

## **Gay parades and the distinction between private and public**

**by Natascha Ilic**

In recent years, gay parades and LGBTIQ groups have become important topics in the Balkans. The observation of human rights is a key component to the progress of the entire region. This essay focuses on the publicly visible occurrences that take place during gay pride parades. It will firstly start by introducing a recent film, *Parada* that has busted the hinges off the doors of society to a mainstream audience in regards to gay pride parades. Secondly, a short history of gay pride parades within the region will be discussed. Lastly, a critical discussion of the topic using other media sources used by the LGBTIQ community will give sight to what the LGBTIQ feels about the topic at hand.

### **The Movie *Parada*<sup>1</sup>**

A surprise to all, *Parada* was a huge hit in 2011 in Balkan cinemas. The movie is about a homosexual couple that wants to organize a gay pride parade in Belgrade despite the dangers of local Serbian nationalists. As one of the most absurd and hilarious turn of events in the film, a brutal Serbian war veteran will ensure the security of the parade to get back his fiancée. For this aim he travels together with a gay doctor in a pink mini Fiat through the former Yugoslavia to find his old war buddies, against whom he fought against during the break up of Yugoslavia. Despite all tensions in the region they became comrades. According to the director Srđan Dragojević

, the goal of the movie is to inform the public about some of the human rights problems throughout the region.

Srđan Dragojević graduated in psychology and movie directed for some years in the United States. He is now a member of the Socialist Party in Serbia (SPS). Although not belonging to the gay community himself, he wants to change and manipulate the minds of his audience in the most positive way possible. The film is an educational political lecture, packed into a language that everyone understands: the language of stereotypes and prejudices. The director plays with a lot of clichés, regarding ethnic background and sexual orientation. Dragojević's hilarious interpretations of the caricatures through the film become a great asset to his audience. The majority of his characters become very likable, understandable, and pleasant. Dragojević measures his success by quoting a teenager who said that he did not like the movie because now

he would not be able to hate gays anymore. Although the majority of watchers (more than 500.000, 330.000 in Serbia) were hostile to the gay community, the reactions regarding the film were positive. *Parada* shows that gay parades are an essential part of societies attempt to fight for equality and human rights. However, they also create mutual connections across the national borders that still divide the new republics of the former Yugoslavia. For example, some members of the Serbian LGBTIQ community came to support the gay parade in Zagreb and vice versa. The movie ends with a dramatic scene comparable to the real events of Belgrade Pride 2010, which resulted in 6000 hooligans and many spectators creating pandemonium for an understaffed police force of 5600.

Two comments according to written interviews with members of the LGBTIQ community state: “The reactions I have witnessed from queers who have seen the film range from 'It was brilliant and hilarious' to 'It was dreadful and homophobic and full of stupid stereotypes'. My impression from reading and hearing many reviews is that for a film that made the mainstream in this region, it's amazingly positive. It's a queer film designed to be watched by a mainstream. Many of the viewers who watched the film include a high percentage of homophobic people who have not yet assimilated into normal trends of the twenty-first century. I believe it succeeds in not being too confrontational (including familiar stereotypes) but also making the gay people in it seem very human and likeable.”<sup>ii</sup>

Others did not watch the movie after seeing the trailer: “I thought there was too much vulgar cussing in the trailer, which actually made me not want to see it.”<sup>iii</sup>

Some critiques pointed out the fact that there were no gay kissing scenes in the movie. The director Srđan Dragojević argued on this that he did not want to lose huge parts of the audience that would dislike seeing two homosexuals kissing. Others asked why the movie was a comedy when it should have been a serious drama. Like mentioned before, the director saw this as the best way to get the attention of the mainstream audience that would then be confronted with the fact that gay people exist and will continue to exist in the Balkans. One controversial and ironic aspect of the film was that nationalistic war veterans protected the LGBTIQ community. Others criticized the movie as a conspiracy supported by the gay lobby.

### **Time Table of Gay Parades in the Western Balkans<sup>iv</sup>**

The history of Gay Parades in the Western Balkans, compared to worldwide happenings:

**1969:** Worldwide, the first kind of a gay parade was held in New York on the night of the June 27<sup>th</sup> 1969 and lasted till the June 28<sup>th</sup> in front of the famous gay bar, The Stonewall Inn. This turned into the Stonewall Riots that were aroused because of numerous humiliating police raids, attacks and degradations of the gay community of New York. All walks of life such as members of the working class, Afro Americans and Latin Americans accompanied the gay activists. In 1970 an efflorescence of gay parades arose triggering gay parades globally, primarily starting in New York and San Francisco.

**2001:** Before the first Gay Pride in Belgrade had really started, a group of LGBTIQ protesters were attacked brutally by several nationalistic homophobic mobs. The police were not prepared for the thousands of demonstrators that took to the street that day so the parade was canceled due to intensive display of violence, religious icons, and unraveling of the city. Due to the drastic lengths the citizens of Belgrade went through to maliciously attack and injure people the parade was stopped.

**2002:** The first Gay Pride in Zagreb, second parade in the region, was also disturbed by several violent attacks by nationalist opponents of the parade. The Zagreb pride got regional recognition because participants got support from the whole western Balkans.

**2004:** The Gay Pride in Belgrade 2004 was canceled due to security threats from counter-demonstrators and escalating violence.

**2006:** The First [Eastern European](#) Pride, also known as the International Pride in Zagreb, aimed to gather support of the LGBTIQ populations Eastern European countries that still have difficulties with demonstrating. The participants of this pride came from all over the world.

**2009:** The second Gay Pride in Belgrade was relocated to a space outside the city centre due to expected heavy public threats of violence. The moving of the pride outside of the city centre and out of the public eye was the result of extremists and absolutely defeated the purpose of the march. The point of Pride is to march where the entire population can see homosexuality out in the open.

**2010:** The third Gay Pride in Belgrade again ended with violence. There were 1000 participants that could walk relatively undisturbed. However there were also 6000 protesters, 150 wounded policemen and 250 people arrested.

**2010:** The ninth Gay Pride in Zagreb, like every parade since 2002, once again ran high with aggressive protests but was out in the open.

**2011:** The first Gay Pride in Split slogan read, "Različite Obitelji, Jednaka Prava" ("Various Families, One Right"). The around 300 participants from Split and about 50 from Zagreb and the region were protected by 700 policemen. Nevertheless, the participants were attacked by the majority of the citizens of Split and were subjected to the throwing stones, bottles, tomatoes, ashtrays, and various other objects. The roar of the crowd was on its mark when it harmoniously shouted, "kill the fags, kill the fags". Around a dozen people were injured and about a 100 were arrested.

**2011:** The parade in Belgrade was forbidden in 2011 to ensure the security of the participants and the whole city. Some claim that it was forbidden because politicians were afraid of losing the elections. On the other hand there were huge debates between Serbian politicians to hold the parade because they struggle for the entry into the European Union.

**2012:** The Gay Pride in Split was peaceful and quite because of 900 policemen accentually coordinated about 500 participants, including some Croatian politicians of the Socialist Democratic Party. Fifty Anti-demonstrations were arrested and Participants said this year's event was an important test of democracy and human rights due to the countries bid to join the European Union in July of 2013. One of the preconditions for Croatia to enter the European Union is allowing equal rights for LGBTIQ community. That is why some call this peaceful gay pride event a show for the international media.

**2012:** In Belgrade an informal, small and peaceful march with policemen, in the main shopping mall Knez Mihajlova and the Republic Square was held. However, it still could not be called a parade.

### **The Private and the Public**

The following comments regarding the Gay parade in Split 2011 are stated from the standpoint of the opponents of the Parade.<sup>v</sup> The negative reactions focus mainly on the distinction between private and public.

People complain about borders that should not be crossed between public and private: "Let everybody do what they want in their own four walls." "Nek svi rade šta žele u 4 zida." Furthermore, spending public money on "private affairs" is criticized: "It is not normal that the state pays 2 million Kunas (about 300,000 Euros) so that 200 people walk around in the city", "Nije normalno da država plaća 2 milijuna kuna da bi se 200 ljudi pokazivalo po gradu." or "In

times of crisis this kind of dissipation of money doesn't make any sense." "U vrijeme krize ovakvo rasipanje novca nema nikakvog smisla." It is seen as a provocation when a topic that is traditionally considered as private is brought to public view: "I think that most of the people in Split don't have anything against people with the same sexual commitment, but they are disturbed by their provocations in the public." "Mislim da ve  
ina ljudi u Splitu nema ništa protiv ljudi iste seksualne opredijeljenosti, ali ima protiv toga da javno provociraju ostale." The presentation of a march for the international media and a political connection are criticized: "As if a band would play for itself", "Kao da bend svira sam sebi", „The Gay Parade is a political march“, "Gay Parada je politički mimohod." Today, in cities, where the LGBTIQ community is more accepted, like for example San Francisco, Amsterdam or Berlin, Gay Pride parades have transformed into festivals of a carnival-like character. In contrary, South-Eastern Europe gay pride parades still have the original political and activist character pressing for human rights and for the LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning) community. The aggressive reactions are the most significant proof that these demonstrations are still needed and equal rights are not yet reality. One possible reason why the masses have a problem accepting the marches in Eastern Europe is because the marches often do not reach the 'average citizen'. According to some opposition statements, it is not clear that the marches have any reasonable goal. Some are afraid that the openness of homosexuality can possibly promote homosexuality if shown publically. Also, the actual fight for equal and human rights is partially understood as a promotion of the left wing parties or any other political parties. But belonging to the LGBTIQ community or fighting for their rights does not necessarily give information about the political orientation of the demonstrators.

Besides the Gay Parades there are several other ways to use the public as a stage for claims of the LGBTIQ community. For example, after the Zagreb Pride 2011 the play „That's So Gay!“ was performed by Kristo Gobin, a Croatian-American gay from California. The performance explores the coming out process of a first generation Croatian American. This work points out the personal and public struggles of coming to terms with one's sexuality within a Croatian household in the United States. The educational play questions the heteronormativity and uses a lot of humor, combined with personal experiences. It also offers a lot of theories about expectations of sex, gender, sexuality and sexual performance.<sup>vi</sup>

A special approach addressing the brutality that happened in the streets of Belgrade 2001 and Zagreb 2002 is the performance "East Side Story" by artist Igor Grubi

. The work consists of a two-channel video installation and a series of eleven photographs: The first projection shows documentary shots of the riots and the attacks of the violent masses upon the participants of the Pride parades in Belgrade and Zagreb. The second video, projected with a delay, shows dancers who are re-enacting the events in stylized dance choreography on the same spots where the violence originally took place. The dramatic structure of the work warns the audience of extreme nationalism. In the absence of an immediate "threatening" ethnic "other" a new victim arises from the "internal enemy" that embodies sexual minorities. Grubic's act is performed in a public space. This exteriorizes the ambiguity of visibility and invisibility.<sup>vii</sup>

“Le Zbor” is the name of a choir from Zagreb, consisting exclusively of female singers. The mixture between the French article “le” (the) and the Croatian word “zbor” (choir) is a word game. It may be read as “choir” or like “lesbor” which implies the word “lesbian”. Just like the name says – and at the same time does not say – the choir consists of lesbians and also straight feminist female singers. It was formed in 2005 as the first choir of its kind in southeastern Europe. They are promoters of human rights through arts and culture, by using singing as their instrument. They also produce films, theatre, fine art exhibitions, fashion shows and even a comic book. Their song repertoire consists of international pop rock hits and socialist revolutionary songs that also thematically refer to women in general. They rearrange traditional, pop and rock songs to overcome their original seriousness. Especially because the Catholic Church in Croatia is not LGBTIQ friendly, Lezbor wants to support believers of a ‘different’ sexual preference.<sup>viii</sup>

This was a short overview about the representation of the LGBTIQ community in the Balkans, especially regarding the case of Croatia. The negative imagery that surrounds the LGBTIQ community is created mainly by the media and continuous to be present in today's society. However, to improve this situation, private concerns are carried to the public, not by using standard media, but instruments like parades, plays, choirs and the arts.

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