

# Searching for a Safe Place: Experiences of Queer Migrants in Lithuania

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**Abstract.** Lithuania presents a dual context for studying queer migration. On the one hand, queer Lithuanians emigrate to more liberal environments; on the other, the country receives queer migrants fleeing persecution based on their sexual identity. This paper examines how intersectionality, heteronormativity, and religion shape queer migration experiences within the Lithuanian context. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with LGBTIQ+ Lithuanian emigrants and immigrants to Lithuania, the analysis highlights how sociopolitical conditions and struggles for equal LGBTIQ+ rights strongly influence migration decisions. Lithuanian migrants often move to Western countries in search of broader legal recognition and opportunities, while migrants from more homophobic regions seek basic safety in nearby European countries such as Lithuania. For Lithuanian migrants abroad, intersecting identities can sometimes facilitate integration, whereas for queer migrants in Lithuania, they often exacerbate challenges. Finally, migration trajectories and experiences are profoundly shaped by prevailing heteronormative attitudes, reinforced by religious discourse.

**Keywords:** queer migration, heteronormativity, LGBTIQ+, intersectionality, religion, gender.

## Saugios vietos beiėškant: *queer* migrantų patirtys Lietuvoje

**Santrauka.** Lietuva pasižymi dvilypiu *queer* migracijos kontekstu. Šalis patiria *queer* lietuvių emigraciją į liberalesnes aplinkas, bet kartu Lietuva priima *queer* migrantus, bėgančius nuo persekiojimo dėl savo seksualinės tapatybės kituose regionuose. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip interseksionalumas, heteronormatyvumas ir religija formuoja *queer* migracijos patirtis Lietuvos kontekste. Straipsnis pagrįstas pusiau struktūruotais interviu su LGBTIQ+ Lietuvos emigrantais ir imigrantais, atvykusiais į Lietuvą iš kitų regionų. Straipsnyje argumentuojama, kad *queer* migracijos motyvams įtaką daro sociopolitinės sąlygos, susijusios su iššūkiais užtikrinant lygias LGBTIQ+ teises. Migrantai iš Lietuvos keliauja į vakarietiškas šalis, ieškodami geresnio teisinio priėmimo ir galimybių, o asmenys iš homofobiškų šalių ieško saugumo artimose Europos valstybėse, pavyzdžiui, Lietuvoje. Daugeliu atvejų skirtingų susipinančių tapatybių sąveika palengvina integraciją Lietuvos migrantams užsienyje, tačiau apsunkina imigrantų integraciją Lietuvoje. *Queer* migracijos trajektorijoms ir patirtims taip pat daro įtaką vyraujančios heteronormatyvios nuostatos, kurias sustiprina dominuojantys religiniai diskursai.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** *queer* migracija, heteronormatyvumas, LGBTIQ+, interseksionalumas, religija, lytiškumas.

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## Introduction

Queer migration<sup>1</sup> has emerged as a significant area of academic research, bridging migration studies and queer theory while highlighting the diverse experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals. This form of migration presents unique challenges concerning migration processes, control mechanisms, protection frameworks, and the understanding of effective integration (Vine and Cupples 2016; Mole 2021). While migration has traditionally been analysed from economic, political, and humanitarian perspectives, research on queer migration shows that sexual orientation and gender identity are also critical factors shaping both the reasons for migrating and the experiences in host countries (Masullo 2015; Namer and Razum 2018; Forte de Lena 2023). Generally, studies on queer migration explore how the motivations and experiences of queer migrants are intertwined with their intersectional identities and the current political and socio-cultural contexts in their home and host countries. Recent studies have emphasised the need to address the intersectionality of queer migration, where sexuality and gender intersect with race, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, language, and nationality, producing complex patterns of vulnerability and agency (Chossière 2021; Ropianyk and D'Agostino 2021; Mehrotra 2010).

However, despite the increasing research on queer migration in Western Europe and North America, the Baltic region—particularly Lithuania—remains underexplored. The geopolitical transformations of the last decade, along with rising labour mobility and refugee arrivals (Migration Department of the Republic of Lithuania 2021), have highlighted Lithuania's evolving migration landscape. There is a significant gap in research regarding how Lithuania's sociopolitical and legal context shapes the migration experiences and settlement of queer individuals, both those leaving Lithuania and those entering it.

This research gap is particularly significant given Lithuania's paradoxical position. On the one hand, limited legal recognition of LGBTIQ+ rights (the country has yet to adopt a law on same-sex partnerships, and gender identity is not included among the non-discrimination grounds in legal norms) and prevailing public homophobia (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2024; ILGA-Europe 2025; Poushter and Kent 2020) may drive some Lithuanian queer individuals to emigrate in search of more liberal environment offering broader legal protections and opportunities for LGBTIQ+ individuals.

On the other hand, Lithuania has also become a destination for migrants, including LGBTIQ+ individuals fleeing conflict, persecution, or authoritarian regimes in neighbouring regions such as Belarus and Russia, as well as from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (Migration Department of the Republic of Lithuania 2021; Official Statistics Portal 2023). Research on the integration and adaptation experiences of queer immigrants in Lithuania remains scarce. However, the growing number of immigrants has exposed a range of issues and challenges, particularly regarding the reception of queer migrants. While the challenges of integrating LGBTIQ+ migrants and asylum seekers have been discussed in earlier research (Biekša 2011;

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<sup>1</sup> Queer migration/individuals and LGBTIQ+ migration/individuals in this paper are used as synonyms.

Jakulevičienė et al. 2012), recent reports highlight a lack of understanding regarding the issues faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals during migration processes in Lithuania (Andrijauskaitė et al. 2023; ILGA-Europe 2025).

Thus, Lithuania represents both a ‘pushing away’ and a ‘welcoming’ context for queer migration: it simultaneously drives some of its LGBTIQ+ citizens abroad while attracting queer migrants from various regions, including Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. This duality underscores the need to distinguish two groups: (1) Lithuanian LGBTIQ+ individuals who emigrate due to personal circumstances or domestic sociopolitical constraints, and (2) LGBTIQ+ migrants and asylum seekers who arrive in Lithuania seeking refuge or other opportunities. Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine how intersectionality, heteronormativity, and religion shape the migration experiences of queer individuals within the Lithuanian context, focusing on both Lithuanian LGBTIQ+ emigrants and queer migrants settling in Lithuania. By exploring how sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, and other social categories intersect in individual migration narratives, the paper seeks to show how Lithuania functions both as a site of exclusion that drives some LGBTIQ+ citizens abroad and as a site of safety and opportunity for queer migrants from neighbouring and more distant regions.

The paper integrates perspectives on heteronormativity, intersectionality, and queer migration studies, drawing on empirical data from semi-structured interviews with twenty queer migrants who have either left Lithuania or arrived there. It examines the differences and similarities in the experiences of both groups and addresses the following questions: (1) How do heteronormative attitudes and norms in Lithuania shape migration experiences? (2) How do intersectional identities influence processes of integration and acceptance? (3) In what ways does religion affect migration experiences in terms of exclusion and inclusion?

## **Theoretical background**

Academic research on migration has explicitly addressed the sexual differences of migrants, their impact on migration motives, the success of integration, and the outcomes of migration concerning the acceptance of one’s sexual identity (Mole 2018). However, queer migration is not solely driven by the affirmation of sexual orientation or the avoidance of persecution due to being queer. It is also influenced by economic and practical reasons such as financial improvement and stability, better career opportunities, socio-economic status, welfare and political regimes, study conditions, family influences, or following a partner to another country (Luo 2022; Di Felicianantonio and Gadelha 2016; Fortes de Lena 2023; Nieves-Lugo et al. 2019).

Thus, a wide range of factors motivate the mobility of LGBTIQ+ individuals, with intersecting identities playing a crucial role in shaping their migration experiences. An intersectional approach underscores how different social categories interact to produce complex systems of both oppression and privilege (Dhoest 2015). According to Chossière (2021), economic conditions, sociodemographic characteristics, and migration status significantly influence the lived experiences of queer asylum seekers. Therefore, the intersectionality approach provides a framework for analysing and understanding the vulnerabilities of queer migrants, the reasons

behind these vulnerabilities, and their interconnectedness. In the context of refugee experiences, intersectionality illustrates how societal norms and expectations intersect with the lives of queer individuals, impacting their ability to find safety, access resources, and gain acceptance in host countries (Diab and Samneh 2024).

More specifically, homosexual identity, within the intersectionality framework, can create adverse conditions for queer migrants before, during, and after the migration process. Heteronormative attitudes, which relate to societal norms in a specific sociocultural context, significantly shape the experiences of queer individuals. Heteronormativity refers to the normalisation of heterosexuality as the only legitimate form of sexuality, profoundly affecting various areas of social life, including interpersonal interactions, career development, mental health, and public opinion. In other words, heteronormativity represents 'the privileged and normalised view of heterosexuality' (Usai et al. 2022; 3). It manifests itself each time there is an assumption that everyone is heterosexual during social interactions or processes: 'Because it is embedded in societal institutions and propagated through socialisation and other widely held ideologies, it is prevalent among both cis-hetero and LGBTIQ+ individuals' (van der Toorn et al. 2020; 160). The framework of heteronormativity challenges traditional standards related to sexuality, family, marriage, and broader social structures.

In any society, heteronormativity shapes the broader sociopolitical context, including public attitudes toward LGBTIQ+ rights, levels of social acceptance, and legislative frameworks. These factors, in turn, influence individuals' decisions to migrate. Heteronormativity also significantly impacts how migrants are received in the host country, affecting their integration success and ability to adapt to everyday life in the new environment. The level of heteronormativity can undermine asylum claims, as research shows that queer migrants often need to make 'appropriate' disclosures about their sexual identity to migration officials. Claims made by queer individuals are frequently rejected due to migration workers' reliance on stereotypes and heteronormative assumptions (Rehaag 2017; Shaw and Verghese 2022; 2).

Wimark's analysis of the domestication of queer asylum seekers uncovers underlying assumptions about heteronormativity in society that affect migration processes and management structures, including housing policies. This leaves queer individuals vulnerable to exploitation and unsafe living conditions (Wimark 2020). Similarly, Nguyen (2021) discusses the political economy of heteronormativity, linking it to neoliberal capitalism, in which societal norms dictate the perception of queer identities, thereby influencing migration trajectories.

Heteronormativity, which is perpetuated by various institutions such as religion, culture, and family, and supported by systems of patriarchy, racism, and political and economic structures, limits individual lives (Murray 2014; Ward and Schneider 2009). As J. van der Toorn and colleagues observe, 'Heteronormativity not only exists in the collective minds of people but is also ingrained in the very fabric of our social, legal, economic, political, educational, and religious institutions' (van der Toorn et al. 2020; 161). Heteronormativity is significant not only in social interactions but also in the structural conditions shaped by various institutions within society.

This paper focuses on and examines the role of religion within the social framework that helps sustain and reinforce heteronormativity. Research shows that religion can shape perceptions of discrimination and influence the experiences of individuals in minority groups (Ghaffari and Çiftçi 2010). Heteronormativity is frequently underpinned by religious ideologies, since numerous religions promote conventional gender roles. In this context, religiosity is frequently correlated with heteronormative attitudes and possible prejudices against sexual minorities (van der Toorn et al. 2020; 161). Various studies analysing gender politics in public discourse produced by religious figures highlight the active role of religion in upholding traditional roles for men and women, as well as traditional (heterosexual) family models (Szwed and Zielinska 2017). Furthermore, other studies indicate that Catholicism has a significant impact on gender politics (Case 2011; Graff 2014; Kuhar and Patternote 2017), aiming to ensure the privilege and sustainability of traditional gender roles, and thus sustain heteronormativity. For instance, in Lithuania, the Catholic Church plays a crucial role in reinforcing heteronormative attitudes within society. As a primary supporter of tradition and morality in Lithuania, the Church has consistently resisted the recognition of same-sex relationships and sex education at schools, framing these issues as threats to national and family values (Ališauskienė et al. 2025; Pocė and Skulte 2023).

Overall, the intersection of identities, along with the socio-political and religious context of the host country, profoundly shapes migrants' lived experiences. This influences their access to resources, social acceptance, and personal integration. In Lithuania, the lack of legal recognition of equal opportunities for LGBTIQ+ individuals, the negative portrayal of the LGBTIQ+ community in public discourse (Jurgaitė 2022) and current public resistance—especially from religious agents—against the term 'gender' in the Istanbul Convention and the equal rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals (Pocė and Skulte 2023) create conditions that provide a significant case study to analyse how intersectionality and heteronormativity manifest in concrete ways, shaping the motivations and experiences of queer migrants in Lithuania.

## Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten LGBTIQ+ individuals who emigrated from Lithuania to Western European countries and the USA, as well as ten LGBTIQ+ individuals who immigrated to Lithuania from Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (see Table 1). The participants, aged 23 to 44, included four women, one trans non-binary person, and fifteen men. Their religious identities varied widely, although most defined themselves as non-religious. Most participants had university degrees, while two had discontinued their studies and one was pursuing admission to a university. All Lithuanian participants possessed long-term permits to stay in Western countries. In contrast, the migrants in Lithuania held work, study, or asylum seeker permits: five had temporary permits, two had permanent permits, and three were awaiting decisions from the Migration Department regarding their residency in Lithuania.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of research participants

<b>Emigrated from Lithuania</b>				
<i>Changed Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Host country</i>	<i>Religion</i>
Dominykas	29	M	United Kingdom	An atheist, grew up in a Catholic family
Tomas	29	M	United Kingdom	Non-religious, grew up in a Catholic family
Rimas	29	M	United Kingdom	An atheist, grew up in a Catholic family
Vytautas	29	M	Belgium	Non-religious, grew up in a Catholic family
Giedrius	44	M	USA	Religious, Catholic, grew up in a Catholic family
Giedrė	40	W	Sweden	Non-religious, but is a believer, grew up in a Catholic family
Saulė	42	W	Sweden	Religious, spiritual, Catholic, grew up in a Catholic family
Linus	39	M	Sweden	Believer, but not religious, did not mention the religious situation in his upbringing
Aušra	40	W	Denmark	Believer, but not religious, did not mention the religious situation in his upbringing
Rytis	40	M	France	Pantheist, grew up in a Catholic family
<b>Immigrated to Lithuania</b>				
<i>Changed Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Home country</i>	<i>Religious identity</i>
Mark	24	M	Iraq	An atheist, grew up in a Muslim family
Lukas	24	M	Iraq	An atheist, grew up in a Muslim family
Theo	30	M	Cameroon	Not practising, but believes in God, grew up in a Christian family
Valerija	29	Trans-non binary	Cameroon	Non-religious, grew up in a Protestant family
Vadim	26	M	Russia	Non-religious, grew up in an Orthodox family

Georgijus	25	M	Russia	Spiritual, tried Pagan, Baptist Churches, grew up in a Neopagan family
Anna	29	W	Georgia	Religious, explored various religious traditions and movements, culturally is Christian, but can't identify with one religion, grew up in an Orthodox family
Romanas	35	M	Belarus	An atheist, grew up in an Orthodox family
Igor	23	M	Belarus	Non-religious, grew up in a non-religious family
Alex	31	M	Belarus	Identifies as Orthodox, but not religious, grew up in an Orthodox family

The invitation to participate in the research was disseminated through both closed and public Lithuanian LGBTIQ+ social media groups, as well as on the website of a Lithuanian non-governmental organisation focused on LGBTIQ+ equal rights advocacy. Additionally, the snowball method was employed to increase participation among Lithuanian queer emigrants living abroad, as they shared the research invitation within their networks. It's important to highlight that locating queer immigrants in Lithuania was a complex process that prioritised participants' consent and safety. Non-governmental organisations with personal connections to the participants played a crucial role in recruitment. Researchers received contact information of participants only after they were fully informed about the research and had given their consent to participate. This ethical approach was essential, as many participants initially felt insecure about sharing their stories and experiences. Therefore, ensuring confidentiality and anonymising the information provided by research participants was critical to protect their identities in any publications. Before conducting the interviews, establishing a safe and trustworthy environment was particularly important. This included outlining the research objectives, explaining the intended use of the collected information, and clarifying that the research was not related to the processes or decisions of migration officials. The study was conducted in Lithuania from May to November 2023.

A semi-structured interview method was employed to explore topics relevant to the research, providing participants with the freedom to share their migration narratives. Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structure and openness, making them a suitable method for examining the sensitive experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals (Kallio et al. 2016).

The interview questions were categorized into five main sections: (1) Information about the participant (sociodemographic characteristics, sexual identity, religiosity); (2) The intersection of sexual and religious identities (interrelations and changes related to these identities after migration); (3) Motives for migration (main reasons and expectations regarding the host



country); (4) Integration into the new country and current life situation (challenges, new opportunities, migrant identity); and (5) Possibilities for returning to the home country.

## **Queer Migration Experiences: Intersected Identities, Heteronormativity and Religion**

To investigate how intersectionality, heteronormativity, and religion shape the migration experiences of queer individuals in Lithuania, the analysis is structured around three thematic categories: (1) intertwined motives for migration; (2) migration experiences in Lithuania concerning intersectional identities; and (3) the role of religion in the experiences of queer migrants. To highlight the differences in migration trajectories and patterns between two distinct groups—Lithuanians living in Western countries and migrants who have arrived in Lithuania from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa—the research findings are divided into two subsections, each focusing on the migration experiences of one group.

### ***Narratives of queer Lithuanians residing in Western countries***

#### ***Intertwined motives for migration***

Most research participants who left Lithuania cited practical reasons for their departure. They migrated for better study conditions, to experience different cultures and countries, and to pursue wider career opportunities. Several had moved because their partners relocated to another country. Only a few participants identified homophobia as a primary factor motivating their migration. For example, Saulė (42, living in Sweden) indicated that homophobia in Lithuania was a primary reason for her decision to migrate, along with the desire for a better life for her autistic child. Another participant shared that the general conservatism in Lithuania influenced his choice to leave: ‘I just didn’t see myself as a homosexual man [in Lithuania]’ (40, living in France).

However, many research participants noted that the freedom to express their sexual identity was a crucial reason for their migration, even if it was not articulated as a rational motive but as a deeper personal need that provided significant comfort. As Vytautas remarked, ‘However, if you look deeper, it’s clear that it was important for me to feel free in terms of my sexual identity. Not to have to be afraid and hide’ (29, living in Belgium). Similarly, Aušra was motivated by the institutionalisation of LGBTIQ+ rights in national law and policy, explaining, ‘Of course, it was tempting to live in a country where same-sex marriage is recognised. Where it is not an issue anymore’ (40, living in Denmark).

For some, the possibility of freely expressing their sexual identity became evident only after migration, when they encountered a sociopolitical context that offered greater opportunities for self-expression and identity formation. As Vytautas reflected, ‘When I left, I didn’t think at all that [sexual identity] was affecting me. Now I realise that leaving has given me a lot to understand my identity’ (29, living in Belgium).



Thus, the motivations for migration appear to be multiple, overlapping, and complex. For some, migration even reshaped their sexual identities and practices, as noted by Carrillo (2004). And as Mole states, '<...> an individual's sexual or gender identity can *indirectly* or *subconsciously* influence their decision to migrate even if this is not declared as a key motivating factor' (Mole 2021; 4). However, we can conclude that in most cases, the decision to leave was influenced by the lack of LGBTIQ+ rights in Lithuania.

### *Experiencing intersectional identities*

All Lithuanian informants in this study were white, identified either as Christians or as non-believers, held university degrees, and resided in large metropolitan areas. This relatively homogeneous sociodemographic profile suggests a concentration of participants within more privileged social strata, where cultural diversity is generally more visible and socially accepted in the broader sociocultural and political context. As a result, their adaptation processes benefited from certain privileges associated with intersectionality (Dhoest 2015), which facilitated their integration into the host countries. It is essential to recognise that intersectionality also affects migrants whose journeys unfold in Europe. For instance, research on North-to-North queer migration concludes that a sense of belonging is influenced by intersecting social, cultural, and economic privileges such as whiteness, masculinity, and nationality (Sólveigar- og Guðmundsdóttir 2023b).

When discussing their sexual identity, Lithuanians did not report experiencing discrimination in their host countries. According to these migrants, although issues related to discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals and a rise in far-right nationalism, which reinforces negative attitudes towards LGBTIQ+, are still present, their host countries (the UK, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, the USA, and France) provide better conditions and more opportunities for individuals to come out and express their sexual identity. The sociopolitical climate in the largest cities of Western countries is more progressive regarding LGBTIQ+ rights, with being queer normalised by law rather than perceived as threatening. As Giedre expressed, 'There is a legitimate relationship; no one has the right to insult me or question me in any way' (40, living in Sweden). Lithuanians discovered more liberal sociopolitical contexts with legally established equal rights for LGBTIQ+ individuals, fostering a more positive public attitude and creating a more inclusive and accepting social environment compared to the context in Lithuania.

However, the prevailing heteronormativity in Lithuania significantly impacted the experiences of LGBTIQ+ migrants, particularly regarding legal and societal acceptance. Many Lithuanians perceived homophobic attitudes to be more pronounced in Lithuania compared to their host countries. Most migrants feel unable to express their sexual identities freely while in Lithuania or envision what it would be like to live there now. As Saulė stated, 'I see that in Lithuania there is a particular fight against the LGBT community as if it were some kind of political enemy' (42, living in Sweden). Many research participants noted that numerous queer individuals fear coming out in Lithuania. They often hesitate to express their sexual identi-

ties through clothing, makeup, hairstyles, or even simple gestures like holding hands with a partner in public, due to the fear of discrimination or exclusion. Vytautas shared that he can hug his partner in public in the host country, but the fear comes naturally as soon as he crosses the Lithuanian border: ‘You can’t be free.’ (29, living in Belgium). According to participants, queer people in Lithuania often feel complex emotions; they may remain silent while also being cautious about their sexual orientation and gender identity. As Dominykas expressed: ‘Many people are not open about their sexual orientation or are out but don’t want to be part of the LGBT community. This also seems to me to be internationalised homophobia’ (29, living in the UK). This silence and the inability to express sexual identity can lead to mental health issues. Rytis, along with most participants, spoke about the mental health struggles resulting from hiding their sexual identities: ‘This is what pushed me into depression because I felt different, like I was living in a closed bubble’ (40, living in France).

Heteronormative discourses heavily influence policies, social acceptance, and individual choices within Lithuanian society. The absence of protected same-sex partnership laws, poor conditions for same-sex couples with children, and widespread negative public opinion reflect deeply rooted heteronormative assumptions that prioritise heterosexual relationships as the societal norm. This is the primary reason most research participants do not consider returning to Lithuania. For instance, Linas articulated the need to create ‘social bubbles’ as a survival strategy, suggesting that the heteronormative pressures in Lithuanian society compel LGBTIQ+ individuals to withdraw or conceal their identities to avoid discrimination. He remarked, ‘If you want to live a good life in Lithuania, you need to have strong nerves or create your social bubble’ (39, living in Sweden). Conservative cultural paradigms also continue to shape attitudes toward LGBTIQ+ rights, often resisting progress. Some Lithuanians expressed that LGBTIQ+ activism is not robust enough and that the sex-negative attitudes lingering from the Soviet era still affect contemporary Lithuania, indicating a need for further changes toward equal LGBTIQ+ rights. Rytis believed, ‘<...> there is no change in Lithuania regarding it [LGBTIQ+ rights]. I think that Lithuania should make more progress. Mentality and beliefs should change’ (40, living in France).

During the interviews, migrants were asked to describe their perceptions of safeness for LGBTIQ+ individuals. They indicated that having a paid job, friends, supportive surroundings, and, for some, LGBTIQ+ social activities contribute to their sense of safeness. However, the most crucial factor for their sense of security, according to the research participants, is the existence of legally established equal rights for LGBTIQ+ individuals, along with a positive public attitude. For instance, Vytautas expressed that ‘Perhaps the first thing is equality laws, including for hate crimes. The second thing that matters is the attitude of society’ (29, living in Belgium).

### *Religion and queer migrants’ experiences*

Migrants’ narratives on their migration experiences provided valuable insights into the role of religion in migration processes. Most research participants, raised in Catholic families,

identified themselves as atheists or non-believers and currently do not have any relationship with a particular religious community. Just a few of them said they are still practising religion. However, they all expressed that the dominant religion—Catholicism—significantly contributes to the prevalence of homophobic attitudes in Lithuanian society. They perceive Catholicism as a force that upholds conservatism and anti-LGBTIQ+ discourse, failing to reflect diversity and equal rights. For instance, Rimas stated, ‘[Catholicism] is anti-LGBT in its dogmas. <...> religion, especially Catholicism, is very conservative, especially on sexual issues...’ (29, living in the UK). Similarly, Tomas remarked about how religion makes an impact on homophobic culture ‘<...> a lot of internationalised homophobia stems from a culture deeply rooted in religious narratives’ (29, living in the UK).

As other studies have shown (Case 2011; Graff 2014; Kuhar and Patternote 2017), Catholicism exerts a significant influence on gender politics, aiming to preserve traditional gender roles and maintain heteronormativity. This is evident in Lithuania, where Catholic agencies and religiously oriented right-wing politicians advocate for the concept of the traditional family. Research participants, observing strong religious support for heteronormative attitudes in Lithuania, identify this resistance as a significant reason why they feel safer in host countries.

### ***Narratives of queer migrants who arrived in Lithuania from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa***

#### *Intertwined motives for migration*

For most research participants who migrated to Lithuania from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, the reasons for their migration were closely tied to homophobia and a lack of safety for being queer in their home countries. Mark from Iraq shared that the fear for his life was the main reason for his migration: ‘Because of the fear of being persecuted for being a member of the LGBTQ community’ (24, from Iraq). Similarly, Theo from Cameroon stated that his primary motive for migrating was to escape the fear of punishment or imprisonment: ‘I want to feel free about my sexual orientation. And I want to find a place where they can accept me as I am’ (30, from Cameroon). These individuals indicated that sexual identity disclosure in their home countries was unsafe, as they faced the threat of imprisonment or even death due to their sexual orientation. For instance, Vadim (26, from Russia) expressed that it was not safe for him to return to Russia as an openly gay man.

Additionally, although some participants migrated primarily because of the political regimes in Russia and Belarus, seeking freedom regarding their sexual orientation was also an important reason. A few migrants mentioned that they chose to move to Lithuania for better career opportunities and educational prospects.

All in all, these narratives highlight the complex and overlapping motives for migration, which include factors related to sexual identity as well as political and economic circumstances. The notion that queer individuals migrate solely for economic reasons is challenged by current research, which emphasises emotional motivations for migration (Stella et al. 2018). Im-

migrants fleeing homophobic environments and oppressive political regimes primarily seek a more liberal sociopolitical climate that guarantees greater LGBTIQ+ rights and protections. Lithuania, the nearest European country for them, has emerged as a potential destination that aligns with these expectations, offering the possibility of a more accepting environment.

### *Experiencing intersectional identities*

Research participants from Eastern countries (Russia, Belarus, Georgia, Iraq) and Africa (Cameroon) provided a nuanced evaluation of Lithuania's environment regarding LGBTIQ+ equal rights and safety. They initially stated that Lithuania is less homophobic than their home countries, where negative portrayals of LGBTIQ+ individuals in public discourse, hostile public attitudes, and even violence and imprisonment for being queer are still widespread. For instance, Igor mentioned that compared to Belarus, Lithuania shows promising trends regarding LGBTIQ+ equal rights: '<...> people are able to find communities, to feel comfortable' (23, from Belarus). All research participants, whether they migrated to Lithuania through safe routes or illegally, reported not experiencing any clear discrimination or fear for their lives due to their sexual orientation and generally felt safe.

However, this sense of safety is not absolute. Queer migrants encountered negative attitudes, emotional pressure, microaggressions, and even insults when they attempted to express their sexual identity in Lithuania. Mark conveyed that even though holding hands with a partner is not legally punishable, he still feels apprehensive about doing so in public: '<...> even in Vilnius [the capital of Lithuania], you can't hold hands or anything, I didn't. <...> But people will not kill you for being gay' (24, from Iraq). Also, according to Valerija, 'Lithuania is very, very homophobic <...>, in another country, LGBT people are more accepted' (29, from Cameroon). Some immigrants also observed propaganda against LGBTIQ+ individuals in Lithuania: 'State-wise, it [LGBTIQ+ equal rights in Lithuania] could be better <...> Lithuania still has a lot of LGBT propaganda' (Igor, 23, from Belarus).

These negative attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ individuals also impacted migrants' initial experiences in Lithuania. During detention, they faced not only systemic issues, such as inadequate living conditions, poor food, and constant transfers between camps, but also discrimination linked to their queer identities. These experiences highlight how Lithuania's migration institutions, which were unprepared for arrivals through the Belarusian route, faced difficulties addressing the specific vulnerabilities of migrants whose identities intersect with both sexual minority status and precarious migration. From an intersectional perspective, the experiences of these migrants in Lithuania reveal how overlapping forms of marginalisation—stemming from their migrant status, sexual orientation, and irregular entry route through Belarus—compound one another. Theo noted that while migration officers acted professionally during the detention process, some border guards used offensive language (swearing) and made derogatory gestures.

It's important to emphasise that queer migrants from Eastern countries and Africa face even more significant challenges in adapting to life in Lithuania. In addition to their sexual

identity and migrant status, they also contend with other intersectional identities characterised by features such as darker skin colour, financial difficulties, limited educational opportunities and language barriers.

The narratives of the research participants align with other analyses and reports done in Lithuania, which reveal instances of racism and discrimination based on ethnic origin, as well as homophobia and transphobia experienced by refugees and fear of deportation (Andrijauskaitė et al. 2023; ILGA-Europe 2025). Besides facing challenges such as discrimination, language and cultural barriers, limited access to healthcare, ignorance about their experiences, and instances of violence and abuse, queer migrants may deal with mental health issues related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics (Namer and Razum 2018; Beltran 2022; Gilbert 2022; Chbat et al. 2023; Kahn et al. 2018; Abbey 2022). Although many queer migrants seek safety and greater life opportunities, the act of migration does not always ensure safety or protection from homophobic attitudes. In fact, many continue to face homophobia, transphobia, and structural inequality, even in countries that offer stronger legal protections (Mole 2021).

Despite existing homophobic attitudes, many migrants who arrived in Lithuania reported feeling safe. For instance, Anna stated she feels secure because she believes no one will harm her physically: ‘<...> maybe people around me are not OK with my sexual identity, but they are not aggressive, you know, no one will attack me and beat me. And you know, and that’s enough for me for now <...>’ (29, from Georgia). Others, like Igor, expressed affection for Lithuania, feeling a sense of freedom: ‘I feel more liberated and freer to choose how to express myself’ (23, from Belarus). Also, Romanas spoke about laws in Lithuania providing a sense of security: ‘The laws in Lithuania are equal for everybody, opportunities are equal for everybody, no discrimination based on original race, or religion, or education or something like that, so I feel comfortable with that’ (35, from Belarus).

In the opinion of queer immigrants, equal LGBTIQ+ rights and an inclusive society would provide them safeness and allow them the freedom to be themselves, make their own decisions, and design their lives without fear of exclusion or discrimination. As Anna puts it, ‘When I wake up, I do not feel worried that I will be abused or physically attacked’ (29, from Georgia).

In conclusion, the socio-political climate in Lithuania provides queer immigrants with a certain degree of safeness and reduces feelings of persecution when compared to their homophobic home countries. However, this sense of safety is uneven, as they still witness public backlash and prejudice regarding LGBTIQ+ rights in Lithuania.

### *Religion and queer migrants’ experiences*

Immigrants in Lithuania have expressed a complex relationship with religion in the context of their migration experiences. On one hand, migrants from highly religious contexts identify religion as a contributing factor to the homophobia in their home countries. For example, Anna noted that the majority of people in her country hold homophobic views, stating, ‘<...>

the Orthodox Church itself tries to, you know, organise the violence against... against LGBT people' (29, from Georgia). Similarly, Mark remarked he would never return to his home country or live in any other highly religious country because '<...> religious countries don't accept gay people' (24, from Iraq).

In these individuals' home countries, religious worldviews, values, and norms that do not support equal rights for LGBTIQ+ individuals are deeply entrenched and often formally legitimised. Dominant religious groups tend to exclude queer individuals, and this exclusionary stance contributes to public resistance against LGBTIQ+ rights. Specific religious communities can establish power structures that foster microaggressions (Sólveigar-og Guðmundsdóttir 2018; 2023a). It is important to note that, while fleeing oppression, many immigrants have found Lithuania to be largely non-religious, where religious views do not significantly influence legal penalties regarding queer identities.

On the other hand, their relationship with religion became complicated as they grapple with feelings of having sinned against their God and violated religious dogmas and values. Most migrants identify themselves as atheists or non-believers; however, for some participants, their religious identities and practices changed upon accepting their sexual identities. Several individuals even attempted to change their sexual orientation to align with religious norms, often suffering humiliation from relatives and peers. After accepting their sexual identities, most participants distanced themselves from their religious practices. For instance, Theo identifies as Christian but has a strained relationship with his faith because he feels it does not accept his sexual identity: '<...> I am Christian. But I'm not practising, because I think that God doesn't accept what I'm doing' (30, from Cameroon).

Therefore, the relationship of most interviewed immigrants with religion is marked by accusations of homophobia in their home countries and the internal struggles of not fitting into their religious communities.

## Discussion

Narratives of Lithuanians living in Western countries, as well as those of migrants who have arrived in Lithuania from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, suggest that the motivations for queer migration are multifaceted (Marnell et al. 2021). Initially, economic and educational factors may be perceived as typical motivations that do not fully capture the essence of queer migration (Gorman-Murray 2009). However, rational reasons—such as the pursuit of better education, career opportunities, or escaping oppressive political regimes—are intertwined with the desire to live safely and freely as a queer person without discriminatory experiences and homophobic attitudes. This insight is particularly evident in the narratives of Lithuanian migrants who moved to Western countries. In contrast, for most migrants who fled their home countries in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, or Africa to arrive in Lithuania, the primary motivation was to escape insecurity or severe repercussions (such as death, imprisonment, or social exclusion) due to their queer identities.



Queer migration, even when motivated by practical concerns, can also provide an opportunity for individuals to understand and reclaim their sexual identities, leading to self-affirmation and reinvention. Research shows that queer migration often creates safe environments that encourage individuals to come out (Baas 2019) and offers 'greater freedom in terms of their sexuality' (Stella et al. 2018; 68). LGBTIQ+ migrants generally reassess their sexual identity and develop a more positive self-perception in their new countries (Vuckovic Juros 2022).

Migrants in less homophobic host countries found greater respect and acceptance for LGBTIQ+ rights compared to their countries of origin. Studies addressing the topic of queer migration from East to West emphasise the quest for security and a sense of normality, highlighting the differences in legal and political contexts between home and host countries (Stella and Gawlewicz 2021; Sólveigar- og Guðmundsdóttir 2018). Research participants noted that, while everyday discrimination and homophobic attitudes can still occur at an interpersonal level in Western countries, LGBTIQ+ individuals enjoy more equal rights and opportunities.

This trend is evident among migration flows from East to West. For instance, one study found that Polish queer migrants view Western Europe as 'diverse,' 'open,' and 'tolerant' (Szulc 2021). Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe and Africa homosexuality and transgender identities are even defined as criminal offences by law, severely restricting the expression of queer sexual identities. LGBTIQ+ individuals from regions such as the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and North Africa migrate to Europe to escape persecution due to their sexual and/or gender identities. They are drawn to Western countries that are perceived to be more accepting of LGBTIQ+ individuals, as evidenced by legal recognition of same-sex marriage and other rights for non-normative households (Alessi et al. 2018; Quah 2023; Human Rights Campaign 2021). The key difference is that Lithuanians have had the opportunity to reinvent their sexual identities in welcoming Western countries, whereas migrants from highly homophobic Eastern and African nations are only beginning to experience the freedom in Lithuania to exist without fear of persecution or punishment.

Assessing Lithuania in the context of discriminatory experiences and homophobic attitudes, both Lithuanian emigrants and immigrants from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa perceive Lithuania as a country characterised by prevailing heteronormativity. They have witnessed or experienced homophobic attitudes, microaggressions, and public prejudice against queer people. However, migrants from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa have a more positive view of Lithuania compared to their highly homophobic home countries. They seem to adopt a coping strategy that can be summarised as 'You can't hold hands with your partner, but at least you won't be killed.' This strategy encourages individuals to compare their highly homophobic home countries with less homophobic host countries and to accept a certain level of safety. While they may not be able to express their sexual identity freely, at least they will not face accusations or harm.

Both the broader motives for migration and integration experiences are related to a hostile social and political environment toward sexual minorities. Lithuania faces challenges in providing equal rights for LGBTI individuals (ILGA-Europe 2025), and public tolerance



of homosexuality remains low (Poushter and Kent 2020). Moreover, the rise of right-wing populism and anti-gender campaigns reinforces conservative attitudes regarding gender politics and the definition of traditional family structures (Juchnevičiūtė 2023). Such conditions play a significant role in sustaining heteronormative attitudes among Lithuanians and influencing queer migration experiences to and from the country. The social and political environment in Lithuania shapes migration trajectories and experiences; Lithuanian migrants often do not consider returning to Lithuania due to the low level of recognition of LGBTIQ+ rights. At the same time, migrants residing in Lithuania question the country's ability to provide space for freely expressing sexual identity.

However, these experiences are not solely influenced by a migrant's sexual identity; other socio-demographic characteristics also affect their integration processes. During interviews, all Lithuanians identified themselves as migrants and discussed issues related to this identity, such as nationalism in host societies and, in some cases, language barriers. However, their adherence to the sociocultural context of host countries—particularly in terms of whiteness, strong educational backgrounds, and cultural similarities—affords them certain advantages that mitigate some critical negative experiences associated with migration and integration (Sólveigar- og Guðmundsdóttir 2023b).

Conversely, for queer migrants residing in Lithuania, sexual identity poses one of several challenges, but it is not the primary issue. The adaptation experiences of these migrants are largely dependent on their legal status. In other words, their lived reality in the host country is shaped mainly by legal factors and, in some cases, by the political environment, such as the growing influence of conservative right-wing politicians in government. These significant integration challenges are further exacerbated by financial difficulties, language barriers, and a lack of opportunities for education and career development (Chossière 2021). Additionally, darker skin colour can add to the challenges of successful adaptation and the process of building a new life in the host country.

In Lithuania, an intersectional approach is particularly relevant. A 2025 public opinion poll revealed that 45 per cent of Lithuanian respondents would not want to live next door to homosexuals. The same survey indicated that 51 per cent would not want to live with Muslims and 43 per cent would not want to live next to migrants from Central Asia (Avil Ileri and Trunov 2025). Therefore, intersecting identities are significant in shaping the mobility, acceptance, and integration experiences that queer migrants encounter both before leaving Lithuania and in host countries. Socio-demographic characteristics impact queer migrants' ability to find safety and access resources in their host countries (Diab and Samneh 2024). Thus, differences in migration experiences due to intersecting identities are often unstable, overlapping, and context-dependent (Wieland and Alessi 2021).

From this perspective, the expression and role of religious identity also depend on the existing context. On one hand, religious identity can significantly contribute to community support during the migration process. Various studies (Lyck-Bowen 2020; Hamdi et al. 2024)

have shown that faith-based organisations provide support mechanisms for vulnerable migrants. On the other hand, religion can reinforce heteronormative attitudes in society by supporting the concept of traditional family structures, defined as a union between a man and a woman. Both emigrants and immigrants have acknowledged the impact of religion in upholding these heteronormative attitudes. Lithuanian migrants have noted that opposition to LGBTIQ+ equal rights in Lithuania is politicised, with the Catholic Church playing a significant role in promoting traditional gender roles and thus sustaining heteronormativity. This has been highlighted in other research that discusses the active role of the Catholic Church in Lithuania in supporting right-wing politics and opposing LGBTIQ+ rights (Ališauskienė et al. 2025; Juchnevičiūtė et al. 2023; Skulte et al. 2025).

However, most migrants coming from highly religious countries perceive Lithuania as a largely non-religious place where religion does not significantly influence debates about LGBTIQ+ rights. Their perspectives, however, may be shaped by their limited understanding of the new sociopolitical environment, short integration periods, and language barriers.

Thus, heteronormativity in Lithuania is not only interpersonal but is also supported by various institutions within the social structure. This heteronormativity, rooted in social institutions such as politics, religion, education, family, and culture, shapes the experiences of queer individuals (van der Toorn et al. 2020; Murray 2014; Ward and Schneider 2009). For queer migrants, a reduction in structural heteronormativity—such as the establishment of legal LGBTIQ+ rights—could lead to a decrease in interpersonal heteronormativity and thereby reduce homophobia and discriminatory attitudes in society.

Overall, these narratives show that each migration story is unique; therefore, these personal narratives cannot generalise the experiences of all queer migrants, as research participants came from specific regions and settled predominantly in Western countries. Migration trajectories from different regions can significantly influence experiences of detention and the adaptation process. Additionally, other sociodemographic factors, such as age, education, and economic status, shape these migration experiences. Keeping this in mind, the paper analysed the narratives of twenty migrants with diverse backgrounds to extract essential insights into their migration experiences and understand how the Lithuanian sociopolitical context shapes queer migration processes.

## Conclusion

This paper discussed how intersectionality, heteronormativity, and religion shape the migration patterns of both Lithuanian LGBTIQ+ emigrants and queer migrants arriving in Lithuania. The narratives of these migrants reveal that the motivations for queer migration are complex and multi-layered. However, these motivations are largely influenced by the sociopolitical environment of the migrants' countries of origin, particularly regarding the status of LGBTIQ+ rights. Migrants from highly homophobic countries often flee in search of a certain, even if minimal, level of safety in nearby European states like Lithuania, where their sexual orientation is not met with persecution or legal punishment. Conversely, migrants from less

homophobic countries, such as Lithuania, typically choose Western contexts that offer more established LGBTIQ+ rights and exhibit lower levels of heteronormativity in both legal and public spheres. Additionally, the intersection of various identities can provide some advantages for Lithuanian migrants in host countries, but different identities complicate the integration process for queer migrants in Lithuania. Sexual identity with other sociodemographic characteristics, such as migrant status and unstable economic conditions, also complicates the integration process for many queer immigrants in Lithuania. Furthermore, migrant's narratives helped to grasp the specific role of religion in sustaining the heteronormative attitudes and anti-LGBTIQ+ discourse. In specific contexts, such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, religion is associated with legally enshrined homophobia and high levels of heteronormativity. In Lithuania, both interpersonal and structural heteronormativity, supported by the agendas of various religious actors, influence the migration trajectories and integration challenges faced by queer individuals.

These insights encourage further analysis of the intersections and changes in queer migrants' sexual and religious identities concerning exclusion and acceptance.

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