

Speech by Mirjana Bogdanović, Executive Director of GSA, at the opening of LGBTI Business Forum, 10 May 2015, within IDAHO Forum 2015 in Montenegro:

Dear Minister,
Your Excellencies,
Dear representatives of institutions and international organizations,
Distinguished experts and colleagues from the NGO sector, dear friends,

It is a huge honor to be here today with you, and I would like first of all to thank the Government of Montenegro, which has enabled us, as so many times before, to discuss and exchange experiences concerning different topics related to the human rights of LGBT people. I would especially like to thank Mr. Jovan Kojičić, Adviser to Prime Minister of Montenegro, who is the coordinator of this year's IDAHO Forum and without whose energy and enthusiasm this extraordinary event would not happen.

Although I'm coming from the NGO sector which has consistently been very critical when it comes to the status of human rights and the position of minority groups – after all it's our job: to strive for equality and full legal equality of all citizens – allow me to begin this brief address with praise and, I believe, realistic optimism.

Both Montenegro and Serbia, from which I come, and I can freely say also the entire region, have undoubtedly made a lot of effort when it comes to improving the position of LGBT people and certain improvements are evident when we compare it to 5 or 10 years ago. I mainly refer to the development of legal and strategic frameworks, increasing the visibility of the LGBT community, as well as positive changes in the attitudes of political elite on the LGBT issue.

However, we still face many problems, especially the prejudice, homophobia and transphobia that are represented in our societies. We all understand, of course, that it is a process and that certain changes take time, but that time must be spent by doing concrete activities in state institutions and in the civil sector, because the greatest share of the work in increasing tolerance toward LGBT people is yet to be done.

One of the topics that may have been so far the least analyzed and discussed in public is the position of LGBT people in the workplace. I have to admit that this is somewhat surprising given that in this area - labor and employment - unlike in some other areas, there are very clear anti-discrimination standards of the European Union relating to LGBT people, and the EU is the predominant strategic and political commitment of the entire region. In addition, in most of our countries, there are fairly good national laws regulating this area. For example, the Law on Labor in Serbia prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment and in the workplace a few years before we adopted the umbrella Law on Prohibition of Discrimination. That is why I am extremely pleased that we are now to discuss precisely these matters at the Business Forum.

I hope that we will be able to present a significant number of the problems related to discrimination of LGBT people in the workplace, which exists, which is rarely spoken of and which significantly affects the quality of life of part of the population of our countries and society as a whole.

I also hope that we will send out a clear and visible message that LGBT persons live in identical economic situations and share the fate of all other citizens with regard to economic reforms, unemployment, corruption, and any other topic of vital importance to citizens, but that LGBT people have an additional fear - fear of not getting a job or losing a job simply because they are who they are, and I hope that we will send a message that we are all going to fight together to make this fear no longer justified.

I believe that we will also be able to send a message to all employers about how a good and affirmative working environment that respects diversity has positive effects on the efficiency of employees and on good company results.

For these and many other reasons, this kind of business forum is important for the whole region, so that we can learn from one another, exchange experiences and open up this important topic; and, of course, so that we can all together, institutions and civil society and the international community, contribute to solving the problems and respecting the equality of all citizens in all spheres, political, economic and social.

And to finish in an optimistic manner, as I began: with your presence here today in such great numbers and expressed interest, I firmly believe that this will happen. Thank you.