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The unspeakable queerness in Romania's communist period: Lesbian and queer accounts beyond gay men's experiences

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Abstract

Informed by interviews with queer women, nonbinary persons, and a trans man, this article aims to fill a major gap in the Southeastern European sexuality studies. It does that by depicting and analyzing several microhistories from communism (1947–1989) and from the early 1990s Romania. The 1990s were also marked by the communist legacy and same-sex relationships continued to be criminalized until 2001. Since gay men's accounts are much more represented in the public space and in the incipient literature on queerness in Romania, the article offers an alternative view beyond this tendency, by bringing forth the particularities and experiences of cisgender women and trans persons and their day-to-day lives within the patriarchal and homophobic society. The article argues that during communism matters of queerness were known, although rarely discussed, and that the accounts of queer women and trans persons were not absent but neglected. Another objective is to offer explanations for the lack of these marginal (ized) accounts in the incipient gender and queer studies literature on Romania.

Keywords

Lesbianism in communist Romania, queer life stories, homosexuality in the USSR sphere

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Introduction

For the past decades,[1] communism in Romania has been scrutinized, debated, and described in the vast dedicated specialized literature. With few notable exceptions (Andreescu, 2011; Buhuceanu, 2022), the realm of Romanian LGBT+ persons´ histories remained underexplored. The silence on homosexuality was cultivated for decades and the fear of the *Securitate* (the Secret Police) permeated through various levels of interactions. At the same time, communism was characterized by oppressive measures against different categories, homosexual persons included, and any "imperialistic" or "Western" elements—as they were typically perceived—had no space in neither public nor private discourse.

While there is a small corpus of literature (Buhuceanu, 2022; Human Rights Watch and IGLHRC, 1998; Negoi;escu and Stanca, 2022; Sirin, 2013) dedicated to queer persons' experiences from communist Romania, it is mostly produced by and has its focus on gay men, as it is the case with other SEE spaces (Bilić and Radoman, 2018). I argue that underrepresented voices made room for themselves, contributed to the activist struggles, and were present in the public space.

The concept of "homosexual subjectivities" is placed at the core of this research, since many of the USSR´s countries and associated spaces such as Romania, lacked forms of homosexual identities (Clech, 2017: 94). The forming and existence of such identities is connected to the existence of a language on queerness. Therefore, I argue that a more useful framing is one which highlights the kinds of lived histories and personal accounts which often refer to a lack of language, information, and definitions in relation to queerness, especially to lesbianism and trans identities, rather than analyzing such "identities" which only began to crystalize after 1989. Since the Soviet spaces did not allow for a social existence of queers (Clech, 2017), this perspective is useful in understanding the non-normative sexualities during those times. Moreover, as Stella (2015) points out, the queer women´s agency is central, as these stories should be placed within the larger framework of how communist society worked, what were the familial implications of these queer subjects, and how they negotiated their sexualities, surpassing the trope concerning the oppressing system guiding their lives (Stella, 2015).

Methodology

This queer ethnographic study strategically depicts lived stories of queer persons, with a great emphasis on the descriptive element to bring to light the complex nuances of the personal accounts, their intersections within the specific chosen context (Rooke, 2010; Weiss, 2011), and to open the discussion on how this novel and (until now) unavailable material can contribute to the deepening of scholarly understanding on gender and SEE.

The main method employed in this empirical study is in-depth interviews. 15 interviews with persons between 43 and 74 years old were collected between November 2021 and December 2022 via audio recording of in person discussions as well as online video meetings. Interviews length varies from 90 to 200 min. Most of the participants are living in different urban regions in Romania, and some reside outside the country. 12 of

them identify as cisgender women, two as nonbinary, and one is a trans man. All except one have university degrees and various professions: curator, university lecturer and professor, high school teacher, writer, physicist, IT professional, lawyer, businessperson, visual artists, and freelancer.

Initial contact was made via email or social networks. Making use of snowball sampling, some interviewees connected me with other informants in their circles. Another recorded interview, with journalist Mihaela Ghiuca, complements the sample by courtesy of Josef Sallanz. Since both Mihaela and her partner are now deceased, this is the only testimony I have had access to, and an invaluable addition to the other interviews.

Written consent was priorly obtained from all the participants and the interview guide and ethical strategies were previously approved by the appointed authority in the host institution´s country, as well as by the project´s funding body. Most informants chose to be referred to, in my published research, with their actual names, with three anonymized exceptions out of which two chose aliases and one of them preferred the use of first name. Since many of the participants are active or known in the Romanian LGBT+ sphere, they preferred to be named. The main methodological reasoning was guided by queer interviewing principles, such as seeing the respondents as partners in the dialogue, reflecting upon the "who gets to talk" (Taylor, 2005) and other issues of representability, as well as paying close attention to intersectionality—mainly elements of class, ethnicity, and sexuality—during the interviews and data processing (Nash and Browne, 2010).

Sexuality and soviet societies

Romania became a "satellite state"[2] of the USSR in 1948, therefore, the views on gender and sexuality followed the line of Soviet influence for decades and became a taboo. At the same time, through homophobic state propaganda, homosexuality became connected to the idea of counterrevolution and homosexuals—seen as signs of the bourgeoisie—needed to be erased from the public space (Mole, 2019). Furthermore, the bourgeois/proletary dichotomy played an important role in the shaping of how homosexuality was seen in communist Romania: in most of the cases, the "typical" homosexual was part of the intellectual elite which consisted of men. Since lesbian and queer women´s accounts were even more rare during the Soviet times (Kon and Riordan, 1993), this deepened the discrepancy between how different sexualities were expressed and recorded. The choice of erasing identities was in tone with the attempts of creating a homogenous national identity around the patriarchal family, with strict predefined roles of women and men (Mole, 2019). The discussion is more nuanced, since in Romania´s case, the ideology on sexuality followed the Soviet logic until the 1960s. During the 1960s, more conservative measures on sexual reproduction and marriage came into force, as the race of productivity between the West and the socialist spaces was picking up. The socialist and capitalist systems were competing to show how well their systems worked (Popa, 2021). Communism as a "process of production" (Popa, 2021) transfers into the sexuality field by not only punishing (unproductive) non-heterosexual behavior but also transferring sexuality matters from individual realm to the collective realm, that is, the collective efforts of building the communist society. The apparent egalitarian view on communist women and

men as partners in these efforts only offers a generic perspective where non-normative sexualities seem to have no place. I argue that one reason for the seeming disinterest in punishing queer women´s sexuality might have to do with the fact that their bodies were still regarded as productive, with many of them settling for heteronormative relationships and producing the needed offspring in the communist economy. Queer women´s relationships were rendered invisible within the "particular configuration of 'compulsory heterosexuality' inscribed in the 'working mother' gender contract, by upholding heterosexual romance, marriage and the nuclear family as the 'natural' and socially desirable norm" (Stella, 2015: 58-59).

Compared to other countries under the Soviet influence such as Federal Republic of Germany, Hungary, or Yugoslavia, communist Romania was isolated (Szulc, 2018), especially regarding access to information and other intellectual and cultural resources. For example, Schenk (1993) shows how the lesbian movement was part of the social movements within East Germany, with different such groups coagulating before 1989. Moreover, some spaces (Yugoslavia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia) decriminalized homosexuality during the 1960s and 1970s (Mole, 2019).

While some communist European states already had LGBT+ official organizations,[3] queer-related events dating from the 1980s,[4] and a more relaxed legislation on LGBT+ persons (Huneke, 2019), communist Romania saw an opposing tendency with more restrictive legislation which also targeted women. It was not until 2001 that homosexuality was decriminalized, after extensive lobbying and struggles during the 1990s for abolishing Article 200[5] (Andreescu, 2011). As the Romanian LGBT+ NGO scene in the 1990s emerged, its focus was to work on legal cases against state and societal discrimination, while portraying the figures of gay respectability, retracing a fragmented history of male-dominated Romanian queerness while showing less interest in the emerging representational issues within the forming "community" and its associated debates and struggles.

The lack of representation

From several accounts of the interviewees, the issue of local representation of queer women stands out: even during the 2000s, many of them have not encountered older[6] queer women, nor had access to such stories. Their only points of reference beyond the homosexual men narratives were lesbian, bisexual, and trans persons´ histories from the US or from Western Europe.

Concerning the scarce presence of voices of women who have some queer memories from before 1989, we can think of a series of factors which impacted this discrepancy in representation. As previously shown, some Soviet spaces and associated countries denied the existence of lesbians through the lack of attention to women and lesbians, in particular (Cvetkovic, 2018; Funk and Mueller, 1993). In addition, Romania was and is a patriarchal society. As Sremac and Ganzevoort (2015: 7) argue, the Central and Eastern European spaces "give primacy to family issues, group reproduction and the defense of the patriarchal order of society."

An example is the Romanian public space, which was mainly available to men, along with the academic and artistic scenes, traditionally dominated by male authors, intellectuals,

historians, etc. In terms of queer history, this meant a focus on the accounts of gay men intellectuals, usually depicted by the few sources tackling homosexuality during communism. Since the Romanian communist ideology saw the peasants and working class as having "healthy origins" as opposed to the corrupted bourgeoisie, homosexuality was also seen as only practiced inside of bourgeois intellectual circles (Buhuceanu, 2022: 78-79).

At the same time, women´s bodies became a nationalist symbol, especially during the last decades of communist Romania. The reproductive policies were doubled by the household duties and work duties the paternalist state would subject women to (Verdery, 1994). During the 1960s, the communist regime was characterized by an ideological shift towards a natalist policy through a stricter control of women´s bodies and desires, thus framing it as a fight with both capitalism and the Nazi legacy (Popa, 2021). Nicolae Ceau escu took a further step and criminalized abortions in 1966, which led to tens of years of illegal, dangerous, and secret abortions. V., a nurse and Mihaela Ghiuca´s partner, was helping other women terminate their pregnancies during communism. One of the women needed to be hospitalized so the abortion was reported. During the investigation, the police tried to blackmail Mihaela Ghiuca into sharing the names of all the women her partner helped: "He gave me a blank piece of paper and he said to tell him the names, or else: 'Here is the article[7] so that you can see its provisions'" (Sallanz, 2003). Mihaela refused to do so. A necessary comment on the rationale behind the police actions: since the two women were living together, it was possible that Mihaela would know who was visiting her partner to interrupt their pregnancies. Moreover, Mihaela was unemployed at that time, which was punished by law with 6 months in prison or a fine between 1.000 and 5.000 lei (through Decree no. 153, 1970).

One interview mentions how finding accounts on queer women was also difficult in other spaces, even from outside the USSR or its influence, such as Austria. Helga Pankratz, one of the founders of the lesbian group within HOSI Wien conducted a similar project during the 1990s, where she, together with her partner, tried to find stories from queer women and their experiences during WWII. They concluded that women were less easy to find and willing to discuss than queer men (Irod, 2022). While an extensive article needs to address the activist shifts from a distinct perspective beyond the NGO one, the evolution of Romanian LGBT + rights during the 1990s and early 2000s can be briefly summed up as follows: "I sincerely believe that the LGBT movement was initially colonized by the gay boys, it is extremely obvious to me that the territorialization was done in the following order: G, L and only after that B and T. I would make a chronological hierarchization of power and access to resources, in terms of quantity. It is still the case nowadays, in my opinion" (Marin, 2022). This tendency is also highlighted by scholarship which deals with power relationships within LGBT + movements, with focus on SEE (Bilić and Dioli, 2016; Bilić and Radoman, 2018; Nicoară, 1995).

Speaking of the unspeakable

The general idea that matters of queerness was not discussed during communist and Soviet times is challenged by some scholars (Hekma et al., 1995; Sweet, 1995). For example, queer persons would discuss matters of sexuality with their doctors quite

extensively in Soviet Russia (Alexander, 2021). In the case of Romania, the puzzling nature of the "lack of language" on non-normative sexualities while such topics appeared in different contexts during communist times is explored by closely following the experiences of the interviewees.

One such account suggests not only that people knew about homosexuality, but also found ways of showing their negative opinions through their limited communication on the matter: "There were these occasional conversations in which people would make it very clear they thought this was immoral, sinful, and a bad idea all around, which certainly was not designed to make me want to talk about anything. So, it was pretty quieted. […] They knew it existed. They didn't like it, and they knew the Church was against it" (Johnson, 2022). The role and influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church during and after communism is extensive. After 1989, the Church has been an active opponent of matters of homosexuality and human rights which started to emerge on the public scene, and for example, has played a central role in the political lobby against decriminalization of same-sex relationships (Nachescu, 2005; Turcescu and Stan, 2019).

Some people would hint at the fact that they were not willing to discuss the topic, and others were straightforwardly blocking the conversation. One example is that of a woman engaged in a romantic experience with the informant: "This girl said: you know, I never did this before and I didn't know people did it and then she professed complete ignorance" (Johnson, 2022). This turned silence into a coping and a defense mechanism which functioned not only regarding one´s sexuality but also in relation to other topics the communist times deemed erasable.

An entire category of forbidden topics can be mentioned: from jokes about the system or about the Ceaușescu couple, to stories concerning the generic West or persons who emigrated there. In one interview, the family had its own strategies for protecting their offspring: by teaching them not to say any jokes about the system, jokes they would hear from the family and its close circles. This idea of not speaking was interiorized by everyone, in their own ways (Lohan, 2022), and this resembled the strategies of not speaking about sexuality at all.

Furthermore, the lack of information often meant that some queer persons were not even aware that homosexuality and lesbianism were criminalized. Cristina Săracu recalls the fact that her first relationship with a woman began in 1987 and she was not aware they were living illegally. Her main concern was to navigate the homophobic society discreetly, without sharing her intimate life with anyone else, fearing for her job and not losing the home she was renting (Săracu, 2021). Almost 10 years later, I. T. was kissing her partner in a bus station in Bucharest, completely unaware that Article 200 existed: "Back then, in ´98, I had no idea homosexuality was a crime. Only after that did I realize it was dangerous. She [a.n.: her partner at that time] should have known, she came as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1996 […], I did not even learn from her that being gay in Romania was a crime" (IT, 2021).

Even if scarce, sources and pieces of language on sexualities would permeate the communist silence on issues of homosexuality. This represented more of a passive acknowledgement of sexuality and its variations. This passivity was broken by the social interactions around this taboo topic and the most available interaction and strategy of

finding out about queer sexualities was gossip. Since in smaller towns people would most often know each other, gossip was one of the primary mechanisms in which strangers would comment on neighbors' and acquaintances' sexualities. This is how queer persons would often find out such sexualities were in fact possible. Examples include people "suspecting" others were living in queer couples, gossip concerning schoolteachers, and stories about dissidents or persons with family or connections abroad, especially in Western Europe.

The latter brought together the political nature of such situations: people would talk with disgust about queer persons trying to reach Western countries, and they were seen as "monsters" and "anomalies" to be avoided at all costs (Nelega, 2022). The combination of homophobia and political stigma offered an opportunity to talk about the otherwise tabu subject of sexualities, as the "unacceptable" traits would make room for discussions in the form of threats, warnings, and gossip. Even a hint that someone could have been homosexual was enough for the Secret police to start following an individual. Having connections with persons from abroad would usually speed up this process. Studying ILGA's Eastern Europe Information Pool reports (1982–1990), Szulc shows how Romania´s brutal regime and treatment of homosexuals stands out in the region. Moreover, it emphasizes how LGBT+ related topics were a taboo in the country, similar to the USSR, and finding accounts of gay men and meeting them in public spaces was, with a few exceptions, impossible for the rapporteurs (Szulc 2018, 74-84).

While in most of the instances, the gossip targeted homosexual men, some also involved queer women. For example, a Romanian actress, wife of a writer, was being designated as a lesbian during some family discussions: "My mother would say: ´Oh, that wife cared about him, she was a good wife. Yes, she was a lesbian, but at least she was taking care of the house [...] When her husband would be out drinking with his fellow writers, she would spend the time at home with her female friends. But the mother-in-law intervened, suggesting those were more than friends" (Irod, 2022). Irod remembers other gossip of the time and the fact that stories of women were usually treated in a lighter note, as their sexualities were seen as more frivolous (Idem.). The patriarchal views were in place, and female sexuality was often disregarded and less studied or discussed. Considering how lesbianism concerns both gender and sexuality as "fundamental operators of power," Bilić and Radoman (2018) argue that these power relationships and exclusions are rooted in the socio-cultural, religious, and individual consciousness.

Communist school memories and its queer episodes

If childhood during communism was marked by queues to buy necessary household products and the special kind of transgenerational socializing it involved, school and the diverse types of interactions queer children and adolescents would have there offer a glimpse into how non-normative sexualities were challenged, repressed, encouraged, or punished before 1989. For some persons, this meant bullying on the bases of their gender identity and perceived gender non-conforming behavior, first loves and relationships, realizing of one´s sexuality even in the absence of a terminology for it, or only a bubble where sexuality was never discussed. The interviews unraveled snippets of stories which

encapsulate remarkable dimensions, given the oppressive context. Gossip was extensively used also when it comes to school and high school teachers' sexualities. I.T. recalls that queer issues were quite invisible during her school years, even if one of her music teachers was homosexual: "Everyone knew he was gay, but I never heard anyone calling him a *faggot*, this word did not exist back then. I´ve never heard anyone speaking ill of him [...], the colleagues would mention this in *sotto voce*, but with no pejorative connotation" (IT, 2021). The lack of language also meant a lack of pejorative terms in daily school interactions concerning queer people: "Some discussions during the breaks were related to questions on how do two men or two women have sex, but the jokes we now know about gay people were not really circulating back then. In general, most of the jokes concerning gay people appeared after the revolution (a.n.: 1989)" (Colța, 2022).

Once the subject became less of a tabu after 1989, the topic slowly entered the mass media realm and was brought into public attention. Another interviewee mentioned the fact that, before 1989, even if she had friends from different circles and some might have been perceived as not conforming, she never heard any depreciative comments: "the topic was less circulated, maybe because one should not even mention the possibility of..." (Costescu, 2022).

While homosexual men found their ways of networking, the life of homosexual women during communism can be imagined as somehow lonely, the stigma around sexuality being doubled by the lack of discussions and other forms of interactions. One interviewee mentioned the story of her lesbian history teacher in her 60s, who chose to tell her about her sexuality and former woman partner. While being warned by her mother against further visiting her former teacher, as the school staff knew the teacher was queer, Mihaela kept visiting her both before 1989 and right after the regime change. "She managed to separate from her husband with some scandal, since divorcing during communism, especially for politically involved persons, was difficult and frowned upon. [...] Then she told me she had a longtime relationship with a woman, a factory director. [...] She regretted they split up and that she ended up alone, she did not even have relatives in our area. [...] Somehow, she was feeling very alone and isolated and maybe this is why she became closer to me, since she could discuss these memories with me" (Marcu, 2021).

In some instances, the teachers would risk and share information on non-heteronormative sexualities during classes. One such example from 1988 is that of a high school teacher who managed to visit "the West" and was sharing information on HIV/AIDS and homosexuality with his students. To contextualize, one needs to remember that the Soviet response to HIV/AIDS was to dismiss the facts as not concerning their space and to reshape it as a "Western problem". Creating a moral panic and sharpening the ideological attacks towards homosexuality replaced possible prevention strategies (Kon and Riordan, 1993). HIV/AIDS would only happen in "the capitalist countries": "He was telling us about other similar stuff as well but at some point, he stopped. Maybe some colleagues told their parents, their parents informed the school and maybe a Securitate policeman told him to shut up if he does not want to ´fall´ from the balcony" (Colța, 2022). Another layer adds to this story: the fact that socialism tried to eradicate the bourgeoisie meant that any references to the decadent morals

(homosexuality included) needed to be erased as well, otherwise this would have meant a failure of the socialist system (Mole, 2019).

Lesbianism was less discussed, even though some accounts mention strong connections to this identity and terminology even from the mid ´70s: "Yes, people would talk about lesbians. The first time I heard about it was when we were called that. I was 15 years old (*a.n.: 1975*), and I did not understand it that well. It was mainly the boys saying: you two are lesbians. [...] The boys were jealous: why are we together all the time?" (Nelega, 2022).

The absence of someone to talk to about matters of sexuality was sometimes maintained during adulthood, well after the communist times: "My first relationship started in 1987 and lasted until 2000, 13 years. The first friend whom I have talked to about my sexual orientation was in 2002, and she was shocked, because she knew us: ´I did not even realize!" (Săracu, 2021). In this respect, the communist legacy of stigma concerning queer sexualities was perpetuated well into the 1990s and early 2000s, prolonging the need of queer people to avoid such subjects in their circles.

Family as gatekeeper of sexualities

Many of the collected stories from before 1989 involve family members and their different ways of managing the signs of non-heterosexual sexualities. Some were manifested by sanctioning non-normative behaviors, with no further discussions on the issue. Others found support in their families, and sometimes this support meant they were not ostracized, while the topic was still not further discussed.

There is another aspect worth mentioning, concerning both the informational flow on non-normative sexualities and family approaches: the geographical position in relation to more relaxed neighboring spaces mattered. "I remember the [US soap opera] *Dynasty* series, which had a gay character. I was watching it with my parents, they had nothing against me watching movies with gay characters. There was this openness of the Yugoslav television, and we had access to this type of information thanks to that" (Marcu, 2021). This concerned the Western part of Romania, where the TV antennas could receive signals from Yugoslavia; other areas in the country had access to Hungarian and Bulgarian TV channels. Yugoslavian television was regarded as progressive and Western-oriented (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992), in stark contrast to the Romanian one, which in the last years of the communist regime (1985–1989) had its program cut to 2 hours daily and would preponderantly present news about Ceau escu. Moreover, the Romanian-Yugoslav relations were also functioning in terms of trade, so Romanians could access goods and images from Western Europe (Sorescu-Marinkovic, 2012).

A way of looking back at family relationships through a queer lens is to imagine a queer unfulfilled love story, as part of the processes of searching for one´s identity and making sense of the world around, even if these fragments seem insufficient for reconstructing the actual events and stories. Simona remembers Claudia, a work colleague of her mother who liked to spend time with the two when they were living in Iai, Simona´s birth city. While receiving photographs as a gift was a practice at that time, in retrospect, Simona is puzzled by the amount of portraits Claudia gifted her mother, one of them with a

dedication ending in: "with all the love." The way Claudia looked also contributes to outlining the image of a queer woman in love with her mother: "Now I would see her as a butch woman, or as an androgynous person, always wearing masculine suits, with relatively short hair and quite masculine overall [...] She definitely did not look like all the other 30 work colleagues of my mother, who were all wearing long skirts and permed hair. Surely, Claudia did not fit any communist ideal of femininity" (Dumitriu, 2022). The mother did not even think anything was out of the ordinary in relation to Claudia. A year after Simona, aged 6, and her mother left Iai behind (1984) and moved to Bucharest, Claudia died at 28 "of too much drinking," as Simona´s mother would say, possibly to school her child into not drinking alcohol.

The gender non-conforming instances during childhood are also tackled by the following trans and nonbinary accounts: "If you were born a girl, you must play only with other girls, only with dolls. When you grow up you are a young lady, you must be careful how you behave, mind your posture, gestures, and the way you speak. I did not align to this thing and because of that I was always having fights at home. I suffered a lot of bullying in school, also because of that" (Colța, 2022). Another respondent recalls refusing to wear skirts from the age of three and the usual confusion—which they enjoyed—surrounding their gender when strangers would ask if they were a boy or a girl (Ioana, 2022).

There is also a practical aspect adding to this discussion on family, which is illustrated by some accounts on how the parents managed to see the lesbian relationships in terms of economical gain or loss. This is another legacy of communism which was transferred to the transition period, as many people continued to find themselves in precarious positions during the 1990s. The material struggles from communism translated into the need of financial stability. Interestingly, in this equation, matters of gender or sexuality occupied a marginal position: "My mother never cared why I have no children, why I do not get married, and I liked this. When that girlfriend appeared, my mother liked her because she was a veterinarian and she would obtain everything she would need from a veterinarian for free" (Atkinson, 2022). For other families, maintaining the social class and status weighted more than the gender of their offspring´s partner: "When I met Cristina, she was very happy. Cristina was settled, she had a job, a house, a car so my mother calmed down. We even showed her our wedding photos" (Marcu, 2021). Therefore, being "properly" inserted into the society was, in some cases, more valuable than heterosexuality, and this led to a more pragmatic approach, at least in some cases, where being financially independent was desirable.

In other cases, family gatekeeping was doubled by the unwillingness to name the possibility of a lesbian relationship. One respondent's grandmother, alarmed by the close relationship of her granddaughter and a school colleague is an excellent example: "She told me: you love each other too much. But, grandma, how can you love too much? I will only tell you this: less. But why? It´s not good. But why? Because it´s not good" (Nelega, 2022). Avoiding discussing matters of sexuality was in line with the erasure of the discussions and depictions of sexuality, which also manifested through the tendency of not offering answers to a range of different questions children or teenagers would ask. This tendency continued after 1989, during the transition

period:[8] for example, sex education in schools is still a tabu subject and a national curriculum or program is lacking.

The stigma on sex would function regardless of one´s sexuality, according to the tendency throughout the USSR, where from the 1930s onward sex became a taboo in state related structures and academia and imposed as a non-subject in the larger society (Kon and Riordan, 1993). Moreover, the practice of placing women together in different hosting/housing situations, or even in the same bed, especially in rural areas and to separate persons by gender to avoid heterosexual sexual encounters also denoted how matters of lesbianism were deemed as impossible or at least unthinkable: "But you do put two women together, that's never going to produce anything. So the unspoken assumption there was: nothing happens in that circumstance, so we benefited from it" (Johnson, 2022).

An interesting perspective concerns persons who did not realize their queerness until later in life, during the 1990s: "I did not even know the meaning of words such as homosexual or lesbian. In a way, this was charming because you live things you have no definition for. […] After a few years of mental torture, my family introduced the term lesbian to me: ´Maybe you should go visit that gay and lesbian association in Bucharest [a.n.: ACCEPT Romania], it just appeared" (Rațiu, 2022). Being identified "from outside" was not uncommon and the lack of information and language was maintained by family, sometimes on grounds of protecting their members from stigma or just avoiding curious intrusions. This type of protection would sometimes transform in pressure to follow the "normal" way of society, involving arranged heterosexual marriages, or entering the closed societies of nun monasteries, some interviewees recall.

Power relationships within certain families are another interesting aspect. Furthermore, when the power was reversed, shifting from parents to their offspring, a different type of interaction arises: "Before she got sick, my mother would ask me: Have you become one of those lesbians? I would ask her in return: Why do you care? […] My mother was educated by the gay men. At some point, I got really upset and abandoned her for a year and a half. While I was away, she would be visited by my gay friends, on their own initiative, twice per week. […] When I returned, she never mentioned anything on the subject for the rest of her life" (Marin, 2022). While the interview went deeper into family relationships and how both sexuality and internalized racism against Roma were constructed and negotiated, this brief fragment only offers a glimpse into how varied the interactions on the topic were, especially when some tabu terms became more widespread after 1989. Roxana´s identification as a Roma person, active in both LGBT+ and Roma activism in Romania since the beginning of the 1990s, brings into question the less explored intersectionality of the struggles. After 1989, brief collaborations between Roma and queer groups against state and societal discrimination laid the foundation shaping a more inclusive activism. The (debatable) success rate of the collaborations in building an intersectional activism in Romania is yet to be explored in more in-depth research. At the same time, several scholars have tacked issues of intersectionality in the context of Roma and LGBT+ identities across SEE (Gabor et al., 2014; Máté, 2015, 2017), matters of exoticization of Roma persons by LGBT+ and feminist movements (Kurtic, 2013), as well as racism of some LGBT+ persons towards Roma persons in the Romanian space

(Woodcock, 2011). The intersections of Roma and LGBT+ identities in the SEE space represent an emerging topic in the current literature in gender and queer studies, as contributions to the specific literature are still scarce (Al-Kurdi, 2022; Máté, 2015).

Reverting to power relationships between parents and (queer) offspring, one can note that objectifying and treating the latter as a property of a certain household functioned during both communism and thereafter. An extreme example from before 1989 is Mihaela Ghiuca´s story: after moving in with her partner when she turned 20, her parents tried to force her to return by telling their neighbors the two women live together, by complaining to the police and having constant fights. “You could not have a conversation with them: ´ Aren´t you coming home? Are you still living with that one? What is it that she does to you?” (Sallanz, 2003). After 1989, her parents went to court and lost the trial to unadopt her. These recollections paint a different image of the tabu around sexuality during communism: in some cases, other factors seemed to weight more than the idea of unspeakable and language was used to blackmail.

The idea of home during communism is explained by the soviet housing patterns: intergenerational living was common during the time, especially for unmarried persons or single mothers who would be further down the hierarchy of persons receiving housing from the state, since couples with children were prioritized (Clech, 2017; Stella, 2015). Moreover, having a job in the place of residence was a condition for being registered there and have the right to live in that space. This meant that living together with your woman partner, as an unmarried woman, would not only expose such couples to homophobia, but also to unwanted attention from the authorities, difficult living conditions, and temporary arrangements. There was a certain privilege in owning a home,[9] which also intersected with the possibility of developing a lesbian relationship and a life together.

Concluding remarks

This article complements the existing literature on queer issues during communism within the SEE region by offering firsthand accounts on how some queer women and trans and nonbinary persons in Romania managed to live, find allies, and reflect upon their identities before and after 1989. This contributes to the diversification of the SEE perspectives by nuancing the discussions on gender related issues in the former communist spaces, in an attempt of decentralizing the current academic tendencies of anayzing SEE spaces as a common block.

The most important finding is related to how the tabu subject of non-normative sexualities during communism was, in fact, discussed even in the absence of a language or relevant information. While the general tendency was to erase such topics from the public and private spaces, the interviews showed how the daily life interactions in different contexts such as school, work, and family contained lesbian and trans elements. Although it was nearly impossible for queer women, trans, and nonbinary people to form communities, some managed to navigate the complicated lives either by themselves or with the help of friends or family. In some cases, family also acted as gatekeepers, perpetuating the patriarchal and homophobic traits of the society.

Although lesbianism was criminalized along with homosexuality, the authorities seemed more interested in prosecuting and monitoring homosexual men than in doing so

with women. This may have led to the general idea that homosexual men were more outspoken and visible in the communist society. Instead, this article showed how the non-normative behaviors, relationships, and ways of life queer women and trans persons had been constantly addressed, coerced, and made visible through gossip and blackmail. Such accounts combine into a larger and symptomatic story, intricately connected to the patriarchal society and its repercussions into the present-day struggles and shifting dynamics in human rights (Bilić and Stubbs, 2016).

A more restrictive legislation concerning non-normative sexualities in Romania made any social organization impossible. The absence of any cultural references and the state erasure of sexuality through sexual repression led to an absence of language on identity which was replaced by a subjective way of living one´s sexuality during communism, as the interviews show.

A further line of research revolves around the proto activism on LGBT+ issues from other SEE communist states during the 80s which materialized in *sui generis* activist movements, forms of organization, and produced queer culture outside the Western influence. In Romania´s case, it was only after 1989 that LGBT+ movements took shape and were influenced by models and collaborations with Western/Nordic organizations, institutions and grassroots/NGO groups and individuals. The conflation between West-centric ideas and the "communist legacy" of the 1990s is one important research direction opened by this article.

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Notes

1. While the article is focusing on cisgender queer women, nonbinary and trans perspectives were also included. These are not exhaustive for trans-related perspectives, but since even less is being researched in terms of such accounts from communism, it is important to include the unique perspectives I had access to. Moreover, the author has opted for using the term "queer" to encompass the broader spectrum of sexualities in a more concise manner than other formulations. That is, of course, not to say that this term was common during the first transitional decade in Romania. It only became more used during the past decade, still less common than "gay" as the spoken language followed its course and continued to adopt foreign terms. Some

might argue using the terms “queer” and “gay” when referring to communist Romania is asynchronous. The author chose to keep these formulations for a series of reasons. Firstly, the interviewees themselves used “gay” instead of “homosexual” during the interviews—the latter term has been extensively and preponderantly used with pejorative and homophobic connotations in post-communist Romanian media and it is no surprise some queer persons chose to use the less charged term “gay.” Secondly, the term “homosexual” is mainly used in Romanian to refer to homosexual men as opposed to English, where it also includes homosexual women.

2. Along with Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland, Romania was part of the Warsaw Pact. Romania´s alignment during the communist era is complex and has been treated extensively in several studies which highlight the way in which the country managed to pursue an autonomous foreign policy, which differed from the one of USSR (King 1979; Nelson 1984).
3. For example, Homeros λ (n.a.: Homeros-Lambda) Association founded in 1988 in Hungary (Evans and Cook 2014, 197).
4. “History of the Slovenian gay and lesbian movement”—in Slovenian. Available at: https://lgbt.ba/topla-braca-hvala-ne-historija-slovenskog-gej-i-lezbijskog-pokreta/.
5. Introduced in 1968, Article 200 from the Romanian Criminal Code punished same-sex relationships and “homosexual propaganda” with prison between one to 5 years. Romania was one of the few exceptions which condemned both LGBT+ women and men under this act (Human Rights Watch and IGLHRC 1998).
6. Apart from referring to persons in their adulthood before 1989, the term “older” is also used to refer to respondents who have experienced non-normative sexualities or had such memories from their teenage years before 1989.
7. Article 1 of the Decree no. 153/March 24, 1970, referred to “persons who evade their civic duty to ensure their means of existence through work, tending to practice a parasitic way of life” (Consiliul De Stat Al Republicii Socialiste România 1970).
8. While there is no consensus on when the transition period in Romania ended (or even if it ended), one can include the 90s and early 2000s as a most referred time frame. An interesting perspective on “transition” in post-socialist countries is offered by Stella: “in its insistence on the need to break with the socialist past, the ‘transition’ narrative perpetuated the east/west dichotomy inherited from the Cold War and tended to see the region’s socialist heritage as a negative factor that hindered progress towards economic stability and political pluralism” (Stella, 2015, p. 135).
9. In the interview, Mihaela Ghiuca mentions the fact that her partner owned the apartment in which they were living together since 1985. Law no. 4/1973 stipulated the conditions under which citizens could acquire their homes from the state fund.

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