

KAUNAS JONAS JABLONSKIS HIGH SCHOOL

**INTERNATIONAL TOLERANCE DAY (NOVEMBER 16)
REPORT OF THE IB IMYP1 CLASS:**

**ISSUES CONCERNING
THE LITHUANIAN LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY**

Kaunas, 2020

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SUMMARY

We, the students of the IMYP1 class, decided to do a project for Tolerance Day. By voting we agreed on researching a topic about the LGBTQ+ Community. We shared our ideas, split into teams and started working. We had five groups and a few other people did smaller tasks individually.

First, the Interview Teams started working. They prepared ten questions and found ten people who were willing anonymously to share their stories and experiences of what it means to be “different than others”. We asked questions about their personal identities, such as which pronouns they would prefer and about how sure and confident they felt about their sexualities. In addition to that, there were also questions about their personal experiences, for example, how their family and friends reacted when they “came out” to them or if they have experienced bullying. Also, we inquired about their opinions on LGBTQ+ community in Lithuania and same-sex marriage.

While the interviews were being done, the researchers’ team gathered ideas and did their research. They found out information about people’s rights within the LGBTQ+ community covering political aspects, history of the legal status of homosexuals including attitudes towards homosexuality in society and discrimination. In addition, the group worked on finding out about the first Pride parade in Lithuania and its media portrayal. The most important and useful information was covered which everyone should know.

In conclusion, this is quite a sensitive theme for most of the young people as they get judged a lot from their friends, strangers or even their family for choosing not to be “normal”. Many Lithuanians have a bad opinion about the members of the LGBTQ+ community. The problem is lack of education about it. Seeing this every day, we decided to talk about it and spread knowledge that will hopefully change other people’s attitude to this topic.

SANTRAUKA LIETUVIŲ KALBA

Mes, IMYP1 klasės mokiniai, nusprendėme sukurti Tolerancijos dienai projektą. Balsuodami pasirinkome temą apie LGBTQ+ bendruomenę Lietuvoje. Pasidalijome savo idėjomis, suskirstėme į komandas ir pradėjome dirbti. Buvo 5 grupės ir keletas žmonių, kurie atskirai darė mažesnius darbus.

Pirmiausia pradėjo dirbti interviu grupės. Jie paruošė 10 klausimų ir surado 10 žmonių, kurie norėtų anonimiškai pasidalinti savo istorijomis ir patirtimi apie buvimą „kitokiais nei dauguma“. Mes uždavėme klausimus apie jų tapatybę, pavyzdžiui, kaip jie norėtų, kad į juos kreiptųsi, ar jie yra tikri ir įsitikinę savo seksualine pakraipa ir kt. Be to, buvo klausimų apie jų asmeninę patirtį, pavyzdžiui, kaip jų šeima ir draugai reagavo, kai jie pasisakė, kad jiems patinka tos pačios lyties atstovai, taip pat ar yra patyrę patyčias. Taip pat jų nuomonė apie LGBTQ+ bendruomenę Lietuvoje ir tos pačios lyties asmenų santuokas.

Kol buvo atliekamas interviu, tyrėjų komanda rinko idėjas ir atliko tyrimus. Jie sužinojo informaciją apie LGBTQ+ bei žmogaus teises apskritai, apie politinius aspektus, taip pat homoseksualų teisinio statuso istoriją, įskaitant požiūrį į homoseksualumą visuomenėje, kitaip tariant, ar šie žmonės buvo diskriminuojami dėl to, kokių požiūrių jie yra. Be to, grupė dirbo ieškodama informacijos apie pirmąjį LGBTQ+ paradą Lietuvoje ir kaip jis buvo vaizduojamas žiniasklaidoje. Buvo aptarta svarbiausia ir naudingiausia informacija, kurią turėtų žinoti visi.

Apibendrinant galima pasakyti, kad tai yra gana svarbi tema daugumai jaunų žmonių, nes jie yra nepriimami tokie kokie yra savo draugų, nepažįstamų žmonių ar net savo šeimos narių tarpe, dėl savo kitoniškumo. Didžiulė dalis lietuvių yra neigiamai nusiteikę LGBTQ+ asmenų atžvilgiu, turi neigiamas išankstines nuostatas prieš šios bendruomenės narius. Pagrindinė problema yra nepakankamas švietimas. Matydami tai kasdien savo gyvenime, nusprendėme apie tai kalbėti ir skleisti žinią, kuri, tikimės, pakeis kitų požiūrį.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG AUF DEUTSCH

Wir, die Schüler der IMYP1 (9.) Klasse, haben uns entschieden ein Projekt zum Tag der Toleranz zu machen. Durch das Abstimmen haben wir uns auf das Thema LGBTQ+ Community geeinigt. Wir teilten unsere Ideen und teilten uns dann in Gruppen auf, und fingen an zu arbeiten. Wir hatten 5 Gruppen und ein paar andere Leute die alleine arbeiteten.

Als erstes, fing das Interview Team an zu arbeiten. Sie bereiteten zehn Fragen vor und fanden zehn Leute, die ihre Geschichten anonym über das "anders sein" erzählen wollten. Wir fragten sie über ihre Persönlichen Identitäten, z.B., wie man sie ansprechen soll und ob sie sich wohl in ihrer Sexualität fühlen. Noch dazu fragten wir sie über ihre persönlichen Erfahrungen im bezug zu, wie ihre Familien und Freunde reagierten als sie "raus kamen" und ob sie Erfahrungen mit Mobbing gemacht haben und auch ihre Meinung zu der LGBTQ+ Community in Litauen und Gleichgeschlechtliches Ehen.

Während die Interviews gemacht wurden, hat das Recherche Team ein Paar Ideen gesammelt und recharchiert. Sie fanden Information über die Rechte in der LGBTQ+ die den politischen Aspekt decken, die Geschichte über den legalen Status der Homosexuellen und auch die Einstellung gegenüber denen in der Gesellschaft und auch deren Diskrimination. Die Gruppe arbeitete auch am finden der ersten Parade in Litauen und wie die Medien sie aussehen lies. Die wichtigste und nuzvollste Information die enddeckt wurde war das jeder es wissen sollte.

Der Beschluss war das es ein sehr empfindliches Thema ist für die meisten jungen Leute, weil sie oft verurteilt werden von ihren Freunden, Fremden und manchmal auch von ihren Familien, weil sie sich entschlossen haben nicht "normal" zu sein. Ein großer Teil der litauischen Bevölkerung haben eine schlechte Meinung über die LGBTQ Community Mitglieder. Das Problem ist das fehlende Wissen darüber. Es jeden Tag zu sehen brang uns auf den Beschluss darüber zu reden und das Wissen zu verbreiten damit sich die Meinungen und Einstellung ändern.

INTRODUCTION

Our class, a group of 27 ninth-graders or as we are officially known, the IMYP1 class of Kaunas Jonas Jablonskis High School, decided to do a project for the International Tolerance Day, which is commemorated every year on November 16. We have chosen to speak about a complicated and much-discussed topic regarding the LGBTQ+¹ community in Lithuania, especially focusing on the LGBTQ+ youth. After selecting the topic for our project, we shared ideas and settled on splitting into groups: there were five teams in total, excluding a few people working on smaller parts of the project individually. Together we all agreed that this particular way the work will go smoother.

Nowadays, a big proportion of the younger generation faces bullying in a close environment because of their sexuality. Lithuanians are inexperienced in meeting, talking to, communicating with people of a different sexual orientation. Because of this, the people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community are unaccepted by their friends, teachers, strangers and even their family. Thus, people with “different” sexual orientations feel rejected by society and need to put on a mask to feel “normal”, to be accepted. It is a sensitive theme for quite a lot of people, as they are still trying to find their real selves. Therefore, by doing this project we intended to help people understand the situation others are in and be more supportive.

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Our work began as the Interview Group came up with various questions to ask the people that we wanted to find out more about. The members of the Interview Group needed to find people who would be willing to openly share their experiences and stories about being different from others. In total, with the help of the whole class, we have managed to find ten young people who were interviewed.

We have asked them ten questions (see Appendix A) about a wide variety of topics: the first question was about their sexuality. As a result, six of them identified themselves as bisexuals, the remaining ones were a queer male, asexual, lesbian and a queer gendered person. On top of that, some of them preferred to be unlabeled. The following question was what kind of pronouns people would prefer to use to describe themselves or which pronouns they would like to be called by. Most of them choose to be called their “usual” pronoun – she/her (for women) or he/him (for men), however, there were a couple that selected to be called they/them. Moving on, the next

¹ LGBTQ+ stands for “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other(s)”, i.e. non-heterosexual individuals.

question was about the age when they started to notice the attraction towards their preferred genders. Our survey participants began to understand their feelings towards the same gender in the early teenage years (most of them from about the age of twelve).

Next there were questions regarding the matter of respondents' "coming out"² to their friends and families. Most of them, six people, told only their friends, on the other hand, four speakers came out to their families as well. All of them got different reactions. In general, all of the respondents' friends were supportive, understanding and did not judge their friend. However, most of the family members were more homophobic and were not happy about this news. That may be the reason why a couple of the interviewed people mentioned that they are not planning on telling their parents about their sexuality. They do not trust them.

Of course, there are other reasons to keep one's sexual identity a secret, such as bullying, which brings us to the next question. 50% of the answers about bullying were positive, which means that half of all the respondents have experienced emotional and / or physical bullying because of their sexuality. The other half have not, but the numbers are quite high regardless. That leads us to make a worrying conclusion that one in two people with a "different" sexuality is in danger of getting bullied, based on our survey.

Another question was about the difficulties that a person (a teenager) with a different sexual identity may experience in modern society. The results were equal, meaning that 50% of the interviewed people said that "it is manageable" because of a few reasons: some of them mentioned that nobody knows about their sexuality and others told that they experience enough bullies in the past. It seems that at the moment, they do not care about hardly anyone's opinions.

The remaining 50% of the respondents said that there were significant problems for them as non-heterosexual individuals. The number is, in our opinion, too high. While overall being a teenager is hard, being an adolescent with a different sexuality is definitely more difficult. Such people cannot be themselves because of the narrow-minded or intolerant people.

Moving on, one of the last questions was about the LGBTQ+ community in Lithuania and their opinion about it. Most of the respondents said that in Lithuania this community is nice, supportive, understanding, accepting, embracing others and feels like a family. On the other hand, others had some complaints: some respondents said that the LGBTQ+ people need to be more

² The term "come out" is used by the LGBTQ+ community meaning "to reveal your non-heterosexual identity".

active in protests. The community needs more support from the government, social media, television, press and a higher amount of education in schools.

One of the questions asked the respondents about legalizing same-sex marriage in Lithuania. All of the answers were yes. There is no point to forbid marriage as love is all that matters. Or as other survey participants said that it does no harm to others and if they want to do it, they should as it is a basic human right to love whoever you want.

At last, the interviewees were asked if they were confident in their sexualities. Six answered yes and not only that, but they are really proud and do not try to suppress it because of others' reactions. Three of them are not as confident, considering there are quite a few reasons such as fear of judgment, not fully knowing their true identity and existing government policies. One person chose not to answer this question.

LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN LITHUANIA

The next step in doing our project was to find out the basic information about the LGBTQ+ community in Lithuania, focusing on the history, the LGBTQ+ rights, laws, impact on politics, attitudes towards homosexuality in society and so on. Naturally, we turned to the Internet to help us conduct research and reviewed many different sources trying to find out more about the LGBTQ+ situation in this country.

In the first part, the Project Research Group talked about the rights and how people in Lithuania face legal and social challenges by not experienced, non-LGBTQ+ citizens. At the time of researching information for this project (i.e. November, 2020), both male and female same-sex sexual activities are legal in Lithuania, but neither civil same-sex partnership nor same-sex marriage are available. It means that there is no legal recognition of same-sex couples in our country.³

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United Nations (UN) Cycle 1 of 2011 brought 15 recommendations for Lithuania regarding LGBT issues. Lithuania accepted 10 of these recommendations and the other 5 recommendations were moved to the national level for further assessment. In 2012 the Lithuanian government declared that all of these recommendations had

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Lithuania (date accessed: Nov 4, 2020)

already been implemented. Up to this day, they have not resulted in any concrete legislative or public policy measures.⁴

THE BALTIC PRIDE PARADES IN VILNIUS

Another theme that was discussed and that we thought might be of interest to people was about the first LGBTQ+ Parade in Lithuania (or the “Baltic Pride” Parade), organized by different LGBTQ+ organizations from the three Baltic States, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

In 2010, the Vilnius City Council allowed Lithuania’s first ever LGBTQ+ Pride Parade, the “Baltic Pride 2010”, to take place on May 8, 2010. A court stopped the parade from proceeding, with a heavy police presence. Baltic Pride 2010 took place anyway, with some violence from the opponents of gay rights. Twelve violent protesters were arrested.⁵ It is interesting, that since that time there were three more “Baltic Pride” Parades organized in Vilnius, in 2013, 2016 and 2019. Every time the parade takes place there seems to be more people participating (in many cases not only LGBTQ+ people, but many of the allies, or supporters) and every time this event is met with less and less violence and fewer opposers.

SITUATION OF THE LGBTQ+ RIGHTS TODAY

Our group thought that it would be interesting to find out something more about the history of the LGBTQ+ rights in Lithuania, so we reviewed the situation of the legal status of homosexuals from the historical perspective. It is not easy to find information about the LGBTQ+ people in Lithuania from earlier times, we have managed to research some of it.

After the occupation of Lithuania by the USSR in 1940, the law of the USSR came into force, in which homosexual relations were considered a crime. In June 2012, the “Order and Justice” fraction of the Seimas unsuccessfully proposed a project to hold a referendum on changing Article 38 of the Constitution to the following wording: “A family is formed by marriage. The family also comes from motherhood and fatherhood. The promotion of homosexual relationships

⁴ LGBT rights in Lithuania (2020). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Lithuania (date accessed: Nov 4, 2020)

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Lithuania#Pride_Parade_2010_in_Vilnius (date accessed: Nov 4, 2020). <http://www.tja.lt/index.php/en/projects/completed-projects/485-baltic-pride-2010> (date accessed: Nov 4, 2020)

is prohibited. The adoption of homosexuals is prohibited". They were not successful and no such changes have been implemented in the Constitution.

The registration of same-sex partnerships and marriages is not legalized in Lithuania still, but on January 11, 2019 the Constitutional Court ruled that Lithuania must grant a residence permit to same-sex couples who have entered into marriage in countries where same-sex marriage is legal.⁶

Even though some rights are favorable for the community, not everyone's attitudes towards homosexuality in society are positive. For example, the Lithuanian Lutheran religious community considers the church's approach to homosexual rights to be a challenge, and homosexual relations to be sinful. Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, however, is prohibited by law in Lithuania.

In Lithuania there is no possibility of entering into a marriage or partnership of persons of the same sex and the aim of the Constitution of the country is to restrict the concept of family to exclude same-sex couples; on the other hand, homosexuals in the country can exercise the right of peaceful assembly. According to some organizations and individuals, homosexuals in Lithuania have the same rights as other citizens.⁷

Citizens' thinking has a huge impact on media portrayal. Historically, the portrayals of the LGBTQ+ communities in media have been negative, reflecting the cultural intolerance of these individuals. However, from the 1990s to the present day, there has been an increase in the depictions of LGBT people, issues, and concerns within mainstream media.

Public opinion polls show that Lithuania is one of the most homophobic countries in Europe. Sexual minorities in Lithuania suffer from systematic discrimination and are subjected to hate speech within the Lithuanian media. Currently, there are many social media sites that allow

⁶ As of 2020, gay marriage or civil unions exist in 47 countries, including Estonia, Sweden, Germany and Finland, to mention a few of Lithuania's neighbours. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_status_of_same-sex_marriage (date accessed: Nov 12, 2020)

⁷ Homoseksualumas Lietuvoje. (2020). Wikipedia. https://lt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homoseksualumas_Lietuvoje (date accessed: Nov 6, 2020)

users to self-identify as non-binary. For example, the new gender options rolled out by Facebook during early 2014 include many different options for non-binary gendered individuals.⁸

CONCLUSIONS

It is common knowledge that, for the past few centuries, Lithuania has been under the occupation of the Russian empire and, later, by the USSR. As such, many people are subjected to Russia's propaganda and for a long time have seen being LGBTQ+ as a criminal act. Even now, there are people who have a distorted view of the situation, seeing the LGBTQ+ people as unnatural, mentally ill and some like, Lutheran religious community, even see them as a challenge.

We can also see this from our interviews, there it is said that those who came out to their parents have been met with negative reactions. As such some choose to not tell their sexuality to their family, creating even bigger gap between communities. That leads to misunderstanding and bullying, as we seen in interviews. The media does not help either, with the LGBTQ+ community often being subjected to systematic discrimination.

Still, there are some good improvements, such as social media letting users to self-identify as non-binary. We also saw that while family members may not necessarily support their child's sexuality, their friends fully support them and tend not to judge others based on their sexual identity.

Overall, Lithuania is not exactly the most tolerant country and does not boast the brightest history concerning the LGBTQ+ community. They have suffered from the Soviet persecution to today's media criticism and government suppression. However, we also see things getting better, with people getting more tolerant and government becoming more lenient, we believe that if people take more initiative things can get better.

⁸ Pagiwa, L. (n.d.). LGBT activism in Lithuania: interview with Vladimir Simonko on www.civicus.org (date accessed Nov 8, 2020). From <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/1212-lgbt-activism-in-lithuania-interview-with-vladimir-simonko> (date accessed: Nov 6, 2020)

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

The following is a questionnaire we have designed to interview the respondents. There were ten questions we agreed upon and asked different people the same questions so that the answers could be grouped and analyzed. The questionnaires were completely anonymous as are the identities of the respondents.

This is a completely anonymous questionnaire, prepared by the IB IMYP1 students.

None of these questions are made to offend in any way.

1. What do you identify as in the LGBTQ+ community?
2. What are your pronouns?
3. When did you first have a feeling or know that you were attracted to your preferred gender(s)?
4. Did you come out to your family and friends / close and trusted ones?
5. If yes, tell us about their reactions and thoughts.
6. Is it hard in society, knowing that not everybody is as open minded?
7. Have you encountered any type of bullying (physical, emotional, cyber-bullying) or discrimination?
8. What do you think about the LGBTQ+ community in Lithuania? What would you change about it if you could?
9. How do you feel about same-sex marriage?
10. Are you confident about your sexuality? Do you ever prefer to oppress it because of others' reactions?