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LGBT Activism and Europeanisation in Macedonia

Miškovska Kajevska, A.

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Growing Oppression, Growing Resistance: LGBT Activism and Europeanisation in Macedonia

Ana Miškovska Kajevska

This chapter is the very first effort to write an overview of the development of LGBT activism in Macedonia. Although the analysis covers the period between 1991 and mid-2015, the discussion of Macedonian LGBT activism starts with 2002, when the first LGBT organisation was actually set up. For the purpose of this text, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight Macedonian LGBT activists in March 2015, and I looked into media items and organisational documents. Due to the time and space limitations, the hardly existent and accessible archives, and the absence of previous relevant socio-historical explorations, I cannot offer here an exhaustive depiction of the analysed LGBT non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the issues which they have encountered in their work. Therefore, given that LGBT activism is close to my heart, I, both as a scholar and a citizen, hope that the events and topics which I focus on, just like those which I have left (largely) unaddressed, will provide inspiration and direction for future and more in-depth research endeavours.

A. Miškovska Kajevska
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam,
Netherlands

The lack of an existing chronological overview I could build upon has prompted me to present the events in their order of appearance, to the extent that such a structure was possible. After addressing the beginning years, I examine the NGOs' engagement with the antidiscrimination law. I then proceed with exploring the growth of visible LGBT activism and its connection to the increase in anti-LGBT violence, after which I turn my attention to the activists' efforts to counter the state-endorsed homophobia and prevent its further—constitutionally sanctioned—reproduction. Lastly, I look into the recent¹ ways in which the LGBT struggle has been combined with the general antigovernmental unrests in the country.

Initial Developments

A singular, but highly important, event marks the public LGBT history in Macedonia in the 1990s: the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in July 1996. The new Criminal Code replaced that which was in use since June 1977, that is also during the first 5 years of Macedonia's existence as an independent state. Male homosexuality was decriminalised by a mere deletion of the article stating that "the persons of male sex who commit unnatural debauchery will be incarcerated for up to 1 year".² No such interventions were needed regarding female homosexual acts, given that the Code did not mention them.

The welcome legislative change did not result, however, from public debates or the coming to power of political parties with progressive agendas regarding (homo)sexuality. Instead it was silently introduced, as part of the obligations which Macedonia had to meet after its ratification of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the admission to the Council of Europe in November 1995 (Helsinki komitet & Centar za čovekovi prava, 2002; Ž.Ġ., 2005). That the removal of the infamous article was not a consequence of a more liberal political and/or public climate is clear from the fact that the state did

¹ The text was finalised in July 2015.

² Article 101.2. Krivičen zakonik na Socijalistička Republika Makedonija (Služben vesnik, 25/1977).

not organise any media campaign to inform the general public about this weighty change (Helsinkiški komitet & Centar za čovekovi prava, 2002). In fact, the Macedonian government “did not undertake any positive steps in the fight against homophobia and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation” (Helsinkiški komitet & Centar za čovekovi prava, 2002, p. 3).³

Six more years were needed before another development regarding the rights of LGBT people would take place: the founding in February 2002 of the first Macedonian NGO which questioned heteronormativity (Centar za građanski i čovekovi prava, n.d.a; N. Mladenović, personal communication, March 14, 2015).⁴ The name of the organisation in question did not contain the terms “(homo)sexuality” or “LGBT”—a decision which might have been partially influenced by the fact that the NGO was established in a fragile post-war context, that is only half a year after the end of the 8-month war in Macedonia between the Macedonian security forces and the ethnic Albanian paramilitaries. The organisation was named rather generally “Centre for Civil and Human Rights (CCHR)”, even though it did not conceal its struggle for the freedom of sexual expression. Its first leaflet stated already that CCHR fought “against all forms of discrimination and violence” and advocated the free expression of one’s “sexual choice, as part of the body of fundamental human and civil rights” (Centar za građanski i čovekovi prava, n.d.a). Ninoslav Mladenović, CCHR’s initiator, suggested the name inspired by the Center for Civil and Human Rights at the University of Notre Dame in the USA, where he had earned his master’s degree shortly before. Nonetheless, such a name with a broad scope was applicable to Macedonia, too:

In Macedonia at that time, the topic was not that overt yet and we wanted to be all inclusive, not too ghettoised, not to look as if we would demand special rights for the gay community, but to aim at an inclusive society I am against exceptionalism (N. Mladenović, personal communication, March 14, 2015).

³Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Macedonian are mine.

⁴The report *Granici* (Helsinkiški komitet & Centar za čovekovi prava, 2002) mistakenly states March 2001 and March 2002 as temporal indicators of the establishment of the organisation.

Soon after its establishment, CCHR conducted a survey on the acceptance of homosexuality in Macedonia (Helsinški komitet & Centar za čovekovi prava, 2002, see also Jankovski, 2002). The research, a first of its kind, was jointly carried out with the Macedonian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and the Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution. The study revealed strong homophobic attitudes in the population. For example, 62.4% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that homosexuality was something normal, 53.4% said not to feel comfortable in the company of homosexuals, and 65.1% said that they would not accept and support the homosexuality of their child. Next to presenting the research findings, the authors advocated the treatment of the rights of sexual minorities as human rights, and the introduction of sexual and human rights education in the school curricula. Furthermore, they stated that the promotion of tolerance *vis-à-vis* sexual minorities and the fight against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation were some of the requirements which Macedonia would have to satisfy as a member of the Council of Europe and an aspiring member of the European Union (Helsinški komitet & Centar za čovekovi prava, 2002).

The idea of “Europe” as a location where the rights of the LGBT people were respected was prominent also in the title of a conference which CCHR organised in Skopje in November 2003: “Homosexuality in the Republic of Macedonia—Between Prejudices and Europeanisation: Social Status of Homosexuals and Legislation on Homosexuality”. The organiser announced this conference as “the first national conference on the rights of homosexuals in the Republic of Macedonia” (Centar za građanski i čovekovi prava, 2004). While the explicit mention of the term “homosexuality” in the title was a brave step, the name proved to be somewhat overambitious.

With the exception of few local activists and experts, the vast majority of the participants came from abroad and did not refer in their talks to the situation in Macedonia. There were LGBT activists from the post-Yugoslav region (this conference served also as a gathering of the recently established SEE Q Network),⁵ members of LGBT organisations from Albania,

⁵The now dissolved SEE Q Network (Southeastern European Queer Network) was established in September 2003. It gathered queer activists and NGOs from the post-Yugoslav region which worked on the promotion and protection of the human rights of LGBTIQ people. See www.queer.ba/seeq

Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, and Sweden, representatives of Amnesty International, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and the Skopje offices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Centar za građanski i čovekovi prava, 2004). Despite the limited presence of local participants, the conference contributed to the awareness of the existence of LGBT people in the country and the problems they faced. This was due to the neutral to positive media coverage, and the presence of the term “homosexuality” in its title (Centar za građanski i čovekovi prava, n.d.b; *Dnevnik*, 2004; Jankovski, 2003c, December 3; M.K., 2003; N. Mladenović, personal communication, March 14, 2015).

Such media reporting also accompanied the first LGBT campaign in Macedonia: “Face the Difference: Campaign for the Promotion of the Rights of Sexual Minorities”. In the summer of 2003, CCHR rented billboard space in Skopje and several other towns in Macedonia to exhibit a poster featuring same-sex couples in tender embraces.⁶ The white colour which dominated the poster and the resemblance of one of the photographed men to Jesus gave the image a somewhat religious undertone. Besides the full title of the campaign, the poster stated CCHR’s name and contact details, as well as the logos of the funders: the Embassy of the United States to Macedonia and the Olof Palme International Center.

Not much happened until Kerri Houston, a conservative policy analyst from the USA, visited Macedonia. Her subsequent article strongly criticised the Ambassador Lawrence Butler for using “U.S. taxpayer dollars to erect billboards promoting the homosexual agenda” and insinuated that the religious connotation was offensive to the local population (Houston, 2004). To support her argument, Houston quoted the then Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski: “U.S. taxpayer funds should not be used to promote alternative lifestyles in my country ... We have many more pressing issues that the money could be used for” (Houston, 2004).

In a press release CCHR accused Trajkovski of spreading homophobia, offending the homosexuals and considering the whole country as his private property. In addition, the at that time major Macedonian

⁶ The poster showed a slightly altered version of a photograph from the exhibition “Ecce Homo” of the Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin.

daily *Dnevnik* openly asked Trajkovski when he would finally face the differences and the reality of the lives of homosexuals in Macedonia. The activists could not, however, press Trajkovski further and demand rectification, as he died in a plane crash a month after. The billboards remained in place until the end of the campaign, whereas the American Embassy changed its policy on the public display of its logo. Even though the billboards displayed CCHR's address, the activists did not experience any damage to their premises or threats (D.J., 2003; *Dnevnik*, 2004; Jankovski, 2003a, 2003b, August 5, August 6; Jankovski, 2004; Kuka, 2003; Pocevska, 2003; *Utrinski vesnik*, 2004).

In spite of the increased public visibility of LGBT issues, thanks to the work of CCHR, some (future) LGBT activists thought that the organisation did not go far enough in challenging heteronormativity and advocating LGBT rights. This dissatisfaction led to the constitution of the Macedonian Association for Free Sexual Orientation (MASSO) in September 2004. MASSO was not, however, the second, but the third Macedonian NGO which worked in this field. The second organisation, Equality for Gays and Lesbians (EGAL),⁷ came into existence in November 2003, but it was officially registered only in February 2004. Contrary to its name, from very early on, EGAL concentrated on the sexual health of gay men and men who have sex with men and maintained that focus up to the present time. Its activities include direct distribution of safer sex supplies and information to its target groups, and collaboration with various state institutions in charge of the public health. Due to their goal of reaching out to very invisible and vulnerable populations, EGAL's activists shun the exposure beyond their immediate work environments. They also seem to have preferred a more implicit action plan for the advancement of the position of LGBT people. In the words of Zoran Jordanov, EGAL's programme coordinator:

If I want to sensibilise you for LGBT, I will not poke you in the eyes with "LGBT! LGBT!", but I will first subtly and indirectly educate you what sexuality is, that there are various sexual identities and that the right to

⁷<http://egal.org.mk/default.aspx?pArtID=1>

choice of sexual identity is a basic human right. Instead of telling you that it is good to be gay. That [approach] is not right (personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Thus, one could speak of a somewhat paradoxical situation: while EGAL had, and still has, the most explicit name of all LGBT organisations in the country, it has never been very visible among the general public nor has it ever aspired to that. It seems that MASSO was established not that much in reaction to EGAL, as in reaction to CCHR. More precisely, the activists(-in-becoming) who wanted more explicit LGBT advocacy and presence in the public space appear to have found EGAL's work far too different and remote to be considered as competition in the struggle for legitimacy and resources. That has not changed even after EGAL had replaced CCHR as the organiser of Rainbow—the semi-public festival of LGBT films⁸ in Skopje (Čilimanov, 2005; Dimitrov & Kolozova, 2012 [2010]; MIA, 2015).

Kočo Andonovski, the former key person of MASSO, explained the main difference between MASSO and CCHR as follows:

Their [CCHR's] strategy was ... "We are not gay, but we work for [the benefit of] gay people". MASSO disagreed. MASSO's first [aim] in all strategic documents was visibility ... If you are not visible, you do not exist. If you do not exist, you do not have rights (personal communication, March 9, 2015).

Already in its first year of existence, MASSO managed to draw large media and public attention. That was primarily a result of Andonovski's public coming out in April 2005, which was the first such declaration of one's non-heterosexual orientation in Macedonia. In a prerecorded talk with the host of a popular weekly debate show on *AI*, the then largest Macedonian private TV station, Andonovski said he was gay and

⁸ Although this festival, whose first edition was in October 2004, takes place at a public venue and is open to everybody, its target audience is LGBT people and their supporters. No special security measures are taken, but the organisers aim at creating safe space by employing a very limited advertising policy.

spoke about what his life as a gay person looked like. The talk, which had been extensively announced throughout the preceding week, was widely watched and, just like the other shows of *AI*, afterwards made available online on its website.

Fearing violent reactions, especially after the succeeding week's live edition in which he was in the guest panel on homosexuality, Andonovski created a survival plan for himself. That plan included friends bringing food to his home, should it be too dangerous for him to go out. Fortunately and, as he told me, quite surprisingly to him, those precautions turned out to be unnecessary. He was admired by many for his courage to make such a risky step into an uncharted territory, while his calm and friendly elaboration of his life empowered many gay men and expanded the understanding among straight people. At the same time, though, other gay men were not all that happy with what he did. They felt betrayed and accused him that his spotlighting of homosexuality and the cruising areas made them visible and put them in danger (Andonovski, 2015; Dimeska, 2014).

Earlier in the day when Andonovski's coming out would be aired, MASSO and the Macedonian Helsinki Committee held a press conference in which they presented the findings of their survey on identifying the size of the LGBT population in Macedonia (Helsinški komitet & Makedonska asocijacija, 2005; K. Andonovski, personal communication, March 9, 2015; Lj.B., 2005). The figure which attracted the most attention was that 9.6% of the respondents said to have regular sexual intercourse with persons of the same sex. The authors of the study extrapolated this finding to the whole population and came with the number of 200,000 people (or 144,000 adults) in Macedonia who practised homosexual sex. This research was later rightly criticised for the inadequacy of its methodological approach for making such extrapolations (Vrangalova, 2006), but at that moment, the publicising of that figure, together with the televised visual portrayal of a gay man, considerably enlarged the public awareness of the existence of non-heterosexual people in the country. In fact, as Andonovski explained, they had deliberately chosen to have these two events on the same day in order to send a powerful message that homosexuality was not a Western import—as the critics regularly claimed—but that there were LGBT people in Macedonia who deserved to have their human rights acknowledged and respected.

The research report made a clear case for the importance of creating antidiscrimination legislation which would include discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Similarly to the report on the acceptance of homosexuality (Helsinkiški komitet & Centar za čovekovi prava, 2002), the authors of this report (Helsinkiški komitet & Makedonska asocijacija, 2005) reminded the public that such a legislative change was needed also because of Macedonia's EU aspirations. This was a timely reminder, given that in March 2005, just 1 month before the publication of the latter report, Macedonia had officially applied for EU membership:

As a state which openly declares its orientation towards the European Union and declares [its] acceptance of the standards which have been built within the framework of this structure, the Republic of Macedonia should face at the earliest date the need for changes which would be in accordance with these standards (Helsinkiški komitet & Makedonska asocijacija, 2005, p. 5).

Engagement with Legislation

Throughout the years, Macedonia's legislators manifested a "confusing" (Helsinkiški komitet—LGBTI Centar, 2014, p. 8) and contradictory behaviour regarding the legal treatment of sexual orientation. After the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1996, the next relevant legislative change concerned the Law on Service in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Macedonia which was promulgated in July 2002. In May 2004, CCHR sent a request to the Macedonian Constitutional Court demanding a deletion of the article which regarded homosexuality as a breach of military discipline. CCHR objected the placement of homosexuality in the same rank as sexual abuse, and pointed that since this provision could lead to employment discrimination, it was not in accordance with the EU equal opportunities legislation.

The Court decided not to act upon this request and justified its decision by the importance of disciplining homosexuality in such an almost exclusively men-only and hierarchical setting in order to prevent potential power abuse. In reaction to this ruling, CCHR and MASSO announced that they would take this matter to the European Human Rights Court

in Strasbourg. The impact of their statement and the possible diplomatic pressure remain unknown, but the changes which were made to this law in December 2005 included the removal of the discriminatory clause in question (Centar za građanski i čovekovi prava, [n.d.b](#); D.J., [2005](#); Mančevska, [2004](#); N.S., [2005](#); Služben vesnik, [62/2002](#), [112/2005](#); Ustaven sud, [2004](#)).

Apart from the Criminal Code and the Law on Service in the Armed Forces, which were improved by deletion of discriminatory provisions, eight other laws were advanced by an explicit mention of sexual orientation as one of the grounds a person should not be discriminated upon. These laws are (in chronological order): Labour Relations Law,⁹ Law on Establishment of the National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility, Law on Higher Education, Family Law,¹⁰ Law on Protection of Patients' Rights, Law on Public Health, Code of Ethics for Civil Servants, and Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

Having in mind the homophobic utterances and practices of the ethnic Macedonian party VMRO–DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) which has been the major party in power¹¹ since 2006, it might seem at first glance paradoxical that even seven of these laws were passed in this time period and only one before, in 2005, when the main ruling party, the ethnic Macedonian SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia), did not spread homophobia. This discrepancy can be explained by the intensified requirement for adjusting Macedonia's legislation after the country was granted an EU candidate status in December 2005.

⁹ This is the only law which does not talk of "sexual orientation", but of "sexual inclination" (Služben vesnik, [62/2005](#)). The latter term is objected by the LGBT activists because it is seen as only referring to the sexual act and not to the other aspects of one's sexuality (Dimitrov & Kolozova, [2012](#) [2010]; Helsinški komitet—LGBTI Centar, [2014](#)).

¹⁰ In this law, the sexual orientation is mentioned only in the context of adoption of children victims of human trafficking. The relevant clause ensures state assistance regardless of the child's sexual orientation (Služben vesnik, [157/2008](#)).

¹¹ The lion's share of political power in Macedonia belongs to its two largest ethnic communities: the ethnic Macedonian (which is, generally speaking, the numerically and politically dominant one) and the ethnic Albanian. This division of power results from Macedonia's ethnic composition, the formation of political parties predominantly along ethnic lines, and the proportional electoral model. Consequently, each Macedonian government since 1991 has been a coalition of the winning ethnic Macedonian party and the winning ethnic Albanian party.

The new development both increased the number of laws which needed to be altered or prepared and influenced their contents. In reaction to the EU demands, as well as the need to reconcile its professed EU aspirations with its political ideology, VMRO–DPMNE appears to have decided to allow the inclusion of sexual orientation in some (less vital) laws, while simultaneously trying to impose heteronormativity through, *inter alia*, a defective antidiscrimination law and constitutional changes (cf. Helsinški komitet—LGBTI Centar, 2014). Due to this absence of a genuine interest in a state with a progressive agenda regarding the human rights and freedoms of its citizens, the LGBT activists rely in their work on the pressure from the EU. Asked about the importance of the EU accession process for the LGBT rights advocacy in Macedonia, Kočo Andonovski replied:

[T]hat process is crucial I think that if it was not for that process, that there would be no political will here to do *anything*. We see how horrible it is when it is [only] pretended to go towards the EU, let alone if they [the authorities] did not have to act ... in such a manner. How cruel would they become and what would our society look like (personal communication, March 9, 2015, emphasis in the original)?

Nonetheless, the activists do not glorify these dynamics. They remain critical of the EU—for example its politics on immigration and economic development—and are aware of the downside of the imposition of regulations by an outside agent, as opposed to the creation and enforcement of progressive legislation and procedures by the domestic political actors. Bekim Asani had a particularly strong opinion on this:

I do not think that we should get rights only because of the EU. We can get them on paper, but will they be respected in reality? I do not want to get rights because of the EU. I want my state, to which I pay taxes, whose air I breathe and whose documents I hold, where I was born, to provide me those basic [rights] (personal communication, March 24, 2015).

The importance of having a law which would address discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation was advocated already by the first two LGBT organisations in Macedonia, CCHR and MASSO, in cooperation with the Macedonian Helsinki Committee. At the end of 2007, the

Macedonian government finally announced that the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy would start working, together with representatives of NGOs, on antidiscrimination legislation. To this end, a union of diverse human rights and humanitarian NGOs was established in March 2008. Macedonia without Discrimination included representatives of MASSO, but not of CCHR—probably because the latter organisation became largely dormant by that time. After MASSO ceased to exist in the second half of 2008, its representatives remained in Macedonia without Discrimination as representatives of the organisations in which they found new engagement: the Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution, and Healthy Options Project Skopje.

In the final version of the draft law which Macedonia without Discrimination submitted to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, sexual orientation was listed as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination. Nonetheless, although no governmental official had objected to the inclusion of sexual orientation in this context, it turned out that this term was conspicuously missing from the version which the Government sent to the Parliament in January 2010 (*BBC Macedonian*, 2010; Centar za istraživanje & Centar za ekonomski razvoj, 2012; Koalicija, 2011; Makedonska asocijacija, 2008; Makedonski centar, 2009; MIA, 2009).

The weeks which preceded the adoption of the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination in April 2010 abounded with fierce debates in the Parliament and the media. Xhelal Bajrami, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, gave contradictory justifications for the deletion. He stated both that the discrimination based on sexual orientation fell under the general category “any other ground of discrimination” and that the inclusion of sexual orientation was “not in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the Republic of Macedonia” (*BBC Macedonian*, 2010). The latter statement was, however, a misrepresentation of the reality since at that moment there were five laws (the sixth would be passed only 2 weeks later) which explicitly mentioned sexual orientation.

The double agenda of VMRO–DPMNE and its ethnic Albanian coalition partner DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) was visible also in, on the one hand, these parties’ untrue claims that the law was in

accordance with the European standards and did not exclude anybody, and, on the other hand, the openly homophobic and deceitful proclamations that homosexuality was an illness, whereas the attempts to reinstate sexual orientation in the law were a covert way to bring about the detrimental legalisation not only of same-sex marriages and adoption of children by same-sex couples, but also of incest, paedophilia, polygamy, and zoophilia.

In order to prevent the promulgation of a law which, instead of benefiting the visibility and protection of a highly discriminated population, would reproduce its invisibility and marginalised status, some (LGBT) human rights activists urged their international contacts to put pressure on the Macedonian legislators. European Parliamentarians, human rights organisations, and the EU Delegation to Macedonia underlined the need to protect the LGBT population and have a law which would be in line with the EU *acquis*—whose adoption is required for becoming an EU member state—as well as with the conventions and declarations which Macedonia had ratified. All these endeavours notwithstanding, the Government did not back down. In protest of the exclusion of sexual orientation, the parliamentarians of the oppositional SDSM left the Parliament before the voting, but even this act did not thwart the adoption of the law (Čomovski, 2010; Dimitrov & Kolozova, 2012 [2010]; European Commission, 2014; Helsinški komitet—LGBTI Centar, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2010; Koalicija, 2011; Lambevski, 2011; Milevska, 2010; Stojančevska, 2010).

Irena Cvetković, the executive director of the coalition “Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalized Communities” (see below) asserted that this episode revealed for the first time “ruling party’s most homophobic face” (personal communication, March 12, 2015), while also disclosing the lack of solidarity within Macedonia without Discrimination. Some of its members, including those from the interest groups whose grounds of discrimination were recognised by the proposed law, did not think it was necessary to insist on the inclusion of sexual orientation:

When the Ministry proposed the draft [law] with a deleted “sexual orientation”, some members of the working group rebelled and asked that the working group publicly stated: “We show solidarity with this group [LGBT

people] and we do not accept the law in this form”. That did not happen and we realised that the [LGBT] community stood alone. That its only spokespersons were the representatives of the organisations which worked with these marginalised communities ... The cooperation and solidarity between the logical partners [among the NGOs] was at a very low level then (I. Cvetković, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

The bitter experience of absence of solidarity at such a crucial moment—after which Healthy Options Project Skopje and the Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution exited Macedonia without Discrimination (I. Cvetković, personal communication, July 27, 2015)—had one positive outcome, though. It motivated the activists of the up to then informal Coalition for Protection and Promotion of the Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalized Communities to formalise its status and thereby expand the visibility, legitimacy, and impact of their work. The organisation was registered in early 2011 as the coalition “Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalized Communities”.¹² It continued to advocate the human rights and monitor the status (including the discrimination) of the same communities it engaged with from its beginnings in June 2007: men who have sex with men, LGBT people, sex workers, people who use drugs, people who live with HIV, and women.

Proliferation of LGBT Activism and Anti-LGBT Violence

After CCHR had become inactive and MASSO had ceased to exist, the Coalition and the Macedonian Helsinki Committee were up to May 2012 the only two prominently visible NGOs which explicitly addressed LGBT rights. Besides these two organisations and EGAL, at that time there was one other formally existing LGBT organisation. Women’s Alliance¹³ has kept, however, a low profile, given priority to self-help grassroots activities and

¹² <http://coalition.org.mk/za-nas/>

¹³ <http://www.womensalliance.mk/mk/za-nas>

not aimed at reaching out to a wider audience. According to its president Gordana Trpčevska:

Women's Alliance works on empowering the community and leaving the closet. Between our four walls we can have workshops and everything else, but we live in the outside world. We need to encourage ourselves and show up anywhere. Not necessarily on TV ... At a concert, exhibition, theatre performance (personal communication, March 16, 2015).

Despite its focus on the rights of lesbian and other non-heterosexual women, Women's Alliance has carried out some broader projects, too, such as a campaign against homophobia in sport and a still ongoing production of the online queer magazine *Sakam.info*¹⁴ with news from Macedonia and abroad. Thus, even though it was established already in October 2007, at the beginning of MASSO's dissolution (its initiators used to work in MASSO), Women's Alliance, just like EGAL, was not involved in the activities regarding the antidiscrimination law. In fact, Women's Alliance has more often than not refrained from collaborating with the other Macedonian LGBT organisations (Arsovska & Trpčevska, 2008).

When LGBT United¹⁵ was founded in May 2012, it brought certain refreshment in the LGBT landscape on the Internet: Its members regularly photographed themselves (albeit with their faces covered) on central urban locations, while holding the rainbow flag. Several other characteristics, though, make this NGO notably different from the other LGBT organisations in Macedonia. The seat of LGBT United is not in the capital Skopje, but in Tetovo (a town which has an ethnic Albanian majority and is considered to be "the capital" of the ethnic Albanian population in Macedonia), its press releases and social media posts are written in Albanian and Macedonian alike, and its leader is an ethnic Albanian.

LGBT United advocates LGBT rights and their treatment as human rights, as well as works on the empowerment of LGBT people and—in cooperation with EGAL—the improvement of their sexual health. In light of the separated realms which the ethnic communities in

¹⁴<http://www.sakam.info/>

¹⁵<http://lgbtunited.org/en/lgbt-united/>

Macedonia usually inhabit, LGBT United has a much greater access to the non-heterosexual Albanians than the other LGBT NGOs. While the geographical displacement from the capital is important because of the decentralisation potential and the empowerment of even more marginalised communities, working in Tetovo, a smaller and more conservative setting than Skopje, means that there is a marked difference in the level of exposure which the activists in each town can afford—as the organisation's head, Bekim Asani pointed out:

The risk is significantly higher here [in Tetovo], [as well as] the stress. In Skopje you can be an activist in the city centre and live in another neighbourhood. Here you cannot Everybody knows everybody here One's movements are different here. Each time I am in Skopje, I feel freer (personal communication, March 24, 2015).

The year 2012 saw the setting up of one more LGBT organisation. The LGBTI programme of the Macedonian Helsinki Committee was upgraded to its subsidiary, named “LGBTI Support Centre”¹⁶ and run by MASSO's former leader Andonovski. The Centre was envisioned as an organisation which would advocate LGBTI rights, offer psychosocial and legal counselling to LGBTI people and strengthen their self-organising capacities, as well as provide assistance to other human rights NGOs. At its opening in October 2012, the Dutch ambassador to Macedonia, in her role as the Centre's funder, sent a clear message to the Macedonian authorities by underlining that the democratic societies were obliged to prevent the discrimination against non-heterosexual people and ensure that everybody's human rights were respected. In spite of the festive and hopeful atmosphere that evening, the Centre's premises were attacked the very same night. The attack “inaugurated” a chain of ten additional episodes of anti-LGBT violence which would, all but two, remain unprosecuted by the state¹⁷ (Amnesty International, 2013, 2014;

¹⁶<http://lgbti.mk/AboutUs/AboutTheCentre>

¹⁷ These episodes are: attack on activists just before the March of tolerance in November 2012, attacks on the LGBTI Centre in December 2012, March 2013, June 2013 (during the Pride Week), and July 2013, attack on activists during the LGBT rights campaign of the Coalition and LGBT United in Bitola in April 2013 (the only attack outside Skopje), attacks on the house of an actor in June and July 2013 after his coming out, attack on a crowded pub during the second

Helsinški komitet, 2013; Helsinški komitet—LGBTI Centar, 2014; Nacionalna mreža, 2015b, April 28; Schuurman, 2012).

The growth of anti-LGBT violence was not coincidental. It represented the downside of the increased number and visibility of LGBT organisations and (at least partially) LGBT-related activities in the capital. To begin with, two new initiatives came into existence in 2013. Subversive Front¹⁸ was established in June that year by former members of LGBT United, following the—apparently not ethnically motivated—internal disagreements over operational matters. In addition to advocacy, as well as provision of psychosocial assistance to LGBT people, Subversive Front aims at developing critical research and educational activities on gender and sexuality. The still informal LezFem,¹⁹ whose first action was on March 8, 2013, was launched as a support group within the LGBTI Centre. It focuses on (lesbian) women and next to being a support and advocacy group, it strives to bring a greater awareness in the LGBT (activist) community and the larger society about women's rights, feminism, and the realities and rights of non-heterosexual women (Antevski, 2013).

Each November since 2009, a March of tolerance takes place. The March, which is a collaborative undertaking of various human rights NGOs, is not a strictly LGBT event, but it, nevertheless, regularly features rainbow flags and messages related to the rights of LGBT people and the discrimination against them. Furthermore, in February and September 2012, the Coalition hosted two international travelling exhibitions: one featuring (his)stories of unstraight people, the other on the Nazi terror against homosexuals. Both exhibitions, but the first one in particular, attracted large audiences. In addition, starting from 2013, a Pride Week is organised. The first such week of LGBT-related discussions and cultural events—which does not include a Pride march—was organised by the Coalition and LGBT United, whereas the two later ones were put together by the National Network against Homophobia and Transphobia which was established in December 2013–January 2014.

anniversary party of the LGBTI Centre in October 2014, and attack on an LGBT activist in April 2015.

¹⁸<http://www.s-front.org/10471072-108510721089.html>

¹⁹<http://lgbti.mk/Community/Lesbian>

The National Network unites all LGBT NGOs in Macedonia (with the exception of Women's Alliance), individual LGBT activists, and supporters. It aims to provide a more powerful response to the escalation of homophobia and transphobia in the public space. Next to being the politically right move, Antonio Mihajlov, the president of Subversive Front, believes that the creation of such a joint entity had a more mundane side too:

Today we have ... [several LGBTI] organisations which have [different] strong sides These organisations have an equal access to funds which support LGBTI issues. Now, when the donor sees that there are ... [more] organisations which work in an area where the LGBTI community is not that large and where the awareness about LGBTI activism is not that high, neither among the general population nor among the civil activists, the question is to whom to give the money and ... expect an effect from that support (personal communication, March 11, 2015)?

The Network's first large activity was the January–May 2014 campaign against homophobia and transphobia. This campaign, which was the only time when Women's Alliance participated in the Network, featured photos of Macedonian celebrities in combination with the statement "SAY NO to homophobia and transphobia". The photos were put on billboards in Skopje, on posters and flyers which were distributed in and outside Skopje, as well as on social media posts and LGBT-friendly websites (*A1on*, 2014; *BBC Macedonian*, 2009; Bogoeva, 2012; *Fokus* 2015; Koalicija, 2012a, August 29; Koalicija, 2013, 2015a; Mihajlov, 2014; *Radio MOF*, 2014; Stojančev, 2014).

The campaign "SAY NO" was the second one, after that of CCHR in 2003, wherein billboards showed both pro-LGBT messages and photographs of humans (the campaign of the Coalition and LGBT United in the spring of 2013 only displayed pro-LGBT messages). Unlike the people on the CCHR's poster, though, who were not part of the local population, the faces on the Network's photos were not only Macedonian citizens, but well-known ones, too, who, moreover, participated in the campaign eagerly.

This difference between 2003 and 2014 is indicative of the certain progress which has been achieved in Macedonia with regard to LGBT issues. Considering the virtually complete silence, invisibility, and lack of knowledge on LGBT issues at the turn of the century, it is very unlikely that it would have been possible at that time to use the format of the 2014 campaign. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that this progress was only partial. The messages in the 2013 campaign were much more explicit than those in 2003 and 2014: for example “Gay. Lesbians. Bi. Trans. Queer”, “It is easy to hate. It is brave to love”, and “I love you. I love you, too. Good night, Kate [female name]. Good night, Bojana [female name]”. These billboards—placed in Bitola, Skopje, and Tetovo—did not “survive” even 24 hours, whereas the billboards in the other two campaigns have remained intact.

Activist Response to the State-Endorsed Homophobia

The visibility of LGBT activism was not the single cause of the increased anti-LGBT violence since 2012. This phenomenon was also a result of the intensified homophobic campaign of the ruling VMRO–DPMNE and the media under its control (read: almost all paper and electronic media in the country). The utterances during the preparation of the anti-discrimination law are case in point. Other examples include the resolute claims in October 2012 against same-sex marriages and child adoptions by same-sex couples; the proclamation in June 2013 of the Minister of Health, Nikola Todorov, that he would not debate the proposed restrictions of the abortion law with groups which advocated LGBT rights; the hate-inciting portrayals of the Pride Week in 2013 and the March of tolerance in 2009, 2013, and 2014 as covert Gay parades; and the statements from the second half of 2013 and the second half of 2014 regarding changes of the Macedonian Constitution.

When the pronouncements on the same-sex partnerships and adoptions were expressed in October 2012, there were no campaigns or other advocacy activities for legalisation. The only remotely related develop-

ment was the unsuccessful request of the Helsinki Committee for a review of the Family Law. In the document sent to the Constitutional Court in May 2012, the Committee elaborated that same-sex couples should be included in this law's definition of "close personal relations", so that the provisions regarding protection from domestic violence could apply to these couples too. However, opponents of same-sex marriages did not mention this initiative at all, but acted as if there was an initiative for the legalisation of such marriages.

Particularly notorious—and not only *vis-à-vis* LGBT people—was the statement of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy Spiro Ristovski. He asserted that there would be no gay marriages in Macedonia nor child adoptions by same-sex couples as long as VMRO–DPMNE was in power, given that the only way for a child to develop normally was to be raised by its biological parents. When the Coalition issued a press release in which it criticised Ristovski's allegations, he threatened with a law suit. In a similar vein, Gordana Jankulovska, the Minister of Internal Affairs, spoke of heterosexual marriages as being based on natural principles, and of the adoptions by same-sex couples as not leading to the nation's prosperity. It became clear later that those utterances had served to prepare the ground for VMRO–DPMNE's proposal for a constitutional definition of marriage as a union solely between a man and a woman. Regrettably, also, the major opposition party SDSM said to be against same-sex marriages, without giving any further explanation (*A1on*, 2012; E.Š., 2012; *E-Vesti*, 2012; Helsinški komitet, 2012, 2013; Helsinški komitet—LGBTI Centar, 2014; Koalicija, 2012b, October 12; *Makfaks*, 2009; *Press24*, 2014; *Zdravstvo24*, 2013).

The attack on a pub in October 2014 turned to be the last drop that spilled the cup. It provoked a strong reaction from several representatives of the diplomatic corps in the country. A few days after the attack, the Head of the EU Delegation to Macedonia, the ambassadors of several EU member states, and a representative of the US Embassy made an unprecedented visit to the LGBTI Centre to express their support to the activists and remind the Macedonian authorities that all citizens should enjoy equal rights and protection. The diplomats also demanded productive state efforts—instead of the continuous practice of inaction and

silence—in locating and putting on trial the perpetrators of not only that attack but of the past ones, too.

In addition, this act of violence mobilised the National Network to set up a series of more radical actions, including body bag protests, in front of the Office of Public Prosecutor. Each time, the activists briefly blocked the entrance to the building and requested an end to the impunity of the perpetrators of anti-LGBT violence. Unfortunately, even these actions did not bear fruit. The last such protest was staged in January 2015. Due to the lack of effectiveness and in light of the disclosure of massive state-organised wiretapping and other types of unlawful state control,²⁰ the Network decided to discontinue for the time being its separate protests and participate more actively in the growing antigovernmental revolt in the country (*A1on*, 2015; LGBTI Centar, 2014; Koalicija, 2015b, January 23; Nacionalna mreža, 2015a, March; Stojanovski, 2014; Vaseva, 2014). I will elaborate more on these recent developments in the last part of the text.

In September 2013, VMRO–DPMNE introduced for the first time the proposal for a constitutional definition of marriage and cohabitation as exclusively consisting of a man and a woman. Although in the already existing Family Law marriage is defined in exactly that way, and only the cohabitation of a man and a woman could qualify, under certain conditions, as marriage, the ruling party felt the need to inscribe these stipulations in the Constitution too. The explicitly communicated justification entailed that since fewer parliamentarians were needed to change a law than to change the Constitution, it would be much easier for SDSM, should this party come to power, to legalise homosexual unions and adoptions by same-sex couples. In order to prevent such a “societal danger”, VMRO–DPMNE reasoned that the institutes of marriage and

²⁰ In February 2015, the leader of SDSM, Zoran Zaev, started a series of public presentations, so-called bombs, of the illegally made recordings of telephone conversations of politicians, journalists, NGO activists, and foreign diplomats. These recordings, which were made by the state intelligence service and given to SDSM by an unrevealed source, disclosed a large-scale power abuse and anti-democratic practices by the ruling parties, VMRO–DPMNE in particular: for example forgery and sabotage of the electoral process, blackmailing, corruption and rackets, use of physical force against political opponents, and extensive control of the judiciary and the media. The June 2015 report of the expert group which was appointed by the European Commission to look into these malpractices can be retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf.

cohabitation needed to be included in the Constitution. The initiative of the Helsinki Committee from May 2012 was again falsely portrayed as being about the legalisation of homosexual marriages.

In the eyes of the proponents of this change, the danger was coming not only from SDSM and its supporters from the NGOs, such as the Helsinki Committee, which received financial support from the Open Society Foundation (i.e. the US billionaire George Soros),²¹ but also from the EU and its, presumably existing, strong gay lobby. After an intense debate in which some opposition deputies criticised both the proposed intervention and the discriminatory discourse of its advocates, and despite the rhetoric of moral panic which the latter employed, the required number of affirmative votes was not, fortunately, obtained (Grupa pratenici, 2013; Helsinški komitet—LGBTI Centar, 2014; Sobranie, 2013a, 2013b, September 23, September 24; Vlada, 2013).

Less than a year after this failed attempt, in June 2014, during the Pride Week, the Government announced that the proposal for a constitutional definition of marriage and cohabitation would be back on the agenda of the Parliament. This time, however, the proposal was not an initiative submitted by the deputies of VMRO–DPMNE, but it was packed in a set of diverse constitutional changes, which were put forward by the Government and presented as bringing new quality and higher standards to the country (Sobranie, 2015; Vlada, 2014b, June 28). That was not the only thing which made June 2014 different from September 2013. The SDSM-led opposition boycotted the Parliament, meaning that the legislative body worked with hardly any dissonant voices. On a positive note, though, the LGBT activism was considerably strengthened, thanks to the foundation of the Network.

In mid-July 2014, the Parliament approved the commencement of the procedure for making constitutional changes. The relevant part of the document which the Parliament voted on only stipulated the need for a constitutional definition of marriage. Following this vote, the Government was given 10 days to formulate the draft amendments and submit them

²¹ The Macedonian example of delegitimisation of critical voices is not unique. As Stubbs (2013) notes, the authorities in Croatia and Serbia in the 1990s have similarly portrayed the recipients of grants from the Open Society Foundation as foreign-funded traitors and spies, that is enemies of the respective state.

to the Parliament. However, in late August, when the Parliament discussed the draft package of constitutional changes, it turned out that the Government had supplemented in the meantime the amendment on marriage with one more article. The inserted article, which had not been previously discussed in the Parliament, defined “registered cohabitation, or any other registered form of life partnership”, too, as a “union solely between one [sic] woman and one [sic] man” (Ministerstvo, 2014, p. 2). It was for that draft package that in early August 2014 the Minister of Justice Adnan Jashari requested the opinion of the Venice Commission.²² Later that month, even before the Venice Commission would deliver its opinion, the Parliament passed the draft amendments, including the one on marriage and registered partnership, after which they were subjected to a 30-day open public debate. The Government and the Parliament alike blatantly breached, thus, the official legislative procedure, all the while claiming to work on improving the state administration.

This intervention caused further furore among the (LGBT) human rights activists. In their analyses and addresses to local and foreign media, the diplomatic corps in Macedonia, and their (international) networks, the activists stressed—just like the Venice Commission would state in its opinion from October 2014—that it was not necessary to constitutionally define marriage because the Family Law already contained the same stipulation, whereas the added second article collided with the rulings of the European Human Rights Court. To give a greater visibility to this problem and point to the different manifestations of the same homophobic politics of VMRO–DPMNE, the National Network linked the factual physical anti-LGBT violence to the alleged symbolic imperilment of heterosexual marriage in the powerful question “What is here in danger? Your marriage or our lives?” and used it as the motto of its protest in front of the Office of Public Prosecutor on January 22, 2015.

²²The Venice Commission, that is The European Commission for Democracy through Law, is an advisory body on constitutional matters of the Council of Europe. Its role is “to *provide legal advice* to its member states and, in particular, to help states wishing to bring their legal and institutional structures into line with European standards and international experience in the fields of democracy, human rights and the rule of law” (emphasis in the original). Retrieved from http://www.venice.coe.int/WebForms/pages/?p=01_Presentation.

It is unclear to which extent the advocacy efforts of the (LGBT) human rights activists have contributed to the deletion of the second article. The Minister of Justice implied its removal only after the Venice Commission had delivered its opinion. He justified the action by the Government's wish to respect the Commission's view and did not refer in any way to the public debate and the human rights NGOs. When the second draft package was submitted to the Parliament in December 2014, the constitutional amendment on marriage did not contain the article in question.

Rather unexpectedly and quite luckily, the proposed constitutional changes have not become a reality in Macedonia. When the final voting on the whole package of amendments was supposed to take place in the Parliament at the end of January 2015, there were fewer deputies present at the session than the number which was required for making such a substantial legal change. As a result of the internal power struggle in DUI and disagreement regarding which constitutional changes were needed,²³ four of its deputies decided to disrespect the coalition agreement between their party leader Ali Ahmeti and the leader of VMRO–DPMNE Nikola Gruevski and abstain from voting on the package of amendments. The session was interrupted and has not been resumed since (Duvnjak, 2014; Fondacija et al., 2014; Koalicija, 2015a; Nacionalna mreža, n.d., 2015a, March; NOVA, 2015a, January 18; S.K.D., 2015; Sobranie, 2015; Venice Commission, 2014; Vlada, 2014a, 2014c, 2014d, June, July, December).

Changing Forms of the Recent Struggle for LGBT Rights

The anti-LGBT attacks, but especially the one on the pub in October 2014, contributed to the increased number and visibility of the supporters of LGBT people and their rights. More precisely, many public figures and non-LGBT activists, who had not up to then publicly expressed empathy with their LGBT fellow citizens, started changing their atti-

²³ The only constitutional changes which the dissenting voices in DUI deemed necessary were those regarding the presidential elections, so that the ethnic Albanian vote received more weight in deciding the outcome (Dodevska, 2015; Unkovska, 2015).

tude, foremostly by participating in the LGBT-related protests of the National Network—a move which was highly welcomed and appreciated by the relatively small LGBT activist community. Still, it seems that the latter was, especially at the beginning, more aware of the connection between the LGBT struggle and the other societal struggles. This made the LGBT activists more open for cooperation with the other interest groups than vice versa, as Slavčo Dimitrov, the programme coordinator of the Coalition, explained:

What is the key, and a good, opportunity at this moment is that finally it is possible to get out of the narrow identity frame and create alliances of resistance with the other movements. That is exceptionally important and there is already a shift in the other movements The key problem, however ... [is that] they are not aware of these [LGBT] issues yet, just like they are blind for the gender issues. But recently, a certain opportunity has started developing. That will be an important point to tackle in the future, too (personal communication, March 17, 2015).

The decision of the National Network, made somewhere in early 2015, to temporarily give less priority to its specific demands for the improvement of the position of LGBT people emerged from the increasingly prevailing understanding among its activists that no other change could be made before the change of political power. Thus, instead of organising separate protests, the focus was shifted to the general call for resignation of the un- and antidemocratic government, as well as prosecution of those involved in the illicit activities which the leaked recordings have disclosed. Thereby, the Network's activists more often than not did not fly the rainbow flag or carried banners and placards with pro-LGBT messages.

This move brought a sort of Pyrrhic victory. On the one hand, the joining of forces led to better protest strategies and a larger visibility of the general dissatisfaction, given that many activists of the Network were experienced protestors and actively participated in the discussions about the next actions. On the other hand, though, the focus on the demands for resignation and prosecution pushed somewhat aside the LGBT issues and the specific problems which this part of the population faced in

Macedonia. Further disturbing was the often occurring choice of the otherwise LGBT-friendly journalists, editors, and activists not to explicitly mention the LGBT people when listing the diverse interest groups which were involved in the antigovernmental protests.

The developments from May and June 2015 indicate that the National Network has modified its strategy in the meantime. It mainstreams the LGBT issues in the general citizens' protests, while also organising distinct actions on issues which specifically concern the LGBT population. At the thus far largest antigovernmental protest on May 17, 2015, some activists carried rainbow flags and later that day set up an information stand with rainbow flags and the visibly displayed text "International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia—May 17". At the protest camp which was built in front of the building of the Government that evening and lasted up to July 16 (following Nikola Gruevski's concession to the establishment of a transitional government with a mandate to organise fair elections in April 2016), one of the tents was jointly populated by LGBT and other activists and decorated with a rainbow flag too. This overt use of rainbow flags has significantly contributed to the visibility of the LGBT activists and issues. Many photos and news reports of May 17 showed these flags and the leader of SDSM Zoran Zaev spoke in a TV interview approvingly of the participation of the LGBT community. By praising the protest, which was co-organised by his party, as providing an example which was superior to the EU average, Zaev also implied that SDSM and its allies were EU's true political partners in Macedonia:

As far as diversity is concerned, many associations, NGOs, intellectuals etc. were involved. Even in Europe it is not common to organise a protest in which Roma people, but also the LGBT community, will jointly participate with their flags, all together. We sent a very forceful message and are particularly proud of that (*Infomax.mk*, 2015).

The Pride Week in June 2015 was announced as a separate event, set outside of the protest camp and walks. That was also where some of its activities were held, such as the Lesbian picnic in the main city park and the three lectures in a mobile gallery. At the same time, the Week also took place at locations which are closely connected to the general antigovern-

mental protests: in front of the Government, the Public Broadcast, and the Office of Public Prosecutor. In these actions, which received a good coverage by the opposition media, the activists declared a moratorium to these institutions and symbolically buried them because of their abuse of power against, *inter alia*, LGBT people (Geroska, 2015; *Lokalno.mk.*, 2015; NOVA, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, June 25, July 15, July 16; Popovska-Pavlovska, 2015; *Sloboden pečat*, 2015). Whether the National Network will maintain the same two-track politics of simultaneous proximity and distance in the future does not depend only on their effects, but also on the at this moment hard to predict larger political dynamics in the country.

Conclusion

Much has changed since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Macedonia in 1996 and the country's beginning steps on the path to European integration. In the 13 years following the foundation of the first Macedonian LGBT organisation in 2002, there has been an increase in the number of LGBT NGOs and activities. Some of these activities were jointly conducted with other human rights organisations—the Macedonian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in particular. There are at present six active formally existing organisations and one informal initiative. Most of them are united in the National Network against Homophobia and Transphobia, but also function as separate entities. Not much diversification has taken place, however, in terms of the geographical location of the NGOs. All but one are situated in the capital.

An important, albeit, generally speaking, quite unfortunate, impetus for the proliferation of LGBT organisations and activities has been the growing state-endorsed homophobia starting from 2008. The homophobic rhetoric and attitudes of the ruling parties were clearly manifested in, for example, the promulgation of antidiscrimination legislation which did not recognise sexual orientation as a ground of discrimination, the unwillingness to prosecute the spreading instances of hate speech and other forms of anti-LGBT violence—let alone work on their prevention—and the two (failed) attempts to constitutionally define

marriage as a union solely between a woman and a man. Because of this political climate, the LGBT activists regularly have to invoke the support of various international NGOs and (supra)national bodies, including the EU ones, as well as remind the Macedonian authorities of the requirements which Macedonia has to fulfil as an EU candidate country.

The expansion of LGBT activism has not been the only positive outcome of the political developments in the past 7 years. Another favourable result was the gradual rise of awareness among public figures and non-LGBT activists regarding the importance of an openly expressed support to the LGBT people and their human rights. The subsequent increased visibility of LGBT issues directly opposed the authorities' efforts to silence the LGBT activists and dismiss their concerns as ungrounded or detrimental to the society at large.

Between February and July 2015, Macedonia witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of general antigovernmental revolt. The disclosure of illegal state-organised wiretapping and various other forms of power abuse brought large masses of people to the streets. Faced with the absolute necessity for a change in political power, many LGBT activists chose to vigorously participate not only in the protests but also in their organisation. Initially, the LGBT issues were hardly articulated. This choice was afterwards considerably corrected, also by the organisation of the Pride Week 2015 which took place both inside and outside of the locations of the general protests. In view of the current political turbulence, it remains to be seen which role the LGBT issues will play and how the LGBT activists will position themselves in the struggle for the establishment of the rule of law in Macedonia, as well as its democratisation and Europeanisation.

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