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**PhD THESIS**

**The Political Interests of LGBT+ Citizens in Romania**

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**- Abstract -**

This research aims to identify the political interests of LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) citizens living in Romania at the time of the study. Additionally, it explores how these interests are represented by Romania's pro-LGBT+ civil society (associations, organizations, and informal groups). The originality of this endeavor lies in creating **the first barometer of the political interests of the LGBT+ community in Romania**.

The work is structured into four main chapters. **The first chapter**, the literature review, provides a detailed analysis of the existing literature on political interests, including feminist and queer perspectives. Through theoretical discussions I establish a solid conceptual framework for understanding how the political interests of LGBT+ individuals are formulated and expressed. This section invites reflection on the diversity and complexity of these interests. **The second chapter** presents the research methodology, including the study design, tools used, and challenges encountered during the research. This chapter ensures transparency and methodological rigor, guaranteeing the credibility of the presented results. Additionally, it details the innovative steps and unique challenges of this study on LGBT+ individuals in the Romanian academic context. **The third chapter**, the most extensive in the thesis, details the research results. Here, data obtained from face-to-face interviews and an online survey with LGBT+ citizens in Romania is presented and analyzed in the form of indexes and rankings of political interests. Data obtained from interviews with representatives of Romania's pro-LGBT+ civil society are also presented and analyzed. These results offer a complex picture of the political interests of LGBT+ individuals at the time of the research, highlighting the unique life experiences of the respondents and indicating a synchronization between the political interests of LGBT+ individuals and those represented by

pro-LGBT+ civil society. Finally, **the fourth chapter** presents a synthesis of the theoretical framework, methodological approaches, and empirical findings presented in the previous sections, discussing the relevance and uniqueness of this research as the first of its kind in the Romanian context.

The theoretical framework is based on the concept of political interests, analyzed from feminist perspectives, queer theory, and the concept of intersectionality, within the foundation of democracy theory.

Political interests are related to the citizenship status of LGBT+ individuals and their representation by public authorities. My study focuses on Romania, a democratic state governed by the rule of law. In a democracy, equality among citizens is one of the defining values. Therefore, the political interests of all citizens, including LGBT+ individuals, are important. Of course, understanding and considering the political interests of all citizens does not mean immediately resolving them, but it does mean respecting the diversity of opinions and desires of those who make up a country's population. Beyond the moral imperative that stems from equality among citizens, there is a political obligation to represent all voices for the proper functioning of a democracy. Historically, majorities have made political decisions, often ignoring the interests of women, ethnic, and LGBT+ individuals as minority voices. This situation is an injustice, a deficit which reinforces systems of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, or homophobia. The democratic solution lies in active commitments to include all citizens in decision-making systems, regardless of their identities (ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), to ensure equality for all. Discrimination against LGBT+ citizens has occurred and still occurs in Romania – from criminalization to marginalization, those who are part of the LGBT+ community have suffered in multiple socio-political contexts. As a result, the political representation of LGBT+ citizens has been inadequate, often leaving them without legal protection and subject to inequalities. Given the situation presented, studying the political interests of LGBT+ citizens is essential for strengthening democracy in an inclusive sense, to protect and respect the political interests of all citizens.

What relevance does the study of the political interests of LGBT+ citizens in Romania have? A counter-argument could be that the Romanian state already takes care of the political interests of all its citizens, at least through the activity of citizen representatives – politicians appointed to hold positions in public authorities (local, government, parliament, etc). However, it is important to recognize, as I mentioned earlier, that LGBT+ individuals have faced and continue to face discrimination. Thus, their political interests are more likely to be ignored than represented, sometimes even vehemently opposed by extremist, radical politicians. LGBT+ citizens, meaning

individuals with non-heterosexual sexual orientation and gender identity, may have specific political interests, as I explain in the thesis. These interests stem from their identities, which differ from the heteronorm: protection against discrimination (in schools, employment, healthcare, etc.), legal recognition of gender identity, the need for legal protection for families formed by same-sex individuals, the need for specialized healthcare services for transgender people, etc. Representing or at least understanding the political interests of all citizens of a country is an act that contributes to the health and cohesion of that society. Of course, this is also important from the perspective of a functional democracy. There may be a stake in this regard – ensuring the unity and solidarity of citizens.

Among the various approaches this study could have taken, I chose to highlight a list of the political interests of LGBT+ citizens in Romania and, among them, which are the most important. I set out a series of epistemic, methodological, and pragmatic-applied objectives. The epistemic objective was to identify the political interests of LGBT+ individuals in Romania, as well as the political interests represented by Romania's pro-LGBT+ civil society. The methodological objective involved creating an index of the observed political interests and ranking them based on the importance indicated by respondents. As pragmatic-applied objectives, I aimed, on the one hand, to determine whether there is alignment between the political interests represented by pro-LGBT+ civil society and those of LGBT+ individuals, and on the other hand, to analyze the results in the local socio-political context.

I used as research method the sociological survey done through face-to-face interviews and a self-administered online questionnaire. To achieve the objectives, I explored the concept of political interests, elements of feminist political theory, including the concept of intersectionality, and elements of queer theory. The theoretical foundation is represented by the theory of democracy. Robert A. Dahl (1998), one of the most important theorists of democracy, proposes the idea of “polyarchy” to “refer to a modern representative democracy with universal suffrage” (Dahl 1998, pp. 90-91). His concept describes political systems in which political power is distributed among groups with diverse interests, and I consider that it validates the relevance of including the political interests of all citizens in governance, regardless of their non-heterosexual identity. Democracy is related to the fact that “each citizen will be both free and equal to all others” (Ball Dagger 2000, p. 52). The idea of equality and freedom of citizens justifies the importance of understanding the political interests of LGBT+ individuals in a society.

Regarding data collection, as I mentioned earlier, I conducted face-to-face interviews with LGBT+ individuals in Romania and with representatives of Romania's pro-LGBT+ civil society and

distributed a self-administered online questionnaire to observe the political interests of LGBT+ individuals in Romania. This research is the first of its kind in the country, and the application of the methodology was exploratory, as there are no similar academic approaches in Romanian literature on the topic of queer political interests. As for the research scope, the data obtained is extensive. 22 interviews and 380 questionnaires with LGBT+ individuals from Romania, conducted between March and November 2022, constitute a consistent database relevant not only for this study but also for future academic analyses about the LGBT+ community in Romania. The database, as well as excerpts from interviews in anonymized form, are available in the appendices of the work. I focused on the political interests of transgender individuals where possible, attempting to explore the LGBT+ community from an intersectional perspective to avoid generalization and observe possible intra-group differences. Regarding the working samples for each type of research (interview, questionnaire), I worked with availability samples because, at the time of designing and conducting the study, national censuses in Romania and generally worldwide did not collect data on the sexual orientation and gender identity of citizens. To conduct the research, I operationalized the concept of political interests by providing a working definition and explanations, based on an analysis of specific literature. To validate the collected data, I used the thematic analysis method as described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). I created a specific section – Queer Terminology – to explain terms related to the LGBT+ community.

Apart from the topic of political interests, I also collected through this research information on the following themes regarding LGBT+ individuals in Romania: life experiences of LGBT+ individuals living in Romania, which I found to be generally negative; respondents' opinions about pro-LGBT+ civil society; the relationship between pro-LGBT+ civil society and the political environment – a subject I did not explore in depth; the people or environments where LGBT+ individuals are out; and socio-demographic profiles of the interview and questionnaire samples, which present important, rarely researched information for understanding the LGBT+ community in Romania.

The research results point to a series of major political interests of the LGBT+ community in Romania. Although statistically unrepresentative, the interviews are qualitatively important. They show that among the 22 interviewees, the most important political interests are, in descending order of importance: legalizing LGBT+ relationships through civil partnership and, more generally, obtaining any form of legalization; introducing sexual education courses, including about sexual minorities, in school curricula as well as through programs for adults; and improving the safety of LGBT+ individuals in society. The questionnaire, which can be viewed from both a statistical relevance perspective and a qualitative one, as the research design allowed respondents to provide

open-ended responses, generated the following three most important political interests: protection against discrimination; legalization of LGBT+ relationships through same-sex marriage; and safety of LGBT+ individuals. The responses from the interviews with LGBT+ individuals in Romania, representatives of Romania's pro-LGBT+ civil society, and the self-administered online questionnaire generated three lists of political interests mentioned by the research participants. From these, I chose to compare those from the questionnaire and the interviews with civil society representatives to verify if there is alignment between them. The lists are almost identical, with the political interest for sexual education missing from the civil society representatives' list, which appears among LGBT+ individuals' interests. On the one hand, the results are clear about what political interests the respondents have and which of these are the most important to them. On the other hand, data analysis, observation of intra-group differences and between the community and civil society, and observation of preferences for certain options show that we have a complete set of data and confirm the importance of studying this subject and developing academic knowledge about the LGBT+ community in Romania.

I have repeatedly noticed mixed feelings towards the Romanian pro-LGBT+ civil society from respondents and interviewees. One person confessed that they refrain from making negative comments about the LGBT+ community in front of those outside it to avoid providing arguments to homophobic individuals. Sometimes LGBT+ individuals practice self-censorship due to the discrimination they face in society, but this can negatively impact the communication of concerns about their own community. For example, the majority of respondents (over 80%) expressed a positive opinion about the pro-LGBT+ civil society. However, this is more of a statistical reality. Correlating the idea of self-censorship mentioned above with the fact that some categories of respondents are more dissatisfied with civil society than others (a tenfold difference between gay men and lesbians), it is possible that the reality on the ground is different, overshadowed by self-censorship.

Finally, in conducting this study, I encountered a series of significant challenges that deserve space for analysis and reflection. I believe that my attempt to research queer political interests will serve those who might undertake similar studies or do research about the LGBT+ community in Romania in the future. From improving research design to a more consistent approach to the identity categories that make up the LGBT+ community in Romania, one important challenge was constructing the questionnaire's grid of questions. Lacking a pre-existing list of researched queer political interests, I chose the option of open-ended responses and then classified the answers into comparable items, which made it difficult to obtain the results. One of the limitations of this

research was the lack of access to specialized literature on the LGBT+ community (political science, sociology, queer theory, etc): there are almost no publications or translations on this topic in Romanian, specialized publications in foreign languages are missing from local public libraries, or their acquisition was difficult due to prohibitively high prices. This made the literature review chapter difficult to complete. Another challenge in conducting the research, which reflects the life experiences of LGBT+ respondents in Romania, was that I faced anonymous death threats due to being part of the LGBT+ community and conducting research on this topic.

An important resource of this research consists of the appendices, where readers can find the collected data in depth, information resulting from data analysis, and other resources about the LGBT+ community in Romania derived from my study.

In conclusion, my doctoral project represents a significant contribution to the understanding and analysis of the political interests of LGBT+ citizens in Romania. The work explores in detail not only their preferences and priorities but also the relationship between LGBT+ individuals and Romania's pro-LGBT+ civil society. Despite the difficulties encountered during the realization of this project, the results obtained constitute an important resource for Romanian academic research on the LGBT+ community in Romania. Based on this study, I believe that future research and public policies can be developed to more effectively address the needs of LGBT+ citizens in Romania.