

THIS IS OUR COUNTRY



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for Human Rights



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Summary

Serbia is a homophobic society with systematic violence and discrimination against LGBT individuals. Homophobia is deeply rooted in the great majority of the population, with seven out of ten Serbian citizens considering homosexuality to be an illness and one in two believing that homosexuality is very dangerous for society as well as that the state should work on its suppression. Both male and female Serbs display an extreme social distance to LGBT persons, would disapprove of friends or relatives who display a homosexual orientation and would not like an LGBT political leader or supervisor at work. Most show a remarkable lack of information on the issues and challenges facing the LGBT community. The more educated and well-paid the respondent, the more positive their attitude towards the LGBT community, with the most negative attitudes noted among the least educated and worse-paid social groups.

These are the findings of "Prejudices Exposed- Homophobia in Serbia", a wide public opinion survey by Serbia's key LGBT advocacy group Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) and the independent monitoring and polling Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID).

According to the poll, 67 percent of those surveyed has a negative stand towards LGBT individuals, 22 percent does not have any stand or are neutral, while only 11 percent has a positive view. Social acceptance of LGBT persons exists only at the theoretical and mostly impersonal level of compatriot and fellow citizen, while the closer the connection, the lower the acceptance.

For most Serbian citizens, LGBT individuals are unacceptable as co-workers or employers, as well as high ranking officials, friends, family members or teachers to children. Some 70 percent said they would not want a relative to display a homosexual orientation, and 64 percent disapproved of the same in the case of a friend.

Serbian citizens accept LGBT individuals only and solely if they keep their sexual orientation private. Although 67 percent concede that homosexuality always existed and 65 percent supports an individual's right to sexual orientation, most of the surveyed are of the opinion that venues where homosexuals gather should not be allowed to exist. Almost 75 percent disapprove of gay parades, while 77 percent is against gay marriages, and only one in 20 is ready to allow LGBT person to adopt a child.

This means that homosexuality is expected to stay within the private domain, while public appearance or expression of LGBT individuals is unacceptable for Serbia's citizens. Those who do not know a single person of homosexual orientation, do not have a positive stand on gay people nor know anyone who has. On the other hand, those who know homosexuals, especially those with personal friendships, have a considerably more positive stand.

The only ray of light is that the levels of homophobia are significantly lower among the younger population, aged 15-29, allowing for the hope that in the next ten years, when this part of population becomes dominant in the society, homophobia in Serbia will decline and the LGBT community could achieve greater rights and freedoms.

Preface to the Report "This Is Country for Us"

During my missions to Council of Europe Member States I am often confronted by the discrimination, prejudices and intolerance that the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities face. Serbia is not an exception in that regard. I have met human rights defenders advocating for the rights of LGBT people and trying to sensitise the wider population. They are in a vulnerable position and the target of many unfortunate incidents of violence, threats, including verbal, physical and psychological abuse.

The present report provides an overview of the level of homophobia in Serbia. The report gives reasons for concern as it indicates a far-reaching negative perception of LGBT persons in Serbia, with 70% of the persons interviewed considering homosexuality as a sickness, and only 8% considering Pride Parades as a legitimate way of seeking equal rights for LGBT persons. Even more worrying is that only 38% of persons consider homosexuals as "the same as anyone else".

Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people have the same rights as others. The agreed international human rights standards apply to them as much as to others but the prejudices in this area are very deep and advocacy against homophobia is clearly not opportune. This underlines the importance of broader and more systematic education and awareness efforts and more principled positions by leading politicians. I therefore welcome the publication of this study and hope it will contribute to less homophobia and transphobia in Serbia.

Thomas Hammarberg
Commissioner for Human Rights,
Council of Europe



The high level of discrimination against LGBT individuals is the direct consequence of such high degree of homophobia. Violent physical attacks on public locations where LGBT events are taking place, but also on individuals, have been registered. A key problem in mapping out the violence is the unwillingness of the victims to report these cases due to fear of unfair treatment and discrimination (victimisation). The victims, but also LGBT organisations, avoid testifying about the violence they experience.

LGBT individuals still cannot exercise their right to freedom of assembly and there were no conditions for holding the Pride Parade in 2008. Still, the LGBT movement managed to appear at a public event, an anti-fascist rally held on Oct 11, 2008, with several LGBT activists among the organisers, three LGBT speakers addressing the rally, and visuals that mostly corresponded with those of the LGBT movement.

State bodies and institutions have made small positive steps towards the LGBT individuals. The Serbian Ministry for Labour and Social Issues presented a substantially changed draft Law on Banning Discrimination, which incorporates definitions of special cases of discrimination, including those when discrimination is based on sexual orientation and sexual identity. The Serbian Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, also included in the drafting of this law, publicly condemned the attack at the Queer Belgrade Festival and several times emphasised the LGBT population as one of the most endangered groups in the country. Ombudsman Sasa Jankovic has shown zeal in promoting LGBT human rights, giving statements on three important LGBT occasions during 2008: International Day Against Homophobia, Pride and during the attack on the Queer Belgrade Festival. The Serbian Culture Ministry financially supported the LGBT web portal www.queeria.com, the first ever case of financing of an LGBT project from the state budget, a good example for the future on how the state should treat LGBT organisations.

The police and LGBT community gave a great example of the kind of relationship that should continue and develop, when they established good cooperation during the Eurovision Song Contest. The police was also significantly involved in the protection of LGBT public venues, but did not show a clear policy shift on the protection of LGBT individuals, as different levels and organisational units within the Serbian Interior Ministry react differently when a specific case of violence needs to be resolved.

The Serbian Medical Society finally recognised that homosexuality is not an illness on May 14, 2008, accepting with a delay of 18 years the decision of the World Health Organisation (WHO) on removing homosexuality from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10).

Serbian State Television (RTS) avoided official communication with the local LGBT community for several months, although it was hosting and organising 2008 Eurovision Song Contest, significant event with numerous and loyal LGBT audience. However, in April 2008, a meeting was held between the organisers, the police and the GSA, which was a start of cooperation on securing the safety of LGBT guests during the Eurovision.

Presidential, parliamentary and local elections in 2008, made the LGBT issue more prominent in the agenda debates of political parties and politicians. During the presidential elections, GSA organised a campaign "Presidential Hotline", inviting candidates to give their opinions on LGBT population. Out of nine presidential candidates, four directly answered the questionnaire, while another four did so in their media appearances. Several candidates for the post of Belgrade Mayor also gave their position on LGBT issue.

Serbian media considerably increased their attention on LGBT issues in 2008, with new record set in print media on the number of articles published about LGBT community during the second quarter of last year (April-June 08), according to a survey by the lesbian human rights NGO Labris. Although the media most frequently report and debate about LGBT issues in a neutral context, and have especially increased their interest in transgender issues, they still allow hate-speech as a legitimate form of presenting a negative position on the LGBT population. Debate and speculations on the sexuality of individuals in the public eye were frequent and had negative connotations, but this practice can be stopped once the Parliament adopts the anti-discrimination law.

In spite of the numerous problems and challenges LGBT individuals and groups are facing, GSA can conclude that Serbia is slowly becoming a country for all of its citizens and that freedom for everyone will come much faster than the opponents, even LGBT individuals, believe.



Gej Strejt Alijansa Gay Straight Alliance

¹ LGBT – abbreviation for lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender persons

² "Predjudices Exposed – Homophobia in Serbia", Report on the public opinion survey (Belgrade, GSA, CeSID, 2008), page 5

³ "Predjudices Exposed – Homophobia in Serbia", Report on the public opinion survey (Belgrade, GSA, CeSID, 2008), page 6

⁴ Ibid. page 7

⁵ "Predjudices Exposed – Homophobia in Serbia", Report on the public opinion survey (Belgrade, GSA, CeSID, 2008), page 6

⁶ Ibid. page 6

⁷ Ibid. page 18

⁸ Ibid. page 16



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