



# Intimate Migrations

Lesbian, gay and bisexual migrants in Scotland

## Preliminary Findings Report

Lesbian, bisexual and gay migration from Eastern Europe to Scotland

Dr Francesca Stella, 24 Feb 2015

This report presents the findings of a pilot study on lesbian, gay and bisexual migration from Eastern Europe to Scotland, carried out by Francesca Stella. This has fed into a larger project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which runs January 2015-December 2016.

The ESRC-funded project 'Intimate Migrations' is ongoing and is being carried out by Francesca Stella, Moya Flynn and Anna Gawlewicz from the University of Glasgow. The project will explore how sexuality may shape intra-European migration by exploring LGB migrants' motivations for migration, experiences of settlement in Scotland and social networks. For the larger 'Intimate Migrations' project, we plan to speak to migrants from both Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.

If you are interested in the project and would like to find out more please contact us:

### INTIMATE MIGRATIONS

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## Pilot Study - Findings Report

**Scope and methodology:** The report is based on a small pilot project undertaken in April-July 2013. The project explored the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual migrants from Eastern Europe. It was based on semi-structured interviews with 9 participants, broadly covering the following areas: 'coming out' and attitudes towards sexuality in the country of origin; geographical mobility within the country of origin; reasons for moving to Scotland/the UK; experiences of resettlement; personal social networks since moving to Scotland; plans for the future.

**Profile of interviewees:** 7 men and 2 women aged 29-39 were interviewed; 8 participants are from Poland (8) and one is from Slovakia (1)<sup>1</sup>. With the exception of one participant who had recently arrived in Scotland, all had lived in Scotland for several years (average 6.5 years). Participants self-identified as either gay or lesbian and lived in the Greater Glasgow area or Edinburgh. With one exception, all were educated to university degree level, and were employed in healthcare, the service sector or white collar jobs. Seven participants were in long-term relationships; four had entered a civil partnership while in Scotland, or were planning a civil partnership.

### **Key themes and findings:**

#### Rural to urban migration within the country of origin

The majority of participants (6) grew up in rural areas or small towns, and migrated to cities within their countries of origin before moving to Scotland or the UK. Reasons for moving were generally related to education (e.g. going to college, university) or work:

[t]hat's the way it's supposed to happen in the villages, with the farmers' children. There's only one who can stay, the rest of the children has to move out. (Marek, M, Poland)

[i]t had nothing to do with my sexuality. No, I don't think it was. The reason I moved to Warsaw was because I wanted to study [...]. But obviously it was much easier to be in Warsaw than in a small village where people were kind of looking at you, not looking at me cause they didn't know, but when the mentality was quite traditionalist in a way, they weren't liberal people. So it was easier to be in Warsaw, I was probably just one of 2 million people living in Warsaw. (Jacek, M, Poland)

However, cities within their countries of origin also offered better opportunities for making contact with other gay people and to socialise on the gay scene; they also offered the advantage of anonymity and the possibility of 'making a fresh start', away from their families and from the more traditional and religious way of life of the villages and small towns where they grew up. All participants had already explored their sexuality and 'come out' before moving to Scotland/the UK.

#### The decision to move to Scotland/UK

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<sup>1</sup> Note: in order to preserve confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout the report instead of real names.

Most participants moved to Scotland as economic migrants after 2004. The exception was a lesbian woman (Maria, Poland) who moved to Scotland as a teenager in the late 1990s (and had no role in her family's decision to migrate); and a gay man (Jacek, Poland) who moved to England to pursue undergraduate studies, and later moved to Scotland with his Polish boyfriend.

For most participants, their sexuality was an important factor in their decision to migrate to Scotland/the UK. Other factors included expectations of a better quality of life, better opportunities for education and employment, a sense of adventure and turning point life events (e.g. a painful breakup, the death of a parent).

I was with this guy and he said, if you want better quality of life and everything you have to live abroad. We've joined with Europe, and he said you have to go first and get a job and settle down, he's a surgeon he can get a job no bother. [...]

*So what made you decide to move over here, was it because of your partner? ...*

Mainly kind of him, cause he said it was a better quality of life, and blah, blah blah. UK is more open about gay people. You get more peace. It is true, it is true (Jaroslaw, M, Poland).

The expectation that life is easier for gay people in the UK was common among participants. Interestingly, it was the UK (rather than Scotland more specifically) that was initially chosen as a migration destination, although after arriving in Scotland participants had ended up staying. The decision to move to Scotland rather than other parts of the UK was down to job opportunities (usually available through agencies recruiting in migrants' countries of origin) and the presence of personal contacts facilitating migration (friends/relatives).

Participants put different degrees of emphasis on sexuality as a factor in their decision to migrate. Lukas (M, Slovakia) talked about his decision to migrate in purely economic terms. He was adamant that he had moved to Scotland from Prague to enjoy better living conditions and to live 'a normal life', which he describes as having enough money to pay your rent, having a car and having holidays abroad. Lukas was from a small town in Slovakia and had previously lived in Prague, which has a thriving gay scene and which he considered the most gay-friendly city he had ever lived in. At the opposite end of the spectrum was Adam, a gay man from Poland who identified the pressures he experienced because of his sexuality as his main reason for migrating. He became a monk in his early 20s, motivated by his strong Catholic faith; however, he left the monastery when he realised he was attracted to men:

I had a girlfriend after I left the monastery I struggled to accept the fact I was gay, I didn't want to be gay, I just didn't want to. I went to the therapy in Poland run by Catholics and I met that girl and I was with her for a year but I just couldn't. Therapy wasn't working and I just thought no, it's time for you to accept who you are and I told her [...].

He also worked as a religious education teacher, and was conflicted because he had to tell pupils that homosexuality is a sin while being gay and hiding his sexuality at work:

There was a fear, it was like living two lives, tiring, exhausting, that was the reason I decided to move. [...] Honestly I was just exhausted, emotionally exhausted, and then one day I had savings and as I said I sat on the sofa and shut my eyes and pointed a finger on the map and

that was very close to Edinburgh and I knew it was going to have to be a country that accepts you know gay people more than Poland [...].

Adam's motivations for moving are emotional (fear, emotional exhaustion) rather than rational (costs and benefits of migrating). Other participants also talked about their decision to migrate in terms of emotion such as discomfort, shame, hope for the future, a sense of adventure and excitement, and love.

#### Encountering homophobia in Scotland and in migrants' countries of origin

Prior to arrival, there was a widespread expectation and perception among the participants that Scotland/the UK was a more 'gay-friendly' place than their country of origin. They mentioned the legal recognition of same-sex couples (civil partnership, gay marriage) and families (parental rights for same-sex couples) as evidence of the distance between Scotland and their country of origin ('we are still 100 years behind I think', Jaroslaw, M, Poland). However, the recognition of LGBT rights was never mentioned as a reason to migrate to Scotland/the UK, although it was sometimes mentioned as a reason to stay:

I don't feel like I have enough reasons to go back to Poland and stay there. Economically, I wouldn't be able to support myself because I would be able to probably, I would probably be able to continue my nursing job but that wouldn't give me enough money to rent a flat. So I'm not going to do that. And also, me and my [Scottish] partner are planning to get married. (Marek, M, Poland)

Similarly, Agata (F, Poland) said that she would like to have children but she struggled with the idea of co-parenting with a woman in the conservative social climate of her native Poland. She mused that 'maybe that's why I just decided to come here, just to start a more normal kind of life'.

Despite the more favourable institutional context, all incidents of homophobic harassment related in interviews happened in Scotland, not in migrants' country of origin (Poland and Slovakia), where there was little recognition of LGBT rights in legislation or policy<sup>2</sup>. As interview data shows, attitudes may not necessarily reflect the letter of the law. All homophobic episodes related in interviews happened in Scotland, and involved both Scots and migrants from interviewees' ethnonational community. Jaroslaw recalled how he and his cohabiting Polish partner were harassed by two local teenagers in the housing estate on the outskirts of Glasgow where they live:

[t]here was two local teenagers who tried to start harassing us, throwing stones, smashing the car and windows in the house and they shout "Fuck off you fucking poofs, fucking Poles, go back from where you came from". Nearly every second night, and we started drinking alcohol 'cause we needed to get sleep and go to work.

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<sup>2</sup> There is no legal recognition of same-sex couples in either country; draft legislation to introduce same-sex partnerships or civil unions were either rejected or shelved. In both Poland and Slovakia, marriage is defined in the constitution as a union between a man and a woman. In June 2014, the Slovakia National Council amended the Slovakian constitution to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman and deny same-sex couples the legal protections associated with marriage. Slovakian citizens were asked to endorse this decision in a referendum held in February 2015 (which also included questions about adoption by gay couples and sex education in schools); the referendum failed to reach the required quorum with a turnout of just 21%.

Piotr and Tomek (a gay couple from Poland) were harassed by two drunk women when driving back from a gay-friendly pub in the centre of Edinburgh. The women shouted homophobic and xenophobic abuse at them while banging and kicking their car, and the episode was dealt with by the police. They also experienced online abuse and intimidation from other Polish migrants. The first episode happened when they tried to organise a meetup group for Polish gay men in Edinburgh: their post on Facebook was met with a spate of hostile and offensive comments. Subsequently, some members of the Polish community tried to discredit Tomek's professional reputation and his leading role in a newly established Polish charity in Edinburgh by outing him on a Polish website.

Participants' experiences complicate the simplistic narrative of a progressive, gay-friendly Scotland and a homophobic, conservative Eastern Europe. However, they also point to the importance of the institutional context: both Jaroslaw and his partner, and Piotr and Tomek involved the local police, perceived to be refreshingly 'gay-friendly', and even a local MP, something which they may not have done 'back home', where the institutional context is different.

One of the reasons why participants may not have mentioned instances of harassment, violence and discrimination in their country of origin is because they tended to be 'out' to a very small group of people (close friends, some family members). One of the perceived differences between Scotland and migrants' country of origin is that 'back home' silence about one's sexuality was experienced as the accepted social norm. Several participants talked about leading a 'double life' in their country of origin, where they were careful about disclosing details of their personal life, particularly at work and with relatives.

I wasn't open to be honest. Maybe it was more don't ask don't say. Even now, parents know about it, but we are not talking about us being gay (Piotr, M, Poland).

There was a general consensus among participants that in Scotland being 'out' was both much more acceptable and the expected norm. Some participants talked about moving away from their country of origin and their social and kinship networks made them feel both more anonymous and freer to express their sexuality:

[w]hen I moved to Scotland I just felt, it just felt amazing. You know, from someone who was hiding their sexuality from some people I was like everyone I met like my first job I was like I'm Adam, I'm gay. I was so, that was awesome feeling. I wasn't judged. This elderly lady I used to work with [...] [a] mature lady in her fifties and in Poland I can't imagine talking about gay sex with someone like that, never mind she invited me to her house to meet her husband and children and I just thought, I couldn't believe this you know (Adam, M, Poland).

This expectation was reversed back home, where 'coming out' was either frowned upon or caused discomfort and awkwardness. Jaroslaw illustrated these different expectations with an example about an encounter with a fellow Pole at the airport, when he was on his way to Poland for a visit.

Don't get me wrong, our people, the Poles, they are kind of open, but even a few weeks ago I was flying back home and there was an elderly lady and she was like, "are you living here, do you have a house and everything?". "Yes". "So do you have a wife and children?". "No, I'm a gay". "Oh really?!?" End of chat! (Jaroslaw, M, Poland)

These preliminary findings suggest that homophobia is not 'just' a problem 'over there', in Eastern Europe. It still exists in Scotland and in migrants' country of origin, although it may be experienced differently: as intimidation and harassment in Scotland, as silencing and misrecognition in the country of origin.

#### Social networks and migrants' settlement and 'integration'

One of the themes explored in the pilot project is how LGB migrants build their social networks in Scotland. In the project starting in January 2015, we will explore in much more detail whether sexuality, ethnicity, kinship and other factors are important in shaping LGB migrants' social networks. Previous research on LGBT migrants has shown that relations with their own ethnonational community can be difficult: the latter can be experienced as unwelcoming of LGB people or downright homophobic. As mentioned in the previous section, a few participants did experience hostility from fellow nationals because of their sexuality (e.g. scathing remarks, being badmouthed, being asked to move out of a flatshare after coming out to flatmates). Some participants deliberately distanced themselves from, or avoided opportunities to socialise with fellow nationals; however, this was not always, or exclusively, motivated by fear of homophobic prejudice:

I've met a couple of people who are more interesting to talk to but in general I've kind of grown myself to mistrust the Poles. [...] Polish people, we can be jealous, we can be pessimistic, we can be very money orientated. That's a quality I didn't like about myself and about other Polish people [...] And also that fact that people, I knew at the time that I am a gay person and I feel that maybe I am not going to be accepted by them for that reason.  
(Marek, M, Poland)

This resonates with other studies on post-2004 Polish migration to the UK (e.g. Burrell, 2011), and suggests that a shared ethnonational background was not necessarily seen as common ground facilitating social interaction.

At the same time, some participants talked about linguistic and cultural barriers that hindered their social interaction with 'locals', particularly when they had not been in the country for long, and talked about how cultural differences resulted in misunderstandings and difficulties when entering in a romantic relationship with a longer-term resident in Scotland. The ability to communicate in the same language, or the shared experience of being a migrant (not necessarily from the same country), sometimes created a common language and formed the basis of social interaction and friendship. Migrants also talked about how important it was for them to keep in touch with family and friends 'back home'. Relations with family members 'back home' were sometimes difficult to negotiate, particularly if migrants were not out or if their sexuality was not accepted by family members.

Interviews revealed very limited interaction with LGBT community and commercial spaces, such as community organisations, bars and clubs. This may in part reflect the age range of the migrants involved (29-39); younger migrants may be more likely to visit these spaces on a regular basis. Nonetheless, interaction with other non-heterosexuals seemed important: many participants had sought out new lesbian, gay and bisexual friends and acquaintances in Scotland, or numbered non-

heterosexuals among friends and acquaintances; a group of Polish gay men had also initiated a meet-up group for fellow gay Poles living in Edinburgh.

Limited interaction with both migrant and LGBT community spaces may indicate lack of awareness of sexuality in migrant spaces, and of ethnicity/migrant status in LGBT spaces. Acknowledging this, in the ongoing larger project we intend to engage and consult with organisations working with migrant, minority ethnic and LGBT communities in Scotland. We hope the project will benefit these organisations by identifying any gap in service provision and facilitate communication across stakeholder communities.