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Prides and Prejudices - Confessions of an LGBTIQ Activist¹

In 1976, the year I was born, homosexuality in Yugoslavia was a crime punishable with up to one year imprisonment. Incidentally, this law referred only to “unnatural fornication between males”, whereas sex between women was not mentioned; either because it wasn’t recognised as a possibility or because male-free practices of any kind (social or sexual) are often not taken too seriously. Whatever the reason, lesbianism stayed out of sight and out of mind, unacknowledged and unnamed, and male homosexuality remained in hiding, for obvious reasons. Even when the law changed and homosexuality was decriminalised (in Croatia in 1977, in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia only in the 1990s), the trouble survived – silence, invisibility and erasure from all cultural and political maps. And nowhere more so, as it often goes, than in small towns – those that pride themselves on tradition, whatever it currently may be. I should know, I grew up in one of those – the picturesque coastal town of Zadar, where they welcomed the Pope in 2003 with the same fervour as they did Tito back in 1979. I remember it well; the view from my father’s shoulders was spectacular.

I grew up during the post-Tito era of 1980s, which they say was more liberal, more lenient toward homosexual topics and allegedly brought some media visibility to gays and lesbians through printed publications. Yet, it would seem to me that these magazines never reached Zadar. The only references to gays I ever encountered were well kept within the spectrum of courtyard insults – we called each other ‘faggot’ and didn’t quite know what this meant. There was no sexual education at school, there was (oh my!) no Internet, and although my parents were intellectuals with hundreds of friends and acquaintances promenading through our home through the years, not once did I hear a word, or catch a glimpse, of anything non-heterosexual. TV didn’t speak about it, school didn’t speak about it, my parents didn’t speak about it, not even the gossiping neighbors spoke about it. There was no word to describe what I felt, so I didn’t feel it.

To be sure, there was literature. But not of the calm, educational kind. There was Virginia Woolf, and then there was Anais Nin and her diaries. I’d always been a great believer in the cathartic power of reading but even in these books the real truth was somehow buried between the lines, the word was never explicitly mentioned, everything was coded and every act of deciphering was accompanied by a sense of excitement and shame. Sure, there were also fragments of Hollywood, but these twisted celluloid creatures seemed to be haunted, doomed and you wouldn’t want to share their fate. And a rare chance of glimpsing at lesbians on national TV was promptly censored; in 1991 Croatian Radio-Television bought the awarded BBC three part series *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, but the broadcast was suddenly interrupted, mid-episode, after the shock caused by a prolonged (but not too explicit) lesbian love scene. The final episode was never broadcast, and no explanation was ever offered. Politically and culturally, all these signals from ‘above’ and the scrambling of the signals ‘below’ meant that my (and many others’, I’m sure) budding catharsis was (self-)censored and effectively suppressed.

And then there came the war. I’d just turned fifteen, started high school and had been in love a couple of times without recognising or acknowledging it (and had anyone suggested I was a lesbian, I’d probably kicked their teeth in). And although the war should perhaps be a good catalyst for self-realisation (every day you face death, so why not finally face your sexuality?), this is not what happened. Instead of a perverted kind of freedom and release, the war brought me another shitload to carry; as Croatia gained independence and Serbs started retaliating by

¹ LGBTIQ stands for *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning*.

shelling Zadar, I found out my surname was, in fact, Serbian, and that, symbolically, I was an enemy in my own hometown. The double burden of ethnic and sexual shame was not a light load, so I decided to leave Croatia as soon as I'd finished high school, off to the Promised Land, home of Virginia Woolf. I didn't care what I'd do there, just take me to England.

Sure enough, my dream came true. I was eighteen, working as an au pair, babysitting three kids and a German Shepherd, in Slough, Berkshire - perhaps you've heard of it as it won the prestigious title of the most depressing English town, a few times. It's also the setting of the BBC series *The Office* which is also quite telling. However, for an unrealised lesbian from Croatia, whose surname in Slough meant less than nothing, this place was heaven. In the library and at the bookstores I found whole shelves with gay and lesbian literature. At the newsagents I found magazines. I went to London every weekend and found out there was a whole living subculture that seemed hardly subservient to anyone; same-sex couples held hands in the street and kissed. And behaved as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Words were all over the place, and deeds, too. And suddenly I felt more ashamed than ever, for having been ashamed. For having let the others' silence silence me, too. And then I got pissed off and sat down and wrote letters (real paper and all) to my family, my friends, much about everybody with whom I corresponded. In each letter I outed myself – even before I had anyone to out myself with. I cared and didn't really care how they'd take it. This was the education for all of us, the one we didn't get when we were supposed to – and I wasn't responsible for their grades.

From what they wrote back, they took it well, mostly. I lost no friends, my family didn't disown me (although some did suggest counseling). But this wasn't enough. I was still pissed off. Because of the silence of others, of the system. And now that I had the language, I wanted to use it to help break the silence. It surprised me more than anyone, this uncontrollable urge to return to Croatia.

'Out' and proud in Croatia

In 1997, when I enrolled at the University of Zagreb, we still had a right-wing government in power, the same party that had initiated Croatian secession from Yugoslavia in 1991 and whose nationalist politics ruled the political as well as cultural arena. Naturally, the rhetoric by which this government had climbed to power was strongly nationalist and patriarchal, and this was hardly a fertile ground for non-heteronormative initiatives. Indeed, the new nationalist discourse called for symbolic and literal reproduction of Croatianhood, effectively putting LGBTIQ issues on hold on the national/institutional level. However, as the war attracted a lot of international media and financial attention supporting the development and upholding of the newly won democracy, this resulted in a spurt in Croatian NGO scene, and some of the NGOs, indeed, were of homosexual orientation. The same year I started my studies, the first 'proper' Croatian lesbian organisation was founded – Kontra, which was later to be the co-organiser of the first Zagreb Pride.

And I was finally proud of myself – all over university halls and classrooms – I was spreading the word as far as it would go. I held hands with my girlfriend (by then I had one) and we kissed like normal couples did – at least on the surface of things, because you never know if someone will find themselves attacked by your kiss and retaliate. We were out in open and closed spaces, in reading and writing. But the changes were not visible as much as we wanted them to be, the silence may have been broken around us, but outside it still ruled. The right(eous) wings of censorship were still in power – at least until 2000, the first relevant political shift since the War and the change of government. Finally, we had a left-wing government and the idea of holding a Pride march seemed like a feasible endeavor.

The Belgrade Pride of 2001

But then Belgrade happened. That's how we talk about it, when we talk about the bloody Belgrade Pride of 2001. We omit the Pride part, because the Pride never happened to Belgrade - it was Belgrade that happened to the Pride and beat the hell out of the handful of activists before they even started to march. The religious groups joined with football fans to exterminate the homosexual virus, the activists (high on democratic changes brought by Milošević's fall) were completely unprepared, and so was the police. It was a defeat of democracy and a blow to the Serbian LGBTIQ movement from which they wouldn't recover for a whole Pride-less decade.

Before Belgrade I didn't know what to think of Prides. As many others, of any sexual orientation, I wasn't sure it was the 'right way' to go about pushing for LGBTIQ rights and visibility. I wasn't much into rallies or group activities of any kind – but Belgrade made me reconsider. A year later, when Kontra and the newly founded gay organization Iskorak decided to organise the first Zagreb Pride, I knew I was going to be there, to test myself and the city and the new political climate. The LGBT community (which at the time existed almost exclusively online and debated in virtual space about things real) was not very supportive of the Pride. There was a lot of pressure on the organizers regarding the style and manner of representation – this major inauguration of homosexuality into public space had to be done carefully, as not to offend anyone and to show how very normal, how very same as them we are. This tactic was perhaps understandable, considering the dramatic invisibility of LGBTIQ people in public life (the only gays and lesbians with faces and names that the 'audiences' could see at the time were 'professional' gays and lesbians, i.e. LGBTIQ activists); in such socio-political context the very existence of gays and lesbians was a shock to the system.

A History of Croatian Prides

So, unlike many of the Prides in Western countries that had by then taken the road of depolitisation by turning into grand carnevalesque celebrations of differences, the first Croatian Pride was all about sameness – coming out of the closets was to demonstrate there were no monsters in them. Indeed, walking in the parade silenced (again!) by the shouting of the skinhead football fans and the verbal and physical aggression pouring out of the side streets, I could hear a saleswoman (who has come out of the shop to watch the show) say to her colleague: "Wow, they look totally normal!" This kind of a reaction may indicate that Croatian citizens really did need to learn the ABC of LGBTIQ. And what I learned, after a friend was hit on the head by a watermelon, after they threw a tear gas bomb in front of the stage, after several of my friends and many more participants in the Pride got followed around the city and beaten up after the march – was that the question of Pride for me was no longer debatable – so long as there's one person who thinks that they can spit, curse or throw stones at the march – I would be in that march.

Although the first Pride was about 'outing' homosexuality as a political question, among the few hundred participants there were probably more human rights activists from 'other' fields and straight supporters than there were gays and lesbians, for whose rights the march was held. The shame and/or the fear they'd be recognised and identified as 'it' was a strong deterrent for much of the LGBT population (who otherwise happily attended the 'merely cultural' events such as Queer Zagreb). This, perhaps, was understandable, as there was no special law to protect them if they were fired, beaten up or otherwise discriminated against on the basis of (suspected) sexual orientation. Lobbying for legal changes was crucial.

To be sure, the 2003 Pride was organised in support of legal initiatives and much public space was devoted to the debate on gay marriages, or, rather, partnerships. The same year the first law regarding homosexual partnership was passed, yet providing only a few basically useless 'privileges' that unmarried heterosexual couples have – this was nowhere close to equality, but

at least gays and lesbians were finally on the 'right' side of the law, proved also by anti-discrimination directives introduced in many existing acts the same year.

The changes, however, didn't happen solely under the left-wing government. Indeed, when the right wing coalition returned to power in 2003, its rhetoric was far less nationalist and far more EU-oriented, which guaranteed that Prides would go on, and that tradition will have to convert a little, rather than gays and lesbians.

The Prides that followed were organised by different groups. The 2005 Pride was saved by an ad hoc feminist initiative Epikriza, after Iskorak gave up on organising it at the last minute, citing as their reason the fact that the Pride march irritated the citizens of Zagreb (!). And after this crisis, the following year saw perhaps the most interesting, complex, and politically ambitious Pride up to this date, the 2006 Internacionala Pride. This was the first Pride organized by a separate, newly founded organisational body, the Pride Committee, which no longer directly associated with any of the existing LGBT organisations. Internacionala Pride was envisaged as the first East-European, i.e. regional Pride, whose aim was to provide space for all the LGBTIQ persons in the region who couldn't hold Pride in their own countries. This Pride was also specific in the broad range of issues it took up as its political platform – apart from LGBT rights, it stood up for workers' rights, animal rights, feminist, peace and eco-issues. This solidarity, however, didn't go that well (again!) with the virtual community - the Cyrillic letters (reminiscent of the archenemy, the Serbs) on the red Pride poster for many evoked 'the dark communist age' and they could also not understand what all these other groups' rights had to do with 'us'. The sense of solidarity with other oppressed groups or minorities was replaced with some more antagonism and ethnic/class intolerance. This Pride was so far perhaps the most inclusive, the queerest, if you will – but its greatest 'accomplishment' was not in what it achieved, but rather what it didn't – and how its failures pointed to the general lack of solidarity among the disadvantaged social groups, which is the main cause for social inertia in general.

The three Prides that followed were growingly less 'eventful', the right wing coalition in its second (turbulent) mandate was showing a civilised face to soon-to-be-joined Europe, vouchsafing more police protection, and thus less violence during and after the march (although attempts to attack the march didn't stop). These Prides were particularly interesting in this pro-EU light, as LGBTIQ-activists jumped on the wave of EU accession and readily employed pro-EU rhetoric in their struggle for rights and recognition. At the 2008 Pride, the organisers stated that "every attack on an LGBTIQ person is an attack on a civilised and European, democratic and free Croatian society" and on several other occasions they called on international organisations to write to Croatian government officials in order to apply pressure. This strategy, however, was only partially successful – what was missing was a true communication between the LGBTIQ movement and Croatian citizens, without the EU mediator – they needed to be converted from an 'audience' to political agents willing to jump off the fence and join the parade. It took Split Pride for this to happen.

In 2010, a year before this most violent Croatian Pride ever I took part in a round table at the hbs's Green Academy on the island of Vis (just opposite Split). I gave a very short presentation. I said what the Croatian LGBTIQ movement needs are louder, more visible and more violent right-wing groups. Because, I felt, the movement has slowed down and the public would not be stirred by anything anymore. And whenever there were anti-Pride rallies (and there were, almost every year during Pride), the 'audience' could clearly see what it is exactly that 'those faggots' want – and that was our winning ticket. Every time the colourful march passed by the toothless, bloodthirsty, black-clad neo-nazi skinheads foaming at the mouth, the symbolic weight of the picture was stronger than any political speech. And spectacle is the ultimate currency in a society of spectacle. It's not enough to tell anymore. You have to keep showing, as far as it would go, to the extreme, until you break. You have to show that it's your life on the line, that a life is what those faggots want.

I didn't feel my speech was taken too seriously – it probably sounded demented, apart from being quite politically incorrect. But when we came to Split the following summer, I saw my dream come true – though on the surface it pretty much looked like a nightmare. Split, a picturesque, traditional coastal town, only a few hours away from Zadar, but not a second ideologically – was on its hind legs. The whole town covered in graffiti calling for violence against gays, the church and the local media adding fuel to the homophobic flames. Split mayor calling us abnormal. A few hundred of marchers – half locals, half us from Zagreb, and some from the 'region' – walking, then stopping – in disbelief. Thousands of inflamed, wild normal citizens shouting at us, throwing bottles, coins, stones; when they ran out of them they pulled plants from the ground and threw them at us. Police standing there, doing nothing. Bleeding heads, people screaming, tear gas bombs. The highly pregnant MEP Marije Cornelissen in disbelief; she was told (by some minister) that the Pride would be safe. Everybody's in shock, the police cordon line doesn't look very stable, we are waiting for it to break and for them to batter us all to death. That's how enraged they are. We finally reach the stage, they continue throwing rocks at us, the police have no plan for evacuation. Finally, after an hour that feels like a decade, we are taken to safety. And the battle is won – Split Pride was the greatest spectacle in the history of the Croatian LGBTIQ movement – after that no one could sit on the fence any longer. No one could be indifferent to the faggot question, there was no way to present the facts other than they were. Again we had war; this time Croatia was not victim, but perpetrator – and there was no way to disprove it.

Split Pride was the quantum leap for the movement – and not because Europe suddenly turned its monitors at us and took out the ruler. It was the quantum leap in the consciousness of the 'audience', of the normal, regular, indifferent citizens – and the ethically disinterested media. There was no one who could defend violence against LGBTIQs after Split. The three major rivaling web portals after Split Pride had their home pages in rainbow colors, calling for people to go to the tenth Zagreb Pride that took place a week after Split. And so, more than four thousand people came to Zagreb Pride that year, five times more than ever before – turning into probably the biggest and the most exciting political march in Croatia. The government had learned its lesson, and so had the citizens. Many of the spectators waved, and those who still weren't supportive finally realised it was smarter to keep it within their four walls.

The second Split Pride and its aftermath

2012 saw the second Split Pride, and the eleventh one in Zagreb. Split local government again proclaimed the march 'unwelcome', but the Church toned down its homophobic rhetoric and asked the faithful to 'ignore' the event. Half of Croatian Cabinet's ministers came to the Pride, and although they didn't give speeches, their presence was loud enough. Present were also a bunch of foreign ambassadors and Marije Cornelissen, who decided to give Split a second chance. This time the police did the job so well no one could approach the Pride within fifty meters. It looked unnatural, almost abnormal. Activists gave speeches that were aimed at those who were too far away to hear them. But they saw us, and that was a start.

On May 11, 2012 Prime Minister of the new left-wing coalition Zoran Milanović stated there were plans of introducing a new law on registered partnerships. Croatia will, apparently, not be as radical as Catholic Spain, which allows gay couples to adopt, but it remains to be seen if it will go as far as Germany, granting gay partnerships all marriage rights, or it may only go for a soft-core version, like France with its PACS, a civil union which grants the partners (same sex or hetero) some of the rights provided by marriage.

Be as it may, a mere decade of Pride activism in Croatia has been every activist's dream – to see the revolution take place and to live to tell.

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Photo by Jelena Topcic

