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Kosovo: Amnesty International condemns attack on freedom of expression

Amnesty International condemns the attack against an event organized on 14 December by *Kosovo 2.0* magazine in Pristina. The organization calls on authorities to carry out a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation which duly takes into account any alleged hate motive on the basis of which this attack was perpetrated.

The event, which was violently disrupted by an organized group of about 20 young men, was held to launch an edition of the magazine dedicated to examining heterosexual and same sex sexuality in Western Balkans.

Amnesty International considers this incident as an attack on freedom of expression, as well as an attack on media freedom, and calls on Kosovo's authorities to act strongly against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Public authorities have to ensure that everyone can enjoy the rights to freedom of expression, physical integrity and freedom from ill and degrading treatment without any discrimination including on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. Authorities must not only refrain from violating these rights but have also to exercise due diligence to ensure that they are protected from interferences from third parties including non state actors.

Prior to the event, numerous Kosovo imams had used strong homophobic language and called for the event to be banned and for use of violence against the organizers according to Kosovo media reports. According to the Kosovo Association of Journalists one imam took part in the attack.

The editor of *Kosovo 2.0* informed the police about threats and hate mail the magazine had received throughout the day, in relation to the planned event, from a group of right-wing football supporters called Plisat. One of the participants, a leading Kosovo feminist, also reported receiving threatening telephone calls and texts prior to the event.

The police initially responded by sending a few police officers to the Youth Hall in Pristina where the event was taking place.

However, at about 6pm a group of some 20 men forced their way into the hall and demolished the stage and all the equipment shouting slogans "God is great" and "Out pederast". A male member of the magazine's staff was also beaten. Part of the incident was captured on video in which a number of individuals engaging in criminal acts are clearly visible.

Despite the violence, the event continued as planned and was attended by some 200 people, including many leading journalists, local officials, and members of the LGBTI community in Kosovo and the wider Balkans region.

An after-launch party was scheduled to take place at 11pm, but some 30 minutes before the party, a group of about 100 men gathered outside the Youth Hall shouting slogans and threatening violence. The authorities sent a special police unit, but despite this a decision was taken by organizers to abandon the event and staff and guests were evacuated by the police in small groups in order not to provoke the gathered crowd.

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International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org