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**Positive Media Representation of the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ Community and Shifting National Attitudes Towards Homosexuality**

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# Abstract

This thesis deals with the question of whether positive media representation can favorably affect attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community in Bulgaria. As a post-Soviet country that recently joined the EU, Bulgaria still has a long way to go towards achieving equality and non-discrimination.

The thesis looks at media representation as one part of the puzzle towards shifting the public discourse on homosexuality in one of the EU's least tolerant countries, according to the most recent Eurobarometer study. The central role of media is telling stories, and the LGBTQ+ stories the media chooses to amplify can have a powerful effect on the attitudes towards homosexuality in the country.

Through an experimental study and literature review on LGBTQ+ attitudes in Bulgaria and worldwide, the thesis uses the parasocial contact theory to analyze attitudes towards notorious pop-folk singer Azis. Both homosexual and Roma and known for his gender-bending performances, Azis is one of the most polarizing phenomena in Bulgaria and wildly successful. The thesis analyzes the current discourse on queer culture in Bulgaria and studies the effects of Azis' media exposure in Bulgaria's specific post-Soviet context as a method of shifting attitudes. The research confirms existing cross-national demographic tendencies in higher tolerance in younger, more highly educated, less religious cohorts. Still, it does establish a strong correlation between Azis' representation and positive attitudes. The pressing problem of proper queer representation in Bulgaria continues to become more and more urgent as "anti-gender" campaigns threaten to push back on positions of equality even further in the near future.

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# Literature Review

## Attitudes and Prejudice Worldwide

Worldwide the topic of LGBTQ+ rights has been a matter of heated debate and polarized discussion over the last decades. The previous two decades have marked a definite upwards trend

in the attitudinal change and acceptance of the community across the world, juxtaposed by alarming anti-acceptance, violent movements in states such as Russia, Hungary, Poland, Egypt, Gabon and Brunei among others.  As globalization and swift media advances continue to shape the way people communicate around the world, this has led to the rapid adoption of new norms and paradigms of what it means to be queer and accepted as such. While the term "queer" itself, taken to mean "strange" or "off," has historically functioned as an offense hurled towards members of the community who could easily be identified because of distinctly effeminate appearance or mannerisms, it has since been reclaimed. Today "queer" is used as an affirmation and celebration of the otherness and not fitting into social norms that come with being a member of the LGBTQ+ community ("LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary" 2015). In this thesis, the terms "queer" and "LGBTQ+" are used interchangeably and extend to refer to anyone who identifies as non-heterosexual or non-cisgender.

Over the last two decades, a "notable global increase" in the acceptance of homosexuality (Smith, Son, and Kim 2014) has been reported. In line with the progress, the United States has most recently legalized same-sex marriages in 2015 (*BBC News* 2015) and ruled on the Supreme Court level that LGBTQ+ individuals must be protected from workplace discrimination in 2020 (Sosin 2020). While the attitudinal and legislative changes vary across states, there is a marked global trend towards approval reliant on the real excitement and momentum of change and the arrival of younger, more progressive, radical, and tolerant generations. With 87% of the countries analyzed in a cross-national study (Smith 2011) moving in the direction towards tolerance, it will be up to these new generations to carry on the change towards full acceptance of the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

Surveying an approval index across countries based on the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), differences across nations are marked by big margins with a consistent dynamic amongst them. In a round of the survey from 2008, in the Netherlands, a reported 70% of the survey respondents said that same-sex relations were "not wrong at all," while only 2.1% of the respondents in Turkey answered so. The top 5 most accepting countries included the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and Belgium, while the last in the list were seven post-Soviet states, as well as East Asian and Latin American countries (Smith 2011). A report by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA - Europe) from 2020 ranks the five most accepting (Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Norway) and

five least accepting (Monaco, Russia, Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan) European states similarly (ILGA-Europe 2020b).

On both a macro and micro level, the issue of acceptance and full enjoyment of the human rights of queer people has become an extremely divisive hot topic. Across different surveys, it is typical for responses to be divided between the two extremes in a precise bimodal distribution. For example, in the ISSP survey question, "when are sexual relations between two adults of the same sex wrong?, the majority in most countries except Japan squarely answered "always wrong" or "not wrong at all" (Smith 2011). The abundance of strong opinions makes it difficult for activists and members of the community. They are counting on negotiating gradual changes in attitudes on a community, national, or international level. While incremental shifts in opinion are essential in the long-run to advancing LGBTQ+ rights, each debate and discussion is capable of inciting disagreement and heated debate. The same bimodal model of conflicting views scaled to a national level can quickly become a battleground for a contentious political feud. Such is the situation in Poland in 2020, where the queer community has become a scapegoat and a target at the hands of a homophobic government, which is setting a dangerous precedent for the disrespect of LGBTQ+ human rights across Europe ("Poland: Crackdown On LGBT Activists" 2020). Because there are very few people without a strong opinion, the topic still makes for a volatile issue around the world.

*Medical and Psychological History*

Historically the incremental positive attitudinal changes would not have been possible without a few landmark shifts in discourse coming from the international scientific and professional circles. In 1973, after a careful process of weighing opposing theories of pathology and normalcy, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality as a diagnosis from the second edition of their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). Around the same time, the discourse in Bulgaria paralleled this from a distance with a shift towards homosexuality as an identity rather than a behavior and advocacy towards decriminalization (Pisankaneva 2003). Over time, this paradigm shift made its way to the international community as well with the World Health Organization (WHO), finally removing homosexuality as an illness from their International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) (Drescher 2015). As this important change established the new normal, conversations shifted away from pathology and

medicine, away from dangerous attempts to rehabilitate and cure these individuals, and towards the moral, social, cultural, and civil dimensions of what it means to be a queer citizen. Marginalizing LGBTQ+ people on the basis of the greater good for society was not tolerated anymore, and many institutions beyond the medical community (ranging between "religious, governmental, military, media, and educational") (Drescher 2015) were forced to reckon with their discriminatory practices. To a general public who leaned on scientific authority and not only religion as a moral compass, this shift allowed for increased tolerance across many communities. Queer people could finally be treated as upstanding members of society, and it meant it was now a responsibility for society as a whole to provide them with the social, cultural, and economic environment in which they freely live. Since these early steps, the depathologization of homosexual, bisexual, transgender, intersex and non-binary identities has also led to massive medical breakthroughs in the establishment of effective therapeutic strategies and proper ethical standards in terms of both physical and mental health (Robertson 2004). And even more recently, in 2011, neuroscientist LeVay published an extensive review of scientific evidence pointing towards the understanding that sexual orientation results "primarily from an interaction between genes, sex hormones, and the cells of the developing body and brain" (LeVay 2011). These findings also opened new avenues to champion sexual diversity as something to be respected and valued rather than a pathology to be treated.

Since the 1980s and the eruption of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the US, considerable steps have been taken towards studying and understanding how and why the LGBTQ+ community in developed countries is disproportionately at risk. Initial mass panic, stigma, and homophobia led to the labeling of the virus as a "gay cancer" and "gay plague," which demonized the community across the US and has left a social imprint to this day, and yet significant progress was made. Men who have sex with men (MSM) and sex workers were quickly identified as important target groups for HIV prevention, and health organizations allocated resources and developed programs that specifically address them (Altman 2004). Quantitatively, there seems to be no correlation between high numbers of diagnosed HIV cases among MSM and tolerance levels towards homosexuality in a cross-European study. Globally among MSM, HIV rates still remain "uncontrolled" and consistently higher or rising when compared to other groups (Ayala and Santos 2016). While the overall incidence is rising, in the European context this could also be attributed to three positive developments: 1) an increase in medical resources available leading to

more available testing and the diagnosis of more HIV cases; 2) the decrease of stigma to visit a doctor and get a diagnosis; and 3) a higher degree of safety and availability to establish sexual contact with other men - as a society becomes more tolerant, MSM are more likely to engage in sex (Slenders, Sieben, and Verbakel 2014) According to Slenders' research, "a stigma effect of HIV/AIDS for homosexuals is highly unlikely in contemporary Europe." The need for an effective response to the epidemic has created new norms of public health and a climate of tolerance towards the unique sexual norms of the queer community. It has become part "of a wider move towards the recognition of difference as an essential part of the human condition" (Altman 2008).

*Legal Recognition*

Despite the global advances in tolerance, there are many states in which majorities find homosexuality "always wrong," higher than the majority of states that find it "not wrong at all" (Smith 2011). This discrepancy makes the task of conducting a truly global analysis of the advancement of rights quite tricky. On a smaller scale, such reflection is more straightforward as regions, states, and individuals either signal unconditional acceptance or completely reject the existence of such individuals as something unnatural or wrong. It is also difficult to analyze a diverse movement such as this one as a monolithic phenomenon. As of 2019, there are still 68 UN member states in which consensual same-sex sexual acts are criminalized and 11 countries worldwide in which a death penalty for homosexual acts is possible (Mendos 2019).

On the other hand, Western countries are passing same-sex marriage bills in Luxembourg ("Luxembourg: Marriage Equality Approved" 2014), providing proper legal recognition for intersex people by issuing corresponding birth certificates in Austria (Anarte and Savage 2020) and planning the complete removal of gender identity as a marker in their national ID documents in order to make life easier for transgender, intersex and non-binary people in the Netherlands (Moca-Grama 2020). Across such a range, it is challenging to analyze correlations across state borders or to identify parallel strands of acceptance. Many states, still struggling with the singular concept of male homosexuality as a threat to the traditional patriarchal family, have an arduous path to go towards comprehending and entertaining the more radical and progressive notions of gender and sexuality that have become synonymous with the Western European states.

It is also important to address the ongoing labeling of respect for LGBTQ+ rights as an exclusively Western, Eurocentric pursuit. While globally, the US and Western European states are at the forefront of this championing of tolerance, their recent histories are not as kind. During the height of European colonization, Britain was instrumental in the implementation of laws against homosexuality in many of its colonies around the world. While both French and British colonies propagated this air of persecution, France abolished its anti-sodomy law in 1750. Still, it took Britain two more centuries to do so in 1967 (Buckle 2019), just a year earlier than Soviet-rule Bulgaria (Pisankaneva 2003). This decree provoked a significant shift in Africa, where there had been no documented laws or practices of LGBTQ+ persecution, and gender was understood in a different paradigm from the Western male/female binary (Buckle 2019). The phenomenon of "imported homophobia," trickling down from British, still rings true in many former British colonies (Frank, Camp, and Boutcher 2010). It is still seen through the prism of false traditionally African, and patriarchal reasoning (Epprecht 2005). The same thing can be said of Christian missionary initiatives throughout the world, who have institutionalized homophobic practices to cases as recent as the 2010s (Boutchie 2019). Today, many former colonies are working proactively to decolonize their land, cultures, and practices. There is intense skepticism towards the advocacy of a human rights movement towards the LGBTQ+ community precisely because of its Western connotations. This first wave of cultural globalization has led to alarming homophobic practices ingrained in laws and social practices as second nature. It will take a different strategy to shift it on its axis, one that will not come from the liberal leadership of the West.

*International Legal Dimensions*

Other important international developments include legal and civil protections and the introduction of legislation that allows for progress towards full equality between queer and cisgender heterosexual citizens. As of 2019, 77 countries around the world prohibit discrimination in employment and 28 states allow same-sex marriage (Mendos 2019) with Taiwan in 2019 as the first Asian country and Costa Rica in 2020 as the first Central American country to do so. Over time the rights of sexual minorities have become internationally recognized as human rights from the European Court of Human Rights' 1981 ruling in Dudgeon v. the United Kingdom. This landmark case set a legal precedent that prohibited Council of

Europe member states from criminalizing homosexuality (Dudgeon v United Kingdom 1981). This was followed by a landmark ruling in the Toonen v. Australia case in 1994, which resulted in the repeal of Australia's anti-sodomy laws and set a precedent for sexual orientation to be included in the anti-discrimination provisions under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Toonen v. Australia 1994). Since then, the UN has taken a proactive role in advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ people, issuing statements about how any laws aiming to punish restrict queer people are considered violations of their universal human rights and will not be tolerated. In 2013, the office of Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner of Human Rights at the time launched the campaign Free & Equal, aiming specifically to raise awareness about the rights of LGBTQ+ people (Pillay n.d.).

In the EU realm, the principle of non-discrimination is part of its legislation and over time it has expanded to contain personal characteristics such as sexual orientation. The EU's political aim is also to advocate for a culturally homogenous group of states (Gerhards 2010, 6) and allowing its citizens in all member states free access to the market also means eliminating any barriers of entry due to discrimination. Gender equality, "as a key principle of the EU ever since the Treaty of Rome" (which introduced equal pay for men and women in 1957) has been supported by 13 directives using the legal basis of the Treaties since the 1970s ("50 Years of EU Gender Equality Law" 2007). The Treaty of Amsterdam, which came into force on May 1, 1999 introduced a new clause, Article 13, stating that: "(1) Without prejudice to the other provisions of this Treaty and within the limits of the powers conferred by it upon the Community, the Council, acting unanimously on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the European Parliament, may take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation" ("After Amsterdam - Sexual Orientation and the European Union" 1999). Since then, Article 21 in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states "any discrimination based on any ground such as [...] sexual orientation shall be prohibited" has offered even stronger protection from discrimination as the Charter became legally binding across EU member states as a result of the Treaty of Lisbon entering into force in 2009 (European Union). The unique position of the EU's legislation gives it the authority to supersede the national legislation of member states thus giving the LGBTQ+ community protection even in states with less protective national legislation (Gerhards 2010).

The increase of visibility and positive legislation has also resulted in the proliferation of international-aiming NGOs that monitor, address and advocate for the rights of queer people worldwide such as AllOut, "a global movement for love and equality" ("All Out | A Global Movement for Love & Equality" n.d.); ILGA, an advocacy group working "towards full equality and human rights for all" ("ILGA-Europe" n.d.); OutRight Action International, an advocacy group that holds special consultative status at the UN headquarters in New York ("About Us" 2018); and IGLYO, "a youth development and leadership organization building LGBTQI youth activists" ("IGLYO - Home Page" n.d.). While the general trend of recognizing sexual orientation and, more recently, gender identity as characteristics covered under international human rights protection, this has not been without contestation. States have taken issue with interpretations of international human rights law and resolutions, in particular with extra-judicial killings and discrimination (Symons and Altman 2015), and have divided both the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. Right-wing politicians across Eastern Europe have been capitalizing on this tension in successful attempts at consolidating nationalist, heteronormative power by pointing the finger at international institutions like the EU and the UN. They blame the organizations advocating for gender and LGBTQ+ equality policies as trying to enforce Western demoralized values as a ploy to destroy traditional national values (Darakchi 2019b). But before focusing on the specific post-Soviet regional movements and how to engage with the ongoing discriminatory rhetoric, it is important to break down the different possible explanations for the worldwide positive shift in attitudes towards queer acceptance.

Different theories attribute the positive worldwide attitudinal change towards homosexuality to three distinct driving forces: 1) the postmaterialist thesis, which deems the accumulation of existential security as an important impetus towards cultivating more tolerance; 2) world society theory, which hints at the development of cohesive worldwide cultural trends that promote acceptance; and 3) the multiple modernities theory, which looks at region-specific movements as the cause for this attitudinal shift (Roberts 2019, 1).

*Postmaterialist Thesis*

When discussing the postmaterialist thesis in the context of LGBTQ+ rights, there is a reported correlation with pluralistic tolerance, gender equality, and tolerance for homosexuality. The fulfillment of basic materialist needs encourages the development of a "pro-woman state"

concerned with a culturally rich, tolerant state with a higher quality of life (Wernet, Elman, and Pendleton 2005). Materialist needs or values can include proper living conditions, security, and national identity. On the opposite side of the spectrum, postmaterialist values include freedom, tolerance of diversity, and self-expression and self-fulfillment. In a postmaterialist world, variety and new forms of expression are seen as something to be celebrated and admired rather than a threat (Inglehart 2006, 26). On the flip side, when speaking of intolerance, economic inequality becomes an important correlate and signifier. In a study across 35 democracies, tolerance is found to decline as national income inequality increases (Andersen and Fetner 2008). This is a more nuanced argument than the broadly-sweeping postmaterialist thesis that higher income across the board leads to higher degrees of tolerance. While upper-class individuals (professionals & managers) follow the expected increase in positive attitudes that the postmaterialist thesis outlines, working-class individuals generally do not. In states with a high-income gap, the attitudes of the working class remain unaffected by economic development (Andersen and Fetner 2008, 942). This phenomenon should serve as a cautionary finding for states that prioritize economic growth without properly addressing economic inequality, for it can lead to an increase in intolerant social and political values (Andersen and Fetner 2008).

*World Society Theory & Global Culture*

Over time, the LGBTQ+ movement towards equality has materialized as not only a social movement but as a cultural force that demands representation. As a marginalized group, the queer community has turned to art, style, and creativity as a means of gaining mainstream acceptance, using "fabulousness" as a political statement and form of expression (moore 2018). Global culture thus emerges as an important signifier of more tolerant attitudes as increased access to media worldwide allows communities and individuals to form more favorable views on homosexuality. Representation of the LGBTQ+ community across media leads to a mainstreaming effect in which groups with conflicting views begin to look at homosexuality through a similar, more favorable lens (Calzo and Ward 2009). Within capitalism, this culture, intermeshed with consumerism, becomes universal across borders and amplified through mass media, travel, and pop culture (Altman, Richardson, and Seidman 2002). When considering the origins of the modern and Western LGBTQ+ equality movement, the individualistic charge of these nations feels true to the spirit of the US with its focus on an individual's freedom to decide

what to do with their career, health, and body. While in the 1970s, the US and other Western countries were becoming more liberal when it came to casual sex outside of one's marriage, this was also a good time for homosexual people to exercise their sexual freedom as an individual's choice (Altman, Richardson, and Seidman 2002). This set the space for the following legal discussions of sexuality rights as fundamental human rights, which were to be socially and legally protected and equal among both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people. This model of growing equality can be attributed to developmental idealism, a set of beliefs that suggests that the global cultural trend is towards strong values in terms of economic growth, education, gender equality and pursuit of democracy (Thornton, Dorius, and Swindle 2015). Sexual and gender equality thus becomes another goal of this pro-development global movement.

And while global culture has the power to reach a large group of people worldwide, its effect is considered not as strong in societies with a high religiosity (Roberts 2019). Coupled with the effects of region-specific movements such as colonization or Soviet rule, this makes for a complicated landscape for the positive media representation to come in contact with (Spina 2016; Buckle 2019). In the former Eastern Bloc region, states feel stuck between the European pressure for higher tolerance and equality and their pedantic Soviet histories of sex censorship. While countries such as the Netherlands have moved on from the mere concept of tolerance, former Eastern Bloc countries are facing sufficient demands to create provisions to limit sexuality-based employment discrimination (Waaldijk, C. and Bonini-Baraldi, M.T. 2006). Free expression of gender and sexuality are becoming a topic for debate and scapegoating following Russia's lead from 2008, which called for autonomy and the respect of the state's "traditional values" in contrast to the progressive Western values in regards to the LGBTQ+ community (Symons and Altman 2015). This has led to a larger European-scale backslide of LGBTQ+ rights such as Hungary and Poland, following again Russia's introduction of laws in 2013 that criminalize "LGBTQ+ propaganda" (Hubbard 2020). The shift in worldwide attitudes towards homosexuality between 1981 and 2012 is favorable, and yet within the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc, as well as the Muslim World and sub-Saharan Africa, overall acceptance has declined. The negative cultural and legal practices in these regions continue to shift backward acceptance of queer people as compared to the West (Roberts 2019). Throughout these three decades, this has led to a marked polarization at two ends: intolerance among the Eastern Bloc, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Muslim World, and tolerance in the West, Latin America, and the

Caribbean, in line with the international norm polarization phenomenon which states sexuality rights have the potential to create international forms of resistance when it comes to attempted norm change from the outside (Roberts 2019; Symons and Altman 2015). Exposure to global culture and its influence to change attitudes is closely related to religiosity. The way global culture spreads both within a country and across states was found to be moderated by the between-country differences in religiosity (Roberts 2019, 128).

*Intolerance and Pushback*

When talking about intolerance, it is crucial to also carve out space to discuss more dangerous examples of intolerance in the face of overt and political homophobia. Similarly to religiosity, political homophobia also requires a cross-national analysis. There are complex trends and instances of organized attacks on the rights of the LGBTQ+ community across state borders. These anti-equality movements are both reactionary and anticipatory, researched, and documented as "anticipatory countermovements" (Dorf and Tarrow 2014) and a "politics of pre-emption" (Currier and Cruz 2020). Worried by the overall movements towards acceptance, conservative and far-right politicians across Europe (and the world) are mobilizing in order to preserve a status quo of tradition, patriarchy and heteronormativity (Mos 2020). Before the Netherlands became the first country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage, there were six European states that had a constitutional ban on it. Since then, eight others have amended their constitutions to specifically refer to marriage as a union between a man and a woman in order to curb the hopes for future same-sex marriage inclusion (Mos 2020). In 2014 Slovak lawmakers successfully amended their constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage (Tomek 2014) in contrast to the trend towards legalization and recognition across advanced democracies (Kollman 2007). Romania became the next country in this tug-of-war in 2018 with a referendum to ban same-sex marriage by introducing a similar constitutional amendment as in Slovakia. Still, due to a low turnout under 30%, it was dismissed ("Romanian Referendum To Ban Same-Sex Marriage Fails"). While some countries make strides forward, other countries strategically pay attention and mobilize, increasing political resistance (Mos 2020, 1).

An interesting effect to note is that in some countries, the introduction of civil unions as the middle step or compromise between full same-sex marriage recognition and the lack of any form of civil partnership, their implementation can have negative effects on attitudes (Abou-

Chadi and Finnigan 2019, 875). They create an additional category and demand other resources of understanding, legislation, and norms for an out-group, which can create further strain in a society that feels emotional labor when they are forced to recognize and honor the rights of LGBTQ+ people. While same-sex marriage is seen as a more controversial step, its adoption has a stronger mainstreaming effect over time due to the familiarity of the format and its cohesion with heteronormative marriages. A same-sex marriage law would reduce in-group and out-group divisions and possess the potential to unite more varieties of married couples under the same umbrella. While this can seem like an alarming anecdote for activists who are trying to enact civil partnerships for same-sex couples as a stepping stone or a first step towards greater equality down the line, there is still merit in it. Despite the chance of backlash, this implementation is essential in countries such as Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania, where societies have not yet reached a general level of acceptance before enacting something as progressive as the recognition fo same-sex marriage (Abou-Chadi and Finnigan 2019, 889).

*Multiple Modernities & Post-Soviet Dimensions*

There is also research into region-specific movements and how cultural programming there affects trends in acceptance. Cultural heritage, religious views, and a Communist past are all linked with more traditional values. Inglehart and Baker propose that post-Soviet states are affected economically by their history in a specific way that tends to lead to less tolerant attitudes (Inglehart and Baker 2000). They argue that individuals who experienced Communism had a two-fold jolt: when they encountered the regime itself and then the rapidly deteriorating economic collapse after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These new austere economic conditions led to the development of "survival" values, mostly focusing on their pressing materialist needs. Even if the economy has since picked up in these countries, there is a marked wariness and traditionalism in people's attitudes, both towards homosexuality and towards general sexual frivolousness (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Pisankaneva 2003). This has been documented as an effect of the collapsing economy: high levels of inequality tend to lead to a lower level of social trust across the state, which results in lower tolerance (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Uslaner 2002). The latter makes an important distinction between two types of trust to explain this phenomenon: particularized trust which is a type of trust towards people the individual has met or who are socially similar to them and generalized trust, which is a trust in

others in general, or an attitude of faith in humankind as a whole. Generalized trust produces more tolerant views, while particularized trust does not (Uslaner 2002). Substantial economic inequality leads to a greater perceived difference and social distance between those who are well-off and those that are not. This, in turn, has a powerful negative effect on social trust and reproduces more negative attitudes towards outgroups. While generalized trust is a value that can generate significant social benefit to a whole state or society, it can not flourish in a post-Soviet state. This builds on several interconnected phenomena in the post-Soviet region such as economic inequality (Andersen and Fetner 2008), cultural difference (Inglehart and Baker 2000), and social conservatism (Pisankaneva 2003). All of these have a strong negative effect on attitudes towards homosexuality, and other post-Soviet correlates include higher levels of nationalism, the role of churches, and the relative newness of the LGBTQ+ social movements (Long 1999). Out of the 35 democracies in the Andersen and Fetner study, those that are proven most tolerant are the ones with high levels of economic development that do not have a Soviet past. Some exceptions are mentioned such as the Czech Republic, with its higher degree of tolerance for the region despite its post-Soviet status and a low GDP and, of course, the United States with its relatively low tolerance despite its Western history and strong economy (Andersen and Fetner 2008, 942). Because of these outliers, economic inequality becomes a vital piece of the puzzle of connecting attitudes with economic conditions.

In states that actively work against income inequality such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland, utilizing policies such as progressive taxation and universal benefits, this might lead to an increase in tolerant attitudes towards many outgroups. On an international level, there is a sizeable between-state income inequality, which can also play a part in the radically different attitudes between more equal states and those with a broader income inequality gap such as the post-Soviet states (Firebaugh 2000). If this between-state inequality does not plateau at some point, this might mean that general tolerance will decline (Andersen and Fetner 2008), echoed by earlier work by Inglehart stating that if the power of welfare states decline, there could be a slide back to materialist concerns once more (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987).

*Individual Level*

On the level of individual differences, most of the research points towards the same attributes as good predictors for higher levels of tolerance towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Abou-Chadi and Finnigan 2019; Andersen and Fetner 2008), consistent with the research of Herek, whose scale was used to measure attitudes towards homosexual people in the experimental survey part of this thesis (Herek 1994). Highly educated people working in more social or interpersonal vocations tend to prefer integration, progress, diversity, and change. In contrast, people with lower education tend to be more skeptical and reject integration and global cultural influences. This mechanism holds for LGBTQ+ attitudes as well in line with the economic inequality paradigm leading to a sense of scarcity and "survivor" attitudes among the economically disadvantaged. The direct effect of education on tolerance is also contested, with other theories suggesting that political influentials or elites are simply more adept at keeping their non-tolerant attitudes private and instead of projecting social norms and values that might be perceived as more in line with their educational background in order to convey an "appropriate" liberal image, which skews their survey results (Jackman 1972). Gender also expresses a strong correlation with attitudes with men typically showing less tolerance than women (Britton 1990; Andersen and Fetner 2008; Smith 2011; Spina 2016; Slenders, Sieben, and Verbakel 2014) There is an explanation attributed to Irvine: "Because the term homosexuality is generally associated with homosexual males, heterosexual men are especially prone to distancing themselves" (Gerhards 2010, 18). Younger people also tend to be more tolerant, interpreted as a cohort effect due to their background growing up with unobstructed access to mass media and communications as well as in societies with a higher degree of economic security. Andersen and Fetner also suggest other predictors are no religious affiliation and those that are unmarried without children, as well as people from larger communities (Andersen and Fetner 2008, 952).

*Summary*

These complex trends and waves of influence create a dynamic landscape against which to present the Bulgarian condition. There are substantial differences both across countries and within each state. While some states have settled the facts on complete acceptance of male and female homosexuality and have taken significant steps to create provision for transgender and

non-binary people, other countries are facing strong ideological pushback and regression of the liberties and equality that the international LGBTQ+ has spent decades advocating for. Across the research, findings that both postmodernization theory, cultural heritage theory, and the multiple modernities theories contribute to justifying the varying attitudes towards homosexuality across Europe and the world. This thesis addresses these various effects and deals with the same phenomenon in the context of the Bulgarian attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, situated among its complex post-Soviet history and current EU member state status.

## Attitudes & Prejudice in Bulgaria

*Communist Secrecy*

Between 1944 and 1989, during the Communist regime in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) was in charge of the State governance, and the country was known as the "People's Republic of Bulgaria" (PRB). The ruling model was a totalitarian communist regime characterized by a one-party dictatorship, a secret service aimed at blackmailing and outing the enemies of the regime, public purges that made an example of these enemies, an aggressively nationalized economy built on the backs of confiscated private property, and a cult for the leader (Hannah Arendt Center, Sharlanov, and Ganev 2010). This consolidation of property was finalized after multiple waves of terror and cemented the total control of the Party and the security services over every aspect of the lives of citizens. In this extremely repressive state, propaganda and control of culture and media were a cornerstone of the way society was kept submissive. While not only "abusing education, training, science, and culture for political and ideological purposes" (Hannah Arendt Center, Sharlanov, and Ganev 2010, 11), the regime did not allow for any deviation from the proper conduct of citizens. As a result, homosexuality was stigmatized in the same way as religion or belonging to the Turkish minority. What was unique about it was that homosexuality was seen as a behavior and not as a separate identity. In contrast to what happened later in global media with the representation of different sexualities as inherent personality traits that could form positive identities (Altman 2002), the communist regime pathologized it as part of the moral fabric of society. Rather than organizing a large-scale prosecution, the state only penalized homosexual people with arrests, beatings, or court cases by way of "broader ideological campaign," in which their homosexual acts were used as leverage to

mine for more pressing offenses (Pisankaneva 2003, 4). There was a shameful moral dimension of homosexuality but only in a landscape of austere moral policing.

In fact, same-sex bonding was encouraged by the BCP as it expressed a physical manifestation of the tenants of the state. Men hanging out with each other was a demonstration that they were true comrades in close contact working together towards progress in society. Even when two men from the party would meet at official meetings, they would hug and kiss each other on the cheeks (Pisankaneva 2003, 13). This was also an element in socialist art such as monuments of soldiers fighting the good fight against capitalism and fascism. The topic of homoerotic depictions of male bonding under socialism has been explored at some length as it pertains to Russia (Healey 2001; Mitchell 2016), and in the Bulgarian context, the same elements of men holding each other's hands or embracing to celebrate victory were not coded as something queer (Pisankaneva 2003, 13). It was sexual ambiguity itself that was policed and pursued both in art and media and in daily life. Under the philosophy of Socialist Realism that came from Russia itself, censorship was employed to remove any hints of deviation from the norms. These directives came straight from Stalin as the source, as he made homosexuality illegal and punished anyone who was discovered practicing it (Mitchell 2016, 1). Bulgaria followed this example of maintaining the picture-perfect image of the Soviet Union, denouncing any displays of femininity, flamboyance, bright fashion, or loud speaking. The police also used the services of the so-called "moral police" who were civilians expected to observe their neighbors carefully and to provide information to the secret services whenever they had reasons to suspect someone of homosexual behavior (Pisankaneva 2003, 13). Anonymity and invisibility were the principal characteristics of homosexual people in Bulgaria at the time, and this explains the lack of information. Homosexual men would meet in secret in public bathrooms and toilets, meticulously gender-segregated, which allowed for privacy in the cabins or in the darkness of broken lightbulbs (Dimitrova and GLAS Foundation 2019, 14). There were well-established cruising spots around Sofia, for those looking to "to find a sexual encounter with another man," ("Cruising Dictionary Definition | Cruising Defined" n.d.) usually as an anonymous, one-time engagement. This lack of visibility of homosexual people was seen as part of a bigger moral quest for decency. The priority was not to altogether abolish homosexual acts but to deny and conceal their existence as fully as possible. They were seen as a Western fixation that could not only endanger the public image of the state but taint others to follow one's indecent example. In

rare cases where homosexual men were prosecuted, they were sent to labor camps or publicly silenced if they were notable figures (Pisankaneva 2003, 8). Because of this fear and anonymity, it is extremely difficult to find any cultural artifacts of the overall queer community of the period. Against the background of multiple records of male persecution, there seems to be only one documented case of a homosexual woman being accused of lesbianism (Dimitrova and GLAS Foundation 2019, 4). This censorship resulted in "unidentifiable homosexual identities" that are hard to compare to the individualistic, sexually liberated gay and lesbian identities that started to emerge in the West (Pisankaneva 2003, 8).

Homosexuality had already been a punishable offense before the first socialist criminal law from 1951, but then, under the heading Crimes Against the Person, a whole category called Lechery was introduced. Art. 176 stated that precisely "sexual intercourse and sexual satisfaction of persons of the same sex" would be a more significant offense with imprisonment up to 3 years (Dimitrova and GLAS Foundation 2019, 18). In 1964, the biggest recorded trial against homosexual men was initiated by the party. Twenty-six individuals, mostly professionals such as writers, musicians, critics, and actors, as well as workers, were arrested for their homosexual behavior. Most of these trials were held behind closed doors and were meant to serve as a public warning to the whole Bulgarian population (Pisankaneva 2003, 11). The criminal act reported that they had continuous perverted homosexual relations with foreigners that were visiting Bulgaria, mostly from capitalist countries. Because of this, there had been a reported spike in sexually transmitted diseases across Sofia, which was troubling and unusual for the national health system (Toshev 2020).

The second socialist criminal law was issued in 1968 and after much advocacy by sexologist Todor Bostandjiev as well as the recommendations from the 1964 International Congress on Criminal Law in the Hague, consensual homosexual acts between adults were decriminalized (Pisankaneva 2003, 10; Dimitrova and GLAS Foundation 2019, 18). Bostandjiev was instrumental to the development of sex and gender studies in Bulgaria in the 1960s and with the first national conference on sexology in 1974. In Eastern Germany (GDR) homosexuality was also decriminalized in 1968 on the basis of research that identified the negative effects of stigmatization and social isolation of homosexual people and promoted acceptance and tolerance (Brückner 1985; Pisankaneva 2003, 9). In Bulgaria, the identity of homosexual people and predeterminant factors of their sexuality began to be a topic of research after 1960. Bostandjiev,

in line with later Western research (LeVay 2011), discussed homosexuality as a natural occurrence and not a behavior that was voluntary and subject to public or moral scrutiny (Pisankaneva 2003, 11). This was in line with the overall trend of streamlining and silencing and sexual expression in all of society. Censorship and repressions under the Communist regime ranged from encouraging only procreative sex (Pisankaneva 2003, 3) to oppressing whole minority groups, imprisoning leaders of human rights group, violating basic human rights and even ordering the assassination of politically inconvenient people like the political writer and dissident Georgi Markov, assassinated in London in 1978 by the Bulgarian secret services (Hannah Arendt Center, Sharlanov, and Ganev 2010, 5,11).

*Democracy of Misinformation*

In the years after the Communist regime and the early days of democracy, the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ community did not have an established or homogeneous identity. Around this time, media outlets began to sensationalize coming out stories often employed as smear campaigns for politicians, artists, and writers. The worst thing that an upstanding man in society could be at the time publically seemed to be gay, no matter whether he was homosexual or not (Atanasov 2009). Most of the narratives were not voluntarily started by homosexual men at the time but instead used as ammo. Being open about one's sexual identity was considered audacious and unacceptable as a vestige from the Communist regime. This phenomenon can be observed in early democratic histories of Bulgaria as well as other post-Soviet states. Any difference was considered offensive, identity was a somewhat dirty word, and tolerance became "another word for the ultimate culture-terrorism of pro-gay liberal audacity" (Panayotov 2013, 164). Movements that advocate for tolerance and equality among gender, race, or sexuality are seen as Western imported values that are not congruent with a Bulgarian modesty. Political opponents see LGBTQ+ visibility through the paradox of the "gay mafia", an invisible, dangerous and ubiquitous force strategizing to pass Western values in order to take over the state and yet one that is always public and demanding recognition. It is a populist idea that aims to discredit LGBTQ+ visibility, shaming all attempts at positive representation as seeking attention and twisting a sensationalistic media narrative when there are no queer people there to tell their own stories: "LGBT visibility is locked in between two anonymities: the anonymity of the political gay mafia and that of the unpolitical gay/subcultural community" (Panayotov 2013, 164). This

has lead to an imbalance between positive and negative representation with a high degree of sensationalism and mythologizing of what the queer Bulgarian experience is. It was not until 1992 that the first NGO dedicated to LGBTQ+ rights, Bulgarian Gay Organization Gemini, was established. Since the 1990s, print media has made some progress in its representation of homosexuality, but it has been slow and tedious, and research shows still high levels of transphobia and mockery (Galev and Vassileva 2015; Atanasov 2009). Bulgarian media still uses questionable conjectures such as "homosexualists," "transsexuals," and leads with scandalous, stereotypical, and misleading headlines when it comes to the community. When contested, this representation is met with more mockery and insistence that Bulgarian society is actually extremely tolerant and that tolerance comes with inherent norms that must not be overstepped if LGBTQ+ people want to really be a part of the Bulgarian culture (Panayotov 2013, 164).

Furthermore, these processes in the Bulgarian context, the gay mafia construction, coupled with the stereotypical media representation, create an effective strategy for curbing prospects of equality by attacking representation and visibility. This narrative has become so ubiquitous that it is now carried out by the general public and not only by politicians. Once the LGBTQ+ community has been painted as dangerous, loud, and asking for too much acceptance, the politically exploited mass public continues to embellish and regurgitate a harmful narrative. In the media landscape, this is a severe problem due to the deprofessionalization of journalism and media monopolization, as "visibility falls prey to the media and the perception of democracy as containing the positions that most negate it—even those of openly neo-Nazi and fascist perspectives from the right-wing parties and intellectuals" (Panayotov 2013, 168). As a result, there is rarely public discourse that would be considered liberal or respectful by EU standards. Instead in the Bulgarian context, a platform is given to homophobic populist politicians such as nationalist leader, current Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Defence Krassimir Karakatchanov who in the past has condemned LGBT activists as "absorbing gay pride euro funds" (Panayotov 2013, 168) and as recently as August 2020 has blamed the massive anti-corruption protests in the country on "some George Soros-backed NGOs and little parties who can't make their way into parliament capitalizing to get power in order to ruin in the country in the name of gay marriages and creating a "gender" republic" (Stoyanov 2020).

Negative attitudes towards homosexuality in Bulgaria are a result of extreme stereotyping and the anonymity of the community itself. As in other Eastern European states, they make for a

convenient scapegoat to mobilize populist ideologies around. According to Darakchi, in an analysis of public discourse in social media commentary between 2017-2018, there are five central mythologized beliefs about homosexual people in Bulgaria (2019a): 1) the idea that homosexuality is a behavior that can be "passed on", "imitated" or "learnt", used to mobilize and strike panic in parents who know how much harder the life of homosexual people in Bulgaria is; 2) the belief that homosexuality is a disease and that the organizations such as the WHO who have removed it from their list of diseases are in a conspiracy of Western propaganda (it is notable that this theory still finds support from Bulgarian doctors and psychologists); 3) the belief that homosexual people are incredibly promiscuous with their identity being essentialized only to their sex life; 4) the belief that homosexual people have a specific physical look that is recognizeable including characteristics such as "feminine", "physically weak" and "easily scared" for men and "masculine" and "rough" for women; and 5) the belief that homosexual people are paedophiles, an incredibly alarming belief built around an ideology that there is a world conspiracy to force "gender education" on Bulgaria that aims to take away people's children and give them to the homosexual paedophiles" (Darakchi 2019a, 608–12). These beliefs, as ungrounded as they are, are the result of an extremely well-calculated international strategy of anti-gender campaigning that has swept Eastern Europe (Bonny 2019).

The Bulgarian interpretation of what is happening on an EU level is also refracted through this prism of fear, loathing, and stereotypes. Decisions are interpreted on a binary between the Easter "proper" science and the Western "propaganda," which is automatically rejected as a conspiracy theory (Darakchi 2019a, 610). Because of Bulgaria's hasty accession to the EU, the legislation and other initiatives that should provide a gradual shift in attitudes did not have time to evolve. As a result, Bulgaria's membership in the EU is often evoked as proof that the country has, in fact, ensured full enjoyment of the human rights of all LGBTQ+ individuals. Behind the hypocrisy of a seemingly tolerant society that does not want to see, hear or interact with queer people (Darakchi 2019a, 607; Atanasov 2009), Bulgaria is ranked one of the most homophobic states within the EU (Kent and Poushter 2020; European Commission 2019; ILGA-Europe 2020b; Fundamental Rights Agency 2020).

*Surveys & Numbers*

According to the Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2019, only 20% of Bulgarians surveyed agree that "there is nothing wrong in a sexual relationship between two persons of the

same sex" while 71% disagree and 9% don't know, putting Bulgaria in the last place in the EU for this marker, compared to the most tolerant Sweden's 95% acceptance rate. To the question of whether same-sex marriages should be allowed throughout Europe, only 16% of Bulgarians agree, while 74% disagree, and 10% don't know, placing the country last again. 39% of Bulgarians believe gay, lesbian, and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, while 45% disagree, and 16% don't know. It is important to note that the acceptance rate for all three has decreased since the same survey in 2015, with the statement "gay, lesbian and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people" declining from 51% to 39% in just four years' time (European Commission 2019). These findings are reciprocated by a national survey by activist organization GLAS Foundation which found that the number of people who believe "LGBT people should not be able to live their lives as they wish" has increased from 18% to 25% since 2012 ("The Attitude towards LGBTI People in Bulgaria Has Deteriorated over the Past 6 Years, According to a Survey" n.d.; ILGA-Europe 2020a). In a 2020 study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights with LGBTQ+ respondents from around the EU, Bulgaria ranks among the top 5 countries, in which the majority of the community are almost never open their identity as such: Lithuania (60%), North Macedonia (60%), Bulgaria (54%), and Romania and Serbia (both 53%). Bisexual men around the EU are more likely to never be open about their identity at 56%, and the highest instance of them choosing to stay private is precisely in Bulgaria with 83% (Fundamental Rights Agency 2020). These statistics confirm the theories from the literature review about the relative anonymity of the LGBTQ+ community in Bulgaria and the rising wave of intolerance on the other side. On a more positive note, new data from the Pew Research Center proves a tangible shift in attitudes with a younger generation. When asked whether "homosexuality should be accepted by society," the percentage breakdown by generations was statistically significantly different to show contrasting attitudes. In Bulgaria's case, only 24% of individuals over the age of 50 said "yes," 35% of those between 30-49 said "yes," and 47% of those between 18-29 said "yes." This shows a 23% percent shift in acceptance between the youngest and oldest generations surveyed, which is consistent with the international findings (Andersen and Fetner 2008, 952). In this light, the approval and support for Sofia Pride are also on the rise. The 2019 Sofia Pride was the 12th annual parade and reported a record number of 6,500 people. While it was harshly criticized by right-wing politicians (ILGA-Europe 2020a), more and more people begin to identify openly

with their sexual orientation and champion and celebrate Pride as it helps them live more authentically (Darakchi 2019a, 617).

*"Gender" Republic*

The most recent situation with attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community came from an unexpected topic. In 2018, the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, suddenly became a contentious topic in Bulgarian politics. After a misinterpretation and an incorrect translation of the word "gender" mistaken to mean "social gender" in the context of "gender-based violence," the term was quickly co-opted as a slur and another imposition from the Western homosexual, liberal states. The rhetoric by those opposing the Convention was a straw-man argument that ratifying it would mean Bulgarians would be able to freely choose their gender identity, introduce "the third gender", promote homosexuality in schools and thus pervert the young generation (Darakchi 2019b, 3). This proved compelling enough and garnered support both by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and by the Bulgarian Communist Party. In the end, the ruling party GERB withdrew the ratification of the Convention. In July 2018, the Constitutional Court deemed it incompatible with the definitions of a man and a woman in the Bulgarian constitution (Darakchi 2019b, 3–4; Šimonović 2019). The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women quickly condemned the decision and urged Bulgaria to act rapidly in the face of the mobilized "anti-gender movement" (Šimonović 2019). All of these attacks are provoked by an irrational fear in the minds of the Bulgarian population that progressive, tolerant policies will undermine patriarchy, family values, and the status quo. Even under the protection of Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation (European Union 2012), homosexual people in Bulgaria still experience forms of discrimination and negative stereotypes in the media and continue to live in fear.

*Presence & Media Representation of Azis*

In the Bulgarian context, one of the most impressive and unlikely public figures to emerge is the pop-folk singer Azis. He was born as Vasil Boyanov in 1978 and is both openly gay and Roma (Nicolov 2016), which makes his astounding commercial success in Bulgaria

even more of an achievement. Azis is known for his flamboyant, drag persona, and unabashed homoerotic music videos and photos. Internationally, he has been profiled by popular youth publications such as Dazed (Nicolov 2016) and Paper Magazine (Kay 2020) and was included in a New York Times roundup called "25 Songs That Tell Us Where Music Is Going" ("25 Songs That Tell Us Where Music Is Going" 2016). Against the background of the repressive Bulgarian society, Azis' career is quite an anomaly. He created a niche in the pop-folk or Chalga genre by donning an overtly feminine image and sexualizing the male body as his object of desire (Kourtova 2013, 59). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, chalga music emerged as a middle-class backlash against the repressiveness of the picture-perfect communist order. Buxom, scantily-clad female singers would sing about love and materialism in a suggestive musical style mixing Bulgarian, Turkish and Greek influences.

Azis took on all the inflections of his genre but with a gender-bending twist. His Roma heritage further complicated his image and made him an enigma on the Bulgarian pop music scene. The mere presence of Azis as a cultural icon has always been divisive and polarizing in Bulgaria. His homoerotic antics have proven antagonistic, more so than those of other gay celebrities in Western countries. Politicians in Bulgaria have tried to censor his creative work multiple times, yet his large fanbase always supports him, and this makes him a powerful example of an open LGBTQ+ individual. He reproduces tropes and images both from Western pop music and from the Balkan music scene, reconfiguring them and playing with his role of the Other in a new musical, physical, sexual and visual context (Kourtova 2013, 55). His presence and commercial success are considered as a visual and musical manifestation of freedom ("25 Songs That Tell Us Where Music Is Going" 2016; Kourtova 2013, 55)and positive representation, and yet the role he plays as the face of the LGBTQ+ community in Bulgaria is a double-edged sword. His provocative appearance in music videos, in full-on drag with red wigs and high heels (*AZIS - Sen Trope / АЗИС - Сен Тропе* 2011), or surrounded by naked men in a bathhouse and lounging naked in a barrel with the letters "Russia" (*AZIS - Hop / АЗИС - Хоп* 2011), their goal is to provoke and jolt the conservative portions of Bulgarian society. His image is designed to poke fun at anyone who takes themselves too seriously and to use controversy to shine a light on homophobic and traditional attitudes. He both capitalizes on his unique position and provides representation, and yet his representation feeds into a lot of the stereotypes that are weaponized against the community. Azis' early decisions to perform in drag could play a role in

the Bulgarians' blurred understanding of gender, homosexuality, and freedom of choice. Seeing Azis, who may or may not be homosexual, publically use a form of femininity to shock, profit, and perform promiscuity, is giving a very specific type of visibility to the queer community. While his representation is mostly positive, it needs to be balanced by more diverse examples of LGBTQ+ visibility in order to combat stereotyping of all homosexual people and constructing an image that can be weaponized for political effect. His performances have drawn both positive and negative reactions. The tensions in his work are best summarized by Kourtova: "[The process] is complicated by the marginal position of Azis as a dark-skinned Roma performer using a musical style with a bad reputation, a man who dresses as a woman and 'shamefully' displays his homosexuality both off and on-screen. Yet in his performance, such a derogatory position is empowering to the extent that individuality is expressed even in an intolerant society, and the freedom to be shameful is presented as an empowering quality. It is within the freedom to copy, imitate,, and openly display images of Otherness that such popular culture phenomena become the domain of social tensions and of the negotiation of identity" (2013, 64). In recent years, Azis has tamed down his provocative image and substituted it with dark hair, jeans, and black t-shirts. While he insists in interviews that this is because there is no need for more extreme forms of representation anymore (Nicolov 2016), Atanasov suggests this was a result of Bulgaria's oppressive homophobia and the expectations around his projects. In 2009, for the second season of Azis' own talk show, he began hosting the shows out of drag in a surprisingly neutral look for him that has carried through till today (Atanasov 2009).

*Media Matters & Battle of Attitudes*

In the context of this tug-of-war between Western tolerant attitudes and post-Soviet Bulgarian tradition, media representation of the queer community is extremely important. The critical factor that has spearheaded liberalization of laws in Bulgaria has been pressure from the EU; this has resulted in strong resistance from within the state. Without a bottom-up initiative to meet the recommendations towards equality of the EU, this has resulted in more vitriol from citizens and right-wing politicians. While a new generation is coming up with more liberal attitudes, it is important to provide them with positive media portrayals of the community. When working on media analysis for this thesis, it proved very challenging to pinpoint any specifically positive representations on TV. In line with the findings from a content analysis of print media,

there were no unequivocally positive representations calling for advocacy and support for the LGBTQ+ community. In the media appearances with Azis, he was more intent on leading with a personal example than representing the community or identifying himself as part of a broader queer community. Even with this intention, it can be argued that his more provocative appearances stigmatized the community due to his reliance on the entertaining and flamboyant stereotypes of the promiscuous and sexually liberated gay man. Shifting attitudes over the next generations in Bulgaria will be closely related to identifying avenues for positive representation and providing it. Pisankaneva predicts that a variety of sexual subcultures will eventually find expression in Bulgarian society sooner or later due to the unprecedented access to media (2003, 15), and Atanasov cautions that the media representations of homosexuality are critically important for the generations growing up because they will be a primary source of understanding their own identity. Against a background of media and parental indoctrination against the acceptance of homosexuality, it becomes hard for homosexual men and women to go against this internalized homophobia later in life. He continues that the minority status of the LGBTQ+ community is different than that of race and ethnic minorities, but is more akin to political ones. The support from one's parents is not there; self-determination happens relatively later and can be kept quiet under dangerous circumstances, which hinders the public debate that needs to happen if attitudes are to be changed (2009). This is why media representation can be a crucial tool in shifting the narrative towards the LGBTQ+ community in these interconnected digital times.

## Theoretical Frame

*History of Media Representation*

Media representation of minority populations has had its own complicated history when it comes to restrictions and censorship. In the US between 1930 and 1968, the Hollywood Production Code (also known as the Hays Code), and the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters, between 1952 to 1983, were tools harnessed for censorship and moral scrutiny in many ways, including the prevention of overt displays of homosexuality on the screen (Raley and Lucas 2006). Queer characters were coded through language, mannerisms or storylines that those in the know would recognize: before the Production code was lifted, "queer visibility manifested itself mostly through "connotation" - gestures, iconography, character typing, plot

devices, genre structures - whereas after a redefinition of this prohibition, "denotation" - openly gay and lesbian characters and storylines" (Kohnen 2015, 47) The very first homosexual characters on screen were either portrayed as brutal victims of violence, pedophiles or drag queens (Raley and Lucas 2006, 23). The end of the Production Code is mythologized to a great extent and is considered one of the watershed moments for LGBTQ+ visibility and equality in the US (Kohnen 2015, 40). The Stonewall Riots are considered the very beginning of the gay rights movement while the end of the Production Code in 1968 marks the beginning of open depictions of gay and lesbian characters. To put this in perspective, while the US was repealing a restriction regarding the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals on screen, Bulgaria was just amending its Penal Code to decriminalize homosexuality.

Even as more homosexual characters began to appear on television and in the movies, their storylines were brief and unsubstantial, used to demonstrate some awareness but never through the lens of a protagonist. Queer characters were either problematized by using their sexuality as a plot point that needed to be resolved or marginalized by being obscured after one episode, never having the luxury of being the protagonist. Queer representation has been researched under many content analyses, and the consensus tends to be that overall there has been some progress of positive representation from the very early closeted days to what is prime-time TV today (Netzley 2010; Raley and Lucas 2006).

*Emergence*

The emergence of positive LGBTQ+ characters came in 1997 with the show Ellen, in which the gay character Ellen Morgan came out in a portrayal by the homosexual actress Ellen Degeneres. This was considered another watershed moment for LGBTQ+ representation as this was not only the first show to have a heterosexual protagonist, but the real-life coming out story of Ellen Degeneres only served to amplify the narrative. This made way for a long list of other characters and artists to come out, serving as "sources of pride, inspiration, and comfort … thus increasing the availability of [LGBTQ+] role models in the media [positively influencing] LGBTQ+ identity" (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011). The impact of Ellen has been studied at length with its profound effect on discourses among the general public well documented (Dow 2001). The next crop of representations came with Will & Grace, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Queer as Folk, The L Word, Dawson's Creek, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, movies such as

Brokeback Mountain and Paris is Burning and musical artists such as Melissa Etheridge and Rufus Wainwright (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011). While some of these shows still relied on stereotypes, there was a tangible shift in the stories and importance given to the queer community and its representation.  Since 2005, GLAAD (originally the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), an American NGO that focuses on media monitoring for LGBTQ+ representation, has published an annual "Where We Are on TV" report. In 2019, "of the 879 regular characters expected to appear on broadcast scripted primetime programming, 90 (10.2%) were identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer" (GLAAD 2019), which was the highest percentage GLAAD has found in the fifteen years of the report. Additionally, in streaming series on Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix, they identified 109 LGBTQ+ regular characters and 44 recurring characters to make a total of 153 LGBTQ+ characters.

*Representation Matters*

In this sweeping wave of positive media representation in the US, scholars began researching and documenting the true effects of media on viewer attitudes towards homosexuality. Particularly researchers began to test for the statistical importance of this representation on both LGBTQ+ community members and non-LGBTQ+ people. In 2002, a survey was conducted with viewers of the American sitcom Will & Grace to measure their viewing habits and their attitudes towards homosexual men. Schiappa asked 245 undergraduate students a series of questions, and out of those who had watched the show "every once in a while," 81% contested that the show was "a significant step forward in television situation comedies because it features gay men in major roles. Additionally, 60% of viewers agreed that the show had encouraged them to think positively about homosexual men (2006, 27).

Using a social cognitive theory approach to study mediated intergroup contact, it was hypothesized that exposure to positive intergroup contact through television would correlate with a more positive attitude towards that group (Ortiz and Harwood 2007). Multiple sources particularly focused on the portrayal of homosexual characters and whether it would result in increased acceptance and a decrease in prejudice towards homosexual people (Bonds-Raacke et al. 2007; Calzo and Ward 2009; Tt and Gr 2011; Ortiz and Harwood 2007; Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006). Calzo and Ward's study was conducted on a large scale with data from 1,761 undergraduate students. While the results varied by gender, ethnicity and religiosity among all

respondents, higher media consumption among men and highly religious individuals was associated with greater accepting attitudes towards homosexuality. While quantitatively, the results were not remarkable, they still identified a "mainstreaming effect," which could unite groups with opposing views on homosexuality towards a more understanding direction (Calzo and Ward 2009).

*Contact Hypothesis*

To understand and conduct the experimental part of this thesis, a variety of different concepts have to be introduced. One of the most notable contributions to social psychology over the last half-century is the so-called contact hypothesis, known to be an incredibly effective strategy for improving intergroup relations. (Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2016). According to the contact hypothesis, or intergroup contact theory, under certain appropriate conditions such as equal status, cooperation towards a goal, and institutional support (Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna 2006), interpersonal contact can produce a positive intergroup contact, which will reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members. Soon after, scientists expanded and developed the theory to different power dynamics and minority groups such as people with special needs, women, and the LGBTQ+ community in over hundreds of studies (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Around the same time parasocial interactions, mediated through mass media such as radio, television and film began to be explored as a social phenomenon, prompting researchers to start analyzing "the relationship between spectator and performer, seemingly face-to-face" with "the illusion of intimacy projected" (Horton and Wohl 1956).

Allport described prejudice as a heuristic or a quick decision made by our minds to categorize a whole group based on a small morsel of information. The contact hypothesis suggests that by learning more about the individual behind the category, this can dissipate some of the harmful prejudice towards the whole group. While the understanding of the group itself will not shift, changing one's attitude towards one group member can result in a shift in their attitude towards the whole group in a positive direction. Categorization itself is not inherently good or bad. Instead, categories take their shape from our learning patterns. Depending on what is relevant to a particular situation or group, our minds will default to noting the exact characteristics or attributes that intuitively make sense for that category. "To be meaningful and useful, categories must include items and exclude others. Thus humans acquire social categories by learning a set

of "similarity/difference relationships" that demarcate one category from another" (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005, 93; Schiappa 2003). If a minority group is characterized by negative characteristics that may not be true for all of its members, the majority group members who hold that opinion constitute prejudice. Prejudice towards an outgroup can be a result of a personal experience or a stereotype acquired from one's own social circle of friends, family and colleagues, or mass media (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005, 93; Atanasov 2009). More topically and in a positive sense, college students who had had a positive interaction with homosexual people tended to project that attitude towards all homosexuals (Herek 1986), and in a national study of interpersonal contact with gay men previous interpersonal contact was found to "[predict] attitudes towards gay men better than any other demographic or social psychological variable" (Herek and Glunt 1993, 239).

*Parasocial Contact Hypothesis*

Schiappa takes the concept of Allport's contact hypothesis and adapts it to a mass-media context, theorizing that the interaction itself is cognitively processed in a similar enough fashion to explore whether the socially beneficial functions carry through in a parasocial context. In three studies from 2005, they test the theory examining majority group members' levels of prejudice towards homosexual men (in television shows Six Feet Under and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy) and towards comedian and drag artist Ezzie Izzard (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005). In all three, the mechanisms of parasocial contact theory are supported by the lower levels of prejudice, suggesting that it may be a powerful tool in shifting attitudes towards sexual minorities. The third study by Schiappa deals with a public figure, and together with research on identification as a mediator of celebrity effect, it can be argued that identification of a public figure can significantly boost the positive effects of media exposure and attitude change (Basil 1996). For media campaigns and advocacy, the implications are that having a strong charismatic spokesperson that the audience responds to will lead to the most considerable shift in attitudes with the potential for more lasting change. Acceptance is characterized as a reduction in prejudice, which "in the context of homosexuals has largely been operationalized as moral judgments (e.g., "same-sex marriages are morally offensive") … and increased support for legal rights (e.g., "homosexuals should be allowed to adopt children")" (McLaughlin and Rodriguez 2017, 1199). There is a breadth of research supporting the power of parasocial contact in a

variety of media formats establishing contact with television news hosts, soap-opera characters, celebrity endorsing products in ads, talk show hosts, fictional characters, athletes and audiences' favorite celebrities (Giles 2002; Claessens and Bulck 2015). The mechanics of parasocial interaction is similar to that of interpersonal attraction, a scale used in the Schiappa studies, and one that will be relevant in this thesis (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005; McCroskey and McCain 1974). Therefore, parasocial contact theory is a worthwhile approach in societies where negative stereotypes are prevalent. Even in Bulgaria's homophobic media climate, the advantage is that there is still a salient media landscape. Parasocial contact theory makes for a compelling study to analyze how positive media exposure to LGBTQ+ personalities can affect stereotypes and shift attitudes towards equality and acceptance.

# Experimental Study

The study is guided by two key questions identified in previous studies using parasocial contact as a means of measuring a positive shift in attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005): 1) Can parasocial contact by majority group members with minority group members lead to a decrease in prejudice? 2) Are the effects of parasocial contact moderated by previous interpersonal contact with minority group members?

## Procedure

The aim is to understand the relationship between the mass media portrayal of pop-folk singer Azis in interviews and the attitudes of his audience towards LGBTQ+ people. Following similar studies on media attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005; Sanz López 2018), a qualitative design was selected as the most relevant. The process of collecting data consisted of a Web questionnaire with interview clips of Azis and questions employed to measure the participants' attitudes towards him and towards homosexuality in a post-test only experiment. The study was conducted in Bulgarian and distributed through a short online link that would randomly assign one out of the five survey versions to responders. The link was first spread out through personal social media and sent out to personal acquaintances. They were then instructed to share it with their networks while aiming for a diverse distribution among age, education, political and social attitudes. The link was

intentionally not spread through the network channels of local LGBTQ+ organizations in order to reach a more representative sample of the Bulgarian population that would not already be passionate and knowledgeable about positive media representation of the community. While they had the potential to recruit more responders, the focus was instead on the diversity of responses.

Even with this goal in mind, the results proved some limitations to this method of distribution. The online survey method required to keep the design brief in order to promote a higher response rate. Short Likert scale-type questions were favored over open-ended questions to encourage a faster response and higher response rate which did not allow for more nuanced and open-ended results. The survey also contained a sampling bias towards people who had Internet access (Bhattacherjee; Sanz López 1827). As the sole method of distributing the survey, people who could not be reached via the Internet had no way of participating in it which contributed to the younger skew of the participants' age (United Nations n.d.).

The independent variable was the four clips that were randomly assigned to survey participants so they would answer the demographic section, encounter one of the four interviews, and then answer questions about their perception of Azis and homosexual people. The distribution of the same link was scripted to ensure a randomization effect so that each new respondent would be shown a different interview. The dependent variable was the measured attitudes after watching the interviews. A control group was included to measure general attitudes towards homosexuality without observing any clips of Azis.

The study was presented to the subjects as part of a study on how media representation affects attitudes on social themes. Following a similar concern as in Chile (Cardenas and Barrientos 2008, 142), the exact topic was not mentioned when distributing the survey to avoid an adverse reaction before the experiment itself. The anonymity of all respondents was guaranteed, and they were informed in writing that the results would be analyzed and become part of a Master's Thesis at EMA and AUTh. The surveys were completed online using Google Forms. Access to the completed surveys was restricted to the researcher only. The first question of the study asked for the participants' consent and confirmed they were over 18 years old before continuing with the next sections.

Measures

**Social and Demographic Measures**

The survey included items to ascertain gender, age, education, sexual orientation, ethnic group, and religious denomination with each question having the option "prefer not to answer."

*Gender*

The survey included the following gender options: male, female, non-binary, and queer in an effort to incorporate and invite potential answers beyond the gender binary. They could also fill in an "other" answer box unrepresented in the options.

*Age*

The age ranges were consolidated in the following groups 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, and 65+.

*Education*

The respondents were asked what the highest level of education you have completed is. They had to choose between: primary, high school (general education program), high school (vocational/trade high school), Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D.

*Sexual Orientation*

The respondents had the options: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual. They could also fill in an "other" answer box unrepresented in the options.

*Ethnic Group*

The respondents had the options: Bulgarian (the majority ethnic group in the country), Turkish and Roma (the minority ethnic groups in the country) as well as the "other" answer box unrepresented in the options. The inclusion of Roma was important as the subject of the interviews Azis is visibly queer and Roma, and his status as a member of two minorities is often a big point of discussion in interviews.

*Religious Denomination*

The respondents had the options: Orthodox, Catholic, Islaam, Buddhism, Hinduism, "spiritual, but not religious," "not religious," as well as the "other" answer box unrepresented in the options. They had the option of ticking several answers here if they were part of several religious practices.

**Measures Related to Perceptions of Azis**

The survey included questions to establish previous knowledge with the artist, and interpersonal attraction scale (McCroskey and McCain 1974) to measure how attractive the respondents find Azis to be, and a homophily scale (McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly 1975) to measure how closely they identify with him.

*Previous Knowledge*

The respondents were asked two questions: whether they know Azis is (yes/no) and whether they are familiar with his artistic work (yes/no) before watching the interview with him.

*Interpersonal Attraction Scale*

After watching the interview, the survey included the "social attraction" subset from the McCloskey and McCain interpersonal attraction scale (1974) while two other subsets on "physical attraction" and "task attraction" were not relevant and excluded. The scale was originally developed in English in 1974, so it was translated to Bulgarian. The "social attraction" subset consists of 6 statements about the subject Azis. Respondents show their level of agreement or disagreement using Likert scale point answers (from "strongly disagree = 1" to "strongly agree = 5") that examine how desirable social interaction with him would be. The scores are added up with some questions using reverse scoring. High scores (close to the maximum of 30) demonstrate a higher attraction to the subject and low scores (close to the minimum of 6) show the least attraction possible to the subject.

*Homophily Scale*

The homophily scale similarly had an "attitude" and "background" subset, and for the purpose of this research, only the "attitude" subset was deemed relevant. This scale was

developed in English in 1975 and again translated to Bulgarian (McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly 1975). The "attitude" subset consists of 4 statements that compare certain characteristics of thought and behavior of the subject Azis to those of the respondents. They show their homophily using Likert scale point answers between 1 and 7 exploring how similar or different Azis is to them. The scores are added up. High scores (close to the maximum of 28) demonstrate a high self-perceived similarity in attitudes, and low scores (close to the minimum of 4) show no self-perceived similarity.

**Measures Related to Homosexuality**

The survey included the Attitude Toward Gay Men sub-scale, which is part of Herek's Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) instrument (Herek 1984). Its validity and appropriateness have been confirmed by its use in similar surveys around the world in Chile (Cardenas and Barrientos 2008), Turkey (Duyan 2006), the Netherlands (van de Meerendonk, Eisinga, and Felling 2003), Singapore (Ku et al. 2007) and the US (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005). At the end of the test after the interviews with Azis, there was a final question asking whether the interview changed their opinion on homosexual people (yes/no). The scale was originally developed in English and consisted of 20 statements, ten about gay men (ATG sub-scale), and ten about lesbian women (ATL sub-scale). They are presented to the respondents with a Likert scale point system, and they show their level of agreement or disagreement (from "strongly disagree = 1" to "strongly agree = 5"). High scores show an extremely negative attitude, while lower scores show extremely positive attitudes.

*Attitudes Towards Gay Men & Lesbian Women - Short*

After many studies using the scale, a short form of the scale was developed with its construct validity supported by significant correlations with other measures (Herek 1994). The short forms were created by selecting five ATG items and five ATL items with a high correlation with the total ATLG scores in previous samples. Because of its shorter length and high correlation it is the recommended form. In the Bulgarian context, it was also important to compare attitudes towards homosexual men and homosexual women, which the different questions on the ATG and ATL scales do not allow for. To do so, a parallel version of the scale was created by rewriting the ATG items so that they refer to lesbian women. Scoring is achieved

by summing scores across each statement with some questions using reverse scoring. Higher scores (more negative attitudes) were consistently associated with: 1) adherence to traditional gender roles; 2) adherence to traditional family roles; 3) high religiosity; 4) membership to a conservative or fundamentalist denomination; 5) political conservatism; 6) lack of interpersonal contact with LGBTQ+ people.

*Hypothesis Test*

After completing the questions about Azis, the four experimental groups were asked: "Did the interview change your perception of homosexual people?" as a yes/no question before submitting their results.

## Stimuli

Bulgarian pop-folk singer Azis has consistently been one of the most popular and provocative performers in Bulgaria over the last two decades. Notorious for his feminine, gender-bending image, sexually explicit lyrics, and overt display of homosexuality, the media depicted him as an outrage, a freakshow performer at first. Over time, he went on to gain commercial appeal and critical acceptance. Azis is described as "a performer who shocks his audiences and Bulgarian society with an unapologetic display of gender-bending homoeroticism" (Kourtova 2013, 53).

During his career, Azis has fielded many interviews about his provocative, cross-dressing style and his personal life as a gay man. His responses have been both strategic to his career and authentic, refining his personal brand and pushing the boundary of the acceptance of the general public. Kourtova writes that "while this has been widely perceived as commercial shtick, it has also stirred up the racial and gender norms of post-Communist Bulgaria and raised questions about the freedom of artistic and commercial expression in the context of democracy, capitalism, and European Union membership."

In the process of selecting the interview materials, clips of interviews with Azis from as early as 2002 up until 2020 were considered. The four interviews that were selected stood out because of the positive interactions and camaraderie that the hosts or co-guests and Azis portrayed on camera.

*Interview 1*

The first interview is from 2002/2003 with Cuban entertainer and talk show host Ray Gonzalez on a small regional TV station Heros TV. As this show is geared towards show business and entertainment, its tone is light and friendly. The clip was found on YouTube, where it is a popular upload because of the video title "Azis' First TV Interview on the Ray Gonzalez show 2002" (translated from Bulgarian) (Gonzalez 2002).  Gonzalez asks the singer about what his own motivation for the provocative image is, and Azis outlines that he is interested in portraying "a unisex trend, the blending of the genders." Later, he shares a positive anecdote from the launch party event for his latest music video at the time, where a young girl, aged 12-13, came on stage and validated both his male and female gender expression. When the host asked her, "Did you like Azis as a woman," she replied, "Yes, this is the most beautiful woman in the world, and as a man, he is still the most beautiful." There are also moments of vulnerability with Azis confiding in Gonzales about his loneliness and complimenting the host's Spanish accent as "very cute."

*Interview 2*

The second interview is from "Vsyaka Nedelya" ("Every Sunday" in Bulgarian) with journalist Kevork Kevorkyan in 2004. Azis is a co-guest with professor Ivan Slavov, an author in the field of kitsch, aesthetics and sociology, dubbed a "kitchologist" (Kevorkyan 2004). The topic of the conversation is the censorship of a billboard of Azis promoting his latest single "Как боли" ("How It Hurts" in Bulgarian) because of "the provocative appearance of the singer, dressed in a woman's corset that accentuated his lower body and revealed his buttocks. Following an order by the Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs the billboard was taken down" (Kourtova 2013, 52). The host tries to provoke the two guests and cast them as opposites - the liberal Azis and the conservative professor Slavov. He asks the latter, "it might turn out we live in a country where Azis could be Minister of Culture. If you had to choose between our current Minister and Azis, who would you choose?" After some polemics earlier, at this point, the two find common ground, and the professor candidly says he would vote for Azis without a doubt because he is "more entertaining [than the Minister of Culture at the time], funnier, and more popular with his fans." Later on, he admits he is impressed by the subtlety he sees in Azis, calling him "a different person" than he'd imagined, "more balanced, more solemn and one that

takes a critical look at himself." The professor praises Azis's complexity as a phenomenon, resisting definitions, and unable to be dismissed as something simple. In this interview, the thoughtful and meticulous approval of the conservative professor Slavov marks a critical endorsement of Azis as a positive member of society to the broader general public.

*Interview 3*

The third interview from 2014 is a joint interview with Azis and the notorious Bulgarian rapper Vanko 1, who collaborated with him on music and was arrested previously for leading a drug, prostitution and human trafficking ring ("Prostitute Ring of Arrested Top Bulgarian Rapper Operated 3 Years" n.d.). The interview is conducted by Martin Karbovski, a Bulgarian journalist with a reputation for controversy and deliberate provocation. This interview is an ambivalent source because of the notoriety of all three personas, but the positive interactions between the heterosexual rapper, known for his gang affiliations and stereotypical displays of machismo, and the candidly homosexual Azis makes for an interesting and unexpected display of acceptance (Karbovski 2014). In the clip, Vanko 1 proclaims that the only difference between the two of them is that "Azis 'plays with things' and I don't." When the host asks him to clarify, Azis cuts in with a laugh: "He's trying to say that I'm gay!" and the rapper adds, "That's the only difference, but we're very close." His confession makes for a very rare moment on Bulgarian television as an instance in which a homosexual person addresses their sexuality in layman's terms, and even more rare is Vanko 1's heartfelt support.  When pressed on about the host about his attitude towards Azis, he says "believe it or not, I see him all the time, and he is so close, I don't even think that he is gay or anything like that. I don't think like that". When they read audience comments live on air later on in the interview and a comment insults Azis by calling him gay, Vanko 1 once again jumps to his defense. Azis laughs: "Why is that person calling me gay like I don't know? They're saying something I've said 15 years ago," and Vanko 1 adds "And he thinks he can somehow insult you with it!" It is a complicated bond of friendship that makes it difficult to unpack the positive and negative representations of the homosexual Azis in this context. During the selection of the clips, moments in the interview where the host provokes them or Vanko 1 calls Azis Vasilka, the female version of his birth name, Vasil, as an affectionate term, were excluded because of their ambivalent or negative connotation. Against

the background of overwhelmingly negative representation in the media, the clips selected here show the rare glimpses of progressive acceptance.

*Interview 4*

The fourth and final interview is from 2020 on the first season of the new, positive late-night talk show The Nikolaos Tsitiridis Show. Azis is the guest and he talks about his latest music video for the song "Who Cares," which depicts him and Italian gay porn star Alex Marte in a storyline in which the two play masculine policemen and embark on a secret relationship behind the backs of a female spouse. In the promotion for this project, the inclusion of this adult male performer seems to be a big selling point for Azis, who mentions it consistently in a series of interviews. In this particular clip from the Nikolaos Tsitiridis show, it becomes a fun anecdote around which the host and the singer poke fun at each other and in turn bond. Azis opens with: "The actor in my new video is one of the most famous porn actors in the world" (Tsitiridis 2020). There is a casualness to the way they discuss the portrayal of the gay relationship and gay porn. The host replies: "Oh, I haven't seen him in any porn!". Azis quickly counters: "Maybe because you don't watch gay porn! You can Google him." Later on, the conversation circles around the blurred line between the personal and professional interactions on set. "Did you and the porn actors get close?" Tsitiridis asks, and then Azis counters by asking in what way does he mean "close"? The answer is another question: "Are you going to work together again? If he played a role in one of your videos, why don't you join one of his porn videos?" At this point, the audience is bursting into laughter, and Azis laughs while quipping "You don't think I have what it takes to become an Italian porn star?" The response is validating and shows the positive interaction between the host and him increasingly growing: "You definitely have what it takes. Look at your chest hair!" And so on, "Is that where you're looking?" And the reply, "How can I not notice it? It's going to poke my eyes out!" The two go on to talk about what it feels like being in the embrace of the gay porn star, and the host says that, like Azis, he would get a bit nervous in that situation too. It makes for a rare shared moment of exploring gay sensuality on TV, albeit hypothetically through the frame of a joke, but it is still an important glimpse of acceptance and representation.

Excerpts from these four interviews make up the independent variable for the survey that was administered to our group.

## Participants

The participants in this study were 79 volunteers recruited online. The sample consisted of 37 women (47%) and 41 men (52%), and one participant choosing not to disclose their gender identity (1%). The age range distribution was as follows: 18-24 (33%), 25-34 (54%), 35-44 (8%), 45-54 (1%), and 55-65 (4%). In terms of education, 14 subjects reported their highest degree of completed education as high school (10 in a general education program and 4 in a vocational/trade high school) (18%); 35 subjects reported completing a Bachelor's (44%); 29 reported completing a Master's (37%), and one subject reported completing a Ph.D. (1%). Seventy-five subjects identified as Ethnic Bulgarians (96%) amongst 1 Armenian, 1 Greek, and 1 mixed Bulgarian/Turkish (1.28% each). The ethnic group distribution is notable because of Azis' Roma identity, which is as contentious a part of his image and identity as his sexual orientation. However, the survey did not reach any Roma individuals. In terms of sexual orientation, the sample consisted of 46 respondents identifying as heterosexual (58%), 27 identifying as homosexual (34%), 5 identifying as bisexual (6%), and 1 opting not to disclose their sexual orientation (1%). In terms of religion, participants were allowed to signify more than one religious belief if it best described them. Thirty-two self-identified as Orthodox (1 with Buddhism and non-religious; 1 with non-religious; and 1 with "spiritual, but not religious"), 24 as "spiritual, but not religious" (1 with "non-religious" and 3 with Orthodox Christianity), 22 as non-religious (1 with "spiritual but not religious" and 2 with Orthodox Christianity), 2 as Catholic, two as Buddhist, out of which one mixed with Hinduism, 1 writing out "I have my own understanding" and one opting not to disclose.

## Hypotheses

The hypothesis that this experimental study tested were the following:

H1: Bulgarian men hold more negative attitudes towards homosexuality than Bulgarian women. The difference is more significant when it comes to homosexual men than women.

H2: Highly religious Bulgarians hold more negative attitudes towards homosexuality.

H3: Highly educated Bulgarians hold more positive attitudes towards homosexuality.

H4: Bulgarians, who have been exposed to Azis' work, hold more positive attitudes towards homosexuality.

H5: The overall Bulgarian population holds unfavorable attitudes towards homosexuality.

H6: The sample in an online survey distributed through personal contacts hold attitudes that are more positive than those of the overall Bulgarian population.

## Adaptation

In the Bulgarian context, the focus was on mass media contact, and the second question identified by Schiappa: "2) Are the effects of parasocial contact moderated by previous interpersonal contact with minority group members?" was adapted to account for previous media exposure to the pop-folk singer Azis instead of individual, interpersonal contact with other LGBTQ+ people. This was done to account for the relative anonymity of the queer community in Bulgaria (Pisankaneva 2003; Panayotov 2013; Darakchi 2019a). If individuals do not generally feel comfortable coming out and being open about their sexual orientation and gender identity with many people in their close circles, then interpersonal contact would not be a significant method of change in the Bulgarian community just yet. Instead, previous mass media exposure to an LGBTQ+ individual would be a good data point for the results of this specific parasocial contact study.

Both of the McCroskey scales for interpersonal attraction and homophily were adapted by translating them into Bulgarian for the survey respondents. Small adjustments to the wording were made to account for differences in language and context.

The ATLG scale was also modified for the Bulgarian context by taking the ATG-Short form and rewriting it into a parallel form which substituted "homosexual men" with "homosexual women." This was done to allow for a direct comparison between the results of the two ATG and ATL sub-sets by yielding a two-item set (Herek 1994). While there are official recommendations to also adapt the scale to new attitudes and developments in the field of LGBTQ+ visibility (Herek 1994), the original wording on the items was preserved. In some cases, the wording on the items was extreme, referring to homosexuality as "a perversion" or to homosexual individuals as "disgusting". Much thought went into whether these items would stigmatize the community and portray them in a profoundly negative light, but in the end, it was decided these phrases might be representative of the widespread attitudes in Bulgaria, so the phrasing was retained and translated as carefully as possible. No previous studies have been done for the adaption of this scale to the Bulgarian context.

Results

        For the results of the survey there were 79 completed responses. Out of the five possible groups (interviews 1, 2, 3, and 4, and the control group), the first interview was assigned 18 times, the second interview 16 times, the third interview 16 times, the fourth interview 12 times, and the control 17 times. Some of the items were reverse-scored and then the scores were calculated using each corresponding scale for interpersonal attraction, homophily, and the ATG-S form and its parallel form for homosexual women.

        For the interpersonal attraction scale, high scores (close to the maximum of 30) demonstrate a higher attraction to the subject, and low scores (close to the minimum of 6) show the least attraction possible to the subject. The mean score across all 62 post-test group participants was 21.85 ($\sigma = 4.89$), which shows a relatively high social attraction to Azis. Across the four separate interview groups, the results on the interpersonal attraction scale were virtually the same.

        For the homophily scale, high scores (close to the maximum of 28) demonstrate a high self-perceived similarity in attitudes, and low scores (close to the minimum of 4) demonstrate no self-perceived similarity. The mean score across all 62 post-test group participants was 13.37 ($\sigma = 5.77$) which shows the general consensus is somewhere in the neutral middle range with more inconsistency between the respondents. Across the four interview groups, the first two interviews had slightly elevated scores (mean interview 1 = 14.94; mean interview 2 = 14.43 compared to mean interview 3 = 12 and mean interview 4 = 11.41).

        For the ATLG scales, higher scores (more negative attitudes) are associated with: 1) adherence to traditional gender roles; 2) adherence to traditional family roles; 3) high religiosity; 4) membership to a conservative or fundamentalist denomination; 5) political conservatism; 6) lack of interpersonal contact with LGBTQ+ people. Here all respondents could be included in order to draw a comparison between the post-test groups and the control group. First, there were no significant differences in attitudes towards homosexual men and homosexual women in any of the five groups (mean was always around 9). Across all groups, the numbers on the ATG-S scale are slightly higher than those on the parallel female scale, which is consistent with H1 and the discourses that male homosexuality is interpreted as more threatening to the patriarchy and traditional modes of masculinity than female homosexuality. In the respondents who were shown

the second interview (between Azis and Professor Ivan Slavov), the attitudes towards male homosexuality are slightly higher. Perhaps the positive media representation of the endorsement of Azis as a potential Minister of Culture had a small effect on the group watching it due to the appeal to the authority of the celebrated academic professor and his endorsement of Azis. Collectively across the four interview groups and the control, for homosexual men, the first interview is interpreted with a slightly higher score of 11.33. Testing this against the female parallel form shows the same result, which makes it more likely that it was representative of the attitudes of the respondents in that particular group rather than the interview content. For attitudes towards homosexual men, the average mean between all four interview groups was 9.95 out of a possible maximum score of 25 with σ = 2.19. For attitudes towards homosexual women, the mean was also 9.95, with σ = 2.88. For the control group, for attitudes towards homosexual men, the mean was 9.52 with σ = 1.73, and for homosexual women, the mean was 9.88 with σ = 1.72. This is not consistent with H4 that Bulgarians who have been exposed to Azis as a member of the LGBTQ+ community will rank more positive attitudes. It also shows relatively positive attitudes that are inconsistent with the homophobic landscape from the literature review (European Commission 2019; ILGA-Europe 2020a). There is not enough data to confirm H5 that Bulgarians hold negative attitudes in line with the data from the Eurobarometer, but the trend described in H6 that the sample of this experimental survey would be more tolerant on average than the Bulgarian population is consistent with the overall positive attitudes in the survey.

Compared across the sexualities of the respondents, out of the 79 samples, one was excluded because the respondent had opted out of the sexual orientation question. The rest consisted of 46 respondents identifying as heterosexual, 27 identifying as homosexual, and 5 identifying as bisexual. Across these, the results for attitudes towards homosexual men were for heterosexual respondents 9.8 with σ = 2.36; homosexual respondents 10 with σ = 1.7; and bisexual respondents with nine and σ = 0.7. For the attitudes towards homosexual women attitudes were: for bisexual respondents ten with σ =1.41; for heterosexual respondents 9.93 with σ = 3.05; and for homosexual respondents 9.96 with σ = 2.22. These show that overall the attitudes of respondents with different sexual orientations were very close in the survey already. The higher standard deviations of the heterosexual respondents could hint at ambivalence and uncertainty that heterosexual people have when it comes to Azis and the larger queer community. Still, it could also be due to the larger sample size. In contrast, the standard

deviations are lower in the homosexual and bisexual respondents for both male and female homosexuals.

Compared across education, three main groups were identified: those having completed high school, those with a Bachelor's, and those with a Master's. There was one respondent with a Ph.D who was not included in this analysis due to the small sample size. For the high school group, the mean on the interpersonal attraction scale was 20.6 with $\sigma = 6.6$, the mean on the homophily scale was 12.83 with $\sigma = 6.3$, the mean on the ATG-S scale was 10.6 with $\sigma = 2.4$, and the mean on the parallel female form was 10.14 with $\sigma = 3.71$. For the Bachelor's degree group, the mean on the interpersonal attraction scale was 22.55 with $\sigma = 4.3$, the mean on the homophily scale was 12.48 with $\sigma = 5.62$, the mean on the ATG-S scale was 9.74 with $\sigma = 1.91$, and the mean on the parallel female form was 9.88 with $\sigma = 2.6$. For the Master's degree group, the mean on the interpersonal attraction scale was 21.3 with $\sigma = 4.44$, the mean on the homophily scale was 14.35 with $\sigma = 5.13$, the mean on the ATG-S scale was 9.65 with $\sigma = 2.15$, and the mean on the parallel female form was 9.93 with $\sigma = 2.26$. These results show a slightly lower than average acceptance rate for Azis on the interpersonal attraction scale for those with high school education, a slightly higher than average rate for the Bachelor's group and a consistent with the mean value for the Master's group. On the homophily scale, only the Master's group has a slightly higher than average value of perceived similarity to Azis, but the rest are consistent. On the ATG-S scale and the parallel female form, the results of the high school education group show slightly more negative attitudes than the Bachelor's and Master's groups which is consistent with H3 and literature that suggests that highly educated individuals are more likely than others to express favorable attitudes (Herek 1994, 213).

Compared across gender, women showed consistently more favorable attitudes than men. On the interpersonal attraction scale, the mean score of female respondents was 23.18 with $\sigma = 4.98$ compared to the male respondents' mean score of 20.91 with $\sigma = 4.67$. On the homophily scale, female respondents' mean score was 14.74, with $\sigma = 5.8$ compared to male respondents' mean score of 12.29 with $\sigma = 5.63$. On the ATG-S scale and the parallel female form, female respondents' mean scores were 9.1 with $\sigma = 1.71$ for attitudes towards male homosexuals and 9.4 with $\sigma = 2.62$ for attitudes towards female homosexuals. For male respondents, the mean scores were slightly higher with 10.5 with $\sigma = 2.21$ for male homosexuals and 10.33 with $\sigma = 2.68$ for female homosexuals. This is also consistent with H1 and the projected expectations from the

literature review that women would be more tolerant in general. There was no significant difference between the attitudes towards homosexual men and homosexual women, which did not confirm the second part of H1.

In the questions about Azis himself and the interview, out of the 62 respondents who were assigned a post-test group, 41 know who he was (66%), and 21 did not (34%). Fifty-two said they were familiar with his creative work (84%), while 10 were not (16%). In their evaluation of how they perceived the interview, 32 said the interview portrayed him in a neutral light (51%), 23 in a positive light (37%), and 7 in a negative light (12%). Only one individual reported a change in their attitude towards homosexual people after watching the interview with Azis. This further disproves H4 that media exposure to Azis could result in a shift in attitudes.

Out of the seven individuals who reported the interview portrayed Azis in a negative light, they are all in the 25-34 age range; there is a range of education and sexual orientations  (1 with high school education, 3 with a Bachelor's degree and 3 with a Master's degree and four heterosexual, three homosexual and one bisexual). Their religious views are another common denominator with four identifying as Orthodox Christian, one as Catholic, one as "having their own views," and one opting not to answer. This is also consistent with H2, and research that predicts high religiosity will correlate with more negative attitudes.

Previous research has demonstrated a strong correlation between negative attitudes and gender, age, education, high religiosity, political conservativeness, and exposure to LGBTQ+ individuals (Cardenas and Barrientos 2008). In the Bulgarian context these findings all seem plausible but further research with a larger sample size should be conducted. While the survey is a good predictor of overall attitudes, it is difficult to obtain more nuanced information about the views of the individuals from a short and convenient question and answer set.

## Discussion & Conclusion

This research is a very small step in the field of media representation of the LGBTQ+ community in Bulgaria as a means of shifting attitudes. As it is the case with surveys of this scale in a graduate school program, I am not able to establish causality between the results and the hypotheses. I find consistency with H1 (in part), H2, and H3, which means that the results are consistent with the expected demographic relationship between gender, education, and religion, and attitudes towards homosexuality. The survey is a good start to begin this research in

Bulgaria, but it lacks the statistical rigor and distribution method to be considered statistically significant. As a result, I cannot claim that the result has provided clear confirmation or proof of the hypotheses derived from the literature review. I hope that the rigorous work in compiling the literature review and the first steps towards constructing a practical experiment for determining ways to affect LGBTQ+ tolerance in Bulgaria positively can provide the impetus for further research. Moreover, a strong personal reason for conducting the research in this way was precisely because of its practical potential. In my work as an artist and journalist, the leading goal is to understand and derive how best to use media to effectively command change and inspire tolerance. Starting this research is an essential step for my next professional endeavors in this area of LGBTQ+ representation in Bulgaria. That said, the experimental study still provides some initial results that could be a valuable contribution to further research on this topic in the Bulgarian and Balkan context.

*Survey Distribution & Survey Content*

Another big challenge was the means of distributing the survey and ensuring a representative sample. Because of the scope of this project and the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Web questionnaire was determined to be the best course of action. The most feasible way to get a variety of responses was through sharing the survey online through a short link that would randomly assign one out of the five survey versions to responders. After distributing the link through my personal network of family, friends, and work contacts, those respondents were instructed to send it forward as well with a focus on diversifying the demographic. The link returned an adequate amount of responses, but after analysis of the results, they skewed very heavily towards acceptance and tolerance, which, as determined from the extensive literature review, is not the case in Bulgaria. There is a large selection bias to using one's personal network to distribute a survey testing attitudes representative of the whole country. Despite the best efforts of all responders, the results were representative of my social circle mostly, a predominantly young, educated, non-religious, already tolerant cohort. The demographic skew of the cohort accounts for H6 and makes H5 harder to prove as there is no representative sample. As mentioned in the experiment section, the use of the internet also introduced a sampling bias due to the survey becoming undiscoverable to those that do not have Internet access. The survey itself being online demanded a shorter, more optimized design that would favor quick responses

that would not fatigue the respondents, especially after the months-long heavy use of online tools during the pandemic-induced quarantine of spring/summer 2020. This made for a more quantitative design in which some of the more fascinating and nuanced questions could not be teased out in this round of research.

*The Representation of Azis*

Against the homophobic media background, the biggest challenge was finding positive media representation in the first place. Azis was selected as a popular figure because of his incredible success as a singer and performer. Still, his brand of visibility makes for a difficult marker for overall measures of attitudes. While much research on this exact topic has been done in countries with adequate representation to pick from (Joyce and Harwood 2012; Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006; 2005; Sanz López 2018; Ayoub and Garretson 2017; Gonta et al. 2017), in the Bulgarian context selecting the proper media content was a big hurdle. A great deal of time was spent talking to local activists, journalists, and researchers who were asked to think of one piece of positive media content originating from Bulgaria. Many of them had trouble coming up with an answer, and Azis was selected as the subject of this research more because of his popularity than because of the exact representation he brings.

In analyzing the content itself, it was difficult to understand the mainstreaming effect that someone as intentionally provocative as Azis would have on the general public. Even in Azis' case, most of the interviews focus on his personal choices as an individual to provoke and entertain through depictions of femininity and promiscuity. The themes revolve around the choices he makes in his music videos rather than the choices he makes as a homosexual man in his everyday life. He is not representative of all homosexual men, nor all members of the LGBTQ+ community. As a result, Azis creates a very one-sided representation of what being queer entails. Similar to findings from studies with fictional characters, oftentimes representation can increase the acceptance of a certain minority while at the same time reinforcing stereotypes about their appearance, mannerisms, and behaviors (McLaughlin and Rodriguez 2017). In the case of Azis, there are many confounding factors, including the popularity of his music, his Roma roots, his drag persona, and his ever-evolving appearance. As Slavov states in interview 2, "as a phenomenon [Azis] is too complex. He cannot be defined, and he is a challenge to our ability to analyze such phenomena" (Kevorkyan 2004). While he is the most obvious choice for

such a study in Bulgaria, it is difficult to control for the way he is interpreted by those that are confused by the freedom of his expression. Research shows that even in more liberal countries such as the US, most homosexual characters on television are extremely stereotyped (Avila-Saavedra 2009).

Azis's media image plays into a lot of stereotypes about homosexuality that international media has already condemned as harmful and unrepresentative of the community. He can be seen as overtly feminine, flamboyant, hedonistic, animalistic, hypersexualized, and possessing a high-pitched voice, all characteristics tethered to the first gay characters on American TV such as Jack from Will & Grace and Cameron from Modern Family (McLaughlin and Rodriguez 2017, 1200). With fictional characters as well as public figures, if the personality being shown confirms some already salient negative stereotypes, then the identification with the person leads to a reaffirming of stereotypes rather than newfound acceptance. In Azis's case, people may begin to "know" him through parasocial contact more than in-person interpersonal contact (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005, 95) and form pointed and lasting opinions about him through mass media, as well as through his creative work such as music and music videos. Because of the provocative nature of his work, these opinions, when negative, can reaffirm stereotypes about the whole LGBTQ+ community. As of today, his monolithic and controversial representation is better than none, but it should not be the sole one representing an entire community. If, in the future, other public figures in Bulgaria use their platform in a meaningful way to gain the cultural representation needed by the local LGBTQ+ community, that could have a powerful positive effect on attitudes. Positive media representation should also be used for advocacy for more inclusive legal changes for the LGBTQ+ community directly. Studies show that advocacy, legislation, and media representation are all interconnected and important parts of the puzzle of reaching equality (Abou-Chadi and Finnigan 2019, 889). Azis and other LGBTQ+ public figures should make it a point to champion equal rights and vocally address the social issues and positive attitudes they want society to adopt. As younger cohorts are already growing up in a more tolerant sphere, this would be a big step towards creating space for media representation that is ethical and not based on stereotypes or ridicule. Viewer frequency is also an important factor as media representation needs to be consistent and overall positive to create lasting change. The degree of identification depends on the frequency of exposure of level of familiarity with the character. The more media presence a public figure has, the more engaging they can be for the

audience. So it can be said that LGBTQ+ people in Bulgaria need a bigger platform with more opportunities for representation so that more of Bulgarian society can become engaged and empathize with their worldview (McLaughlin and Rodriguez 2017, 1199). In the next few years, adequate media representation of the community will be instrumental as the "anti-gender" rhetoric intensifies after similar backsliding in Poland and Hungary. Bulgaria will be at the precipice of tolerance and overt homophobia, and it will be up to the media to define what equality in a democratic European state could mean for Bulgaria.

*New Forms of Media*

Over the last decade, the internet has become a meeting place for communities of all sorts due to its accessibility and democratic structure. It creates an environment in which users can find and create content they do not see represented in mass media. Because of its ubiquitous status today, the Internet could be an essential medium for creating more salient parasocial contact opportunities with the queer Bulgarian community (Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna 2006; Chen 2016). There has been a general lack of public queer communities online. While many queer people use Facebook and Instagram, these social media networks have not done much for improvement in representation due to the anonymous character of the communication there. One postmodern space of finding representation and community is online gaming with its homosexual "gaymer" culture. There has been some research on the need for queer representation in these spaces, but in conversations with LGBTQ+ gamers, other requirements emerged as more prevalent. Gaymer identity seems to revolve around finding a space where the players can comfortably express their identity. For them, this extension of the self digitally is more important than having representation with the avatars of the game itself (Shaw 2012, 81). The experiences of homosexual gamers in the research by Shaw indicates that there is a search for a specific queer sensibility and a safe haven where they can express their own identities without fear of hate speech. In the online realm, just as parasocial contact is mediated through the internet, so is the bullying and homophobic abuse that is a problem across Bulgaria and the world. In this discussion, an important point about the tension between representation and exploitation emerges, one that is also relevant in the context of Azis. As he takes on a provocative image to create discussion and represent the LGBTQ+ community, his presence can easily be appropriated for capitalist gains by those that profit off his success. Then the real voice

of the community becomes muted, and it sends a message to the community that only certain forms of queerness are desirable and marketable, creating even more of a censorship on the path to visibility (Shaw 2012, 81). The question remains on how best to utilize these new online spaces in a constructive way that facilitates positive interactions between the majority heterosexual outgroup and sexual minorities. There is a lot of potential in the comfort of online spaces, but it is a double-edged sword due to anonymity and the lack of repercussions it brings.

*New Frontiers*

In line with previous research on the topic, this thesis bridges the gap between a body of theory about the effects of media representation on attitudes towards minority groups with literature dissecting the development of the LGBTQ+ movement in Bulgaria. While there is strong documentation of history and the current trends in both a national and international context, there is not a strong movement towards more practical steps. In order for Bulgaria to move forward in terms of acceptance, the local organizations should continue to analyze media trends and how to enter the conservative conversation without antagonizing and building more mistrust in the LGBTQ+ community. There is very little political support for the LGBTQ+ movement as well, which makes devising innovative campaigns difficult as they are interpreted as an international movement excised and slapped on to a cultural landscape that does not mesh together. While the results of this survey are a good benchmark, they do not provide much practical information on the type of representation that needs to be developed either. One severe limitation of the survey format is the quantitative skew. Attitudes towards a complex group of people cannot simply be quantified statistically, but nevertheless, it is an important first step to devising more qualitative and story-driven strategies for media representation.

Another important point is the narrow focus of this whole thesis on specific markers of acceptance as related to homosexuality, which is only a sliver of the conversations that need to be addressed when talking about LGBTQ+ rights in Bulgaria. There is much criticism in the international sphere regarding how the movement of queer liberation was started by transgender people of color. Over time it has been co-opted by cisgender white gay men, serving as the members of the community with the most privilege and most access to social, cultural, and economic power (Kulick 2013, 3). In the Bulgarian context, analyzing Azis does not reproduce these power dynamics fully, yet nonetheless, there was no lesbian, transgender, or intersex

representation in the study. This is a field of future research as a lot of the literature from the Bulgarian past also focused heavily on the narrative of homosexual men. In this topic, qualitative research is extremely important as it will lift the lid on hidden forms of violence (Darakchi 2019b, 20) and homophobia that cannot be detected in statistics and quantitative research.

Creating grounds for an ethical, progressive, and objective media presence for the LGBTQ+ community is an important and time-sensitive issue. The situation in Bulgaria is representative of a bigger trend with low levels of social acceptance and the harassment of sexual minorities leading to mental disorders and suicides (Haas et al. 2011) or immigration towards more liberal countries (Flynn, Stella, and Gawlewicz 2018). Hate speech and physical harassment are also prevalent problems in Bulgaria, and as a modern democracy, the country needs to look hard at the implications of these movements and make a strong commitment towards improving the life quality of LGBTQ+ people in Bulgaria.

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# Annex:
## (Interview Transcriptions in English)

*Interview* 1 (Gonzalez 2002)

**Host:** What type of video do you prefer at the moment?

**Azis:** At the moment I am on an unisex trend, the blending of the genders.

**Host:** And then you say you don't want people to talk?

**Azis:** It's not that I don't want to, I guess it's just interesting to journalists. I am interesting to the people that don't know me.

    (Later on)

**Azis:** In a music video I wore pink heels, wigs with naked men around me and at the music video premiere there was a young girl 12-13 years old and she came with a flower and started crying. And then the host Anton Stefanov asked the young girl - did you like Azis as a woman; she said yes, this is the most beautiful woman in the world; and as a man, he is still the most beautiful, and the whole restaurant started cheering. But most of all it made me incredibly happy.

**Host:** Behind this mask you seem like a sensitive person; are you a happy person where you are home alone?

**Azis:** No, I'm very alone.

    (Later on)

**Azis:** I also want to say that I really love the way you speak, it's very cute. I hope the fans like the music video, and you'll be the first one to air it here in the city of Varna.

**Host:** Thank you so much! I wish you lots of success and when you become as famous as Madonna like you said to visit me again

*Interview 2* (Kevorkyan 2004)

**Host:** It might turn out we live in a country where Azis could be Minister of Culture. If you had to choose between our current Minister and Azis, who would you choose, Professor Slavov?

**Slavov:** Without a doubt - Azis.

**Host:** Really?!

**Slavov:** Yes, he is more entertaining, funnier and more popular with his fans. I don't know if the minister has 25 000 fans who would be there for each of his appearances.

(A few sentences later)

**Slavov:** I have to admit I see a different person here in Azis.

**Host:** Person?

**Slavov:** Yes, more balanced, more solemn and critically looking at himself, I hope it's not just pretense.

**Host:** Isn't what he is showing on stage pretense?

**Slavov:** As a phenomenon, he is too complex. He cannot be defined, and he is a challenge to our ability to analyze such phenomena.

(Later on)

**Azis:** I have no insecurities because I do feel Bulgarian.

**Slavov:** He is a bulgarian and he is also successful, and he will always have people who accept him without criticism. He has a huge following which will support his every move.

*Interview 3* (Karbovski 2014)

**Vanko 1:** The difference between me and Azis is he "plays with things" and I don't. We're the same in every other way.

**Host:** "Plays" with things?

**Azis:** He's trying to say I'm gay!

**Vanko 1:** That's the only difference, but we're very close!

(Later on)

**Vanko 1:** I see him all the time and he is so close, I don't even think that he is gay or anything like that.

(Later on)

Reading Facebook comments from the audience: "Gay"

**Azis:** Why is he calling me gay like I don't know? They're saying something I've said 15 years ago.

**Vanko 1:** And he thinks he can insult you with it.

*Interview 4* (Tsitiridis 2020)

**Azis:** The actor in my new video is one of the most famous porn actors in the world

**Host:** I haven't seen him in any porn.

**Azis:** Maybe because you don't watch gay porn (audience laughs). You can google him!

**Host:** And then my search history will show me things I don't want to see.

**Azis:** You can install a program that protects your search privacy (joke)

(Later on)

**Host:** Did you and the porn actor get close?

**Azis:** In what way? (audience laughs)

**Host:** Are you going to work together? If he played a part in one of your videos, why don't you join one of his porn videos?

**Azis:** You don't think I have everything an Italian porn star needs?

**Host:** You have everything it takes definitely! Look at your chest hair.

**Azis:** Is that where you're looking?

**Host:** How can I not see it, they're going to poke my eyes out!

(Later on)

**Host:** Tell us something spicy from the shoot.

**Azis:** I haven't been touched by a man who has been with more guys than me. He's a really

strong and intimidating guy so I played along and was nice to him.

**Host:** I would get a bit nervous too (audience laughs)