera and microphone and the encouragement of personal contact with the facilitator if any concerns were to be raised. This was also in step with the approach by Reyes and Finken [46], whose future workshop conducted in a Facebook group allowed "lurking," even when not currently participating. Reyes and Finken also encouraged personal contact with the facilitator and the choice of Facebook as an asynchronous, familiar, and flexible way to connect. Facebook also provides a unique type of additional information in the form of likes and comments [45].

3.2 Technology choices

The participants, having been recruited through Facebook, were already familiar with group membership and using the platform, making it easier to organise and supplement the main activities through it [45]. Both Reyes and Dimond et al. relied on Facebook groups for communication within the group of participants [23, 45, 46]. It was chosen because of its ubiquity and accessibility [45], as well as its ability to provide an asynchronous discussion space (in a way similar to DeVito's "asynchronous remote community") [17, 23]. In this project, a Facebook group was similarly used to coordinate and summarise meetings, provide the meeting prompts in advance, and give participants the chance to make posts expressing any thoughts and feelings they did not get to discuss during the sessions for one reason or another.

For the synchronous events such as the workshops and interviews, Zoom was chosen for two reasons: first, it was inadvisable to organise a physical event in Bulgaria (a highly unvaccinated country) during the concurrent Covid spike; and second, some participants were not located in Sofia full time and/ or had an especially busy schedule, making online

participation the more accessible option to them. It was imperative that the meetings also accommodated any physical or psychological disabilities, as well as dysphoria (voice dysphoria was mentioned specifically by one person). Zoom provides the option to participate in chat without having to use a camera or microphone, as well as the ability to be heard without being seen.

All data was anonymised, and due to the more personal nature of video and audio, any recordings were deleted promptly after the project wrapped up.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical concerns included protecting participants' identity, especially given the sensitivity of the topic; vetting who has access to the Facebook group to prevent malicious actors from obtaining personal information or otherwise causing harm; the issue of extracting information and knowledge from the community at the cost of time and emotional labour; and operating from outside the country on a topic that mainly affects those actively living there. The following measures were taken to address these concerns.

Informed consent was obtained, and participants' identities were protected by anonymising any quotes from the workshops, interviews, and posts. Recordings of the workshops were deleted after they had been fully processed and documented in an anonymous manner. Only hard copies of the consent forms exist (printed out from the online form, which was then deleted), as the digital copies of the consent forms are not as secure and contain participants' real names. Participants were recruited either from within the already-vetted official Bulgarian LGBTQ+ Facebook community, or on the condition of being certain that they do not harbour any malicious intentions towards the rest of the group (e.g. recruiting through the author's personal network). Ways to continue working with the ideas generated during this project were provided, such as the continued existence of the Facebook group and technical help to any of the participants who want to work on one of the group's ideas, and support throughout the process was available through direct contact with the facilitator. The voices of those who are living in the country were prioritised, especially when writing the report; however, during the interview process, it became evident that the issues at hand affect participants outside Bulgaria too, and moreover are often the reason they left in the first place. Nevertheless, conducting this study from the relative safety of a country such as Sweden is a position of privilege, as one is shielded from the direct effects of homophobia endemic to Bulgaria, and this fact must be acknowledged. Finally, none of this project will be published as "research," as it has not been approved by an ethics board. Instead, this should be considered a pilot study which can lead into other research later on.

3.4 Participant demographics

Initially, 10 people were recruited, but two eventually dropped out, leaving the total number of workshop participants at 8. Four of them were cis women, two were nonbinary, and two – genderfluid. Among the group, the set of reported sexualities included: lesbian, queer, bisexual, asexual, and "attracted to feminine presentation." Participant ages ranged from 23 to 30. Two people live in Bulgaria full time, one lives there part time, and five do not live in Bulgaria but visit on occasion. Out of the 8 participants, 5 agreed to the individual interview.

3.5 Workshops

Haimson [32] and Reyes [45, 46] both utilise themed sessions or phases in their workshops. Haimson et al. [32] broke down their trans technology discussion into theme-focused workshops, while Reyes defined three week-long phases to her project: Critique, Fantasy, and Implementation [45, 46]. In a PD study about rural LGBTQ+ communities, Hardy and

Vargas also took a three-phase approach, consisting of future workshops with the following goals: “critique the present, envision the future, and implement the future” [34].

Likewise, in this project three workshops were conducted with 8 Bulgarian LGBTQ+ participants recruited through the largest community Facebook group in the country at the time. There were three week-long phases with a themed Zoom meeting for each phase. The above approaches inspired the idea of conducting three themed workshops over as many weeks, focusing on (1) identifying issues the participants face, (2) a blue-sky exercise where participants come up with any solution they would like to see, regardless of difficulty or limitations, and (3) narrowing the focus onto those solutions that are both plausible and liked by the participants. Meetings were coordinated, summaries of past meetings provided, and prompts stated through the project’s Facebook group.

The structure of the project had been revealed to the participants in advance and was adjusted in accordance with their feedback, as the whole point of this exercise is for the focus to be on them and on getting their voices heard. Examples of adjustments included not requiring cameras and microphones to be on at all times, so that those with social anxiety, voice dysphoria, or other concerns can be comfortable, as well as providing two time slots for each of the three Zoom meetings in order to accommodate both working and studying schedules, one on a workday and one on the weekend.

3.6 Interviews

Reyes conducted interviews with the participants after the workshops were over in order to fill in any gaps left by the discussions as well as gather final impressions [45]. Hardy and Lindtner utilised personal interviews in their study of rural Grindr (dating app mostly aimed at gay men) users’ ways of relating to social media and their community [33]. Similarly, this project used interviews to fill in discussion gaps, gather final impressions, and consider the personal experiences of participants which may have informed the position from which they engaged with the workshops. Personal interviews were conducted through Zoom or Facebook PM with those participants who consented to that after the end of the three week group discussion period. Those conversations that happened in writing had to be conducted that way due to the respondents being in a hostile environment where they could be overheard discussing their identity by unaccepting or unaware family members.

The reason for the workshops to be done first and the interviews second instead of the opposite (even though it could be expected that one-on-one meetings would establish rapport with the participants) is threefold. First, not all participants agreed to take part in the interviews, while everyone indicated that they wanted to be in the workshops, and it was desirable to have everybody start on equal footing. Second, the interviews were a way to gain additional details and perspectives on what was shared in the workshops, and the familiarity built up during the group phase helped create an atmosphere of trust crucial to the kind of sensitive topics that were discussed one-on-one. Finally, conducting the interviews after the workshops had already concluded allowed respondents to reflect on their experience in the group and on what was said.

3.7 Facebook group

The Facebook group where the project was coordinated also served as a space for communication within the group. Tools such as likes and comments provided a feedback channel for opinions on the workshops’ topics and additional thoughts on the discussion summaries. One participant who was often quiet during the group activity (although present at both time slots in all three weeks) took the opportunity to share their thoughts after one of the workshops by creating their own post.

The group provides an opportunity to adhere to the goals of community-oriented PD by including participants in the generative process and creating the conditions necessary for them to be able to take follow-up work and maintenance into their own hands [41].

After the end of the last workshop, the participants were invited to discuss how they would like to manage the group and its membership. It was decided that after wrapping up the workshops and interviews, it would be left up on Facebook so that participants can remain in contact with each other and with me. It has been opened to other LGBTQ+ people who would like to join, and admin privileges have been given to two of the participants, who expressed the desire to have them so that they can moderate posts and regulate who may enter the group. The original members were urged to delete any posts and comments they would not want the potential new arrivals to see.

3.8 Approaches to analysis

Given the personal and diverse nature of the data, a qualitative analysis was the only logical approach to take. Qualitative analysis approaches were used in the studies by DeVito, Hardy, and Dimond [17, 23, 33]. According to Braun and Clarke [6], such an analysis is always an act of interpretation (i.e. making sense of the material) and as such needs to be tied to political, cultural, and material contexts; as full a picture as possible is necessary in order for the interpretation of the data to properly do its job of revealing a "take-home message" about the needs and wants of the workshop participants.

A paper from 2011 by Sherriff et al. uses thematic analysis to interpret the results of a study with LGBTQ+ people aged 13-26. That discussion focused around coming out and bullying, and many of the participants talked about the negative impact of discrimination on their health and social life [47], a similar thematic to that of the present work. The interpretation method being used here is also thematic analysis as per Braun and Clarke [7]. The authors break down the process into several phases, starting with familiarisation with the dataset, coding, and generating initial themes, then developing, reviewing, refining, and naming those themes, and finally writing up the resulting interpretation.

It is important to note that all materials - recordings, interviews, posts, comments - are in Bulgarian. Braun and Clarke note that language might propagate stigma or marginalise, so it is preferable to work with the language people actually use [6]. In the interest of preserving the full meaning and nuance the speakers intend, no full translations will be done for these materials. Instead, quotes will only be translated when they are integral to the completeness of the report, and the original text of the quote will be provided as a footnote in such cases. Sometimes, quotes were given by the participants in English, and in those cases they are simply provided in their entirety.

The Results and Discussion section contains a summary of the three workshops, with the content organised by the general theme it fits into. The themes were determined by sorting each topic discussed by one or more participants by identifying the central issue it pertains to and putting topics with the same central issue together, resulting in several categories (eventually themes) within the data from each workshop. The usefulness of this approach comes from the ability to give names to the broader themes within the discussion and, once named, view them in the context of existing knowledge about the political and cultural climate in Bulgaria, as well as interpret what they may disclose about the experience of members of the LGBTQ+ community in the country. Any such interpretation must, in order to remain faithful both to the participants and their trust and to the core values of participatory design, focus on reporting the meaning of what was said as accurately as possible, first and foremost. The acts of placing the content of the discussions into context or organising it so that a handful of main underlying themes are evident must aim to impart a deeper understanding of the issues at hand and the ways they are being experienced by the participants, and not to mince words or look for meanings that are not there, i.e. as much as possible and reasonable in a scientific context, to take the participants' words and feelings at face value. Even so, one must keep in mind that this is still an act of interpretation – of telling a story constructed out of everything that was said during the three weeks of workshops and the subsequent two weeks of interviews – and limited by the size and composition of the sample, personal misunderstandings or biases, and the scope and timespan of the discussions themselves.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Between the workshops and the interviews, there were noticeable commonalities in the topics which participants discussed, but also drastic differences in the perspectives from which they discussed them. The ideas of education, access to resources, and media representation, as well as the feeling of urgency around on-the-ground conditions of threats and violence in public, persisted throughout all three workshops, as participants were pinpointing practical problems and designing practical solutions. As this analysis will show, these ideas were also present in the text of the individual interviews, although in a more personal and more acute way, especially when it came to experiencing violence both in public contexts and in one's private life and family environment. The urgency of these problems in the group discussions turned into (sometimes visceral) fear in the interviews when respondents were talking about their personal run-ins with homophobia and its consequences. However, participants were often hopeful and saw various ways technology could be directed at solving some of these deep-seated issues.

4.1 Workshop 1

In the first workshop (deemed by one participant "the complaining session") the group was asked to identify issues faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Bulgaria. Four categories of problem were evident in the conversation - interpersonal homophobia, institutional homophobia, lack of information, and lack of representation/ freedom of expression - with several sub-themes traceable within them.

4.1.1 Interpersonal homophobia manifesting through violence and othering. Participants commented at length on everyday, interpersonal homophobia encountered by them and their friends and loved ones. There was general agreement that homophobia is the status quo in Bulgaria, normalised to the point of being part of the culture: this includes the language of hatred and othering as part and parcel of common parlance. The use of slurs is not even always "meant" to offend - they are reduced to generic insults. Meanwhile, participants noted, the so-called liberal position in Bulgarian society boils down to "It's okay to be gay, as long as you are not visibly gay." This rigid heteronormativity even seeps into queer spaces, one participant noted; internalised homophobia is rampant due to people's desire to be accepted and "normal," especially when it comes to family and friends.

As seen from the research [5, 19, 39, 40], there has been an increase in anti-LGBTQ sentiment in recent years. Participants have noticed this in their own lives and theorise that it may at least partly be due to "imported" hatred and far-right propaganda on the internet. One person suggested that this may have been helped along by Covid19 lockdowns ushering radical groups even more into the online sphere, where their rhetoric eventually seeps into mainstream spaces, allowing them to mix amongst themselves and exchange ideas, inevitably leading to far-right ideology extending its reach.

Most urgently of all, homophobic attacks such as the ones mentioned earlier on [8, 9, 19, 24] are rampant. The increase in violence has chased people away from parks and public spaces that were previously full, participants said, and even children and pregnant people have been assaulted. It cannot be stressed enough that the oppressive weight of constantly being under threat of physical violence in the streets of your own city was the number one issue pointed out by every single participant in this workshop. Even in subsequent workshops, the conversation returned to this point again and again. *"People are dying,"* one person said. *"This is what should be written about."*

4.1.2 Institutional homophobia creating second-class citizenship. The discussion on the prevalence of homophobia in Bulgarian society also veered into the legal issues faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the country. Echoing the Call It Hate report [5], the foremost problem participants talked about was the lack of legislation defining crimes motivated

by homophobia as "hate crimes." Presidential candidate Rasate's attack on Rainbow Hub [35, 38] was mentioned as an example of a crime that would have incurred far greater consequences, had there been an adequate legal framework within which the perpetrators could be prosecuted. There was an awareness in the group that the issue of institutional homophobia does not exist in a vacuum and is part of a general climate of nonchalance and even reluctance when it comes to the progress of human rights in the country. Participants thought this problem was deepened by the willingness of the media to platform homophobes and demonise the LGBTQ+ community, resulting in a chilling effect on any momentum LGBTQ+ rights could have gotten among "regular" citizens and a deepening of existing prejudices. One participant mentioned they knew that while the concept of conversion therapy is not familiar to most Bulgarians (but the practice is not illegal either), there are individual medical professionals and therapists who offer it to parents of LGBTQ+ children. In light of these issues, marriage and adoption rights were almost an afterthought to the group, although they were mentioned; put simply, these are not things one is able to give much thought to when struggling to survive in an increasingly hostile environment.

4.1.3 Lack of information. In multiple sessions, the topic of information and education kept coming up. Participants pointed to the lack of education about LGBTQ+ people as a major contributor to widespread homophobia. Several people argued that lack of access to information makes queer children even more vulnerable than they already are, as they have to seek it out online from questionable sources or remain open to predatory behaviour from adults due to feeling isolated and alone. One non-binary person pointed out that non-binary genders cannot even be explained properly in Bulgarian due to the utter lack of terminology that can be understood by the average person. This, they said, was the main reason why they were not even trying to come out to their otherwise accepting family. These lapses in language as well as education put up additional barriers between queer people and those they want to get through to, and could even be weaponised against them in order to isolate them further or to prevent children from having the means to discover and express their identity. Furthermore the inability to define oneself fully in one's own tongue can prevent people from seeing their true numbers, making it harder to organise and start a mass LGBTQ+ rights movement.

4.1.4 Lack of representation/ freedom of expression. In connection with the previous theme of lack of information, participants also talked about the lack of visibility and representation of LGBTQ+ people in Bulgarian media and art, as well as the suppression of material that does include them (see the uproar around *The Other Bulgarian Women* [20]). This means that queer expression is "odd" and stands out; participants mentioned not being "brave enough" to dress how they would like or wear LGBTQ+ symbols on their clothing or accessories for fear of violence and ostracism. This contributes further to the mass shoving of the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ community into the proverbial closet, the pushing of its art and its scene underground, and the stifling of its ability to define itself as a collective culturally as well as politically.

4.2 Workshop 2

Five categories of solutions formed during the blue-sky workshop: access to information and support; counteracting violence; counteracting misinformation; immediate measures; community and organising. Multiple ideas are contained in each theme, and within themes different subthemes can be created.

4.2.1 Access to information and support. There are two subthemes within this theme: *normalisation of LGBTQ+ existence* and *information and support for young people*. Ideas falling into both themes touched on the importance of education in the processes of normalising being queer and supporting youth. Participants suggested that one way normalisation can come about is through in-class discussions and informational posters in schools; these would provide informational resources (such as websites to visit) and support to those who need it (school counselling or numbers to

call). Furthermore, there was agreement that this must all happen under a long-term, radically different education plan, which would have the potential to change the culture and public opinion around LGBTQ+ issues in Bulgaria. Almost all participants underlined the importance of education in shifting cultural perspectives. Several people also touched upon the idea of normalising LGBTQ+ existence through representation in popular media: movies, series, even advertisements with "normal, regular" people in them who happen to be LGBTQ+.

Even outside of schools, participants emphasised the crucial role of *information and support*, especially for younger LGBTQ+ people. The suggestion of an informational application/ website emerged, where youth could read articles and other material answering their questions and providing them with other information that might concern them as members of the community. Another application idea suggested direct contact with a trained professional and the ability to ask a question at any time of day or night; this solution came with the caveat that it would be best to also provide in-person contact, for example with school counsellors, so that children and teenagers can receive support regardless of whether they prefer to speak to an adult directly, or remain anonymous and ask private questions online.

4.2.2 Counteracting violence. The measures participants suggested to counteract homophobic violence fell into one of two kinds: *institutional* and *social*. *Institutional measures* included "police doing their jobs" (i.e. changes in how the police force operates in general, as well as specifically when it comes to anti-LGBTQ+ crimes), a legal framework encompassing crimes committed out of homophobic hatred (such a framework is entirely missing from Bulgarian legislation, as discussed earlier), and banning the infamous Lukov March. [1] *Social measures* had more to do with media and public perception than changes in government and policy. Participants suggested running Facebook ads positioning LGBTQ+ rights as something congruent with the teaching of Jesus Christ, in order to reach an older, conservative, Orthodox Christian audience that is often found on that platform. The idea behind such ads would be to "speak their language" and draw a connection between so-called Christian values and LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance. When it comes to more traditional media, participants reasoned that qualified, media trained representatives should be seen in news, talk shows, and other programmes seen by that same older audience, so that a counter-narrative to current prevailing opinions can be provided to them. The focus in both cases is on middle-aged and elderly Bulgarians, as participants thought that they are the ones who are the most likely to hold homophobic beliefs - as shown earlier, this is supported by the data [5, 25].

4.2.3 Counteracting misinformation. Within the theme of counteracting misinformation, the two major subthemes once again came down to *education* and *the public sphere/ media*. *Counteracting misinformation in education* was a distinct discussion from support during education (discussed earlier on), as participants suggested changes in the educational system at its very root, as opposed to simply introducing support channels and LGBTQ+ friendly lesson plans. The two main solutions offered were (1) teach children critical thinking throughout the curriculum - in subjects such as history, literature, maths, science - and during all 12 school years; (2) carefully construct and foster an open and accepting school environment, since children pick up everything easily, including hatred and prejudice, i.e. change must begin with parents and teachers who pass these on to them.

When it came to *counteracting misinformation in the public sphere and the media*, participants suggested a fact-checker website (in the style of e.g. PolitiFact) specific to Bulgaria, where users can check claims they encounter online or in traditional news sources, regardless of whether these claims have to do with the LGBTQ+ community or not. It is apparent

[1] Lukov March is an annual event organised by far right groups, named after a Bulgarian WWII general who had close ties to Goering and led the "national socialist" contingent in wartime Bulgaria [1]. Participants march along one of the capital's main streets, often dressed in black, carrying torches, and displaying ultranationalist symbols.

that participants agreed that misinformation cannot be countered selectively, and in order to remove lies about LGBTQ+ people and issues from the public sphere, the media landscape must become more reliable as a whole.

4.2.4 Immediate measures needed to address emergency. Participants often brought up the urgency of the situation and the need for emergency measures to be in place before trying to implement any other more general solutions. These immediate measures included *suicide prevention*, *legal reform*, and *solidarity with/ from allies*. The sorely needed legal reforms to the penal code and policing have already been covered earlier: participants mentioned hate crime legislation, police violence, and the complete lack of support for victims, which can also be seen in the EU report and other research [5, 24, 25, 31].

The discussion naturally made the connection between the constant, unrelenting dangers and problems stemming from living in a homophobic society and the need for suicide prevention. At the time of writing, there is no LGBTQ+ oriented suicide hotline or other similar support channel in Bulgaria. Participants underlined the need for such a service, especially for young people who might be living with homophobic relatives, but also suggested that it would be helpful to have access to talk therapy, where one can offload concerns without these concerns necessarily being medicalised.

This need for human connection is also evident in the theme of *solidarity* which was noticeable in the discussion. Participants reasoned that if allies and cisheterosexual friends openly expressed their support of LGBTQ+ loved ones in front of other straight people, this could eventually lead to a shift in the culture and a decrease in everyday homophobia (especially if such homophobia gets called out by straight allies instead of LGBTQ+ people only). Solidarity, two participants claimed, could also happen on the lines of class: LGBTQ+ people in Bulgaria are often poor, and so are many others, meaning that their interests can align on e.g. workers' rights despite differences stemming from gender and sexuality.

4.2.5 Community and organising. There were two general subthemes participants talked about within this theme: *meeting others* and *political action*. Once again the discussion circled back to schools, where participants suggested clubs and extracurricular activities could be organised for LGBTQ+ students so that they have the chance to build friendship and community, addressing the loneliness many feel growing up "different." For adults, another application idea emerged: somewhere people can meet other members of the community specifically with the goal of making friends in mind, without the expectation of a romantic or intimate relationship. This spilled into the theme of *political action* as someone proposed that the app could also be helpful when organising LGBTQ+ events and protests. Another idea was to build some manner of "filtration" system that could help prevent the infiltration of online LGBTQ+ spaces by malicious actors (e.g. fascists making fake accounts to join queer-themed Facebook groups).

4.3 Workshop 3

Similar to what was seen from the literature, participants ended up choosing mostly tangible, practical, technology-backed solutions. In step with the results of previous research, these included ways to connect with other community members and share experiences (see Hollaback [23]), as well as digital resources that would be available to anyone who needs them. However, more "analog" ideas were also chosen from the pool created in the second workshop, focusing primarily on creating safe community spaces and combatting homophobic propaganda and its normalisation. Overall, the goals both kinds of solution strive for have to do with access to information, normalising LGBTQ+ identities, and building a stronger and tighter-knit Bulgarian LGBTQ+ community.

Below are the ideas determined by the participants at the last workshop to be plausible and achievable while still having some positive effect on Bulgarian LGBTQ+ people's lives.

- An application with easily accessible information in Bulgarian on various LGBTQ+ topics, e.g. articles, study summaries, news, and opinion pieces
- Facebook ads with "counterpropaganda" aiming to fight the misinformation many people (especially 40+) see on their social media feed every day
- An organised campaign of distributing posters and stickers condemning Lukov March throughout the streets of Sofia
- A hotline people can call when they need support or simply to talk to someone about LGBTQ+ issues
- A book club for LGBTQ+ people and books
- An LGBTQ+ forum (2000s interest forum style) with volunteer moderators - this idea was unanimously declared the group's favourite at the end of the workshop

The selected ideas show the participants' extremely down-to-earth, realistic approach to solving or contributing to solving looming, complex, ingrained systemic issues. The concept of starting small and the awareness of the effects even small changes would have on individual community members were at the forefront of the discussion. The focus was often on providing any source of support, even if it wouldn't have a large-scale or immediate impact on Bulgarian society as a whole, as long as it would provide a space and time when LGBTQ+ people can feel safe and accepted. Participants seemed to realise that a systemic problem cannot be resolved with individual solutions, and yet saw value in both supporting each other (with resources and community building) and in localised resistance (by using technology to counter homophobia). In the group, some people mentioned their own technological skill and talked about how they could apply it to make the chosen ideas a reality together.

4.4 Interviews

4.4.1 Identity and language. The five participants who chose to respond to the interview questions identified in the following ways: two were nonbinary, two were cis women, and one was genderfluid. Two out of the five respondents gave a single word answer, while the rest gave a more detailed explanation - two of them resorted to using English words where they found that there was not a corresponding term in Bulgarian. Among the respondents, two said that they "prefer women/ femininity one identified as "bisexual or maybe asexual," one as a lesbian, and another as queer/ lesbian. Two people gave detailed answers to the question about sexuality, and once again felt they needed to use English words to fully describe the way they identify. This had previously come up in the workshops as well; participants often switched to English when talking about identity because of the lack of Bulgarian words to describe it. Most identity-related terms that do exist in Bulgarian are imported from English, and when that happens, they sometimes turn into slurs, as some group members pointed out. The most egregious example of this is the word "gender," which very regularly gets used as an insult against trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people in Bulgaria. This goes to show the utter lack of serious public discussion of gender and identity in the country; there is a word base to describe these concepts in English precisely because that discussion has been happening among English speakers. A significant part of this dialogue has taken place on the internet - another example of technology's role in rights discourse.

Only one of the respondents mentioned being out to their family, but only about their sexuality – which family members are accepting of – and not their gender, citing an inability to even begin to explain it lacking the proper words and context in Bulgarian: *"even my family, the big exception, does not have the informational basis to understand me, nor do I have the language or the cultural framework in Bulgarian to create such a basis."* [2] (Gender being even harder to discuss with

[2] "Дори моето семейство, голямото изключение, няма информационната база да ме разбере, нито аз имам езика и културния framework на български да създам такава база."

loved ones than sexuality had come up in the workshops as well.) One other participant mentioned being out to their mother – who reacted with confusion and shame – but not the rest of their family, and receiving varying degrees of "deep hatred" from their ex-partner and other older adults they came out to. *"My life changed completely,"* they explained, *"the result was a severe loss."* [3] The respondent decided not to come out to many more people besides their current partner, as there wouldn't be "much chance for anything good" [4] to come of it. The remaining respondents explained they were only out to some friends and no family. Two said their friends are supportive, and one reported that non-LGBTQ+ friends were only "tolerant" as long as "the gays are not pushing themselves in front of their eyes." [5] Respondents cited fear as a reason to not come out to their families or their broader social circle. *"They have shown me with their behaviour that they don't support people who are not heterosexual, and I don't feel ready to [...] enter open conflict."* [6]

4.4.2 Living in Bulgaria. Only one of the interview respondents currently lives in Bulgaria full time, while most others said they visit family often or live there part-time. They cited varying reasons for being away, such as education, opportunity, and the ability to express oneself and be accepted. One respondent said they had "economic, political, cultural, educational reasons to leave" and described the country as patriarchal and homophobic. *"Coming back to visit, I feel this oppressive atmosphere in the air and I can't stick around for too long before feeling like I'm regressing on my own journey of mental health, gender, growth, self-discovery etc. I feel myself… regressing into safety (survival) mode, making myself smaller, diminishing the authenticity of my presentation, which is normally very bold,"* they explained. Another participant also described a similar sense of having to limit their presentation and look "normal" for fear of confrontation with people in public. Someone else also cited academic and career reasons, but then added that if they were to express themselves freely, they would be met with "blind fury and judgement." *"If I had to stay, I would hide and that would eat me up on the inside, if I fought I would fight with everything I have, and I don't think I would win or even survive,"* they elaborated. [7] Overall, the interviews indicated Bulgaria can often be unlivable for the majority of LGBTQ+ people; they cannot live in constant fear, so they move abroad. Once there, they become even more aware of the differences between their two countries, something participants often reflected upon in both workshops and interviews. As a respondent put it, *"Conditions for me, in terms of work, life, people who surround me – if I was not hiding here in England and decided to be fully honest – are frankly frightening, and thinking of doing this in Bulgaria is a paralysing terror."* [8]

Out of the people who do not currently live in Bulgaria, one plans to return in order to be with their Bulgarian partner, but the rest state that they have no intention to come back except for visits. The respondent who lives in the country plans to stay, citing their wish to remain close to their family and their love for Bulgarian nature. Out of those who do not want to return, one participant simply stated *"It's too warm and homophobic,"* while another said: *"[In Bulgaria] you must live according to given standards or you turn into a target"* [9] and shared that in their current Western country of residence, they are not afraid for their life "so often and so much," [10] as opposed to feeling at risk even when completing everyday

[3] "Моят живот се промени коренно, но резултата беше груба загуба."
[4] "Има много добри причини да си замълча, най-вече ако единствените резултати са отрицателни и щети ще бъдат нанесени без особено добър шанс за нещо добро."
[5] "Гейовете не ми пречат, но да не ми се навират в очите."
[6] "Не съм открита пред семейството и родните ми, тъй като са ми показали с поведението си, че не подкрепят хора, които не са хетеросексуални, и не се чувствам готова да водя подобен диалог с тях и да влизам в открити конфликти."
[7] "Не виждах дом или място или нация която би ме приела, не видях хора с отворени сърца а сляпа ярост и осъждане. С времето това укрепи моята воля да търся живот другаде, защото ако трябваше да остана ще се крия и това ще ме изяде отвътре, ако се боря бих се борил със всичко което имам и не мисля че щях не само да победя, но и да оцелея."
[8] "Условията за мен, като работа, живот, хора около мен, ако не се криех (тук в Англия) и реших да бъда изцяло откровен са плашещи, а мисълта да го направя в България е вкоченяващ ужас."
[9] "Трябва да се живее както е по наложени стандарти или се превръщаш в мишена."
[10] "Няма да се страхувам за живота си толкова често и силно."

tasks such as clothes shopping or getting groceries in Bulgaria. Some of the respondents also cited career opportunities as reasons to not return, and one even stated that even if they happened to be cis and straight, they would still not feel like they belong there due to it being "too patriarchal and buckwild overall."

4.4.3 Homophobia in Bulgaria. Interview respondents talked about being affected by anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in various ways, but almost everyone mentioned restricting their presentation and personal expression in some way – wearing less noticeable clothes, not breaching the topic of gender for fear of negative reactions. Most respondents had also experienced a detriment to their mental health: feelings of rage, sadness, and helplessness when faced with homophobia on social media, being afraid for loved ones back in Bulgaria while out of the country, feeling guilty for not being able to make people around them more accepting of LGBTQ+ people at large, even dealing with lasting trauma after moving away, taking years to feel "normal" in their new place of residence that is more accepting. There were also other losses: relationships, money, health, time "wasted" trying to be accepted, a difficulty in finding romantic partners when too afraid to show your real self in public. One participant reported being met with insults and no understanding the few times they tried to discuss their gender. Others mentioned being afraid to show affection to their partner outside, and one reflected on the attack on Rainbow Hub [35]: *"When Rainbow Hub was attacked by a group of fascists led by a presidential candidate, I remember the deep horror I felt. I know some of those people, even though they aren't my close friends. We've met at events, protests, etc. Suddenly seeing them on the news, beaten, was... a distinct category of shock."* [11] It is worth mentioning that two people said they were "not very affected" by homophobic attitudes, but then proceeded to describe serious and lasting mental health consequences and quite a few everyday disadvantages. These respondents were deeply aware of what they described as "passing privilege" and realised that there are members of the community even more marginalised than themselves, who face even more of the material consequences of widespread, socially ingrained homophobia.

When it comes to dealing with the problems caused by homophobia in Bulgaria, participants mostly had two approaches: leaving the country or trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, avoiding "looking queer" at the cost of feeling inauthentic. One of the respondents talked about trying to combat internalised homophobia and low self-esteem caused by homophobic comments by reading about these topics and getting more educated about mental health. Another took the approach of offering help to community organisers whenever that is a possibility from abroad as part of the process of healing from psychological trauma. Despite the reality of such trauma and the difficulties they face, multiple respondents maintained their position on passing privilege and the privilege of being able to live abroad, and were acutely aware that some of the ways they cope are entirely unavailable to many other LGBTQ+ people, especially those living in Bulgaria full time while being visibly queer. Despite the severity of some of their own circumstances, participants understood that it could be worse still, and showed a great deal of empathy for fellow members of the community facing even more disadvantages. Many respondents worried not only about themselves and their own safety and well-being, but also that of other people like them, indicating a strong sense of community and solidarity in the face of fear and discrimination.

Most respondents defined success for LGBTQ+ rights in Bulgaria as the right to marry, representation in government and media, and the needed legislation being introduced both in relation with hate crime and when it comes to gender identification. One participant elaborated, saying that success must include gender care, education, and support, while another added that it requires an end to discrimination which affects workplace and social participation for LGBTQ+ people. One respondent did not define success for the community, saying that it is too far in the future - *"first, action needs to start"* - and that more politicians have to be on the side of LGBTQ+ rights as a prerequisite. Participants listed a variety

[11] "Когато Rainbow Hub бяха нападнати от група фашисти начело с кандидат за президент, си спомням дълбокия ужас, който изпитах. Познавам някои от хората, макар че не са ми близки приятели. Виждали сме се на събития, протести, етц. Изведнъж да ги видя в новините бити беше... особена категория шок."

of improvements that the success of the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ cause would bring to their lives, most citing the ability to simply live in the everyday unimpeded and feeling free: *"The biggest thing would be some semblance of peace of mind, letting go of some of that fear we all carry because I no longer have to fear for the immediate safety and wellbeing of people and communities I care about very deeply."* Respondents living abroad said that they would visit more often, as they would feel safer and protected by the law, knowing they are "a full citizen." One reasoned that even if rights were to be won, there would still be a lot of healing the community would have to do after.

When asked what they would want people to know about living as an LGBTQ+ person in Bulgaria, participants generally tended to warn about the dangers found in the country and inform about challenges. *"LGBTQ+ foreigners should avoid the country. Never visit parks in the evening. Everyone with football attire should be avoided. Travel together and preferably have pepper spray on you,"* a respondent advised. Another wanted to stress that efforts from NGOs are bringing hope to a challenging situation and trying to counteract the violence and discrimination with the little resources they have. One participant wanted people to know that LGBTQ+ individuals cannot live authentically and safely in Bulgaria: *"It's permanent survival mode. It's hypervigilance, trauma, fear. We were right in the meetings to call it a state of terror, because it is. And that's.... not really living. If we're lucky we get to be... alive."* Another remarked, *"It feels almost exactly the same as it would've 50 years ago... No progress."* [12] The final respondent turned the question around and wanted to speak to other Bulgarians and tell them that their LGBTQ+ compatriots are dying and not getting a chance at normal life.

4.5 Continuing the work

Both DeVito [17] and Hardy [33] discuss ways in which the values and needs of the LGBTQ+ community can be considered and reflected in design practice. Pointing out specific concerns and ways in which the community would like to see them addressed could be a chance to open doors to further research and practical projects which focus on implementing solutions wanted and needed by the community. As per Iversen and Dindler [41], a sustainable and successful participatory design initiative needs to involve the group actively in creation processes and empower the participants to take charge of the continuation and maintenance of any subsequent projects. A first step towards this long-term goal has been leaving the discussion group up on Facebook after the study was over, so that participants can remain in contact with each other and the facilitator, which could help in bringing some of the ideas from the workshops into reality in the future. One of the suggested ideas was to use the group to post summaries of new LGBTQ+ research, so that members can keep up with developments in the field. Furthermore, efforts to create the LGBTQ+ information app are already underway, although it is still in an early stage. Meanwhile, the LGBTQ+ book club has found its home on a Discord server and suggestions for the group's first read are being considered.

5 CONCLUSIONS

As pointed out earlier, research with a specific focus on participatory design involving LGBTQ+ Eastern Europeans is scarce, and even the broader area of LGBTQ+ rights in that part of the world is underrepresented academically, particularly when it comes to work authored by Eastern Europeans themselves. This is especially true in Bulgaria, a country where the current climate is remarkably hostile to minorities, including LGBTQ+ people, as has been demonstrated. It is tempting to hope that with a new generation of researchers and activists now beginning their work, the situation may eventually improve; but the fact is that at the moment, LGBTQ+ voices in Bulgaria are routinely suppressed, especially those of

[12] "Че се усеща по почти същия начин, както преди 50 години... Никакво развитие."

individuals who are powerless to stand up to systemic violence alone. This is why it is necessary to hear these individual voices. It is sometimes easier to desensitise oneself to the aggregate of suffering than to the personal stories of specific people, and this is in part why this paper included more direct quotes from the interviews than the workshops: they are salient and filled with personal experiences, and they show why it is important to understand and address the issues raised by the participants, by previous research, and by numerous LGBTQ+ people living in Bulgaria.

It is worth observing that the recommended action from the 2019 Call It Hate report for the country [5] overlaps in large part with the measures participants wanted to see taken. Specifically, this was evident on the points of including gender identity and expression in the list of protected categories, introducing adequate hate crime legislation, providing police with appropriate sensitivity training, educating broader society on LGBTQ+ issues, and counteracting negative stereotypes in an organised fashion. Despite the low volume of research into LGBTQ+ topics in Bulgaria, many avenues of action that authorities could undertake to alleviate the dire situation have been identified. The results of the workshops also relate to previous research done outside the country: for example, the LGBTQ+ forum is reminiscent of other community spaces such as Hollaback [23], while the issues raised by the participants overlap with those identified by Haimson et al. in their work with trans people [32]. Just as in those studies, it was evident throughout this project that technology can and should be seen as a tool for community building and for resistance.

Harking back to McWilliams [42] and doing PD through a queer theory lens, it is evident that even the relatively minor act of attending a few workshops can provide the space and framework required to question established narratives. The results of this project are indeed congruent with the idea that "the heterosexual matrix permeates all aspects of culture" [42], but they are also indicative of how little can prove enough to push people towards action and organising, even if it is on a small, local scale. A difference made to a few individuals is in no way a solution to systemic issues that will continue to affect those individuals until met with appropriately scaled measures; however, that does not render the creation of even a limited-reach safe haven (such as, say, a queer book club with monthly meetings) worthless.

Finally, it must be noted that the work presented here is interpretative, and no single interpretation is the objectively "true" way to make sense of a specific volume of data. Furthermore, any interpretation is coloured not only by the lenses through which the facts are being viewed, but also the researcher or author's identity and knowledge [6]. Despite one's best efforts, there is no way for an individual to provide a complete and comprehensive overview of the situation, representing the full diversity of Bulgarian LGBTQ+ people. This is why this project should be viewed as a start, or the cautious cracking open of a door. Further context and further research is needed, due not only to the small sample size, but also to the scope of the project, which was not able to include intersections between being LGBTQ+ in Bulgaria while also being Roma, or to reflect the experiences of older LGBTQ+ people, among other complexities. While the author is an insider to the community, not living in Bulgaria and therefore no longer being subjected to the same conditions as some of the participants is a form of privilege that has undoubtedly coloured the interpretation lens. Hopefully, future work can provide chances for a more complete, intersectional, and nuanced take on the issues raised here, especially when it comes to amplifying marginalised voices and finding ways to use technology and design to advance rights and equality.

This project attempted to use participatory design as a tool to interrogate both the problem and solutions spaces around homophobia in the context of Bulgarian culture and society, aiming to describe the needs and wants of the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ community. While the gap in research (both by and about Bulgarians) about LGBTQ+ topics is wide, there has been work done about inequality and discrimination affecting minorities in the country in general, and several outside reports (such as those from the EU) point to the severity of the situation. Similar research from other countries shows positive outcomes from utilising technology as a community-building tool, and speaks to the continued effectiveness PD can have as a starting-off point for community-centred solutions. In this project, PD was used not only as a way to find out

what solutions the group wanted or needed, but also to report on the difficulties and discrimination faced by participants, adding personal perspectives and detail to the grim picture of Bulgarian homophobia painted by previous research. The workshops focused on three phases of discussion: identifying issues, imagining the future, and bringing the possible solutions down to earth, while the interviews provided additional context and individual points of view. In the end, six ideas were put forward by the group as plausible and helpful ways to take action, including both technological and other solutions. Some of those solutions have been carried forward after the project wrapped up, and the work of implementing them has already started. The relatively minor act of providing a temporary space to discuss community issues in safety and confidentiality led to practical action on the part of some group members, indicating that while individual action cannot fully begin to address a complex, entrenched, systemic problem such as Bulgarian homophobia, it can still make a difference in somebody's day-to-day life. Thus, local responses and small acts of resistance can be meaningful and worth the attention, work, time, and persistence they require.

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A PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

A.1 Workshops

All respondents stated that they were overall happy with the workshops, most saying that they were friendly and pleasant. Some participants felt that the discussion had been productive and had many perspectives that got them to think deeper about the issues at hand, while others were happy to have a safe space to vent and talk to other LGBTQ+ people and expressed sadness at the meetings reaching their end. One respondent shared that they did not usually get this much contact with other queer people, so it was nice to be able to discuss common problems. Another said they "felt hopeful" because of the plausibility of the final set of ideas the group reached. A participant called the workshops a "community exercise and reality check letting us all know that it is in fact very bad and not cool and we are not in fact insane or overreacting. Weirdly enough, collective despair and anger can be a kind of positive and hopeful experience."

A.2 Changes for future projects

Participants were generally content with how the workshops were handled, the two main suggestions being to provide more time for future projects and recruit more people: "Bigger samples, more diverse samples, less of an exclusively young white spread," as one respondent put it, while another reasoned that a higher number of discussions would be better for keeping up inertia. One participant said they liked the workshops, but would also attend similar events where homophobic people are invited, hoping that common ground could be reached in that way.

A.3 Involvement in future initiatives

Respondents expressed a desire or willingness to participate in bringing some of the ideas from the workshops to life, from writing code to doing research to "any help that is needed" as far as this is possible to achieve with only volunteers. One person felt it was their responsibility to take action: "I would really like to participate wherever possible, because I think I owe it to myself and the LGBTQ+ community. I owe it to the child within myself who took years to accept [themselves] for what [they] really are."