

LGBT Minorities as Easy Targets: A Case Study of the Specificities and Commonalities with other Neglected Endangered Groups in the Context of Nationalism-Dominated Societies

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I. Introduction

Feeling safe is much more than the simple notion of being defended from external menaces. One can be confined and imprisoned thus being bodily and firmly protected from the outside world. But, never the less and truth be told, this one can still feel unsafe in its fundamental essence when facing the last and ultimate bare minimum of his own existence – his nature – as a spring of someone else’s hatred.

In his book, *Serbian Diaries*², a gay Belgrade university teacher using the pen name Boris L. Davidovich, writes a diary as his country descends into nationalism and chaos in which he tells the story of a friend, Branko, who was nearly murdered by a member of the Serb special forces. During the conflict in Bosnia, Branko met the soldier while visiting his brother at the Belgrade Army Hospital. After some fervent sex, the Serb special forces agent suddenly noticed that Branko was circumcised. Grabbing his gun, he pointed it to Branko’s head and threatened to kill him, accusing him of being ‘Muslim trash’.

The hatred directed against the homosexual minority has commonalities with that directed against ethnical minorities. Sometimes, as Boris L. Davidovich stated in his book, these two hatreds run the same lane. Other times, homophobia presents some specificities, particularly in the context of nationalism dominated societies, what I hereby volunteer to briefly analyse. First and foremost, the acquaintance and awareness of the reasons and causes of such social isolation and misconduct are also victims of a profoundly rooted segregationist social conception. But the major cause of such solitude of this minority is, as Hannah Arendt once noted, the fact that, contrary to ethnical minorities, there is no particular physical sign of being a homosexual. Given this ‘solitude’, this fact alone implies that one can still feel unsafe in its fundamental essence when facing the last minimum of his own being – his nature – as a cause of someone else’s hatred.

Given this, and to uphold the ideas in my mind, I will bring into play some examples of Serbian society. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that these examples are not strictly a Serbian

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² GMP, Gay Men’s Press, London, 1st edition of 1996.



reality. On the contrary, Serbian society is just a vivid pattern of a social phenomenon that can happen in every society once the circumstances are given.

II. Nationalism, Religion and the Social Burden of Being Homosexual

Security as one's feeling can and must also take into account the appreciation of the social burden brought to this one if he or she decides to risk assuming his or her truthful nature, given that this is essentially the ultimate responsible for his or her attachment to a minority. Therefore, such examination must, of course, consider the oppressive dimension of nationalism towards the individual. In the particular case of the Balkans, the judgment of a lot of people is shaped by religious beliefs and nationalism. For these people the European Union represents not only well being and quality of life, but also dubious and ludicrous moral standards. Thus, it is a true danger to tradition. And in a way, these people are seeing their opinion confirmed by several NGOs' claim that the equality of homosexuals must be a precondition for entering the European Union. This fear is largely exploited by the vivid nationalism in the region. Being national foreign born minorities regarded as external enemies, homosexuals join Roma and Jews as a group normally seen in the Balkans as an internal danger to a nation's existence. If an ethnical minority gives birth to a non national and consequently to a inferior race, gay and lesbian persons do not give birth and raise children at all. Patriarchal and homophobic traditions are therefore combined with a strong nationalism - homosexuality contradicts the whole idea of a 'vigorous' and 'perfect' nation. Religious beliefs are obviously close to these conceptions. During the wars of the 90s and with the resultant isolation of Serbia and increase of nationalism, people's attachment to the Orthodox Church became stronger. More and more, individuals tend to identify with the religion that is associated to their ethnicity. Thus, the Serbian Orthodox Church became very popular among several levels of Serbian society. In times of war and nationalism, people in Serbia have identified even more with the Serbian Orthodox Church's views on policy and internal affairs. One cannot disregard the fact that it was the only Serbian institution during the Ottoman Empire and thus strongly connected with all major conceptions and roots of the Serbian people. Considering this, it becomes rather easy to envisage the sympathy and links of nationalism with the Orthodox Church. The Serbian Orthodox Church considers that "*all uses of the human sex organs for purposes other than those ordained by creation runs contrary to the nature of things as decreed by God, interfering with the normal development of societal patterns*" further adding that "*the homosexual degrades his own sex and thus denies to himself the self respect that is generated from the feeling that one is in line with God's Creation*"³.

Nationalists do represent the power of such ideals in the society in which they defend their political proposals. And as a reaction to previously unknown gay and lesbian movements, an aggressive heterosexist religious nationalism shapes the mainstream and the right-wing and is trying to defend Serbia against its enemies - this is seen as the fate of the eternally attacked Serbian nation. Just like the mainstream, the extreme right is aggressively Serbian, straight and orthodox. I must emphasize, that this is by far not a singularity of Serbia. Common patterns can arise with the examples of other European societies, the new eastern democracies being a particular case. In the contemporary Polish society, for example, the leading role of the Catholic Church in the struggle against the former communist regime still grants a huge

³ Orthodox Statement on Homosexuality, available at:
http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/ethics/statement_on_homosexuality.htm.

influence of fundamental Catholic ideologies in the new Polish democracy. ‘God’ is by far a common word in the political speech of central and right wing Polish politicians. ‘Homosexual’ is always a symbol of an externally and foreign based imposed menace to Polish morals. In political statements as well as in their specific communication and propaganda, Polish groups of the far-right (for example: the League of Polish Families) are quite clear about their ultimate ideal: a homogenously heterosexist and catholic Polish nation. And, *mutatis mutandis*, here lies the similarity with Serbia: cultural and collective suspicions erect the inner arrangement of this talk of hatred and violence - and it seems that sexuality has become its ultimate level, its face. The Polish homophobic social and political speech has turned the homosexual individual its public frame, in a political rhetoric aiming to impose a cage of fears. When the talk is about homosexuality, then beneath the surface it is about religion about the joblessness, about the war, about the whole of Poland, or about the whole of Serbia. In both societies, aiming to obtain a benefit for their purposes, homophobic conservatives are turning liberty expressions and freedom desires into polemics for nationalist use. In nationalism dominated societies, homosexuality is therefore viewed as an aggressive act, an undesirable, violent, repressive and hostile existence. The political and social majorities that are setting norms and repressing non-heterosexist identities push away, with their speeches, the language of emancipation. At the same time, violence seekers and neo-fascists stick to their straight, brutal language of open street violence in the name of a “normal” majority as they did in the first Gay Parade in Belgrade in 2001 or those of Krakow, Poznan or Warsaw or as just some time ago in the brutal and violent attack of the Queer Festival in Cinema REX, in Belgrade, perpetrated by a group of 20 masked nationalists. Despite the fact that they are talking different tongues, conservative mainstream and violent nationalist hooligans are acting from the same nationalist-religious, homophobic ideological base.

The “normality” of the majority is created when otherness is created and ruled out. And it is precisely at this point that the homosexual individual becomes particularly vulnerable: the homosexual individual’s nature is identified with strangeness, with danger and even with crime (homosexuals tend to, per example, be identified with paedophiles). The need to act in response to such ‘social danger’ is logically just a minor step and thus easily foreseen. The homosexual faces then alone his condition as a spring for someone’s hatred.

III. The Need for Security: the Diversified Dimension of the Concept

Feeling secure is much more than being merely sheltered. It is basically assuming the whole of one’s condition is respected not as a special phenomenon of the standard norm but strictly as normality itself. Further more, it must be said that security has a plural and diverse significance. Therefore, security is not only being protected from a violent street attack but also, for example, having economical and labour protection against discrimination. In this Balkan *milieu* of insecurity and uncertainty, marked by political and ethnical stress occasionally too vivid to uphold the rule of law and democratic values and the consequent protection of endangered minorities, it is urgent to stress the application of current anti discrimination laws as well as to study and to develop new rules in order to guarantee a broad sense of security to a neglected minority.

Given this urgency, common with the ethnical motivated hatred, it is important to fight the generally social accepted ‘hate speech’, a speech intended to humiliate, terrorize and

encourage violence or actions that are damaging for a person or group of persons on the sole basis of discrimination. In 2002, Serbia took a major step forward when it passed ‘The Broadcast Act’ in which lawmakers prescribed suppression of hate speech (Article 21):

“The Agency shall ensure that the broadcasters’ programmes do not contain information inciting discrimination, hatred or violence against an individual or a group of individuals on grounds of their political affiliation, or their race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. Conduct in contravention of the prohibition in paragraph 1 of this article shall be deemed grounds for pronouncing the envisaged sanctions by the Agency, independently of the other legal remedies at the disposal of the aggrieved”

Furthermore, article 79 of the same law says that:

“Public broadcasting service carriers shall in their news programme production and broadcasting abide by the principles of impartiality and fairness in treating different political interests and different persons, uphold the freedom and pluralism of the public expression of opinions, and prevent any form of racial, religious, national, ethnic or other intolerance or hatred, or intolerance on the grounds of sexual orientation”

This was a great leap forward in the Balkans basically because media influence attitudes and contribute to the creation of stereotypes lesbian and gay population. Given this, LABRIS, a Serbian lesbian human rights organization, has started in 2006 a study, supported internationally by ILGA, aiming to monitor hate speech in Serbian electronic media⁴, particularly 13 different programmes on four national television channels, resulting in three complaints being sent to the Republic broadcasting agency. Some of the material obtained by LABRIS and available in this research gives us a clear perception of ‘hate speech’. What follows is a brief reference to some of the identified situations of hate speech in public media.

- 1) In the programme ‘The Pyramid’, aired on 18 March 2007, the guests Ivana Zigon (actress, IZ), and Branka Nevistic (programme host, BN) had the following conversation:

IZ– “So, human rights, I think, don’t protect anymore what’s dignified and human in a man, but we listen more and more about...I don’t know...about rights of some pathological and abnormal occurrences. For example, rights of homosexuals, rights...well I don’t know if there were so many drug addicts until Europe and the West started teaching us how we should live (...) it’s important for me that a man should be either romantic or macho, but be alive, it’s important for me that there are not many gay pride parades”

BN – “And why is that, Ivana? I didn’t understand...Perhaps people of different sexual orientation are really the ones who are the most romantic? Why ...a man to man, for example...”

IZ- “You think the most imaginative ones? To see in that something romantic”

BN – “Imagination is, perhaps, part of the romance”

IZ– “No. When it’s sickness, No! You know, that sickness should be treated when it becomes the sphere of influence”

⁴ Study available at: <http://www.labris.org.yu/en/images/hate-speech.pdf>.

2) In the programme 'Bravo Show', aired on 7 March 2007, the guests Drazen Zeric (pop singer, DZ), and Jelena Bacic Alimpic (programme host, JBA) had the following conversation:

JBA – “Well, Drazen, how is your girlfriend doing?”

DZ – “I don't have a girlfriend”

JBA – “No, no, no...it's impossible there aren't girls around...there aren't any boys, are there?”

DZ – “No, no, no...there are girls around me...Boys, God forbid! Although that's fashionable in Zagreb, but....”

JBA – “It's fashionable in Zagreb?”

DZ – “It's not fashionable here as well, is it? I've expected all, but here... and in Sarajevo! Luckily, it hasn't arrive in Sarajevo yet!”



JBA – “Not yet? That's what you think...”

DZ – “But it has...the Deen boy...what's his name...singer...he swings a bit that way”

JBA – “Swings a bit? (laughter) Well...he is a bit spoiling this macho image, isn't he?”

DZ – “It's not a macho image. Normal way is when a man is with a woman. A man and a man is abnormality”

These two examples demonstrate how easy it is to create a broad sense of 'abnormality' forcing an individual to accept his apparent inferiority and thus deny him the access to a bare minimum of social rights. As said above, if one is to carry out a holistic approach to the concept of human security, it is essential to consider the understanding and the perception that the individual has of his or hers own rights. Above all, it is essential to consider how 'hate speech' affects this discernment. The first step in the long and winding road to equality and justice is fighting hate speech.

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