Research Report

Sport and the LGBTQIA+ Community in Romania

Club Sportiv Ocazional Association (CSO)

BUCHAREST, AUGUST 2026

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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PAS CU PAS Project

Needs assessment · quantitative and qualitative stages

Club Sportiv Ocazional (CSO) · Bucharest, August 2026

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1. Executive summary

This report summarizes the findings of the quantitative stage of the "PAS CU PAS" project needs assessment, an online survey of the LGBTQIA+ community in Romania on access, safety and experiences in sport and physical activity. The study collected 202 responses and informs the development of the project's guides and capacity-building workshop, as well as the individual qualitative interviews that follow.

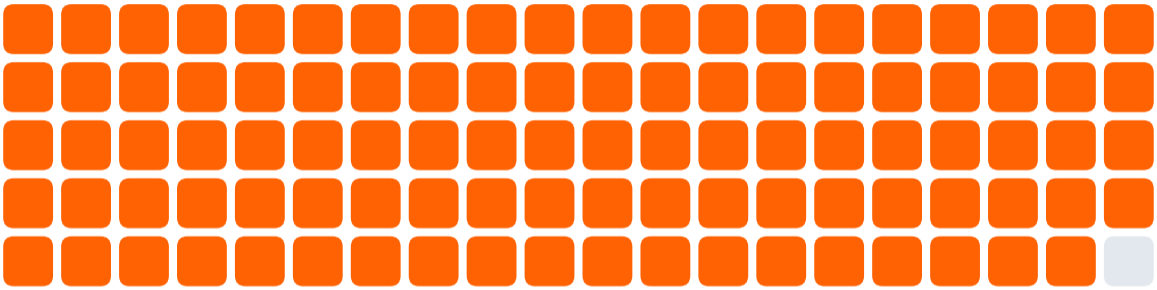
Key figures

202 survey respondents	**98.5%** are open to joining an LGBTQIA+ sports group in a safe setting	**64%** do not know any LGBTQIA+ group doing sport in Romania
45% do not feel safe being open about their identity in sport (score 1-2 of 5)	**2.73 / 5** mean comfort being open about an LGBT+ identity in sport	**2.35 / 5** comfort of TNBI people (vs 3.04 for cis women)
99% of those who feel unsafe would still join a safe group	**49%** of respondents live outside Bucharest	**80%** are cis women or TNBI people (the priority target group)
32% cite fear of judgment/harassment as a barrier (54% among TNBI)	**61%** already exercise regularly (daily / 2-3 times a week)	**15%** do not do any sport but would like to start

Main findings

- **Massive demand, almost no supply.** 98.5% of respondents would join a safe LGBTQIA+ sports group, yet 64% do not know any such group. Even among those who know none, 98% would join, a huge gap between need and supply.
- **Safety is the key barrier, and it hits unequally.** 45% do not feel safe being open about their identity in current sports spaces. TIN people are the most affected (mean comfort 2.35 and 62% in the unsafe zone), significantly below cis women (3.04).
- **A paradox of resilience.** Although 61% already exercise regularly, many do so despite a hostile environment; 99% of those who feel unsafe would prefer a safe space. Solo sport is often a fallback, not a choice.

- **Geographic inequality.** Comfort is lower outside Bucharest (2.62 vs 2.83), and half of respondents come from the regions, exactly the project's target audience.
- **The need goes beyond football.** Interest is spread across hiking, fitness, running, swimming and low-barrier team sports, suggesting diverse, low-barrier formats.



98.5% would join

Interest in joining an LGBTQIA+ sports group in a safe setting (98.5% of respondents)

2. Introduction and context

Sport is a recognized factor of individual development and social cohesion, with documented effects on physical and mental health. For LGBTQIA+ people, however, access to sport remains marked by specific barriers: rigid gender norms, segregated spaces (changing rooms, showers), a hyper-masculinised competitive culture and the fear of discrimination or of being outed. In Romania, where community recreational sport is underdeveloped compared with Western Europe, these barriers are amplified by a community infrastructure concentrated almost exclusively in Bucharest.

Club Sportiv Ocazional (CSO), the only official LGBTQIA+ sports club in Romania, runs the "PAS CU PAS" project to support the emergence of safe and inclusive sports groups in as many cities as possible, especially outside the capital. This needs assessment aims to identify the community's barriers, needs and interest, and to ground the activities that follow in the project.

3. Methodology

Instrument. A self-administered online survey, in Romanian, with closed questions (single- and multiple-choice), a 1-5 Likert scale for identity comfort in sport, and six open-ended questions for qualitative exploration.

Sample and recruitment. 202 responses, collected through CSO channels via online dissemination in the LGBTQIA+ community. For some questions (the comfort scale, awareness of groups, willingness to participate) the valid base is 198 responses, due to a few non-responses.

Analysis. Frequency and percentage distributions for closed variables, cross-tabulations (by area of residence and by gender-identity groups), and a thematic analysis of the open-ended responses. The TIN group brings together trans, non-binary and intersex people (trans men, trans women, non-binary people and "other identity").

Limitations. This is an indicative study, not a statistically representative one. The sample is a convenience, self-selected one: the results describe the community engaged with and connected to these networks, not the entire LGBTQIA+ population of Romania. Self-reported data may be affected by social desirability. With these caveats, the size and consistency of the sample provide a solid, indicative basis for the project's decisions.

Ethics and personal data. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Contact details were provided explicitly only by respondents who agreed to a later interview and are processed solely for the purpose of the study, in line with the GDPR.

4. Respondent profile

Gender identity

Gender identity	No.	%
Cis woman	94	46.5%
Cis man	28	13.9%
Trans man	23	11.4%
Non-binary person	29	14.4%
Prefer not to say	13	6.4%
Trans woman	9	4.5%
Other identity	6	3.0%

The priority target group is well represented: cis women (46.5%) and TIN people (30.3%) make up 76.8% of the sample. The project's target (at least 50% women and TNBI people) is thus naturally exceeded, reflecting the profile of the community mobilized around CSO.

Sexual orientation, age and residence

Orientation	No.	%
Lesbian	87	43.1%
Bi / Pan	50	24.8%
Gay	28	13.9%
Queer	20	9.9%
Aro / Ace	9	4.5%
Other	8	4.0%

Age	No.	%	Area of residence	No.	%
25-34	78	38.6%	Bucharest	103	51.0%
18-24	64	31.7%	Large urban (150,000+)	73	36.1%
35-44	42	20.8%	Small urban	14	6.9%
Under 18	12	5.9%	Rural	12	5.9%
45-54 / 65+	6	3.0%			

A predominantly young and urban profile, but with an important regional component. Almost 90% are aged 18 to 44. Although half live in Bucharest, the other half (49%) come from

outside the capital, the segment the project specifically addresses. The 12 respondents under 18 are relevant for the data but are excluded from the project's activities involving minors.

5. Detailed results

5.1 Relationship with sport in childhood and adolescence

41.1% practised sport consistently, 36.6% practised but dropped out after a short period, and 22.3% avoided sports activities as much as possible. In other words, nearly 6 in 10 respondents had an interrupted or avoidant relationship with organised sport during their formative years.

A notable difference across groups: avoidance of sport in childhood is highest among cis men (43%), compared with TIN people (19%) and cis women (16%), a sign of the pressure of masculinity norms and of homophobic bullying in boys' sport.

5.2 Reasons for dropping out or avoiding sport

The analysis of responses on reasons for dropping out/avoidance reveals a mix of personal and structural factors, the latter strongly tied to gender and identity: discomfort around changing rooms and showers, bullying and harassment from peers, inappropriate comments from teachers/coaches, the fear of being "found out" and the association of sport with rigid gender stereotypes.

> *"I went to the gym once with a trans coach who told me it would be fine whichever changing room I used. Yet once inside, I was told 'careful, you're in the men's'."*
> **trans man**
>
> *"As a woman with short hair, who wears masculine clothes and has an atypically feminine body type, I was often looked at strangely in changing rooms or bathrooms. I got comments like 'hey boy, your bathroom isn't here'."*
> **cis woman**

5.3 Current physical activity

Current exercise frequency	No.	%
2-3 times a week	69	34.2%
Daily or almost daily	54	26.7%
Occasionally (a few times a month)	45	22.3%
Not at all, but I would like to	30	14.9%
Not at all, and don't want to	4	2.0%

61% exercise regularly, and only 2% do not want to at all. Important for the project: 15% do no sport even though they would like to, a latent audience ready to be activated if the barriers of access and safety are removed.

5.4 Where they prefer to do sport

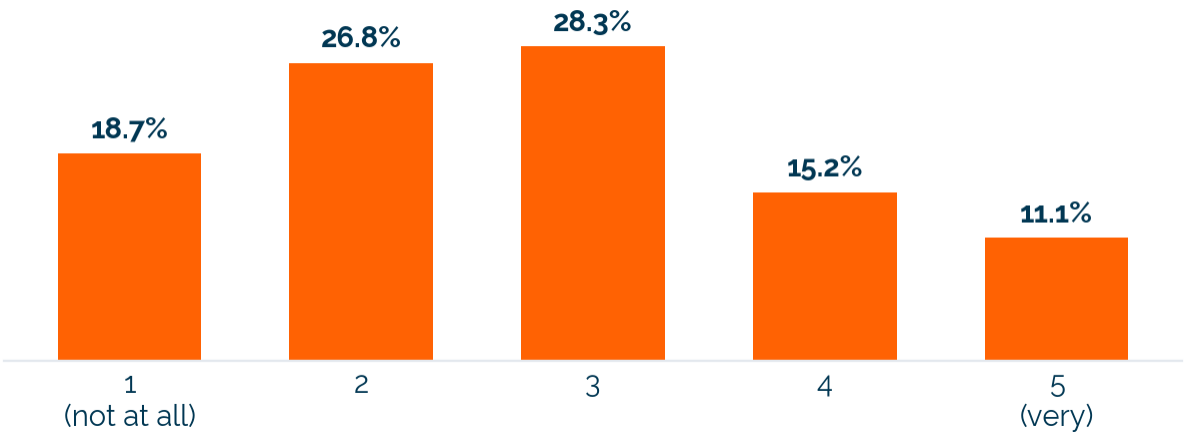
Preferred setting (multiple answers)	No.	%
Outdoors (parks, running)	131	66.2%
Commercial gyms	103	52.0%
Sports clubs / amateur teams	96	48.5%
At home	76	38.4%

The dominant preference for the outdoors (66%) confirms the potential of low-barrier, low-cost activities (hiking, running, games in the park), easy for local groups to organise. Almost half (48.5%) are open to clubs/amateur teams, the niche in which CSO operates.

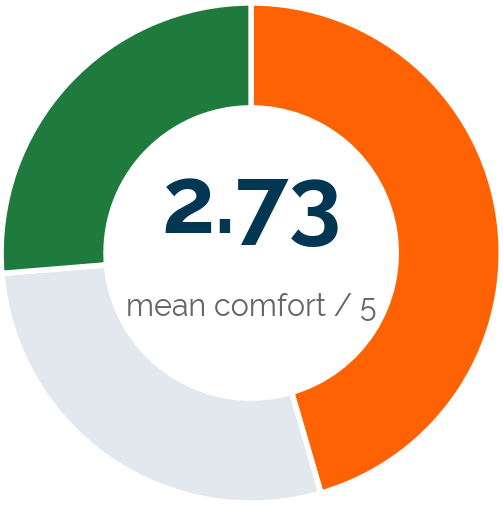
5.5 Safety and identity comfort in sport

To the question "How safe and comfortable do you feel being open about your LGBT+ identity in current sports spaces?" (1 = not at all, 5 = very), the mean is 2.73 out of 5, with a distribution skewed towards discomfort:

Comfort level	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	37	53	56	30	22
%	18.7%	26.8%	28.3%	15.2%	11.1%



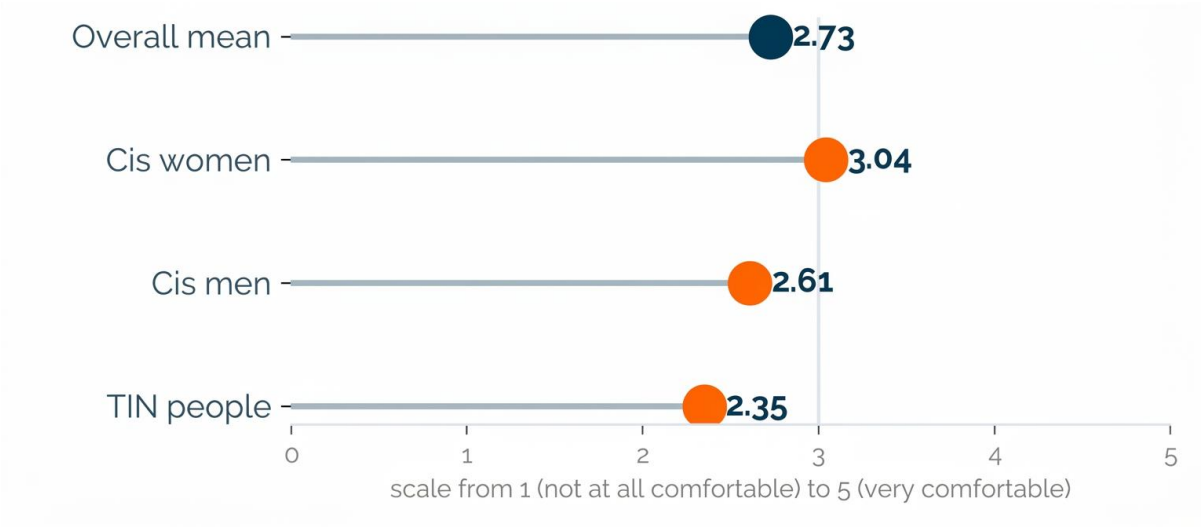
45.5% fall in the unsafe zone (1-2), and only 26.3% in the comfort zone (4-5). This is the study's most important result and confirms that safety, not lack of interest, is the central obstacle.



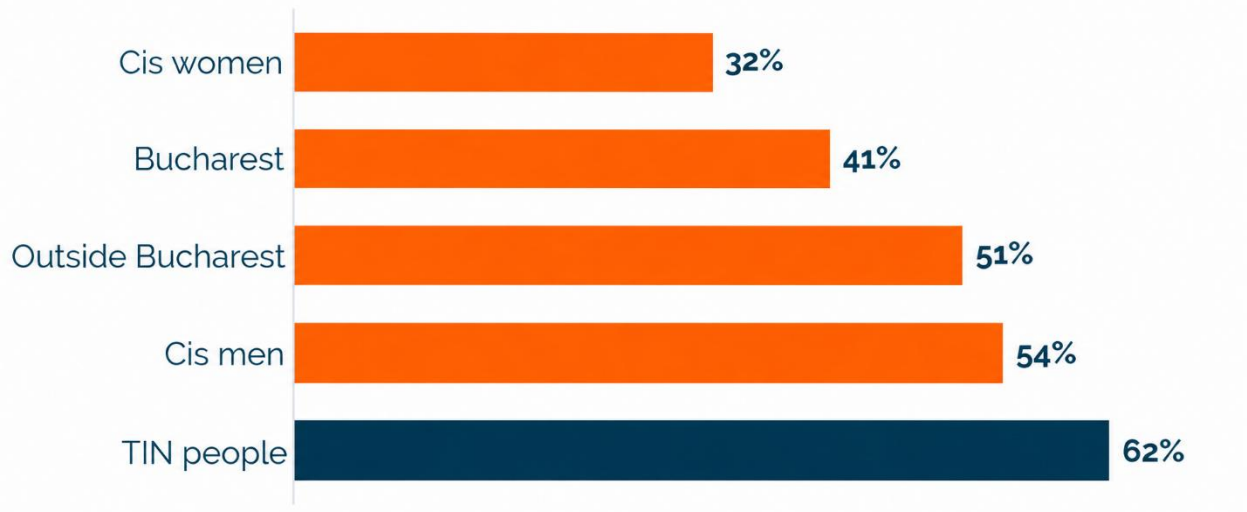
Who feels the least safe

Group	Mean comfort	% in the 1-2 range
Cis women	3.04	32%
Cis men	2.61	54%
TIN people	2.35	62%
Bucharest	2.83	41%
Outside Bucharest	2.62	51%

Mean comfort being open about one's identity in sport, by group (scale 1-5)



Share of those who feel unsafe (score 1-2), by group

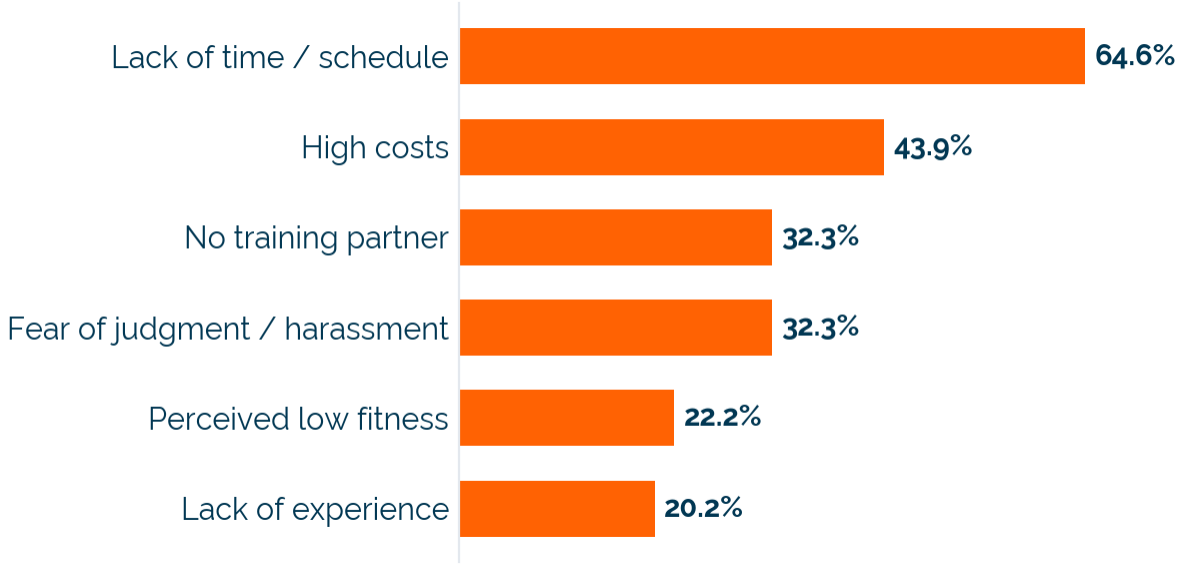


TIN people are by far the most vulnerable: a mean comfort of 2.35 and 62% in the unsafe zone, well below cis women. Added to this is a clear geographic gradient: outside Bucharest, insecurity rises by 10 percentage points. Marginalisation is therefore cumulative (gender identity × geography).

5.6 Barriers to sport

Barrier (multiple answers)	No.	%
Lack of time / busy schedule	128	64.6%
High costs (membership, equipment)	87	43.9%
No training partner	64	32.3%

Barrier (multiple answers)	No.	%
Fear of judgment, staring or harassment	64	32.3%
Perceived insufficient fitness	44	22.2%
Lack of prior experience	40	20.2%



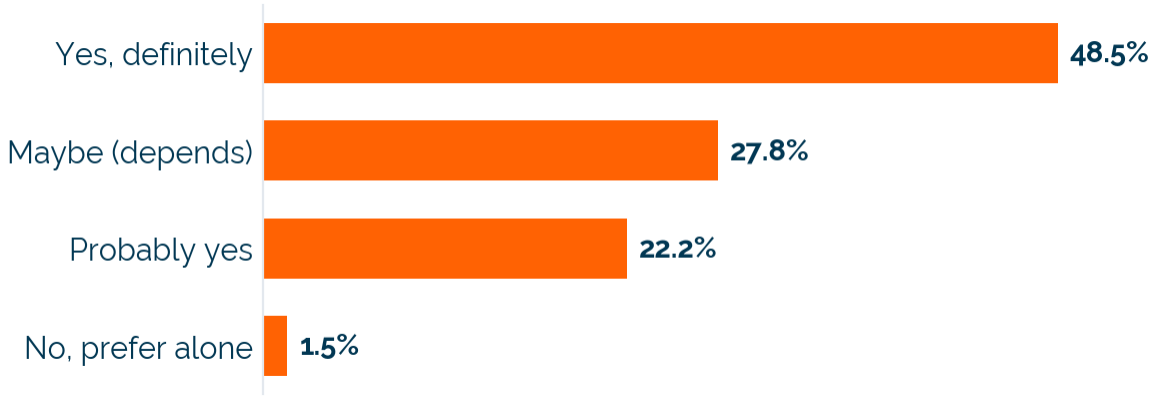
Beyond the "classic" barriers (time, cost), two are directly addressable by the project: fear of judgment/harassment and the lack of a partner/group (32% each). A safe LGBTQIA+ group solves exactly these two problems. And the fear of judgment is deeply unequal: it affects 54% of TIN people, compared with 32% of cis men and 18% of cis women.

5.7 Awareness of existing groups

64.1% of respondents do not know any LGBTQIA+ group doing organised sport, while 35.9% do. The low level of visibility confirms one of the project's premises: the need to make existing initiatives known and to build a "map" of them. A few respondents mention local initiatives (for example Cluj United) or even CSO, a sign that the nuclei exist but are barely visible.

5.8 Interest in joining a safe group

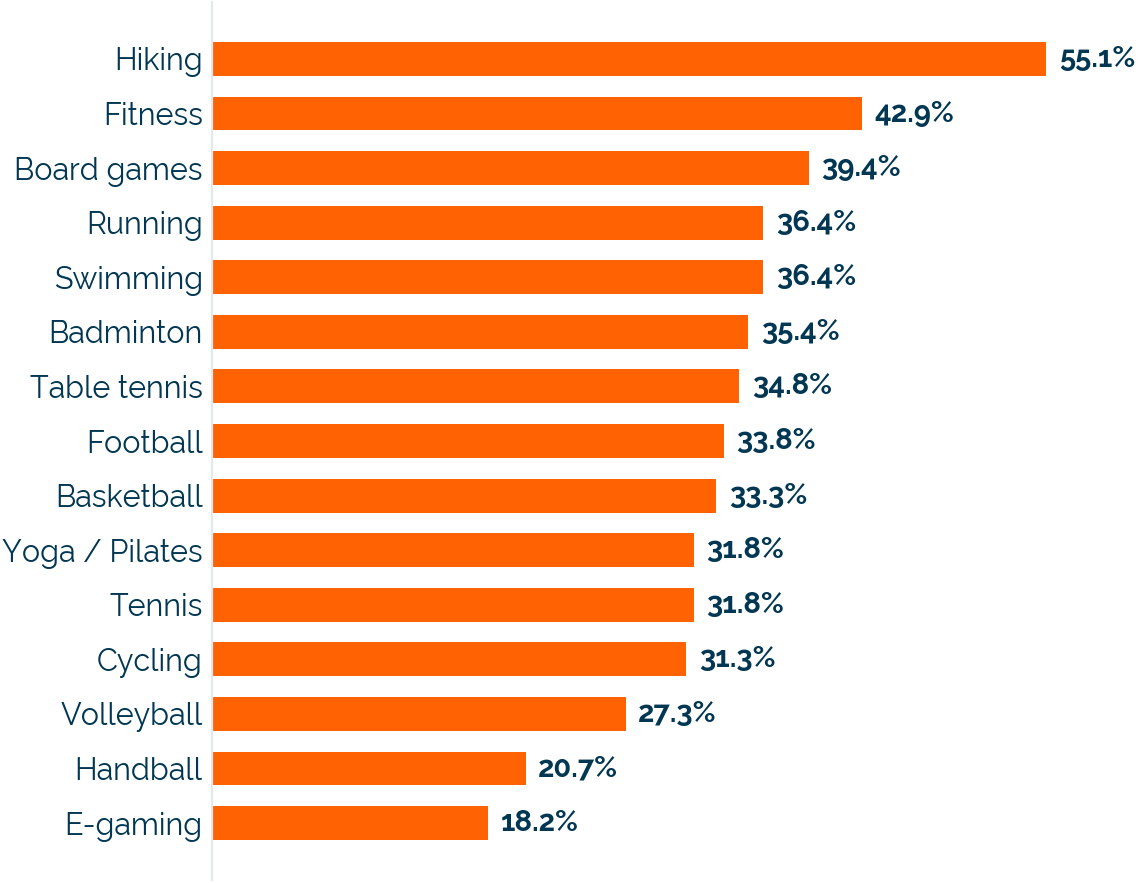
Would you join an informal LGBTQIA+ group in a safe setting?	No.	%
Yes, definitely	96	48.5%
Maybe (depends on sport/location)	55	27.8%
Probably yes	44	22.2%
No, I prefer to exercise alone	3	1.5%



98.5% are open, and nearly half "definitely". Interest holds up even in the most affected segments: 99% of those who feel unsafe and 98% of those who know no group would join. Latent demand is huge and is waiting only for a safe offer.

5.9 Desired sports and activities

Activity	%	Activity	%
Hiking	55.1%	Basketball	33.3%
Fitness	42.9%	Yoga / Pilates	31.8%
Board games	39.4%	Tennis	31.8%
Running	36.4%	Cycling	31.3%
Swimming	36.4%	Volleyball	27.3%
Badminton	35.4%	Handball	20.7%
Table tennis	34.8%	E-gaming	18.2%
Football	33.8%		



Interest is broad and goes well beyond football. Hiking leads by a clear margin (55%), followed by fitness, running and swimming. This supports a multi-sport model, with accessible, low-cost formats that regional groups can easily replicate.

5.10 What defines a "safe space"

From the analysis of open-ended responses, the elements that make a sports group truly safe are, in order of frequency: the absence of judgment and a sense of acceptance (66 mentions); the presence of other community members, "people like me" (36); physical safety and confidentiality (22); clear rules / code of conduct / moderation (14); a non-competitive, relaxed setting (11); openness to beginners (11); and gender-neutral changing rooms (4).

> *"A space that is explicitly queer friendly, where bullying or other toxic behaviour is not accepted, where changing rooms are not split on the basis of sex assigned at birth."*
> **open-ended response**

6. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses

The free-text comments sketch out a few recurring themes that add depth to the figures.

The total absence of supply

> *"I was a member of an LGBT volleyball team in the diaspora for 4 years. In Romania we have NONE for ANY sport."*
> **cis man**

Changing rooms and the body, the critical point

Changing rooms and showers consistently appear as moments of acute vulnerability, especially for trans people and those with gender-non-conforming expression, but also for cis women who are misgendered.

Authority and gender stereotypes

> *"Being a cis, relatively feminine woman, I was pushed aside by my teammates who were guided by gender stereotypes."*
> **cis woman**

> *"I would go to the gym with friends and the guys would rush to show them exercises or load their weights, while I waited in vain, they didn't even look at me."*
> **cis woman**

A hostile local climate (in the regions)

> *"The bigger problem is that most people in my area and my age group are judgmental and anti-LGBT, sometimes misogynistic."*
> **region, outside Bucharest**

Community sport as healing and belonging

> *"The experience of playing with people from the same community helped me enormously to accept my orientation, which I don't think I had done so deeply before. It also helped me socialise."*
> **cis woman**

> *"CSO is a model of good practice when it comes to organised activities. Congratulations!"*
> **non-binary person**

7. Qualitative stage: individual interviews

To deepen the survey findings, we conducted a series of semi-structured individual interviews. Participants were selected from among the respondents who, at the end of the questionnaire, expressed their willingness to be contacted for an interview. We gave priority to people from the project's target group (women and trans, non-binary and intersex people) and from outside Bucharest, so as to capture regional realities that are less visible in the quantitative data. The interviews explored in depth the barriers, the needs for a safe space, regional realities and the personal experiences behind the figures. Those interviewed come from Bucharest and beyond (Brasov, Timisoara, Cluj and smaller towns), and they include local organisers. The quotes below are anonymised.

Changing rooms and changing spaces: the critical barrier

The most consistently mentioned barrier, especially for trans and non-binary people, is changing rooms and showers. They appear as moments of acute vulnerability that generate avoidance strategies and a real emotional cost, up to giving up conventional gyms entirely. The fear can persist even after transition, as a reflex.

> *"When I go to the gym, I try not to cause discomfort and use the men's changing room. And when I run, I choose to wear a mask over my face so I don't stand out, that way I feel fairly safe."*
> **trans woman, Cluj**
>
> *"A safe space is a space where I don't have to think twice before entering a changing room or when I take my clothes off."*
> **trans man, Bucharest**
>
> *"I always looked for the most secluded corner and went to the gym only at hours I knew it would be almost empty. Even now, although I look completely different, I still get a knot in my stomach when I walk into the men's and I still look for the hidden corners out of reflex."*
> **trans man, small town**

The most frequently proposed solution: individual changing cubicles (useful for everyone, not only for trans people) and gender-neutral options, instead of strictly binary changing rooms.

People matter, not just the facilities

Interviewees stress that safety depends more on the attitude and training of staff than on the venue's facilities. A coach from the community can completely transform the experience, whereas a modern gym remains unsafe if the staff are hostile or unprepared. The ideal described: someone who sees the person and the performance, not the label.

> *"Safety depends on the coach as a person, not on the gym's policies."*
> **trans man, Bucharest**
>
> *"I was very lucky with my coach. Labels or how I looked didn't matter to him, he only cared whether I trained hard. The fact that he judged me only by my work, not by my body, was an immense relief."*
> **trans man, small town**
>
> *"I think it's a commitment from the start: these are our values, we don't accept discrimination, we don't accept body shaming. Micro-aggressions and stares are otherwise part of everyday life."*
> **non-binary person, Timisoara**

Explicit signals of a safe space

A space perceived as safe needs clear, visible signals: explicit rules, inclusive language, asking for pronouns at the first meeting, and visual markers (a sticker or a flag) that also act as a filter for people with hostile attitudes.

> *"A sticker with a flag would clearly signal that the place is welcoming and would keep people with toxic attitudes at a distance."*
> **trans man, Bucharest**

A dedicated group or integration? A tension to keep in mind

Not everyone interviewed sees a group dedicated exclusively to the community the same way. For some, such a group is exactly the safe space that is needed; for others, separation risks reinforcing marginalisation, and the ideal remains the natural integration of trans and cis people, without labels. This is a tension worth keeping in mind when designing activities: to offer a safe setting without turning it into a visible label that isolates.

> *"I feel that if we separate into a dedicated group, we somehow end up marginalising ourselves. The goal would be for us to be integrated together, trans and cis people, without separate labels and without a pointless distinction."*
> **trans man, small town**

Regional realities and existing nuclei

The interviews confirm both the gap in the regions and the existence of real but fragile nuclei outside Bucharest. In Brasov there is a group that trains using the facilities available locally; in Timisoara there is a group (Transcore) and an emerging running initiative; in Cluj, the community is present but isolated and without a dedicated sports group. In smaller towns, the organised offer seems designed almost exclusively for children, and adults who want to start from scratch are left with practically no options.

> *"There are people who tell us they've been following us for seven years and have only now come. Each in their own time. If people aren't ready, it's better not to come; you*

> *achieve nothing by force."*
> **organiser, Brasov**
>
> *"There are no options for adults. If you didn't start as a child, you have no chance; the organised opportunities seem made exclusively for children."*
> **trans man, small town**
>
> *"My only question is: when will you do something in Cluj too, or when will you expand?"*
> **trans woman, Cluj**

Implication: regional development can build on these people and already-existing groups, offering them visibility, mentoring and resources, instead of starting from scratch. Time, trust and the safety of being visible remain essential factors.

Sport, mental health and belonging

As in the survey, the interviews show that community sport works as a tool for wellbeing and self-acceptance. For several people, moving within a safe group was part of a broader process of gaining confidence and getting through a difficult period. The recurring message to those who hesitate: the first step is the hardest, but it is worth it.

> *"I want to get involved precisely because I know what it's about and what lies behind it."*
> **gay man, Bucharest**
>
> *"From the very beginning of my transition I tried to be confident, so as not to have problems, because if you're shy and withdrawn, people target you immediately."*
> **trans man, Timisoara**
>
> *"Without taking the first step, you have no way of knowing how good it feels to reach your goal. You have to overcome certain fears, because that's the world we live in. But it's worth it."*
> **trans man, small town**

Roots in childhood: bullying and gendered sport

Many of the interrupted relationships with sport originate at school: bullying on grounds of gender expression, identity or orientation, comments from teachers, and heavily gendered sports spaces, which pushed many to avoid physical activity entirely for years.

> *"Until 2019, my relationship with sport was non-existent. I was bullied at school for my gender expression, gender identity and orientation, and I had ended up avoiding sports spaces completely."*
> **non-binary person, Timisoara**
>
> *"When I wanted to play football or basketball with the boys, they made fun of me and sent me off to the girls, as if I wasn't allowed to exist among them."*
> **trans man, small town**

Concrete recommendations drawn from the interviews

- Individual changing cubicles and gender-neutral options, instead of strictly binary changing rooms.
- Staff training, inclusive language and asking for pronouns at the first meeting, considered more important than luxury facilities.
- Explicit anti-discrimination policies (including a signed commitment at sign-up) and visible queer-friendly signage.
- A safe but as natural and integrated setting as possible: avoid visible labels that can isolate, while still offering the safety of the community.
- Options for adult beginners, especially in small towns, where the organised offer targets almost exclusively children.
- Adapting training to specific needs (post-operative recovery, use of compression gear).
- A FLINTA, non-competitive and low-barrier model, plus consistency in organisation, as the foundation of trust.

8. Correlations and vulnerable groups

TNBI people, a double marginalisation. On every safety dimension, TIN people report the worst experiences: the lowest comfort (2.35), the highest share of fear of judgment (54%) and heightened vulnerability in gender-segregated spaces. They are, at the same time, among the most motivated to join a safe group.

The geographic gradient. Outside Bucharest, comfort drops (2.62 vs 2.83) and the local climate is more often described as hostile. The concentration of community resources in the capital leaves the regions uncovered, exactly the gap the project targets through its 5 regional groups.

Latent demand. The overlap between insecurity and the wish to participate is almost total: 99% of those who feel unsafe and 98% of those who know no group would join a safe one. In practice, the entire need is unmet.

9. Discussion

The results can be read through the lens of "minority stress": LGBTQIA+ people, especially TIN people, navigate sports spaces in a state of constant vigilance, managing their identity (self-censorship, avoiding changing rooms, arriving already dressed from home) at a real emotional cost. This burden explains why high interest in physical activity and low comfort in existing spaces coexist: many do sport despite the environment, often in isolation.

The barriers are largely structural, not individual: rigid gender architectures (changing rooms), a competitive and hyper-masculinised culture, the behaviour of authority figures (coaches, teachers) and a community offer centralised in Bucharest. They cannot be solved through personal effort, but through creating alternative, safe and explicitly inclusive spaces, exactly the "low-barrier", non-competitive and FLINTA model promoted by CSO.

Finally, the testimonies show that such a space produces not only physical health but also benefits for identity and belonging (self-acceptance, community, socialising). Inclusive sport thus becomes a tool for wellbeing and cohesion, with effects that go beyond the playing field.

10. Conclusions

1. There is broad, unmet demand for safe LGBTQIA+ sport in Romania: 98.5% would join, but 64% do not know any group.
2. Safety, not lack of interest, is the central obstacle: 45% do not feel safe being open about their identity in sport.
3. TIN people and those outside Bucharest are the most vulnerable and should be prioritised.
4. The barriers are structural (changing rooms, competitive culture, authority, centralisation), so the solution is to create alternative safe spaces, not to place the burden on the individual.
5. Interest goes beyond football; a multi-sport, accessible and non-competitive model has the greatest participation potential.

11. Recommendations

For the project's guides and workshop

- An explicit "safe-space code" (anti-bullying rules, respecting pronouns, moderation) should be the centrepiece of the guide.
- A dedicated section on changing rooms and gender-segregated spaces, with concrete solutions and neutral options, the most sensitive topic for TIN people.
- "Low-barrier", non-competitive and multi-sport models (hiking, running, games in the park), easy to start at low cost.
- A good-practice guide also for mainstream sport actors (gyms, clubs, coaches), starting from the behaviours flagged as problematic.

For developing the regional network

- Prioritise cities outside Bucharest and support existing nuclei (for example Cluj, Brasov) instead of starting from scratch.
- The qualitative component (the individual interviews) should dig precisely into experiences of safety, changing rooms and the local climate, and identify future local organisers.
- Visibility: a "map" of initiatives and targeted communication, to reduce the 64% who do not know that groups exist.

12. Next steps

The qualitative stage has been completed, and the conclusions of the interviews are integrated into this report (see chapter 7). Together with the quantitative results, they feed directly into the project's guides, capacity-building workshop and pilot activities.

Report produced within the PAS CU PAS project. The data were verified against the primary source (202 responses).