

# “Stop it, f\*ggot!” Producing East European Geosexual Backwardness in the Drop-In Centre for Male Sex Workers in Berlin

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I examine the negotiations of national and sexual belonging of a Romanian gay sex worker in Berlin in the contemporary geosexual context defined by binarism between ‘modern’, ‘liberal’ and ‘tolerant’ Western Europe and its ‘traditionalist’ and ‘homophobic’ East European *Other*. I analyse how, by means of an overt display of his own homosexuality, the sex worker symbolically distances himself from his native country. By extension, this reinforces the image of the East and its inhabitants as inherently homophobic and, therefore, backwards. The article is based on ethnographic research in the drop-in centre for male sex workers in Berlin, an environment that reveals how deeply contemporary geosexual differences are anchored in the cultural logic of everyday life.

## KEYWORDS

Eastern/Western Europe, everyday life, geosexual difference, homophobia, male sex work, neo-traditionalism, Orientalism

## Geosexual Politics in Contemporary Europe

At a recent international conference German scholar Anika Keinz confessed to feeling discomfort and unease as she, in the mid-2000s, was observing German political discourse while conducting ethnographic fieldwork on feminist movements in Poland (Keinz 2017). Keinz’ unease stemmed from the realisation that the values of gender equality, sexual diversity and LGBT rights that Polish feminists eagerly fought for in Poland have been used to marginalise and discriminate *ethnic and racial Others* in Germany. As a matter of fact, a look at the news from around 2007 reveals the deep discrepancy between the use of sexuality and gender in the Polish and German public discourses. In Poland LGBT prides, called equality marches, have been attacked by right-wing radicals and dissolved by the police, and the conservative party then in power claimed that homosexuality



is foreign to the Polish nation (Graff 2010). Meanwhile in Poland LGBT people became oppressed on the basis of their sexual identity. In Germany homosexuality itself became a means for oppression of ethnic, national and religious *Others*, as the question on attitudes towards same-sex relationships became part of the test for citizenship by naturalisation when Germany legalised same-sex civic partnerships, gay prides became commercial mass events and Berlin elected an openly gay mayor.

The unease Keinz felt was (and remains) the spirit of the time. Almost fifteen years later most former socialist countries joined the EU, attitudes towards sexuality and, in particular, towards the so-called sexual minorities remain one of the major differences between Western and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> One may take a look at different historical legacies of gender and sexuality regimes in both parts of the continent to understand how this difference came into being. In Western Europe the social change of the 1960s brought liberalisation of sexual norms, the emergence of gay and lesbian movements, a gradually increasing acceptance of LGBT people in the society and the incorporation of LGBT rights into human rights platforms of governments and EU institutions. While liberalization defined the changing social climate in Western Europe, a return to traditionalist, patriarchal models of gender and sexuality characterised the sexual and gender regime of former socialist countries (Berry 1995; Funk 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000; Johnson and Robinson 2007; Keinz 2008). This ‘neo-traditionalism’ (Johnson and Robinson 2007) has commonly been viewed as a reaction to the socialist policy of forced women’s emancipation. In addition to being criticized for creating the infamous double burden of both reproduction and care as well as wage work on women, this policy was denounced as a foreign influence and the departure from it was explained in terms of a return to ‘normalcy’ (Keinz 2011). The wish to return to a presocialist, pre-emancipated patriarchal state, now labelled as ‘normal’, was coupled with anxieties about maintaining national identifications after the accession to the European Union. It engendered all policy areas relevant to sexuality and gender and manifested in aggressive denial of LGBT rights and a heavy investment in reaffirmation of patriarchal gender and sexual norms (Graff 2010; Keinz 2011; Renkin 2009, 2015).

As this brief overview demonstrates, both Western European sexual liberalism and East European neo-traditionalism are comparatively recent phenomena, having emerged in the context of social development of respective countries, under the influence of the transnational

and geopolitical context.<sup>2</sup> Within the West, however, ‘homophobic’ policies and attitudes in Eastern Europe are often seen as a sign of an everlasting and essential Eastern European difference and backwardness (Kulpa 2014). The Western discourses attributing homophobia and traditionalism to non-Western societies have been widely analysed as a part of ideologies of cultural domination that use the values of sexual freedom, tolerance, secularism, women’s and LGBT rights as a civilisational marker of Western privilege (Fassin 2010; Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem et al. 2008; Karakayali 2011; Puar 2007; Tsianos und Pieper 2011).

In such a way, the reference to homophobia in Eastern European countries is used to maintain and reinforce the Western moral superiority, which rests on an ever-lasting imagining of Eastern Europe as the backwards, traditionalist and undercivilised Eastern European *Other* of a modern and progressive Western European self (Wolff 1994). Indeed, as Hadley Renkin (2016) argues, the concept of homophobia itself harks back to the imagined civilisational difference between Western and Eastern Europe. Renkin sees the origins of homophobia in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic concept of ‘phobia’, a term used to describe a primordial and irrational fear reaction. Freud and his followers first analysed phobias based on reading and conducting ethnographic studies among non-European and Eastern European peoples and seeing them as signs of these peoples’ wildness and civilisational underachievement.<sup>3</sup> Renkin argues that the historical legacy of the homophobia concept renders it highly problematic, as it tends to define hostility towards homosexuals as inherent in particular individuals and collectives, making it characteristic of their psychological or moral inferiority. By these means the current Western discourse on postsocialist Eastern European homophobia constitutes the essentialising image of Eastern Europe and its inhabitants as underdeveloped and, ultimately, not yet civilised.

The purpose of this article is to advance the research on the place of homophobia in contemporary imaginations of Eastern European backwardness by examining the appropriation of the concept in social interactions of everyday life. The article is based upon four months of ethnographic fieldwork in the drop-in centre for male sex workers in Berlin in the winter of 2014–2015, where I conducted my research on negotiations of gender and sexuality among Romanian and Bulgarian hustlers working in the German capital.<sup>4</sup> The importance of the drop-in centre in reproducing the dominant geosexual order has to do with the paradoxical social positioning of this place, which I describe in the

first section. On the one hand, the drop-in centre is run by a LGBT project and is physically situated in Berlin's gay neighbourhood, thus representing 'Western' values of sexual acceptance, tolerance and homonormativity. On the other hand, most of the clients of the drop-in centre are Romanians and Bulgarians who do not identify as gay. While talking about their sexual orientation, they insist on their 'normalcy', which implies heterosexuality, and demonstrate aggressive masculinity and hostile attitudes towards openly gay people.

In line with my argument that the Eastern European homophobia should be seen in its contexts, I look at these exhibitions of homophobia not as signs of inherent heterosexism and sexual backwardness of Romanian and Bulgarian hustlers but rather as articulations of frustration over exploitation in the Berlin's gay scene and in Germany's labour market in general as well as markers of Romanian and Bulgarian national identities abroad. Upon describing the setting of the drop-in centre, I demonstrate how the only openly gay Romanian sex worker there negotiates his national and sexual belongings by symbolically distancing himself from people from his native country and fashioning himself as a victim of Romanian homophobia. He does so, first, by displaying his nude pictures to his compatriots in anticipation of the negative reaction and, second, by interpreting a verbal assault perpetrated by another Romanian hustler for reasons other than the innate hatred of homosexuals in terms of homophobia. I argue that in such a way he makes this assault readable within the contemporary European geopolitics of sexuality and demonstrates the deep embeddedness of cultural imaginations of Eastern European homophobia in social interactions of everyday life.

### **Introducing the Drop-In Centre: Homophobic Behaviours in a Homonormative Environment**

The drop-in centre is a part of Sub/Way, a social project for male street-based sex workers. It occupies the first floor of Sub/Way's premise, which is located on Nollendorfstrasse in Berlin's traditional "gay-bourhood" of Schöneberg. The majority of male sex workers who visit the project work in neighbouring hustler bars and on and around the train station Zoologischer Garten. The sociological and social work literature usually renders street-based sex workers as the most marginalised group of people working in the sex industry (Wright 2003). They are believed to suffer from multiple intersecting discriminations

on the grounds of foreign origin, residence status, lower-class origin, lack of education and professional skills as well as history of family or sexual abuse and/or drug addiction (ibid.). Most clients of Sub/Way may well fit into this profile. They come from poor rural areas in Romania and Bulgaria and often belong to a marginalised ethnic group of Roma.<sup>5</sup> As my ethnographic interviews with sex workers and staff members of Sub/Way revealed, these Romanian and Bulgarian men often come to Berlin in a hope to escape poverty and find a regular job but fail to do so and resort to sex work as the only means of survival. The prevalence of Romanians and Bulgarians in Sub/Way fits into the current demographic profile of male street-based sex workers in Berlin and other big German cities (Casteñeda 2014; Gille 2007; Jautz und Klein 2010).

Most male street-based sex workers do not have a permanent housing and social and health insurance. In such a way, the drop-in centre functions as a place where they can spend their time in relative safety, rest, socialize with peers and do small household tasks like laundry and shower. They also can receive social and medical counselling provided by staff members of Sub/Way and volunteer doctors, checks for HIV and other STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and treatment for minor injuries and illnesses.

Sub/Way, the social project that runs the drop-in centre, has existed since 1994. It was founded in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, as male sex workers have been seen as one of main risk groups and likely transmitters of the HIV virus from homosexual subculture to the so-called general population (Wright 2003). Sub/Way's foundation also coincided with the first wave of migration from former state-socialist countries of Eastern Europe to Western Europe. The project's location on Nollendorfstrasse is close both to hustler bars and mainstream gay locales of the Schöneberg district. In addition, it is also in the immediate proximity of other LGBT institutions, such as the gay men's counselling centre Mann-O-Meter, the antiviolence project Maneo and the HIV-service project Berliner Aids-Hilfe.

In its activities Sub/Way is guided by values of the so-called third wave of social work with hustlers in Germany (Stallberg 1985). While the first two waves, roughly corresponding to the Weimar and the postwar era, were characterised by repressive attitudes towards sex workers, who were viewed as moral outcasts, criminals or perpetrators of diseases in need of salvation and reeducation, the third wave of social work, which has been prevalent since the late 1970s, is rooted in orientation to the clients' life-worlds and acceptance of lifestyles of

male sex workers (*ibid.*). Accordingly, Sub/Way's staff does not try to 'save' young men from prostitution but rather accepts their occupation as a first step and attempts to improve their social and medical conditions within the preferred social environment. It renders help in exiting from sex work only when specifically asked.

Through its institutional legacy in the AIDS activism, maintained networks, geographical location and personal composition of the staff, which consists of four self-identified gay men and one self-identified heterosexual woman, Sub/Way is deeply anchored within Berlin's LGBT scene. The self-understanding as a LGBT project is manifested by the rainbow flag that waives at the entrance to the project's premise and Sub/Way's institutional presence at major festivities of Berlin's LGBT community, such as at the annual Motz Street Fair, where it staffs an information table.

Against this backdrop of Sub/Way's self-positioning, it is striking that most Romanian and Bulgarian sex workers, who are core clients of the drop-in centre, do not identify as gay. Despite the fact that all male sex workers are believed to have sex with men, most would insist on 'being normal' when asked about their sexual orientation. This 'normalcy' implies heterosexuality and has been illustrated by regular discussions among hustlers of their girlfriends or heterosexual families in Berlin, Romania or elsewhere. Being asked specifically about sexual intercourse, many hustlers evoke a 'performative' notion of sexual identity. In accordance to this notion, which arguably exists in many contexts outside Western Europe and North America (Kulick 1997; Mai 2004), one's sexuality is defined not as an innate characteristic but through a role taken in sexual intercourse. In the context of the same-sex sexual act, only the partner taking a receptive – or passive – role would be considered homosexual (Kulick 1997; Mai 2004). In such a way, many hustlers eagerly claim they are only active in sex, thus underscoring the own 'normalcy' and refuting the possibility of homosexuality.

The emphasis many hustlers in the drop-in centre put on the own 'normalcy' was often underscored by performance of aggressive masculinity. These performances included speaking in a loud voice, loudly laughing, walking in broad steps and intentionally not giving a right-of-way when facing someone in the hallway. The fashion and styles signifying masculine toughness, such as black leather jackets, scruffy jeans or a designer stubble, complemented many hustlers' aggressive behaviour.

Still, others fashioned their heterosexual identification by marginalising those who were seen as gay, thus demonstrating the intrinsic

connection between heterosexist masculinity and homophobia (Kimmel 1997). In so doing, they also tacitly evoked the symbolic binarism between ‘gay’ Western Europe and normal, heteronormative East. Such was the behaviour of Mohammed, a slim, athletically built Romanian Roma hustler with dark hair, dark eyes and a small moustache. I encountered Mohammed in one of the first days of my ethnographic research in the drop-in centre. He was sitting on a sofa in the lounge area, slowly and joyfully smoking a cigarette. I took a seat on the chair next to him. Realising I was new in the drop-in centre, he asked me what I am doing there. Hearing that I was doing my dissertation research seemed not to be what he wanted to learn, as in the second, rather unrelated question he directly asked me if I was gay. Being shocked by a sudden redirection of the conversation to my sexual persona, I for a moment hesitated to answer but then somehow reluctantly said, ‘Yes’. Mohammed turned away from me, deeply inhaled from the cigarette, took a small pause and then said, in a reassuring tone, ‘For me it is not a problem’. Eager to bring the ball back on my side, I asked Mohammed about his sexual orientation. Mohammed laughed and said that today he is gay and tomorrow not. I figured out that he was referring to the time he searches for clients in hustler bars. Allegedly trying to correct himself and refute the possible assumption of (casual) homosexuality, Mohammed quickly added, ‘But I am only active in sex’. At the end of this strange but revealing conversation, I learned that while Mohammed has been living in Berlin for several years, he periodically goes back to Romania, where he has a girlfriend.

This was the first and only verbal exchange I had with Mohammed. Despite the fact that he was a regular visitor in the drop-in centre, he hesitated to talk to me since then. I attribute this hesitation to my coming out. Indeed, our only conversation exhibited the significant attention Mohammed paid to the issue of sexuality. Despite his insistence that my gayness was not a problem for him, the fact by itself that he posed the issue of a nonheteronormative sexual identity in terms of the ‘problem’ as well as his rejection of me after he forced my coming out, demonstrated that, in fact, the problem existed. While Mohammed compelled me to come out by asking about my sexual identity in essentialist terms (‘Are you . . . ?’), he referred to his own ‘gayness’ only in terms of situational behaviour and in a playful form meant to render the topic nonserious. Notable in this regard is also the fact that he lived up his ‘gay’ identity only in Berlin while upholding a heterosexual relationship in Romania. In such a way, ‘Berlin’ and, by



extension, ‘Germany’ and the ‘West’ appeared to stand for ‘gayness’, while ‘Romania’ came to embody heterosexual masculinity.

Even though the above-mentioned behaviours and narratives reproduced the binarism between Western homonormativity and the heteronormative East, I argue that the hereby exhibited rejection of and hostility to homosexuality (in its conventional Western understanding as an innate sexual identity) should not be interpreted as a sign of inherent East European backwardness in sexual issues. Similar to the view that homophobic policies and discourses in the East European states are not thinkable outside of their national and transnational contexts, as they often present a reaction to perceived threats to national and cultural sovereignty (Graff 2010; Keinz 2011; Renkin 2009, 2015), I argue that heterosexism and homophobia present in verbal and nonverbal behaviour of self-identified ‘normal’ hustlers should be seen as being embedded in transnational socioeconomic inequalities they directly face. These inequalities force Romanian and Bulgarian hustlers, who usually come from ethnically marginalised and economically underprivileged communities, to offer their sexual services on Berlin’s gay scene in the first place. Miroslav, a Bulgarian hustler in his late twenties, is a case in point. Miroslav has been doing sex work in Berlin for several years, and as the time progressed, he felt increasingly rancorous and disillusioned. Once, in a conversation with staff member Katharina, he nearly broke down in tears as he expressed his desperation: ‘What am I doing here? I am doing this job and working with people who are too stupid to find something else.’ Miroslav’s resentment of his inability to find a better occupation than selling sex to men, an inability that in itself resulted from his underprivileged nationality and residency status in Berlin, evolved to the visible hostility to gays in the drop-in centre who he seemed to blame for his unworthy job and marginalisation. This hostility was strikingly different to the friendliness and joyfulness he demonstrated in the hustler bars, as he talked to clients, on whom his economic survival was dependent. Since Miroslav correctly identified me as a gay, he never greeted me or talked to me. His contempt was demonstrated in an interaction that happened between me, him and intern Jonis. A bulky, down-to-earth guy with a long black hair and a beard, Jonis became especially popular with sex workers, as he regularly accompanied them to the swimming pool and played table tennis with them. He was heterosexual and read as such. Once, as I was chatting with Jonis in the kitchen, Miroslav came in and, hardly looking at me, interrupted our conversation by saying that he needs to talk to Jonis



– hence, I need to go. This sudden outbreak of the nonrespectful and rude behaviour shocked me. Stunned, I left. When I later asked Jonis’ opinion on Miroslav’s behaviour, he confirmed my already existing suspicion: ‘Miroslav is a homophobe and does not like gays.’

Taking everything into consideration, the environment of the drop-in centre was characterised by explicitly articulated and permanently reinforced binarism between ‘gays’ and ‘normal’ heterosexuals. This binarism challenged Sub/Way’s self-positioning within the LGBT scene and proceeded along the lines of West/East dichotomy. Given the heterosexist and hostile environment of the drop-in centre, lived by most Romanian and Bulgarian hustlers, it was, then, not entirely surprising that Sub/Way’s only Romanian client, who openly identified as gay, would try to distance himself from Romania, a nation, the meaning of which came to be associated with ‘normalcy’ and heteronormativity. By distancing himself from this heterosexist and homophobic Romania, he would negate the situatedness of this homophobia in transnational socioeconomic inequality and, in one particular case, in the context of a social interaction, investing in the idea that homophobia is a manifestation of the inherent Eastern European backwardness.

### **Fernando: Provoking and Labelling Homophobia as a Way of Symbolic (Dis)identification**

One day, when I came to a usual staff meeting before opening the drop-in centre, social worker Katharina announced that Sub/Way received a visit from the police, who brought an alleged victim of human trafficking and asked Sub/Way to take care of him. Notwithstanding the common and problematic conflation of migrant sex work with human trafficking, it was the first and only possible trafficking case I encountered during my fieldwork in the drop-in centre. Fernando, as Katharina introduced a new client, would stay in the centre as long as the police were investigating. If his status as a victim of human trafficking were acknowledged, Fernando would receive a residence permit in Germany and thus, be entitled to welfare benefits. It would put him in a more privileged position than other hustlers, who, despite being EU citizens, did not have automatic rights for benefits and, thus, had to manage economic sustainability alone.

As the centre opened at 12:30 p.m., Fernando was already there, standing close to the radiator in the dining room and curiously looking

around. He was a slightly overweight young man of medium height, looking quite fashionable in his dark jacket and swifty jeans, with his dark-coloured hair blending with several blonde strands.

From that day on, Fernando visited the drop-in centre almost every day. As he was new in Berlin, he had no other place to go. In general, he was eager to tell the story of his life. Fernando was born in a small city in Romania close to the Serbian border. He came from a binational family, with his mother being Romanian and his father Serbian. In addition to being proficient in both Romanian and Serbian languages, he also spoke Romani, the language of East European Roma. However, when I asked him if he is Roma, his face suddenly flushed and he promptly denied it. Knowing that it is unusual for Romanians of non-Roma origin to speak and understand Romani, I was slightly irritated by his reply and reaction. However, I realised that he probably did not want to disclose the stigmatised ethnic identity.

In Romania Fernando enrolled in a teacher's college and received his master's degree in pedagogy. The fact that he was in possession of a higher education diploma distinguished him from most Romanian and Bulgarian hustlers, who hardly had a school completion certificate and were in some cases illiterate. The educational status was not the only difference between Fernando and other Romanians in the drop-in centre. He was the only one who openly declared himself gay. His sexual identity, along with economic considerations, was a reason why he left Romania and moved to the West. He told me that in his native town in Southern Romania gays were much closeted, there were no gay venues, and only rare home parties were taking place. The chances on materially decent living were as limited as those for sexual freedom. According to Fernando, he would only earn about 250 Euro a month if he worked in his learned profession as a school teacher.

Fernando was thus one of very few migrant sex workers whose migration decision was to a large extent motivated by his sexuality. (Two others, a Polish and a Bulgarian, also identified as gay but only occasionally visited the drop-in centre.) Given that Fernando's migration was partly motivated by his sexuality, his could be seen as a case of "sexual migration" (Carillo 2004). Upon completion of his higher education in Romania, Fernando moved to the Belgian city of Antwerp. Once there, he worked as a bartender in a gay bar, where he met his future husband, a Danish man who would eventually marry him and bring him to Denmark. The topic of his relationship with his husband was taboo for Fernando; he was equally unwilling to talk

about circumstances that made him a victim of human trafficking and brought him to Berlin. After having lived in Berlin for a while and experienced the life in the German capital, Fernando started to like it and became determined to stay.

Despite negative baggage from Denmark, Fernando generally assessed his life in Western countries very positively. He often juxtaposed his experiences in Belgium, Denmark and, now, Germany to those he made in Romania. While talking about his work in Antwerp, he was visibly happy and his eyes shined. In contrast, when the conversation touched upon a Romania-related topic, he always switched to a cynical tone and only spoke about his home country in a negative sense.

It was not unpredictable that as an open gay, Fernando would have difficulties coming to terms with other Romanian hustlers whose self-identification circled around rebutting homosexuality in its Western meaning. By being a gay and sharing an admiration for a Western (gay) life style, Fernando was different from his heterosexual and heterosexual Romanian compatriots. In one of his first days in the drop-in centre I saw him standing alone in the corner of the dining room, looking sceptically at loud and aggressive Romanian and Bulgarian hustlers passing by, shaking his head and saying, ‘I don’t like it here.’ His alienation from other Romanians in the centre went so far that Fernando was afraid that they could harm him. Once a week one of Sub/Way’s interns brought the ‘boys’ to a communal pool. This offering was designed to let the boys temporarily escape the rough and exploitative context of the scene and, ideally, to bring them into contact with everyday life in Germany. Fernando agreed to go to the pool only if more staff members would join. One intern alone, he reasoned, would not be able to protect him if the ‘boys’ decided to assault and throw him into the water.

As time passed, however, Fernando, seemed to overcome his original fears and began talking to other Romanian hustlers. One day I saw him sitting at a table with two young Romanians. With their slim athletic bodies, shaved heads, sport suits and trainers, they looked very masculine and would perfectly fit into an image of a homophobic Eastern European scene. Fernando was showing them something on his smartphone. The boys kept silent and were visibly confused and irritated, as they alternately looked at Fernando and the screen. Seeing this irritation, Fernando began to smile brightly. Later I asked him what he had been showing. It turned out that Fernando showed pictures from a gay party in Denmark that he attended wearing a long

red dress, high heels and bright makeup. Fernando added that while taking a look at the pictures, his interlocutors were repeatedly asking him if he really comes from Romania. They were so astounded!

As these questions revealed, these Romanian hustlers saw the homosexuality and cross-dressing so eagerly displayed by Fernando as incompatible with Romanian nationality. In such a way, one can argue that they shared a traditional view of relations between sexuality and nation, according to which a nation-state is always imagined as heteronormative (Mosse 1985). My interest in the foregoing interaction, however, lay less in hetero-nationalist attitudes the hustlers' reaction revealed and more in the question of why Fernando displayed his pictures in the first place.

I asked staff member Robert about his opinion. Robert was confident that Fernando showed the pictures because he was very naive and could not foresee the harm that the open display of homosexuality/cross-dressing among heterosexist hustlers could bring him. 'Fernando is like a child', Robert explained. 'He does not understand that the boys here do not like gays and can hurt him.'

However, from my conversations with Fernando, I never got an impression that he was 'like a child'. Indeed, he seemed to be very well aware of generally negative attitudes towards gays in Romania, as these attitudes, ultimately being a *raison d'être* for closetedness of gay life, were one of the reasons he left his home country. Going by my observations of Fernando's behaviour, I came to the conclusion that he foresaw and, in fact, calculated irritation and confusion that displaying his pictures would evoke in his interlocutors. In such a reading, his bright smile illustrated the satisfaction he felt when the reactions he had anticipated came into being. Fernando's strategy appeared to lie not in hiding his own homosexuality and, thus, avoiding the possible harm its revelation could cause but rather by exposing the sexual identity in such an open and stereotypical way as possible. In such a way, he openly sought to challenge the heteronormative and homophobic attitudes widespread among Romanian hustlers, therefore ultimately distancing himself symbolically from the country these people and their attitudes represented.

However, Fernando's self-fashioning of his own homosexuality was meant not only to symbolically distance himself from Romania but also to mark Romanians as sexually backwards and homophobic, as demonstrated by the conflict with his former pal and then bitter enemy John. In the drop-in centre, where almost all Romanian

and Bulgarian hustlers were underprivileged due to their nationality, ethnicity and class, John seemed to be the most underprivileged of all. John originated from a Roma family in a small Romanian town. When he was a little child his alcoholic and abusive father supposedly threw a bottle of beer into his head, leaving him with lasting brain damage. On the way to John's adolescence, his family moved to a middle-sized city in Southern Germany. When John turned sixteen, he left his father and came to Berlin. As he spoke very little German and did not receive proper schooling, let alone professional education, he initially earned money by selling newspapers on streets and begging, but soon he started to hang around in the hustler scene. In this lower segment of the sex industry, he maintained one of the lowest positions. His small height and long, dark, scruffy hair he rarely had opportunity to wash and the usual wardrobe of an oversized female winter coat and a second-hand sport suit assured him only a very low amount of 'erotic capital' (Green 2008). Given his looks and the destitution they embodied, John was banned from the hustler bars. His only workplace remained the train station Zoologischer Garten, where, as staff member Robert told me, he offered elderly clients to perform a blow job on him for as little as five Euro.

John's looks, poverty and light mental health problems made him a social outcast in Sub/Way, as other hustlers regularly ostracised and ridiculed him. In being an outcast, John was similar to Fernando. Still, the fact that they became friends surprised me, as both seemed to be very different in terms of residency status, social class, sexuality and chances for a decent life in Germany. The obvious differences notwithstanding, the two were often seen in the drop-in centre together, as they chatted, played games or simply hanged around. It was rumoured that John and Fernando's friendship was so close that John, at the time homeless, even slept in Fernando's room in a shelter for victims of human trafficking.

As unlikely the friendship between them seemed to be, so abruptly it came to an end. One day in the centre Fernando was in a funny mood and wanted to play with John. He permanently followed and chased him, tried to drag him from a sofa as he was lying and resting and even tried to get into the restroom as John was inside. John, who spent the previous night at the train station and had hardly slept, was visibly tired and understandably annoyed by the extensive attention Fernando paid to him. Many times he asked in vain for Fernando to stop. John's annoyance at Fernando evolved into fury, as, after hours

of the seemingly never-ending harassment, Fernando approached him from behind and tried to pull the cap from his head into his face. In wrath, John turned around and crossly said, 'Stop it, faggot'.

After hearing this, Fernando's funny mood suddenly changed. Whining and crying, he went to Katharina's office and loudly complained to her that he had just become a victim of homophobic assault from John. As Katharina had been around the whole day, she knew that Fernando might himself have triggered John's aggression. However, in the context of a LGBT project like Sub/Way, homophobia was an accusation that needed to be taken seriously.

In an attempt to solve the conflict, Katharina spoke to John and urged him to apologise to Fernando. After John initially tried to excuse his behaviour and insisted that it was, indeed, Fernando who needed to apologise to him, he finally did what Katharina had asked. While begging Fernando's pardon, John looked at his former pal bitterly and with disappointment.

As I was unwillingly observing Fernando and John's interactions on this day, I at times felt as annoyed and furious as John, but for a different reason. I believe for Katharina the Fernando/John conflict looked as infantile and nonsensical as it was for me. However, by having examined it in retrospect, I came to realise that this conflict, which had a playful form and was not in itself to be taken with all possible earnestness, was actually very serious in what it revealed in terms of deep cultural logics. By virtue of accusing John of a homophobic assault, Fernando, in fact, did nothing less than exhibit the role that the notion of homophobia plays in reinforcing the symbolic binarism between Western and Eastern Europe as well as its inhabitants. At this point we can return to Renkin's critique (2016) of 'homophobia' as an internalising and psychologising concept with origins in Sigmund Freud's notion of 'phobia'. Similar to Renkin's argument against the conceptualisation of homophobia as an innate characteristic of certain (undereducated and undercivilised) individuals or collectives and for the analysis of homophobic policies and narratives in a larger context of intersecting national and transnational discourses (*ibid.*), I argue that manifestations of homophobia in everyday life should also be viewed in the context of social interactions in which they develop. In the conflict between John and Fernando the verbal assault John perpetrated seemed to be caused not by his innate hatred of Fernando's sexual identity – this hatred would indeed signify the assault as homophobic – but by annoyance at Fernando's rude and impolite behaviour. In such a reading John latched onto the term 'faggot' for expressing his

fury at Fernando not because he disdained homosexual identity per se but because he foreshadowed that only by touching on the sensitive issue of sexuality would make Fernando stop his harassment.

However, in complaining about John’s ‘homophobia’ and, thus, framing John’s furious reaction at his own tactless behaviour in terms of the primordial, irrational hatred of homosexuality, Fernando implicitly invoked the Orientalist discourse by rendering John a backwards and homophobic East European *Other*. Perhaps without being consciously aware of the deep cultural meaning of his words, Fernando exhibited and reinforced the sexual-political binary between the Western Europe, imagined as sexually liberal, tolerant and ‘homo-friendly’, and Eastern Europe, seen as patriarchal and homophobic. In the context of this particular interaction, this binary was represented by Fernando himself, who, through his admiration and eagerness of the Western gay lifestyle, self-fashioned his own belonging to Western homo-normativity, and contrasted against John, who now was stigmatised as a homophobe in addition to already existing marginalisations due to his ethnicity, class, looks and disability. In this regard, it seems logical that John came to embody Fernando’s homophobic *Other*. By being a poor, unkempt and a badly dressed Roma migrant who lacked education and job and had a history of family abuse, John already represented the East European backwardness. In such a way, it was easy to attribute to him homophobia that would become yet another marker of his East European difference.

### **Conclusion: Re-Production of Geosexual Politics in Everyday Life**

As I showed in the beginning of this article, in previous years there has been a surge of research on the role of sexuality and, specifically, same-sex sexuality in the reproduction of a lasting East-West dichotomy within Europe. While originally this research focused on the revival of traditionalist gender and sexual ideologies in Eastern Europe after 1989 (Berry 1995; Funk 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000; Graff 2010; Johnson and Robinson 2007; Keinz 2008, 2011; Renkin 2009, 2015), more recently critical researchers began to problematise the reproduction of the inner-European Orientalism through the West’s appraisal of its own ‘tolerance’ in sexual issues *vis-à-vis* the allegedly intolerant and backward East European *Other* (Keinz 2017; Kulpa 2014; Renkin 2016).



In this article I sought to complement the existing research on the role of sexuality in the neo-Orientalism (Renkin 2016) that has been largely focused on public, media and scientific discourses as well as practices and policies of the state, NGOs and organised political movements. By analysing the everyday social interactions in the drop-in centre for male sex workers in Berlin and paying particular attention to the case of Fernando, who strategically used accusations of homophobia to redefine his national and sexual belongings and to re-establish his identity within the imagined sexual geography of Europe, I demonstrated that the contemporary inner-European geosexual order, which is based upon a binary between progressive and enlightened Western and traditionalist and backwards Eastern Europe, exists not only on the macro-level of discourses and policies; it is also deeply anchored in cultural imaginations of European societies and its people and has enough symbolic power to inform trivial conflicts in everyday life. The fact that these conflicts happened in the drop-in centre for male sex workers also demonstrates that migrant sex work in Europe may be studied not only with regard to issues of human trafficking and exploitation but also how it exhibits and reinforces the existing inner-European geosexual division.

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## Notes

1. For the sake of my argument, I identify ‘Eastern Europe’ as former socialist countries of the Soviet bloc. It should be noted that throughout history both the borders of Eastern Europe and the geographical concept itself have been highly contested, as Wolff (1994) and others have argued.
2. By postulating a binarism between Western homonormativity and East European traditionalism, I do not claim that these ideologies are unique for these respective parts of Europe. I neither neglect really existing homophobia and contestations of LGBT rights in the West, nor do I claim that patriarchal, traditionalist, homophobic attitudes are shared by all inhabitants of East European countries. However, I argue that both Western homonormativity and East European traditionalism can be seen as hegemonic ideologies in a Gramscian (1971) sense: clearly not uncontested, but certainly dominant. Furthermore, I do not claim that Western homonormativity and East European traditionalism are merely images or discursive (self-)representations without links to empirical reality. It is undeniable that acceptance of sexual diversity in the West is higher, while traditionalist and homophobic attitudes and policies prevail in Eastern European countries. However, contrary to essentialist approaches, I see this modern ‘neo-traditionalism’ (Johnson and Robinson 2007) not as permanent and inherent in Eastern Europe but as a product of specific socioeconomic and historical developments. In such a way, I also argue against seeing Western tolerance and acceptance as signs of the West’s civilizatory privilege over the East.
3. See Renkin (2016) for a selection of these studies.
4. For a description of occupational activity of my interlocutors, I interchangeably use the terms ‘hustler’ and ‘sex worker’. ‘Hustler’ is a literal translation of *stricher*, which is a definition commonly used both in social work literature and professional practice of Sub/Way and similar projects. I use ‘sex worker’ to emphasize the often-voluntary character of the occupation in the sex industry (in terms of absence of direct physical enforcement) and avoid moralising implications of a concurring term ‘prostitute’.
5. For critique of trafficking discourse in relation to sex work, see Andrijasevic (2010).

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