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Serbia: Official silence greets homophobic poster campaign

The Serbian right-wing group, Obraz, launched an anti-gay and lesbian poster campaign across Serbia in July this year as part of their continuing homophobic activities. The posters, which bore the slogan "Better Prevention than Cure (Better safe than sorry)", were illustrated with mock road signs suggesting that same sex couples should be prohibited.

Eight LGBT groups in Serbia sent an open letter to government officials following the appearance of the posters. They demanded that the officials, including the Minister for Human and Minority Rights, make a public statement against homophobia.

They said in the letter that they were turning to the officials publicly, "for it is important not to stay silent about any kind of discrimination, including discrimination against homosexual citizens".

The groups were extremely concerned at the homophobic threats implicit in the Obraz posters. They pointed out that the Obraz campaign, by claiming that gay men and lesbians are sick, breaches the provisions of both European and international human rights conventions, and defies the stance of the World Health Organization.

"We, the undersigned, believe this to be a violation of the basic human right to freedom of choice of a sexual partner and to be symptomatic of severe abuse of the public space. It also foreshadows the possibility of further discrimination, not only against homosexual people, but also against any other minority that Obraz might characterize as failing to conform to their concept of the "National Spirit [Srpstvo]".

"Considering that you are advocating for the integration of Serbia into the European Union, we expect your condemnation of homophobia, which is prohibited by the crucial documents of the EU and by the new anti-discriminatory law of Republic of Serbia, as well. We demand from you, the representatives of all citizens, to clearly and publicly condemn the action by the Fatherland Movement Obraz and every act of homophobia in general in accordance with the Constitution, which guarantees equal rights for all individuals. By doing so, you will provide safety and security guarantees for all people in Serbia."

The letter was signed by representatives of Labris (Lesbian Rights Group), Direct Action GLTB, Centre for the Promotion of LGBT Human Rights, Pride Association, New Age Rainbow Organization, LAMBDA - Centre for the Promotion of LGBT Human Rights and Queer culture, QUEERIA LGBT Working Group and the Belgrade Queer Studies Programme. These groups have not, as yet, received any reply.

Obraz's campaign was apparently launched in response to a "long live diversity" campaign launched in the town of Zrenjanin by the lesbian group, Labris, on 24 June, supported by two local radio stations. On 13 July, JM, the only identifiable lesbian in Zrenjanin, began receiving threatening SMS and email messages believed to have been sent by members of Obraz. Further threats were posted in a debate on the local newspaper's website.

Graffiti reading "For Serbia with no fags" and "Fags are not humans" was painted on the walls of a women's education centre. The poster campaign was then launched by the Zrenjanin branch of Obraz on 15 July.

Obraz was one of the groups behind the attacks on the first Belgrade Gay Pride march held in June 2002. On that occasion, Amnesty International expressed its concerns at the failure of the Serbian police to protect participants from attack by members of right-wing organizations and homophobic groups. The organization also expressed its concerns at the lack of an adequate response by the Serbian authorities and reminded them of their duty to exercise due diligence in the protection of all of their citizens irrespective of their sexual orientation.

Although 32 people were arrested in connection with these attacks, none of the alleged organizers, who had posted threats about the march on their website, were brought to justice.

Plans for a Gay Pride March on 17 July 2004 were eventually abandoned due to concerns for the safety of the participants. Attempts to raise funds to hire private security guards to protect the marchers from any further attack had failed.

The LGBT community in Serbia is also concerned by the continued manifestation of homophobia in both the Serbian media and in political debate.

Although LGBT groups report attacks on their community, very few incidents appear to be reported to the police as they say people do not believe the police will treat such reports seriously. However, the attack on Abdel-Latif Hamad, a leading member of the LGBT group, New Age Rainbow, was reported to the Belgrade police. Abdel-Latif Hamad and three friends were attacked at 3.30 am on 11 July 2004, after leaving a gay party in Belgrade. They report being attacked by four men who hit them with bats and clubs, shouting "You want a party, fags, well, here's a party for you". Abdel-Latif Hamad was the most severely injured, suffering a broken nose and tooth, a cut on his forearm and swellings under his eyes. An investigation is reportedly ongoing.

Amnesty International calls on the police and judicial authorities to act with due diligence to protect LGBT people from violence within the broader community. The authorities should make clear that such violence is a criminal offence and will not be tolerated. Specific directives and training should be given to law enforcement officials on how to identify and investigate homophobic crimes. All allegations should be properly investigated, the perpetrators brought to justice and adequate redress provided to the victims.

Further information on LGBT groups in Serbia :

LABRIS - Lesbian Human Rights Group - <http://www.womenngo.org.yu/labris>

GAYTEN LGBT - Center for Promotion of LGBT Human Rights - http://www.gay-serbia.com/gayten_lgbt

PRIDE - Pride Association (also in German) - <http://www.belgradepride.org>

New Age Rainbow ("Deèko" magazine - also in several other languages) - <http://www.gay.org.yu>

LAMBDA, Center for Promotion of LGBT Human Rights and Queer Culture - <http://lambda.balconn.com>

QUEERIA - LGBT Working Group - <http://www.queeria.org.yu>