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Gay march plan tests Serb feelings

By Mark Lowen
BBC News, Belgrade

A gay parade planned to take place in Belgrade on Sunday has been cancelled, due to security concerns.

The decision came after a recent wave of homophobic graffiti that has appeared across the city with slogans like "Gay parade - we're waiting for you" and "Death to homosexuals".

Past days have seen increased threats from ultra-nationalist groups vowing to stop the parade at all costs.

The organisers and city authorities feared a repeat of eight years ago, when Belgrade's first ever gay parade had to be abandoned half-way through due to widespread violence by an angry mob of protesters.

Television pictures of bleeding participants and police firing rubber bullets to disperse the crowd were flashed across the globe.

Majda Puaca, one of the organisers of this year's event, also took part in 2001.

I met her in one of Belgrade's few gay bars - a smoky little venue, tucked away behind the central boulevard.

It is a far cry from the very public party scene in the rest of the city, in which the streets are teeming with cafes and nightclubs. This particular place tries hard not to be noticed.

"2001 was really scary," Majda says.

"I came to the central square and saw all these people.

"At first I thought wow, I can't believe that so many people have come to the pride. And then all of a sudden a guy came and punched a girl in front of me.

"The policeman was standing just two metres away eating ice cream and not responding. I screamed at the guy 'why did you hit this girl?' and he replied 'she's not a girl, she's a lesbian'."

Homosexuality in Serbia is still far from accepted. The gay scene is underground and members of the community are regularly the target of discrimination.

"I can't do just those basic little things, like sitting in the park and holding my girlfriend or kissing her, because I'd be beaten," says Majda. "I think about leaving Serbia all the time. But this is my home."

It had taken some time to rebuild the confidence to give the parade another go, but in the end the government felt the threat posed by far-right groups was too great.

One of those bodies at the forefront of the protest movement is Obraz, an Orthodox Christian organisation .

Mladen Obradovic, 29, is secretary general of Obraz.

Over his desk hangs a portrait of the former King of Yugoslavia, Peter I.

"All those trying to promote homosexuality as normal or acceptable are the enemies of the Serbian nation," he tells me.



Majda Puaca, a gay pride organiser, was horrified in 2001

“ The Republic of Serbia has capitulated. We have not ”
Gay Pride organising committee



Witnesses said the 2001 violence appeared to be organised

"They are trying to destroy our country and our traditional values. We don't want Serbia to become like Holland," he says, grimacing at the thought.

"Everybody knows what will happen if the Belgrade pride goes ahead."

I ask him if that means violence. He replies: "I said, everybody knows what will happen."



Mladen Obradovic says he fears for Serbia's traditional values

Organisers had hoped for political support, but they received very little.

Belgrade's Mayor, Dragan Djilas, said recently that he believed sexual orientation should not be paraded.

Church opposition

Opposition had come from Serbia's national church as well, calling the event a "shame parade, not a pride parade".

President Boris Tadic had been under pressure to break his silence over the rally.

He finally issued a last-minute statement, not supporting it, but saying that the state would offer protection for its citizens, regardless of their religious, sexual or political affiliation.

“ The fact that the pride couldn't go ahead shows that Serbia is still a homophobic society ”

Marko Karadzic
State secretary for human rights

"Too many politicians are just afraid of their votes," says Marko Karadzic, state secretary for human rights.

He was one of the few ministers who publicly backed the parade, receiving death threats for his stance, to which the government made no response.

"The fact that the pride couldn't go ahead shows that Serbia is still a homophobic society," he says.

"We need to make much more effort to clamp down on the groups and individuals inciting attacks."

"I want to show that we have moved away from the values we inherited from Slobodan Milosevic, that we have learned from the past that violence is not an option to fight against something you don't understand or aren't willing to understand."

Serbia 'failed'

Serbia is indeed trying hard to shed its image of the 1990s, forged through the Balkan wars, and to present a new face to the world - open, peaceful and accepting of minorities.

One of the motors of that change is the desire for European Union membership.

Belgrade says it will submit its application for candidacy by the end of the year. The government has an eye on mid-October, when Brussels releases its annual progress report on the country, containing sections on human rights and respect for minorities.

Anxious voices in Brussels may now grow louder over the apparent inability of Serbia to hold a peaceful gay pride, particularly after several European embassies had leant the event their support.

The Serbian government will want to avoid any move that could jeopardise the country's EU path.



Homophobic graffiti has been appearing across the city

Serbia's prime minister has assured the country's gay community that better lines of communication will be established to ensure that the parade can be held in the centre of the city next year.

The organising committee will certainly keep up the pressure.

"The state has failed the fundamental test," it says in a statement. "The next exam period is approaching fast. The Republic of Serbia