

LGBTI PEOPLE IN SERBIA BETWEEN HOMOPHOBIC VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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PURPOSE

The purpose of the paper is to present improvements in the position of the LGBTI+² people but also to warn that long-standing obstacles and challenges have not yet been removed. The text focuses on the results of the research “The degree of social integration of the LGBTI+ population in Serbia” (Mršević, 2021), organized by the Geten group.³ The starting hypothesis of the research was that the situation in Serbia was improved in everyday life, primarily in terms of reducing social distance. Therefore, we decided to document the observed trends of improvement by research results. The research examines the existence of the degree of social integration as opposite to social distance. Thus, we wanted to deconstruct the easily accepted negative stereotype that the situation of LGBTI+ people in Serbia is permanently bad, while the majority population does not accept sexual minorities and opposes the expansion of their rights (Antonić 2014, 218-219).⁴

The text is also based on a series of current, domestic research studies related to the position of LGBTI+ people, reports of independent institutions, as well

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2 The acronym includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual people. In the following text, LGBTI+ will be used to cover all the mentioned categories. In those parts of the text where the results of research or the views of other authors who do not use the acronym in the manner stated in this text are given, we have left the original, authorial version.

3 Geten is the title of Belgrade based Center for the Rights of LGBTIQA persons.

4 Part of our public feels aversion towards the alleged subjection of Serbia to the cultural hegemony of the “Empire” and the acceptance of the transnational establishment by local LGBT organizations.

as on the accompanying public policy documents, indicating trends of the current social situation of LGBTI+ persons at the beginning of the new Millennium. In different parts of the world, there are evident significant improvements of the LGBTI+ people civil status, equating it now almost completely with the majority population (Mršević, 2009: 34). These legal changes reflect a growing integration of that minority population in society, at the same time in reverse, and in turn contribute to the reduction of social distance.

In terms of public policies on the position of LGBTI+ people, Serbia constantly lags not only behind the European West and North, but also behind the neighboring countries, Croatia, Montenegro and Hungary, where the Law on Registered Same-Sex Unions (Law No. XXIX, Hungarian Official Gazette, 2009)⁵ was enacted in 2009. There is an average of 75.3 registered same-sex unions in Hungary per year (male - 48.7, female 26.7), the average age of partners is 38.7 years (Bejegyzett élettársi kapcsolatok, 2022: 01.29). In the shadow of these improvements in the neighboring countries, we sought to document domestic trends of improvement, which, although not yet visible in legal changes, already exist in reducing social distance which is neither small nor sporadic.

Three basic problems have characterized the position of the LGBT+ population in Serbia for years (Mršević, 2019: 619): a threat to personal security due to the occurrence of unauthorized (or rarely sanctioned) phobic violence, tolerated phobic hate speech in public discourse and the lack of opportunities to establish legally regulated same sex unions. After two decades of legislative changes, improved access to justice, increased visibility and the rise of several prominent activists and organizations, despite these significant developments and clear changes in the attitudes of citizens across the region, violence and discrimination continue to be a major challenge for the community (Gavrić & Čaušević, 2021: 8).

DESIGN/METHODS/APPROACH

The research (Mršević, 2021) comprises online interviews and direct personal contact, which were conducted from February 1 to April 30, 2021. The research included two separate questionnaires. The first questionnaire, designed for the general, majority population, was based on the adjusted Bogardus scale of social distance, designed to examine and measure social distance through the degree of readiness of respondents to accept various types of social interactions with members of the surveyed social group. In addition, in order to determine the degree of LGBTI+ integration more authentically and more precisely, and particularly, to

⁵The Law rules the establishment and termination of same-sex unions (Törvény, amely szabályozza a bejegyzett élettársi kapcsolatokról szóló).



identify possible directions and actors for improvement, a second questionnaire was used for the minority population of self-identified LGBTI+ people to examine their personal experiences, attitudes and assessments of their position and rights in Serbia. The research included the respondents from both groups in a total sample of 1,151 people: 687 adults from the so-called general population (249 men and 438 women) and 464 adults self-identified as members of the LGBTI+ population (237 women 227 men). The findings of the research conducted by Mršević and other used sources confirmed that violence and discrimination of the LGBT+ community in Serbia still exist. 94.6 percent of the LGBT+ respondents reported that they experienced physical violence, verbal insults, and threats. 96.3 percent reported that they were forced to hide their sexual orientation / gender identity from their surroundings. Violence and discrimination of LGBTI+ people happen everywhere, according to 93.7 percent of the respondents, more precisely in schools, 91.4 percent, in public places, 90.9 percent, in political parties, 81.0 percent. There are parents who still believe that only heterosexuality is natural and feel sorry for a daughter who finds warm tenderness in a woman's arms (Lee Evans 1994: 293). Violence against young LGBTI+ people is especially prevalent: 79.1 percent of the respondents of the LGBTI+ sample experienced personal discrimination and / or violence, including death threats, job loss, denial of inheritance, deprivation of valuable property, especially housing, forced treatment in mental hospitals, involuntary treatment outside medical institution, total or partial denial of parental support and rejection by the family, denial of support, eviction, and the like.

"The fact that they denied me support and decided to allow me to continue my studies was the last straw in the cup of misunderstanding. I packed my things, went to Belgrade, passed the entrance exam, to find a job that allowed me to live and study. Alone. From that moment on, I thought that there, in the place where my parents lived, was no longer my home. (M.23, student)." (Erdei, 2014: 138)

The Protector of Citizens also states that LGBTI+ people are still often victims of discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices. (Protector of Citizens, 2020: 47-48). Although LGBT+ people are a little safer in Belgrade and Novi Sad, this still is not the case in other places. (Danas, 2022, June 9). Life of LGBT people, especially in small communities, may be described in one word - fear. People are afraid of the reaction of the environment, but also of the treatment they will receive in the mandated institutions when they report violence. Sexual orientation and gender identity were the motive for 42 cases of violence and discrimination that the organization "*Let it be known*" recorded in 2018 (BBC, 2019, June 6). The number of attacks reported to this organization was thirty percent higher than a year earlier. Many cases recorded this year have never been reported to the authorities. The data from 2017 shows that more than two thirds of persons who reported hate crimes assessed the treatment in state institutions as negative, inadequate, and



humiliating. In regard of violence against the LGBTI+ people the situation of the Pride Info Center in Belgrade is illustrative. Since the founding of the Center in 2017, there have been fourteen attacks and no attackers have ever been prosecuted although these attacks were duly recorded by cameras. Whoever they are (from juvenile passers-by to members of the neo-Nazis groups),⁶ impunity is a principle that applies to them, which may give some new attackers an incentive to organize a new attack (Danas, 2022, June 9).

According to the findings of a survey conducted in 2020 by the IDEAS Center for Research and Development in cooperation with the Regional Center on a sample of 182 gay people, more than three quarters of respondents (77%) believe that the Republic of Serbia does not care about LGBTI+ citizens. Emotional violence was reported by 56% of the participants in the last year, 8% of LGBTI+ people were exposed to physical violence, while in 2020, survey indicates that 14% of LGBTI+ people reported experiencing sexual violence (CeSID, 2021: 12). Discrimination based on sexual orientation is widespread in both public and private life, primarily due to the extremely negative social perception of LGBTI+ people expressed even by academic authors (Antonić, 2014: 215-216).⁷ The LGBTI+ population is one of the most vulnerable groups because it faces daily marginalization, discrimination, harassment, threats, violence and hate speech (Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, 2011: 30). Homophobic ambient affects not only individuals or a particular LGBTI+ person, but it also creates a whole range of challenges for their environment, friends, neighbors, relatives and especially their immediate family (Mršević, 2020: 38).

Despite some positive developments, cases of discrimination, violence and hate speech against LGBTI+ people are generally not adequately treated in Serbia. One of the widespread, long-standing prejudices against LGBT people is that they are ill. However, the ministries in charge of health issues, as well as medical associations, do not take steps to overcome this prejudice. Moreover, even the persons with professional authority spread and strengthen this prejudice by their own statements (Commissioner for Protection of Equality, 2011: 31). The full realization of the rights of this population in the field of education, employment, health, social protection, legal regulation of same-sex unions and legal consequences of adjustment (change) of sex and gender identity, as well as protection of their physical and mental identity is still not noticeable. The Protector of Citizens notes that the attitude of the media towards LGBTI+ people, their position, and rights is changing and improving when compared to previous years - the number of neutral and positive texts has increased. However, LGBTI+ people often continue to appear in the

⁶The faces are often clearly visible, but the offenders are usually not detected, and never punished.

⁷ Homosexuality, in itself, is an immoral phenomenon because homosexual behavior cannot be socially universalized, while the affirmation of gay rights is considered one of the official tasks of American foreign policy and a regular means of Washington's pressure on insufficiently obedient states.



media tabloid contents in very negative connotations (Protector of Citizens, 2017: 123), sometimes relying on academic production where some authors point out that the agenda of the LGBT movement affects some of the basic social institutions, like marriage, education, and children's socialization (Antonić, 2014: 208).

There are still security risks for participants during the Pride Parade (Labris, 2017: 9), but also in relation to the daily life and safety of LGBTI+ people, so additional activities should be directed towards improving the safe environment (Labris, 2018: 27). There were instances of inappropriate statements, comments and media reports related to the LGBTI+ population, which can be characterized as hate speech or abusive and degrading treatment (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2022: 47).⁸ Ineffective criminal investigations remain one of significant problems (Vlada Republike Srbije 2022: 48).

Also, in recent years, hate-motivated attacks have been reported, mainly due to actual or presumed sexual orientation or gender identity (Labris, 2015-2016: 12-15). It should be emphasized that LGBTI+ people have distrust towards the police, which is a key reason why they are reluctant to report violence (Radoman J., Radoman M. and Šapić, 2017: 33). The sense of belonging to the social community is still limited, and the family, social circles and the state institutions remain the sources of pressure and stigma (Gavrić & Čaušević, 2021: 7).

In the absence of any legal solution, same-sex partners resort to finding alternative ways, and use all existing legal and non-legal mechanisms, which will at least partially compensate for the rights enjoyed by spouses in a traditional family. Consciousness raising groups are such compensating social models, which involve lesbians getting together, discussing what's bothering them, creating avoidance tactics, developing an analysis of social context and understanding the way oppression has developed (Hoagland, 1990: 135). This status, together with pressure created by the conservative social environment, leads to a complete lack of legal and physical security. This causes revolt in the LGBTI+ community, which results in increasingly negative attitudes, increasing mutual animosity between the LGBTI+ and the majority heterosexual population, even between gay men and lesbians themselves (Frye 2019: 161)⁹, thus leaving less and less room for finding a lasting solution. On the other hand, when the LGBTI+ community, through its representatives, raises the issue of legalizing same-sex unions, these initiatives are often not understood by the public as a requirement to ensure the enjoyment of some basic human rights, but instead are rather interpreted as a reckless in-

⁸ See, for example, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, complaint no. 07-00-128 / 2020-02 opinion of 12.02.2021, complaint no. 07-00-174 / 2019-02, opinion of 29 May 2019; complaint no. 07-00-390 / 2018-02, opinion of 2 August 2018.

⁹ Expectations that gay men understand and support feminist and lesbian causes are strikingly unfulfilled.



sistence on unfounded privileges (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, 2021: 2).

FINDINGS

One of the starting hypotheses of this research, based on previous pilot studies, is that the social distance towards LGBTI+ people in Serbia decreases over time, which is a good indicator that the degree of their social integration is increasing. The hypothesis is confirmed as the main research finding.

The reduction of social distance and negative attitudes towards the LGBTI+ population was confirmed by the comparison of these results to similar, earlier research in Serbia in the previous decade.¹⁰ As regards the attitudes towards violence against people of different sexual orientations perpetrated by groups and individuals, the vast majority of the respondents, i.e., 63 percent of them, claimed that such violence ought to be punished in the same way as any other type of violence against anyone. Young people's views were again found to be divided on the topic of pride marches, with some in the under-29 cohort reporting they would join a pride parade whilst others were prepared to use violence against the marchers. (CeSID, 2021: 12)

A significant readiness of the general population to enter into various business and private relations with LGBTI+ persons was stated by the 2021 Geten organized research. There is a decrease of social distance and a gradual increase in social integration, e.g., 88.5 percent accept to be acquaintances, 76.6 percent to enter into a business / professional partnership, 85.4 percent to hire an LGBTI+ person, 87.3 percent to work for an LGBTI+ employer. Most of them do not object to LGBTI+ people taking various close private, and also leadership social roles, to being teachers in schools, coaches, babysitters to their own children and geriatric assistants (guardians for the elderly) to their own grandparents, etc. Yet social distance still exists in terms of close private relationships, for which 66.4 percent assess that they are not ready. 60.3 percent are not ready to accept that the closest family member (brother, sister, child) enters into a same-sex marital / extramarital relationship. In short, business is acceptable - love is not.

¹⁰See, for example: Gay Straight alliance "Prejudice in the spotlight - homophobia in Serbia, 2010". Commissioner for Protection of Equality poll "Attitudes of citizens towards discrimination in Serbia", 2012-2013. Gay Straight Alliance in 2014 poll among police officers. Commissioner for Protection of Equality "Attitudes of citizens towards discrimination in Serbia" conducted in 2016, 2018 and in 2019. Center for Public Policy Research, 2017. Ideas GLIC and Spectrum, Position of LGBT+ people in the labor market, 2018. Commissioner for Protection of Equality, survey of discrimination in the labor market, 2020.



It is important to point out the major disagreement of the respondents with the negative attitudes that exist about the LGBTI+ population, in the public, media and political discourse. This is one of the most important findings of the research because it gives a completely different picture of the attitudes towards the LGBT+ population, whose members are very often presented in a negative light in the media and in the statements of certain personalities in the field of politics, culture, sports and the like, e.g. as imports from the West, disease, contagion, contrary to our tradition and morals, etc.

A rejection of widely spread negative stereotypes regarding the LGBT+ people is significant. The interviewees do not agree on all points studied. LGBTI+ people in Serbia "lack nothing" rejected 91.6 percent, that LGBTI+ affiliation is contagious rejected 91.0 percent, that LGBTI+ people should not work as educators rejected 82.0 percent, that LGBTI+ people are sick rejected 81.2 percent, that some western countries are lobbying for the rights of the LGBTI+ population in order to reduce the birth rate in Serbia, rejected 78.7 percent.

A significant majority, more than half of them, expressed their disagreement with e.g., attitudes that the ban on LGBTI propaganda in Russian schools should be an example which Serbia should follow - 75.3 percent. That the LGBTI+ lobby rules the Serbian government from the shadows is rejected by exactly 70.5 percent, that LGBTI+ people contribute to lowering the national birth rate is not accepted by 70.6 percent, that LGBTI+ people impose their lifestyle on others is unacceptable 66.1 percent, that pride parades publicly spread immorality is rejected by 5.9 percent. A particular attention is to be paid to the rejection of the attitude often placed in some public discourse and academic publications¹¹ that equalizing the rights of the LGBTI+ population with other people of our country is against the tradition, religion, and culture of our people - 65.5 percent

Contrary to the rejection of the negative attitudes towards the LGBTI+ population, more than half of the respondents agreed with the positive attitudes, which is rather significant. The acceptance of the positive attitudes is one of the most important findings of the research because it gives a completely different image of people's attitudes towards the LGBTI+ population, which is commonly presented in a negative light in the media and in public statements of individuals in politics, culture, sports and the like. Most of the respondents of the general sample either completely agree or partially agree with several affirmative statements. The artistic achievements of LGBTI+ persons (films, music, literature) are worth considering - 89.7 percent. It is very important to accept that LGBTI+ people should be allowed a registered same-sex unions as a form of establishing family communities, with which 82.1 percent agree; that schools should teach about human rights and achievements of the LGBTI+ population - 79.6 percent; that LGBTI+ people should be allowed to

¹¹ The work and actions of LGBT activists are most often financed by Washington or Brussels based foundations, what is why they are seen as imposing a new, foreign system of values on Serbian society from the outside (Antonić, 2014: 218).



adopt / foster children under the same conditions - 75.6 percent; that the protection of the LGBTI+ population from physical violence must be more consistently implemented - 74.8 percent; that the protection of the LGBTI+ population from discrimination must be more consistently implemented - 72.6 percent; and that the state's task is to enable regular and safe pride parades - 66.1 percent.

The acceptability of LGBTI+ people in social and private roles and relationships was assessed regarding the answers to a number of questions related to the opinion of the respondents on whether it is acceptable for LGBTI+ people to perform certain social roles: to be my chosen doctor is completely acceptable - 80.9 percent respondents; to be my boss / supervisor in the workplace is perfectly acceptable for 80.9 percent of the respondents; to be the selector of our national sports team is completely acceptable for 79.9 percent; minister in the Government of my country - fully acceptable by 77.1 percent; the Prime Minister of my country - fully acceptable by 76.7 percent; the President of my country - fully acceptable by 76.6 percent; the president of the municipality in which I live - completely acceptable by 76.9 percent; to teach at school is perfectly acceptable by 74.8 percent.

It is very important to mention the position that the LGBTI+ persons should be allowed a registered partnership as a form of establishing family communities, with which two thirds fully agree - 65.4%, while 16.7% partially agree, meaning as much as 82.1 percent of the respondents from the general population. This is one of the important findings of this research in a situation when it is easily considered by the public that the legalization of same-sex unions cannot "pass" in Serbia, because allegedly, most of the population do not agree with redefining marriage in this way, which can lead to a meaningless, institutional crisis, and abandonment of marriage as a legal institution (Antonić, 2014: 208). This research result refutes the authenticity and accuracy of this supposedly widespread negative attitude of the majority, which is nowhere exactly documented or measured. It is most likely that the prevailing loudness and presence of opponents of same-sex unions in public discourse derive from the misconception that their views are majority, while the much quieter majority has nothing against such unions, and even considers it the state's duty to provide the necessary legal context.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE

Social distance indicates the existence of intolerance and hostility towards certain groups. It is not only a problem that points out the existence of social divisions, marginalization and isolation of those to whom this distance is great; it is also fertile ground and "justification" for various types of discrimination, hate speech,

violence and other hatred motivated crimes. In addition, tacit “knowledge” marginalizes homosexuality by not mentioning it (Stolić 2014: 18).¹²

Directions for improving the position of LGBTI+ people comprise respect for their human rights as an important indicator of realized rights and freedoms in a society (Radoman, & Radoman & Šapić, 2017: 9). Modern societies should be inclusive – the societies which accept and respect differences, and in which each individual can realize their full potential, feel accepted and protected while participating equally with others in all areas of social life. Inclusive, democratic, non-discriminatory development of society cannot be the subject of arbitrary decision-making as to who will enjoy all human rights in full and who will not. The precondition is the elimination of harmful stereotypes and prejudices (such as the one that LGBT ideology and its legal-normative embodiment in Serbia is “homocolonialism“, AntoniĆ, 2021), the promotion of human rights culture and the elimination of social and any other distance from members of groups at risk of discrimination (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2022: 91).

The main positive changes identified by the 2021 Geten-organized research are those on which inclusiveness needs to be further built: holding the Pride Parade from 2014 till nowadays in eight years, increasing openness and increasing presence in public discourse of the problems facing the LGBTI+ population, considering the position of the LGBTI+ community as human rights, continuous actions of independent institutions in cases of discrimination and violations of human rights of that population, as well as so far¹³ unhindered five-year mandate of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia entrusted to a woman of an openly same-sex orientation. In addition, the publicly announced parenting of the Prime Minister has certainly reduced the stereotype about the alleged lesbian inability to be mothers (Tanjug, 2019, February 20). All these changes have contributed, in their own way, to the acceptability of the idea that diversity is normal even when it is a minority (Mršević, 2019: 621). Opinions, attitudes, suggestions, etc., regarding the directions of improvement come from various sides, e.g., from regular annual and special thematic reports of independent institutions, from research conclusions, through the views of civil society organizations, etc. Not to be forgotten: for the process of identity creation, the place where this process freely takes place, the so-called “arenas of representation”, is of great importance (Savić, 2014: 149).

12 Educated people, confident in the power of “knowledge” about what is “normal and natural” in the domain of sexuality, often do not mention homosexuality at all, but by “knowing” what is “right”, they create a ground for the public condemnation and disqualification of persons of same-sex sexual orientation. Homosexuality is seen as an act, a procedure, a momentary departure from the track of correctness, but not as a permanent identity mark and life-long way of living.

13In the time of finalizing this text in June 2022



In all of them, as a denominator, there is a common need to reduce stereotypes and prejudices towards the members of groups at risk of discrimination, as well as activities aimed at promoting a positive public image of these groups. Clear and strong messages that any kind of violence is unacceptable and socially undesirable should be sent from all addresses. It should be also communicated that LGBTI community is a vulnerable group which needs support to exercise its rights. There is no single reason for a denial of rights that belong to them or rights that already belong to other groups. (CeSID, 2021: 43)

The Geten-organized research on the degree of social integration indicates that in terms of the general social situation, the respondents largely opt for such inclusive egalitarian social relations. Most respondents of the general population believe that all people should be treated equally, which 95.9 percent agree with, whereas the opinion that everything possible must be done to equalize conditions for different groups of people is a view taken by 90.4 percent of the respondents. Just as we strive to build a society in which we can fearlessly express our opinions, with respect for each individual, we should apply the same mechanism to diversity in all its forms - to different orientations, gender, appearances, desires, and dreams. (Mondo, 2022, June 6)

Continuous work on promoting a positive image in society of members of these groups also contributes to the reduction of discrimination and greater social inclusion. It should be borne in mind that certain stereotypes and prejudices stem from ignorance and / or misunderstanding of culture and other characteristics of members of certain groups, and it is necessary to work on getting to know other cultures, peoples, languages, customs and the like. The media also have a significant role in achieving this measure (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2022: 104).

When creating laws, strategies and other public policies at the national, provincial and local levels, the rights and interests of members of groups at risk of discrimination shall be taken into account and the effects of these public policies shall be monitored, in cooperation with civil society organizations. The effects of the measure are the creation of systemic conditions for the improvement of public policies aimed at members of groups at risk of discrimination and equalization of opportunities for members of these groups (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2022: 100). When LGBT+ people are protected from violence and discrimination they become actors of changes, they may increasingly participate in the processes of solving the challenges of their own securitization. That way, they are in a better position to put on the mainstream political agenda their security, endangered by the continuous victimization, violence and discrimination. According to the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, securitization depends on the historical and cultural context in which the securitizing discourse takes place. Treating something as a security issue is always a matter of political choice (Šulović, 2010). The same applies to the LGBT+ persons' security.



Social inclusion of LGBTI persons leads to important conclusions: that their vulnerability has legitimacy, that they have the capacity to point out the relevance of the threats and that they participate in decision-making and/or legitimately influence decisions that are binding upon relevant political actors.

It is more effective if security is conceptualized in terms of normative goals to be achieved or as an expression of basic values that need to be protected, than if it is articulated as something “to be defended against” (Šulović, 2010). Finally, after listing all the proposed measures to improve the position of LGBTI+ people, it should be concluded that it is important to understand that insisting on the values of equality, human rights for all and combating discrimination does not endanger anyone’s freedom, but only complements it.

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