

Gay Pride Amsterdam 2013

Event: Political Café

Summary: Discussing the current state of affairs in the European Neighborhood with members of VVD.

Moderated by Pieter van de Stadt.

Date: Thursday, 1 August, 2013 20,00-21,45

Location: Heeren van Aemstel, Amsterdam

Speaker: Petar Stojkovikj

The position and access to human rights of the LGBTI community in the Republic of Macedonia

Dear representatives of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, panelists, ladies and gentleman, distinguished guests, representatives of civil organizations, and media representatives.

Thank you for the kind invitation and opportunity to address you today. In addition, I would like to stress that I appreciate your interest and attention regarding the information that I am about to share with you concerning the position and access to human rights of the LGBTI community in the Republic of Macedonia. In order to give you an opportunity to ask questions I shall be brief and hopefully you will have a concise picture regarding the status and position of the LGBTI people in my country.

I will begin with the statement that the people being part of the LGBTI community represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in the society. Having this said, I emphasize that today in Macedonia this group is asking, discussing and truly hoping that their basic human rights are being respected. This means that today in Macedonia the CSO representatives are working on providing access to the right to life, freedom of movement, assembly, speech and basic need for public space free of violence in order to be able to socialize among each other.

This statement as it is might sound unbelievable; regretfully, I have to confirm that this is the everyday life for the people of this community. This is my own reality too. Not long ago I have decided to "come out" and share my intimacy with the public. Being an actor, human rights activist and a public figure made no difference for me as well as for the community. Hence, violence is not lenient towards any group within our society that seems different from the majority of the population.

However, I will not say that violence as a form of oppression focuses only towards the LGBTI community, thus violence has become a tool for physical and psychological oppression towards minorities that are perceived as non acceptable in the political and legal matrix of the system. In the interest of time, I will only speak about the position of the LGBTI community and events linked with violence towards this particular group, but one has

to be aware that other marginalized groups are in a similar or same position such as the Roma community, women, CSO representatives, media workers etc.

It may be too complex for you to understand why I said that LGBTI people are unable to access their basic Human Rights. Therefore, I will present some facts coming from the reports of local CSO or Human Rights organizations and relevant international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, as well as from my personal experience with violent and homophobic groups. The analysis of these reports describe a picture of violence, discrimination, humiliation and how people are being treated as irrelevant on the well propagated thesis that they are sick and should be exterminated in order not to spread the disease called homosexuality. Today, gay men and women in Macedonia are perceived as sick people that will ruin the hetero-normative society and destroy the healthy values among religious communities. Regardless of the religious groups differences the perception towards the LGBTI people remains to be the same.

Having in mind that the ethnic and religious identity of these groups comprises the identity of a well-behaved citizen with exception of small percent of the general population, the LGBTI people are not acceptable, therefore have no rights within the system thus making them second-class citizens. Just briefly, I will state some facts from the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia reports on the escalation of hate crimes in the last year that present a result of organized governmental and public homophobic campaigns. Since the opening of the first visible and openly accessible LGBTI support center in the Old Bazar in Skopje in September 2012, public officials began with personal statements on their view of the LGBTI community. The statements were similar, always emphasizing on the argument that being a homosexual means that you are a sick person that is ruining the Macedonian family and therefore society as a whole. The so called "Macedonian family" is and only considers being normal if it is comprised by one man and one woman. Nothing else is acceptable. Living in ethnically, religiously, politically, socially divided society these statements encouraged people that have negative position towards the community to practice violence as a method for expression of hate.

Because of the abovementioned, in only few months the community and I personally faced numerous physical attacks. The first attacks were mostly concentrated towards the LGBTI support center at night while people were not present however; the lack of reaction of the State institutions to condemn and punish the violence brought a new dimension to hate in our society. Violence became direct, personal and in increasing number of events of hate crimes towards people from the community. For an example, a medium group of young people attacked my own home twice with rocks and to this day remains unknown to the police officials. The LGBTI support center was stoned three times and there were two attempts to burn it down. One of these attacks happened just recently during the opening of the Pride week in Skopje or precisely on June 22. At the opening ceremony there were 40 people comprised of LGBTI people, supporters, human rights activist, health professionals, guest from neighboring countries etc. Around 40 young people gathered, well equipped and with identical ski masks stoned the center and try to torch it down having no consideration for the people being inside. Fortunately, if I may use such word, no one was seriously injured, although one police officer had to be taken to hospital and was released shortly.

This event came because of false information released in the public that on June 22nd the LGBTI community will have its first pride and provoked some groups in the society to take matter into their own hands. The result was open violence and death threats made to each person that may be gay or is perceived as such. The lack of immediate response by public officials and State institutions that have to provide protection in such cases was unavailable. Silence and ignorance towards violence became a reality. The Committee representatives had to address each Embassy, international governmental and "watch dog" organizations just to receive any reaction such as condemnation of violence by public officials such as the Prime minister and the Ministry for internal affairs. Again, I have to stress that the attackers remain unknown to the police officials, at least an investigation was opened under the pressure of representatives from foreign governments one being the Dutch Ministry for foreign affairs and the Ambassador in Skopje.

One can only be grateful for the unconditional support of your country and there are no words to express the gratitude, however, the fact that such support is not available from the State institutions and representatives of all citizens within the country is devastating. That only confirms that Human Rights are accessible only to certain groups and individuals associated to the groups. This remains to be a reality regardless of the fact that Macedonia has ratified most Human Rights conventions and is a member of Council of Europe, WTO, WHO, OSCE, UN etc, hold candidate status and aspires towards full membership within the EU. Even if the institutions reacted based on the domestic legislation or the Constitution of the country, protection and access to rights should be sufficient.

However, reality hits hard when you realize that this is not available to you because you are different. Reality shows that violence is regarded non-acceptable act only if you are part of the majority and only if considered worthy to live and be free of violence.

Under whose standards I ask today would I be worthy to enjoy my basic rights and liberties. Where do I and others like me, get a stamp that says that we are eligible to life free of violence?

Thank you for your attention.