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EU has a role to play in tackling Serbian homophobia

With a pride parade facing anti-gay threats in Belgrade, the EU should help to address this barrier to Serbia's accession



Rob Miller

guardian.co.uk, Saturday 11 September 2010 14.00 BST

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Men beat a gay activist in Belgrade, during the city's first pride parade in 2001. Photograph: Mulan Putnik/EPA

"Cekamo vas." The message, sprayed on walls across downtown Belgrade, is simple but effective: "We're waiting for you." The messages seem vague, but the identities of their targets – and of those who paint them – are obvious to all who see them. They are a message for those who would think to stage a gay pride parade in the city: think again.

Belgrade's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community last attempted to hold a pride parade in September 2009. From the start, it looked a hopeless task. Threats were made, anti-gay leaflets handed out across the city; extremist groups threatened to storm the parade if it went ahead, to send a message that homosexuality was not welcome in Serbia. The city government and the police decided, somewhat spinelessly, that they could not adequately ensure the safety of the participants, and the parade was cancelled.

In fairness, they had good reason to fear for the safety of the parade: they had only to think back to 2001, when the first attempt to hold one had ended in tragedy. As the parade progressed through central Belgrade, a crowd of 2,000 protesters converged upon it. Many held banners: "Serbia is for Serbia, not for homosexuals"; "No to immoral homosexuality and depraved orgies"; "Orthodox for a morally clean Serbia."

Soon, predictably, the mood soured; the protesters unleashed a ferocious attack upon the parade, throwing fists, chairs, whatever came to hand. "As a society, we are not mature enough to accept such demonstrations of perversity," came the simple response from Belgrade's then-chief of police, who pointedly refused to criticise the attackers – let alone discipline his own police force for their inaction.

So the announcement this week that Belgrade's LGBT groups would in October try again to stage a pride parade was met with some scepticism. Had Serbian attitudes really shifted in the last decade, let alone in the last year? Homophobia and homophobic violence remain distressingly frequent in Serbia, and it seems difficult to point to specific ways in which things have improved.

The problem is not unique to Serbia; far from it. Many places outside the highly developed world – and places within it, of course – remain violently homophobic, and even the most tolerant of countries have shaken off their intolerance only over the past 25 to 50 years. The situation in Serbia is surely not as bad as in Jamaica, for example, or even Russia. Homophobia remains, though, a tremendous problem in Serbia. The tight interweaving of virulent religious chauvinism and impassioned nationalism has given rise to a curious ideology, a sort of clerical fascism in which the principles of monarchy, heterosexuality, patriarchy, and religious observance are given an immutable, unquestionable status. Even outside this extreme, though – well within the mainstream – homophobic attitudes are commonplace.

The road to tolerance is long and arduous, but the European Union surely has a role to play along the way; after all, improvement on human rights will be one of the criteria to which Serbia must eventually adhere if it is to eventually join the EU. The moral duty of the EU and other supranational organisations is surely to ensure the protection of minority rights even in non-member states, and to uphold as a barrier to entry the highest standards of human rights. If it occasionally fails in this endeavour itself – the recent case of the French Roma, for example – then that is no reason to abandon these standards altogether.

If proper pressure is put on the Serbian and Belgrade governments to protect the civil rights of the LGBT community, to allow them to exercise properly their right to assembly, then the attitudes of the populace, which are already milder than those of the extremists, will surely also change. To uphold these rights is an obligation already placed upon Serbia – as a member of the Council of Europe and a signatory to the European convention on human rights, for example – but if it requires prodding, then so be it. By supporting legislation such as the 2009 anti-discrimination act, and by encouraging Serbia to protect its LGBT population, the shift can be accelerated.

The EU must tread carefully, though. In this most sensitive of areas, there is a thin line between encouraging and patronising, between universality and ethnocentrism. The situation is particularly fraught in Serbia, where nationalism has always thrived on a vision – one forged in bitter historical experience, it must be said – of an imperilled Serbia, in which outside interference is constant and to be resisted.

If the EU can encourage Serbia to embrace greater levels of tolerance without becoming overbearing, without meddling, then perhaps this year's parade and the LGBT cause in Serbia in general are not dead. If it cannot, and if the notion of introducing true equality becomes successfully equated with caving in to neo-imperialism, then there is surely no hope at all.