



EDITED BY ROMAN KUCHAR AND JUDIT TAKÁCS

BEYOND THE PINK CURTAIN

EVERYDAY LIFE OF LGBT PEOPLE
IN EASTERN EUROPE

The initial urge of *looking behind* “the Iron Curtain” will ultimately lead us to *look beyond* – and challenge the existing frame-works. Considering that the social and cultural homophobia still seems to be a unifying experience for LGBT people, “the West” is not necessarily as far from “the East” as it is sometimes suggested ...



ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES AND SUBVERSION OF GENDER IDENTITIES ARE SO UNACCEPTABLE TO THE PREVAILING HETERONORMATIVE IDEOLOGY THAT IT AT BEST TOLERATES THEM OR PUSHES THEM INTO A "TRANSPARENT CLOSET": THROUGH THE SILENCE THAT IS OFTEN SEEN AS A POLITICALLY CORRECT RESPONSE TO THE ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES AND GENDER ISSUES, AND WITH AN OBSSIVE INTERVENTION OF SIGNS DESIGNED TO ENSURE DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN "THEM" AND "US". THIS COLLECTION EFFECTIVELY PROBLEMATIZES THE IMPOSED HETEROSEXUALITY IN THE DICHOTOMIZED CONCEPTION OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER AND THE INEQUALITIES REINFORCED BY AN APPEAL TO THAT DICHOTOMY. AT THE SAME TIME - THE COLLECTION, WHICH FOCUSES ON THE ANALYSIS OF THE POSITION OF LGBT PEOPLE IN CERTAIN EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES - IMPLICITLY DRAWS ATTENTION TO THE HIERARCHICAL DIVISIONS OF EUROPE AND TO THE "OTHERNESS" OF EASTERN EUROPE.

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BEYOND THE PINK CURTAIN GATHERS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR »INTIMATE/SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP« (14-15 OCTOBER 2005), ORGANIZED BY THE PEACE INSTITUTE (LJUBLJANA), AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (LJUBLJANA), ASSOCIATION FOR THE INTEGRATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY (LJUBLJANA) AND THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIOLOGY, HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES (BUDAPEST). SCHOLARS AT THE SEMINAR, FOCUSING ON THE LIVES OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN POST-SOCIALIST EASTERN EUROPE, WERE GATHERED TO DISCUSS THE EVERYDAY LIFE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT PEOPLE REGARDING THE FUNCTIONING OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES THAT SEPARATE THE "GOOD HETEROSEXUAL CITIZEN" FROM THE REST. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE EAST EAST: PARTNERSHIP BEYOND BORDERS PROGRAM (OSI) AND THE EC PROGRAM PROMOTION OF ACTIVE EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP. THE BOOK ALSO INCLUDES STUDIES, WHICH WERE NOT PRESENTED AT THE SEMINAR.



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HATE CRIMES AGAINST LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL PEOPLE IN BELARUS

VIACHASLAU BORTNIK

INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of this article is to draw attention to cases of hate crime, violence and harassment experienced by lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in Belarus, where no original publications with any scientific value on this topic are available yet. Issues related to Belarusian LGB people tend to be dealt with in reviews on LGB issues in general (Bortnik 2003; Solberg 2004; Takács 2006). It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a scientific background to the extent, patterns, causes and consequences of hate crimes motivated by homophobia. The information presented in the article was collected from reports of the Belarusian Lambda League for Sexual Equality (Lambda Belarus) as well as from the results of two focus group interviews conducted with LGB people in two cities.¹ The aim of the focus group interviews was to highlight the main features of the problem and to work out recommendations to improve the situation by generating discussions about homophobic hate crime with its victims.

OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION OF LGB PEOPLE IN BELARUS

Although homosexuality has not been a criminal offence in Belarus since 1994, homophobia is widespread and instances of harassment occur in all spheres of society (US Department of State 2006). Homophobic attitudes and prejudices are very strong. According to the results of a small scale (N = 287) survey conducted by Lambda Belarus in April 2002, 47% of Belarusian respondents think that gays should be imprisoned (Sol-

¹ Belarusian Lambda League for Sexual Equality (Lambda Belarus) was established in 1998. Similarly to other LGB groups in Belarus, the authorities have never registered it. Two focus group interviews took place: one in Gomel (5 July 2006) which was attended by 11 LGB people aged 17 to 42; one in Minsk (8 July 2006) with 9 LGB people aged 18 to 46. The cities were chosen on the basis of the following criteria: population size and the presence of LGB groups or activists within the city. In relation to Gomel (population size: 500,000), LGB people feel a lack of support and a greater sense of isolation and invisibility because the Belarusian gay scene is concentrated in Minsk.

berg 2004, 46). A negative statement about homosexuals by President Lukashenka in September 2004 also demonstrated that homophobic attitudes exist at the highest levels of government (US Department of State 2005).²

According to *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii*, 6 April 2005, Belarusian MP Viktor Kuchynski proposed to re-criminalize homosexuality. "My position as a deputy is: all these 'queers' and others are to be punished to the maximum," said Kuchynski at the parliamentary session during the discussion concerning the presidential decree "On some measures of the prevention of human trafficking" on 4 April 2005. According to Kuchynski, the Criminal Code is to be amended, and the penalty for homosexuality ought to be re-introduced. However, this proposal was not supported by the parliament. Interior Minister of Belarus, Uladzimir Navumau gave this comment to the Russian News Agency Interfax: "Mutual consent is usually present [in homosexuals relations], and we would not like to encroach upon this sphere too deeply."³

According to Lambda Belarus reports, in April 1999 Russian Orthodox Church officials have publicly called for the execution of gays. In May 2003 in Minsk the European Humanities University banned the screening of the documentary film *Outlawed* on discrimination of gays and lesbians in different parts of the world,⁴ which had been planned as part of the Amnesty Film Festival, organised by Amnesty International Belarus at the university. According to the university staff, the ban was made under pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church.

The government-controlled media try to smear the political opposition by associating it with homosexuality. The media broadcast footage of a fake demonstration by a small group of "sexual minorities" at the opposition congress of 2 October 2004 along with comments of bystanders that "gays are evil." Program announcers added commentary to the effect that homosexuality goes hand-in-hand with Western paths to development (US Department of State 2006).

² On 28 September 2004, at the Consultation meeting with the Belarusian Security Council Lukashenka said: "We have to show our society in the near future, what they [EU and USA] are doing here, how they are trying to turn our girls into prostitutes, how they are feeding our citizens with illicit drugs, how they are spreading homosexual perversion here, which methods they are employing."

³ Olga Ulevich, "Deputy Kuchynski proposed to imprison homosexuals," *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii*, 6 April 2005.

⁴ *Outlawed* that was produced by Amnesty International Dutch Section in 1998 tells the stories of lesbians and gay men in five countries (India, Nicaragua, South Africa, Romania and the USA) and is an excellent tool for raising awareness about discrimination and LGBT activism across cultures.

Three foreign diplomats were expelled from the country on the pretext of their sexual orientation in the period between October 2004 and August 2006. According to the reports of the International Lesbian and Gay Association, the first case was the expulsion of the Second Secretary of the German Embassy on the false pretext of drug use in October 2004, while his Ukrainian boyfriend was arrested.⁵ The story was commented on at length on government-controlled national TV with a lot of homophobic rhetoric. According to Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 25 January 2005, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry on 21 January expelled the Czech diplomat Pavel Krivohlavy, accusing him of depraving minors and inciting them to "antisocial behaviour."⁶ "To put it plainly, Czech diplomat Pavel Krivohlavy made juvenile boys drunk in order to subsequently try to drag them into bed," Belarusian TV alleged.⁷ The network's main news program Panorama on 21 January 2005 broadcast secretly recorded footage showing Krivohlavy purportedly drinking alcohol and kissing young men in what appeared to be a café or a restaurant. "You'll certainly agree that our neighbours' understanding of democracy is peculiar: intoxication of youths, debauchery, and pornography. Do they have the moral right—they who are spreading the worst, vile predilections in our country—to teach us how to live?" Belarusian TV commented in Panorama. In July 2006 Minsk police accused Reimo Smits, a former Latvian diplomat in Belarus, of distributing pornography. Scenes of a homosexual act involving the diplomat were also broadcast on TV.⁸

Most Belarusian LGB organizations have never been registered by the state and operate illegally.⁹ In April 1999 the Ministry of Justice blocked efforts by the Lambda Belarus, the country's first and only lesbian and gay rights organization at that time, to gain official registration as an NGO. The Ministry cited technical reasons, although Lambda Belarus

⁵ International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). 2005. <http://www.ilga.org/news_results.asp?LanguageID=1&FileCategory=9&FileID=491> (24 June 2006).

⁶ Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). 2005. <<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/01/83701c0a-3289-404c-8677-10e1c72070ad.html>> (24 June 2006).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 2006, <<http://www.rferl.org/news-line/2006/08/3-cee/cee-010806.asp>> (24 June 2006).

⁹ There are only two exceptions. Lesbian group YANA was officially registered as a young women's NGO. Although their members are lesbians and they work specifically for lesbians, they have to hide their activities from the officials. The group is mostly involved in organizing educational and social events for lesbians in Minsk and Brest. Gay group VSTRECHA was registered as a nationwide youth HIV-prevention NGO. Their target audience consists of men having sex with men (MSM). They constantly experience resistance from the side of the state while trying to address needs within the organization's mission.

members claimed the authorities were seeking to deny registration of a gay and lesbian organization (US Department of State 2001). Members of LGB groups have been targeted as hate crime victims many times. For instance, on 13 November 2001, Edward Tarletski, the leader of Lambda Belarus was physically assaulted in Molodechno, which resulted in brain concussion diagnosed in the hospital where he was rushed to and in which he spent seven days. The police refused to take action in connection with the assault for the reason that it was "impossible to find the perpetrators" (Solberg 2004, 47).

Belarusian LGB groups also do not receive civil society support. In July 2001 the Organising Committee of the 1st Belarusian Youth Congress voted against the participation of Lambda Belarus delegates. In March 2002 several Belarusian media outlets published a press release of Youth Front, one of the biggest youth groups in the country, which contained homophobic statements and humiliating notes about gays. Pavel Severinets, the leader of the Youth Front, called homosexuality a "sin and perversion deserving death." According to Severinets, the existence of homosexuals is "the result of decay and sinfulness in the world."¹⁰

In March 2002, the State Press Committee annulled the registration of the only Belarusian publication for sexual minorities, *Forum Lambda* (Human Rights Watch 2002). The vague wording of the recent amendments of the Criminal Code adopted on 15 December 2005 (Law N 71-Z) provides wide discretionary powers to the authorities allowing them to label activities of LGB groups as illegal attempts to discredit or harm the Belarusian state.¹¹ Criminal persecution has been introduced for the coordination of activities by an association or a foundation, which has been suspended or liquidated (Article 193-1). Bearing in mind that most of Belarusian LGB groups do not have any legal status anyone who organizes such activities may face a fine and six months imprisonment, and in vaguely defined "serious cases" they can be subjected to a "restriction of freedom" for up to two years. A new regulation makes "education or other forms of preparation" for mass demonstrations, or financing such actions illegal, and punishable by imprisonment for up to six months or a "restriction of freedom" for up to three years (Article 293-1). Training or preparation of people for participation in group activities which "grossly violate public order," as well as the financing or material support of such activity, can also lead to a jail term of up to two years (Article 342).

¹⁰ GAY.BY. 31 July 2001, <<http://www.apagay.com/press/release/2001/2001012e.php>> (29 July 2006).

¹¹ Zakon Respubliki Belarus ad 15 snezhnya 2005 N 71-Z, Zvyazda, 22 December 2005.

Article 369-1 on "discrediting the Republic of Belarus" punishes those who provide "false information" to a foreign government or organization, which is interpreted to misrepresent the political, economic, social, military or international situation of Belarus, its government agencies or the legal situation of its citizens. Such actions are punishable by six months in jail, or a "restriction of freedom" for up to two years. Starting from 1999 all LGBT events have been banned by the government and attacked by the police. According to the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military of the University of California, Santa Barbara, Belarus is among those countries that ban gays from serving in the military. Amnesty International Belarus has documented at least seven cases of gay men from Gomel who did not serve in the army because of their sexual orientation. No cases of harassment of gays in the army have been reported, but this may be the result of gay individuals hiding their sexuality. The currently effective legislation provides no protection to victims in cases of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (Bortnik 2003).

IMPACT OF HATE CRIME

Hate crimes against LGB people represent the most insidious manifestation of intolerance and discrimination,¹² based on sexual orientation or gender identity. They are liable to inflict considerably greater emotional and psychological distress upon their victims than non-bias offences. According to the American Psychological Association, victims of hate crimes may experience higher levels of anxiety, anger, intense fear, and isolation and feelings of vulnerability and depression (APA 1998). For many victims, this emotional degradation leaves deeper scars than physical injury.¹³ The fear and anxiety generated by hate crimes extend beyond individuals, however, and affect the family and wider community to

¹² A working definition of hate crime is given by OSCE/ODIHR. It takes national differences into account, such as differences in legislation, resources, approach, and needs. A hate crime can be defined as any criminal offence, including offences against persons or property, where the victim, premises, or target of the offence are selected because of their real or perceived connection, attachment, affiliation, support, or membership of a group, which may be based upon a characteristic common to its members, such as real or perceived race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or other similar factors (OSCE/ODIHR 2005, 12). The term homophobia is used to describe fear of, discrimination against or hostility towards lesbians, gay men or bisexual people.

¹³ A report issued by the American Psychological Association likened the symptoms exhibited by victims of hate crimes to those exhibited by individuals suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. Like other victims of post-traumatic stress, victims of hate crimes may

which the individual is perceived to belong. Members of the same group feel victimized, while members of other commonly targeted groups are also reminded of their vulnerability to similar attacks. The behaviour and actions of victims and communities may also be impacted. Victims of hate crimes, and the groups to which they belong, may avoid particular shops or streets and adjust their daily routines, clothing, and appearance for fear of being targeted.

Perpetrators of hate crimes may be motivated by range of biases, including those based on sexual orientation or gender identity (OSCE/ODIHR 2005, 25). According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, a clear association exists between the presence of hate motivation and the extent of injury inflicted against a person. Hate crimes, as compared to offences and incidents with no hate motivation, are also more likely to involve multiple offenders, serial attacks, heightened risk of social disorder, and greater expenditure of resources to resolve the consequences of the act (CCJS 2001).

Belarusian law enforcement agencies do not collect data on the number and type of hate crimes motivated by homophobia. In its response to the OSCE/ODIHR's *Notes Verbales* the Belarusian government provided raw statistics only pertaining to hate crimes and violent manifestations of anti-Semitism (OSCE/ODIHR 2005, 27).¹⁴ The lack of information on hate crimes against LGB people makes it impossible to assess how widespread the phenomenon is nationally. The only sources of information on this issue are NGO and media reports. From January 2001 through June 2003 activists of the human rights advocacy program of Lambda Belarus documented at least 33 cases of hate crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity. They mostly received information through interviewing victims and their families, witnesses to hate crimes and local human rights activists. They also monitored newspapers, websites and other media outlets. In the following I will provide examples of hate crimes featured in an unpublished report of Lambda Belarus issued in July 2003.¹⁵

Between 2001 and 2003 hate crimes resulting in the murder of gay men were reported six times by Lambda Belarus:

heal more quickly when appropriate support and resources are made available soon after incident occurs.

¹⁴ Decision No. 4 of the Maastricht Ministerial Council encouraged all OSCE participating States "to collect and keep records on reliable information and statistics on hate crimes" and tasked the ODIHR to serve as a collection point for information and statistics collected by participating States and to report regularly on the information received.

¹⁵ Text of the report was included in the book *Let Our Voices Be Heard: Christian lesbians in Europe telling their stories* (Solberg 2004).

On 18 April 2001, the dead body of pensioner Alexander Stephanovich, a well-known Minsk gay was found in the backyard of the apartment block where he lived. His body had knife stab wounds all over.

On 4 July 2001, Ivan Sushinsky, former director of Minsk's Oscar gay club died in the city's 5th Clinical Hospital after a violent assault by homophobic thugs. Mr. Sushinsky was rushed into hospital in a critical condition. He had a head injury, there were knife-shape burns on his body, and his hands and legs were tied with adhesive tape. The police department of Minsk's Sovetski district started an investigation into the case, but the perpetrators have never been found.

On 15 February 2002, the dead body of Victor Kovyl, 34, was found in his parents' apartment in Zhlobin. He was openly gay both at work and in public. The police refused to give the details of the murder to Kovyl's partner, Alexander, and one of the officers said to him: "It serves you right, faggots!"

On 17 November 2002, the mutilated body of Mikhail M., 50, was found in his flat in Minsk. According to the police, this was the fifth murder of this kind committed in the capital during the last two years.

Rape of gay men was documented by the report two times.¹⁶

In the night of 16 May 2001, Andrei Babkin, an activist of Lambda was badly beaten and raped by the entrance of his apartment and subsequently was taken to hospital with severe injuries. Later, on 3 August 2001, unidentified person(s) broke into and vandalised his apartment where fliers, posters and booklets of the Gay Pride Festival had been kept.

On 10 June 2002, three unidentified men heavily beat and raped a local resident Dmitri L., 18, in Komunar. The victim was taken to the intensive care ward of Gomel Regional hospital where he spent 2 weeks.

Aggravated assault took place in 13 cases:

On 12 April 2002, verbal assault and beating of the two gay and one bisexual man took place outside a gay club "Babylon" in Minsk. According to witnesses a group of skin-heads (around 12 young men) who attacked three visitors of the club ran away before the police arrived.

¹⁶ The Criminal Code in force at the moment in Belarus was passed in 1999. The only homosexual acts that remain crimes are those that violate the consent of the sexual partner. The crimes of homosexuality are covered in Chapter 20 (Section VII) that is dedicated to "crimes against sexual inviolability or sexual freedom." Article 167 covers "forced actions of a sexual character." It states that "*Muzhelozhstvo* [specific Russian definition of "male sexual intercourse with male," literary "man lying with man"], *lesbianism or other actions of a sexual character committed by use of force or threat thereof against the victim, or by exploiting the victim's vulnerability, are punished by deprivation of freedom from three to seven years*" (The National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus—Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, <<http://www.pravo.by/webnpa/text.asp?RN=HK9900275>> (23 June 2006)). The age of legally relevant consent for participation in sexual acts is equal for homosexuals and heterosexuals—16 years old.

Despite an apparent rise in reported homophobic attacks, in most cases police officers refused to take a complaint of a potential hate crime or failed to properly identify and investigate hate crimes. Additionally, a number of hate crime cases also involved police brutality against LGB people:

On 2 July 2001, in Minsk the police detained and badly beat Andrei Scherbakov, one of the founders of Lambda Belarus.

On 29 March 2003, the security guard of the Buda-Bar nightclub in Minsk heavily beat Yuliya Yukhnovetz, volunteer for Minsk Pride Festival, only because she kissed a girl in the club hallway. She was taken to hospital where she was diagnosed with a "closed injury of the cranium."

The Lambda Belarus report featured cases of simple assault (1 case), threats (2), burglary (1), destruction of property (1), civil rights violations (5), and dissemination of hate material (2), as well.

On 29 August 2002, before the "Gay Pride 2002" festival Edward Tarletski, leader of Lambda Belarus was called to the City Department of Minsk Police where he was told that if he organizes a gay parade on the streets of the city "the police will not take any responsibility for possible disorders." The police also threatened Tarletski with criminal prosecution if a demonstration like that of 2001 reoccurred.

On 10 May 2003, an unknown hacker broke into the Belarusian LGBT web site APAGAY. He deleted all the topics of the site's forum and introduced a new one calling for the murder of gays. In addition while downloading the home page of APAGAY the notification "FAGGOTS MUST DIE" and "STOP FAGGOTS IN BELARUS" appeared on the screen. The break-in was followed by telephone calls to the members of the site's team with threats of physical violence.

A special concern arose from cases of Internet censorship:

In December 2002, the administration of the Belarusian State University in Minsk banned access to all gay internet resources in the computer labs.

On 20 March 2003, the administrators of Soyuz Online, the biggest Internet café in Minsk popular among gays blocked the Belarusian gay and lesbian web site APAGAY.

The report emphasized that victims of hate crimes have likewise included those, not necessarily LGB people themselves, who are taking action against human rights violations and discrimination motivated by homophobia. In this context homophobic violence becomes a human rights issue engaging the state's responsibility under international standards relating to torture and ill-treatment. The failure of Belarusian authorities to protect LGB people against hate crimes, violence and harassment can be seen in a range of different areas. These include inadequate pre-

ventive measures, police indifference to abuses, bias against non-heterosexual forms of sexuality in the court system, failure to define abuses as criminal offences, and legal loopholes hampering criminal prosecution.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS ON HATE CRIMES

Most aspects of hate crimes against LGB people have also been reflected in the focus group interviews. The experience that living as an LGB person in Belarus is difficult and often painful is reported by most of the focus group interview participants.

It scars the victim more deeply. It is much more difficult, I think, as a victim to say I was put in the hospital because I'm lesbian . . . you are beaten or hurt because of who you are. It is a direct and deliberate and focused crime, and it is a violation of, really, a person's essence . . . you can't change who you [are] . . . And it's much more difficult to deal with . . . Because what a hate crime says to victim is, "You're not fit to live in this society with me. I don't believe that you have the same rights as I do . . . you are second to me. I am superior to you" (Lesbian, 39, Minsk).

The majority of respondents hide their sexual orientation from strangers to avoid unfavourable treatment, but they are relatively open about it in the local LGB scene. 75% of respondents reported that they had been violently attacked and/or harassed because of their sexual orientation, and 45% of them referred to experiencing three or more cases of violence and/or harassment. The most common form of harassment was homophobic verbal bullying.

I came out when I was 13 and I was always being called a "faggot" at school. Even teachers gossiped about me (Gay man, 18, Minsk).

My fellow student bullies me verbally in the college dormitory and in other public places whenever he meets me. Usually he does it in the company of his friends. He calls me dirty names often used to denigrate homosexuals (Bisexual man, 19, Gomel).

Other less frequently occurring forms of violence and harassment reported by our respondents included threats, hate mail, and blackmail.

I often receive humiliating letters via e-mail and on the forum of the site I run in Gomel (Gay man, 22, Gomel).

A group of teenagers in my neighbourhood threatened to beat me up and damage my car. They usually bully me verbally on the street (Gay man, 32, Minsk).

My girlfriend and I got an anonymous call from someone who said that we would be killed. I didn't go to the police because I was afraid of a scandal. People might find out, and I might lose my job (Lesbian, 39, Gomel).

More than half (55%) of the focus group participants reported experiences of physical attacks against them.

Several young men were walking down the street, and one of them said that I'm a "fag-got." Right away, another one hit me very hard on the head (Bisexual man, 28, Gomel).

We were attacked by a group of young men while returning from the gay club. They did not like it that we were walking hand-in-hand (Gay man, 20, Minsk).

Violent attacks and harassment were committed by various categories of perpetrators: an acquaintance (8 cases), a family member (6), an unknown person (6), a neighbour (5), a fellow student (3), or a co-worker (2 cases). Respondents referred to domestic violence as a serious problem: individuals coming out to their families as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, particularly young people, were often rejected and in some cases subjected to violence within their families.

I was falsely accused of committing domestic violence against my mother in an unfair investigation by corrupt prosecutors. My status as a lesbian was used against me. I spent 6 weeks in a pre-detention institution (SIZO) and was given a 12-month suspended prison sentence by the court. Although I'm a lawyer I was unable to protect myself in the national justice system (Lesbian, 31, Minsk).

I was a victim of a homophobic attack during which I was badly beaten. When I got home my mother said that this would always happen to me because of my "lifestyle" (Bisexual woman, 23, Gomel).

It was also pointed out by our respondents that LGB people often avoid reporting crimes against them, in particular cases of hate crime and domestic violence, because of a reluctance to reveal their sexual orientation and fear of homophobic treatment by police officers. Therefore, it is not surprising that only less than one-third of all respondents, who experienced violence, said that they reported the incident to the police, and even among them there were two people who did not tell the police that sexual orientation was the cause of the violence. Fear of revealing one's sexual orientation to family members, friends, employers and others can prevent LGB people from not only contacting the police but also from seeking protection from human rights groups. Participants agreed that the police very often refused to act in cases of brutality committed against LGB people and failed to conduct investigations into homophobic hate crimes.

We were the last visitors in the bar with my friend. The owner of the bar together with his son decided to beat us up. They locked the door and we couldn't escape. They

badly beat my friend ... and I kicked the door in. The police showed up, but they behaved as though I was the guilty one. We were taken to the police station together with our attackers. The police let the attackers go, without even finding out who they were. The attitude toward us was very humiliating. It was as if we were the criminals, not the victims (Gay man, 26, Gomel).

The police told me nothing could be done, to forget it. 'Move on', they said. Two simple words, but I cannot put it out of my mind (Bisexual man, 42, Minsk).

We were drinking beer with friends in the city park when a guy walked by and decided that I was gay. He came up and punched me so hard that he knocked out a tooth. Others were shocked, but they didn't react, because they just thought that the attacker had drunk too much. I did not report the incident to the police, because it is my experience that the police in particular have a nasty and humiliating attitude towards gays (Gay man, 25, Minsk).

LGB victims of domestic violence hesitate to contact law enforcement for fear of being arrested, or because they worry about how their partner would be treated in police custody because of their LGB status. Respondents also mentioned that the police sometimes conduct unprovoked actions in bars and cruising areas frequented by homosexuals. It was emphasized that exposure is a precursor of the occurrence of harassment based on sexual orientation, especially on a direct and personal level. If nobody knows or suspects that one is an LGB person, one is less likely to suffer discrimination or harassment because of one's sexual orientation. Respondents believed that the Belarusian government shares responsibility for acts of violence and harassment against LGB people: on the one hand, hate crimes are instigated by officials at the highest level, and the government's tolerance of homophobic violence rises to the level of complicity or acquiescence, on the other.

CONCLUSION

Findings presented in this article leave no doubt that hate crimes, violence and harassment are particularly important issues for LGB people in Belarus. Homophobia and prejudice in society force LGB people to conceal their identity in everyday life to avoid unfavourable treatment.

75% of our respondents experienced some form of violence and/or harassment because of their sexual orientation. A striking aspect of hate crime against LGB people is the extent to which such crime goes unreported. LGB people often do not report crimes against them because they fear a dismissive, hostile or abusive response from the police. Under-reporting, coupled with the police response to those reports which

are made, indicate that people who commit crimes against LGB people tend to get away with them.

Most LGB victims of violence find access to legal redress and reparation difficult, if not impossible. Impunity and indifference habitually surround many acts of violence against LGB people. One of the key factors in breaching this climate of impunity is to ensure that police officers are adequately trained to respond appropriately to crimes against LGB people so that victims are encouraged to come forward, confident in the knowledge that the justice system will work for and not against them.

Only practical government action on equality and diversity can help to reduce the damaging effects of homophobic hate crime on Belarusian LGB citizens: the government should secure greater legal protection against homophobic abuses by adopting constitutional and other provisions prohibiting all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Special measures should be implemented to ensure that people who have been victims of hate crimes based on sexual identity have access to means of gaining redress and the right to an effective remedy, including rehabilitation and compensation.

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