

OUT WE COME



DOWN AND OUT IN BELGRADE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC
ACCOUNT ON THE EVERYDAY LIFE EXPERIENCES OF
SERBIAN GAYS AND LESBIANS IN 2004

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INTRODUCTION

It is a rainy Friday evening in February 2004 and I am Vlada's and Nikola's guest. In the kitchen of their small but cosy apartment in Belgrade's Dorcol-area Nikola has prepared gibanica for us. To the boys' delight the dough and cheese pie is my favourite Serbian dish. Vlada is thrilled about having met a Dutch girl. "We are so happy we met you," he says, opening a bottle of red wine "for special occasions. When you said you came from Holland my whole world was shaking, my legs went weak." He smiles. "We just spoke about going to Holland and getting married and the next day we met you." Over the delicious dinner we talk about gay life in Belgrade, about my research project, and about The Netherlands. Eventually I have to tell them it is only possible to get married in The Netherlands when at least one of the partners is a Dutch citizen. Vlada looks genuinely sad. He explains he desperately wants to leave the country: "I just have to get away from here. I do not want to wake up when I am fifty years old, thinking: 'what have I done with my life?' We have to live on very little money, you know," he continues, "the general income here is about two hundred Euro a month. Besides, I cannot be myself here. I cannot publicly show my love for Nikola, while that is what I so desperately want. All we have is this small apartment—it's the only place where we can really be who we are."

The story of Vlada and Nikola and the fact that their apartment is "the only place where they can really be who they are" vividly illustrates the complexity of being gay or lesbian, living a homosexual life, and maintaining a relationship with someone of the same sex in Serbian society. This chapter intends to answer the question how young gay and lesbian adults in Belgrade experience their every day social lives.

On January 15th 2004 I arrived at Belgrade Airport, determined to answer the question: which social and cultural factors influence the process of self-understanding of young gay, lesbian and bisexual adults in

Belgrade, and how do these young men and women experience their “different” sexual orientations? Through the forum of the website *gay-serbia.com* I met several young Serbian adults. We met for coffee down town and I started meeting their friends and the friends of their friends, got invited to parties, and threw a birthday party myself. Soon I was a part of “the scene” in Belgrade, first as a “foreign acquaintance” and later as “one of the girls.”

Thirty-five men and women, the youngest being nineteen and the oldest thirty-three at the time, agreed on participating in my project. Throughout the months, the majority not only became my cooperative informants but also my friends. Although diverse in educational background, jobs, and personal interests, these fifteen men and twenty women have one thing in common. They share the realization that they are “not necessarily straight.” I explicitly use the term “not straight,” because not everyone was anxious to label him- or herself as gay or lesbian. For some it was not problematic, but others answered questions about their sexual identity or sexual orientation with a confused “I don’t know,” “I think I am bisexual,” or “Maybe I am a lesbian”; “Maybe I am gay.” Yet every single boy or girl realized he or she is not necessarily heterosexual and has expressed him- or herself about this to others.

My work narrates a particular moment in the lives of my informants when gay and lesbian life in the city was relatively “vibrant.” Gay parties were organised twice a month by Belgrade’s youngest gay and lesbian initiative *Pride* as well as by private originators. Several informal circles had come into being, created through contacts forged on-line. And by the time summer approached the city, even a gay café was opened in central Belgrade. For five months these men and women were accompanied by me, a twenty-six year old, female Dutch anthropologist who felt to be part of Belgrade’s “gay population” and tried to understand the way in which they experience their sexual orientation. I tagged along with them, I observed and participated in their lives, carried out extensive interviews, and initiated group discussions. As a result the information presented in this chapter is a constructed narrative built on anecdotes, diary entries, observations, and interpretations I gathered between January and June 2004.

When discussing the way in which homo- and bisexual men and women in Belgrade experience their every day social lives we can apply Gerd Baumanns concept of “shifting identities” to their social actions. In *Contesting Culture. Discourses of Identity in Multi-ethnic London* anthropologist Baumann (1996) indicates that the shifting of identities is a process in which association and identification with a certain “community”

depends “on context and contingency” (Baumann 1996, 4). Baumann’s thesis is applicable to my argument, for in action and expression my informants *do* actively “shift” their “sexual identities” depending on “context and contingency.” In this chapter I will show in detail how this notion of “shifting identities” relates to the way in which my informants interact with their social surroundings by choosing to express a certain sexual orientation, depending on the context. This chapter reveals how at gay parties or among like-minded people and “gay-friendly” friends many young gay, lesbian and bisexual adults will—at least to a certain extent—openly express their homosexuality, while in public places and among people ignorant of their “sexual difference” (including family members, colleagues, or co-students) they rather choose to be fully or partly silent about it. This silence takes shape in publicly ignoring and hiding one’s sexual orientation and homosexual relationship, in actively lying about it, and in structurally attempting to pass as heterosexual. The stories that were told to me over the months by my friends and informants in Belgrade shed a light on this practice of “passing,” of shifting between a heterosexual, a bisexual, and a homosexual identity, which is a necessity in order to maintain your social and economical position in Serbian society. Each paragraph therefore starts off with a story which gives insight into the ways young Serbian gays, lesbians, and bisexuals negotiate their different sexual identity in relation to, and interaction with their parents (1) and their straight friends (2). The stories presented also highlight how my friends and informants can “be themselves” and meet like-minded people almost only in the virtual space provided by the Internet (3). Finally, I will focus on how my informants feel about the public manifestation of their homosexuality by presenting their views concerning the plans to organize another gay parade in Belgrade (4).

“I AM A GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT TO MY PARENTS”

When I was still with Ljilja we spend a lot of time together. For my parents I made up a fake boyfriend, Vlada, and Ljilja’s room-mate was my cover-up. When I went to see her I always told my mum I was going to see Vlada. Then my mother would call me ten times in one evening, which was really annoying. One night my phone rang and it was my mum telling me that she felt bad, that she wanted to go to a hospital and that she needed me to come home. . . . Eventually I got home and found my mother sitting at the table, looking very bad. My father was sitting on the other side of the table. I felt ashamed, because somehow I knew I had to tell them. So I came in and my mother asked: “Are you pregnant?” “No.” “Who is your boyfriend? Is he problematic?” “No.” “Do you take drugs?” “No.” “Are you in a cult?” “No!” “What is the problem then? Who is your boyfriend?” Then I said: “It isn’t about a boyfriend, it is about a girlfriend. I am gay.” My mother completely lost it at that moment. . . . My father said: “Wife, I don’t

understand these foreign words. Please translate them into Serbian to me.” And I really think he didn’t understand. So my mother said to him: “Husband, our daughter’s nature is not to love boys. She likes girls.” My father was angry and disappointed. I could see their world crushing down and for weeks they were looking at me strangely, as if I was a freak. I am a great disappointment to them, because everything they taught me I am not going to become (Kristina, 21).¹

Besides the anti-homosexual attitudes dominating Serbian society, several reasons can be named for feelings of disappointment and guilt shared by gays, lesbians, and their parents. In the first place, homosexuality undermines traditional patriarchal values for it implies the impossibility of family creation: one’s coming-out makes parents realize that their homosexual child shall not confirm to traditional values. Consequently, parents fear for their child’s economic and physical well-being. Being homosexual and therefore not being able to marry means their child is not guaranteed a secure future with shared burdens, with someone to look after and who looks after them when they grow older. Parents can also feel responsible for their child’s “deviance”: they fear they are guilty and shall be blamed and shamed for having an “abnormal child” by their social surroundings. Žarko is one of my many informants who analysed the response of his own mother as well as of his boyfriends’ parents along these lines.

Maybe it’s that they’ll never have grandchildren. And they are afraid for security and that you might end up alone in the end: “Who is going to give you a hand or cook for you when you are old?” It’s the generalisation of gay relationships; that they don’t last. And you cannot explain that it is not like in the movies or the way it is talked about. My boyfriends’ mother is worked up about grandchildren and afraid of skinheads, while my mother thinks she is responsible. I am not the perfect son any more. My mother thinks it is a cult, that I am brainwashed by gay society and the gay lobby (Žarko, 24).

Like Žarko and Kristina, Marko too, came out to his parents. His detailed account indicates that the resistance of his parents to his sexual orientation is also influenced by an anti-homosexual attitude, by heterosexual family expectations and by feelings of disappointment, guilt and shame. But although coming-out was a complicated process which resulted in a forced moving out of his parental home, Marko says to be very lucky, because he “had the best response you can get from parents in Serbia”:

¹ All names mentioned here are invented. The number next to the name denotes the age of my informants.

Before I came out to my parents I told them “just wait for my birthday,” because I thought: “They cannot kill you when it is your birthday.” I made a list with the worst stuff a mother can have, like having a son dying of AIDS, dying of cancer, being a junky, a killer, a homosexual, a thief, and more. . . . I gave them the list, I told them I was one of those, and I asked them to think about what they could tolerate and what not. They were reading the list for a month and in the end they told me: we can accept everything, but not homosexuality or being on drugs. So basically my parents preferred having me dying from cancer within two weeks over having a homosexual son. Anyway, my birthday came and I had written a text of twenty pages with the big story of my life. My birthday wish was for them to listen to me reading the text without any interruption. I read the text for three hours. . . . I told them I tried everything: one year of psychiatry, three years of being with Dragana, because I thought: “If I tell them I tried everything they cannot force me to try more.” I simply didn’t want to give them the space to suggest anything else. When I finished they told me: “Go to your room and don’t come out until we call you.” My mother was crying and my father had the most serious face I had ever seen. . . . Eventually they told me: “It is terrible for us that you are homosexual, but we are thankful that you told us now. . . . We won’t discriminate you, we won’t tell you it is bad, because we know you will have a very hard life being a homosexual in Serbia and we know you will be discriminated and shamed by other people. We’ll be watching that and we will be sad. But really, it’s better for you to think rationally and try to be heterosexual. Therefore you don’t have the right to bring boys, just girlfriends.” I tried to make them feel sorry by telling them that I will find a way for sexual activity in the future, that I know how to find sexual activity with men. When they asked me how, I said: “There are plenty of public toilets and parks and beds in strangers apartments, more then you can imagine.” . . . They were terrified and came up with a solution: “We will sell this big apartment and we will buy two separate apartments. You can live in one. We want to see you and be OK with you, and the only thing we expect in return is that you don’t remind us of your homosexuality.” On the day I finally got the apartment I felt really happy and really sad at the same time. Economically I did very well, but emotionally I was alone, much more alone then before. . . . They locked the door and I was so terrified. When I heard them start the car and drive off I started crying. I felt like in prison; some desert island called “my apartment” and they are going away by ship, leaving me to live my terrible life. . . . They are very homophobic, but they love me very much (Marko, 24).

Although the majority of my informants say that they are on guard when it comes to manifesting their different sexual orientations, none of them experienced full social and economical exclusion by their parents. Not only Marko and Kristina, but apart from a few exceptions, all my informants frequently stressed having good, caring and loving fathers and mothers. Yet many of them also indicated having to deal with the idea that they have disappointed their parents to some extent. Not being able to live up to the expectations of both Serbian society and their family, young homosexual adults in Belgrade experience their parents’ disappointment as well as, in most cases, the refusal to really accept their child’s homosexuality. Twenty-six year old language student Jelena and

thirty-year old journalist Srđan also indicate that the social pressure for being heterosexual, getting married and giving birth to a child is high; for some homosexual men and women too high even:

Zoran and I broke up, because he was under a lot of pressure from his parents. I think that has been important for the fact he has now found a girl, married her and has a child. Nobody knows he is my ex-boyfriend; nobody even knows he is gay, not at all (Srđan, 29).

My mother doesn't know I am gay and I know she wouldn't think about me being a lesbian. It simply wouldn't occur to her. . . . I have been out with my girl for two nights now, and I can't think of anything to justify a third. I am running out of lies and I am getting scared. I never had to lie about something like this before. Now I am afraid my mother will discover that I am lying, so I am panicking. I am afraid one of my straight friends will call; that my mum will talk to them and that she will find out I have been lying about seeing them. I sometimes use my straight friends as a cover-up, but they don't know that. I mean, I can't tell my friends I am a lesbian. It's really, really difficult. And I don't want to tell my parents either. I mean, I don't see why I should shock and disappoint them by telling them I am not normal; that I am not the perfect daughter (Jelena, 26).

Jelena's story evidently indicates that lying and hiding about something as essential as being in a relationship with a person you love is a tiring and nerve-wrecking experience, because, as Ivan explained, "for one lie you have to make up twenty others." Nevertheless Jelena, and like her the vast majority of young homosexual adults in Belgrade, chooses to deal with the practice of "passing" in order to secure her social and economic position. In *Queer Nationalism* Kevin Moss describes this process of passing as "a kind of acting": "Almost all gay men and lesbians can and do pass as straight on occasion. In many cases we are assumed to be straight unless we specifically mark ourselves as gay by dress, gesture, and remark. But there are also cases in which we choose an active strategy not to undeceive those who assume we are straight. We may use the wrong pronoun when talking about someone we love. We may pretend interest of someone of the wrong sex. . . . Passing is thus a kind of acting, and it is something most (gay men and lesbian women) of necessity learn well at an early age" (Moss 1995).

An important and in Belgrade frequently used method of passing is what my informants referred to as a *cover-up*: a friend of the opposite sex prepared to convince the surroundings his or her "boy- or girlfriend" is heterosexual. In order to hide her two-year relationship with Anja, Maja has found a cover-up in Bojan. At a get-together at her place she showed me a picture of her and Bojan hugging, and laughed: "Aren't we cute together?" The she explained: "We took this photo at a party a while

ago. It's for my parents. I showed it to them, so they would know who my boyfriend is." Similarly Jelena argued that for couples who are still living with their parents, cover-ups prove to be *the* solution:

There are couples who still both live with their parents; they never have space to be together, to have sex or to have some moments together. Like Ivana and her girlfriend. They both live at home with their parents in Kragujevac, and Ivana is still in high school. Jovan is her cover up. He is her boyfriend from Belgrade, and even went to Kragujevac to meet the parents. Now they give Ivana money to travel to Belgrade twice a month, so the girls only have the Pride-parties at which they can be together (Jelena, 26).

Hiding, passing and "shifting" between a heterosexual and a homosexual "identity" depending on the context of a situation is part of the every day life of many young homosexual adults in Belgrade. This paragraph has illustrated how many young homosexual men and women negotiate or fully hide their homosexuality from their parents, because they do not want to disappoint and shame them by confronting them with the fact they have a child who does not conform to the traditional family values. Yet, despite feelings of shame and disappointment a great number of parents in Serbia eventually learn to accept and deal with the homosexuality of their child to a certain extent. The next paragraph explains how not only parents but also heterosexual brothers, sisters, cousins and friends come round by adopting a dual attitude towards homosexuality and negotiating sexual differences within the dominant anti-homosexual discourse.

I AM A STRAIGHT GUY WHO SOMETIMES WANDERS OFF

When I told my friends I am bisexual a few of them were shocked and surprised. For them I was straight. And actually I still am. I am a straight guy who sometimes wanders off. After I had come out to my best friends, two of them called me for a coffee. They asked me if I really was gay and I said "no," because I am not. But they told me that they had spoken about it and that they had decided it's unnatural. They said that they don't want to hang out with me any more. A few days later they called me again, saying: "Sorry, we overreacted." We talked about it, and they said: "Well, it is wrong, but you are doing it, so it is OK." Another guy, also one of my friends, said he was going to beat me up at the next gay parade. But two other guys responded positively. One of them was my room-mate in the students' home where I lived. I remember one night we slept the four of us in our room. . . . I shared a bed with my boyfriend, and he shared his bed with a girl. One moment I heard her whispering. Then I heard him say loudly: "If you have a problem with them being in a bed together then you'd better go to your own room!" (Ivan, 26).

Refusing to live a lie Ivan, at a certain point in his life, decided to come out and tell the people he cares about that he is bisexual. The story about his coming-out to his heterosexual friends is rather significant, for it represents a great number of stories I heard over the months. Ivan's narrative not only brings out the fact that the kind of response and the amount of acceptance he received to his coming-out varies per person, it also uncovers a rather paradoxical general attitude towards homo- and bisexual men and women in Serbia. Basically the reply Ivan got from two his friends—"It is wrong, but you are doing it, so it is OK"—is said to be a common response many heterosexual Serbian people have to the coming-out of homosexual friends and loved-ones. As Žarko explained this double standard in a conversation:

There is a difference between general ideas and ideas concerning individuals. People here easily say: "I loathe the gay population, but you are my brother and I respect that." My best friend was very homophobic in the beginning, but his sister had a best friend who was gay. He took up a certain guarded attitude toward that friend, but when he got to know him he was cool. He changed his opinion and they became good friends. Really, people just need to meet a person and find out that there is nothing different about them. Bringing it onto their own skin will make them realize there is no difference (Žarko, 24).

Obviously there is a difference between the way people respond to homosexuality on a public level and the way they deal with its presence privately. In *Contesting Culture* Gerd Baumann (1996) distinguishes a "dominant discourse" that "defines ethnic groups in Southall as communities and identifies each community with a reified culture." Additionally, Baumann identifies a "demotic discourse," literally the discourse "of the people," which questions and counteracts the dominant one (Baumann 1996). When applying Baumann's notions of a dominant and a demotic discourse to attitudes towards homosexuality in Serbia we can argue that the dominant discourse defines homosexuals as a homogeneous group of sick or abnormal, non-Serbian people who suffer from "homosexualism"; homosexuals are stereotyped and reified as the "strange, foreign, Western Other." Nevertheless, while publicly deploying quite an anti-homosexual attitude, the stories of my informants indicate that privately people tend to negotiate and oppose the dominant, anti-homosexual discourse. Confronted with the coming-out of a loved-one people realize homosexuality is no longer an issue regarding a strange Other, but a matter that concerns a friend or family-member. Consequently they choose to partly or fully question, revise and deny their reifications. This attitude also extends to entertainment, for instance to characters on tele-

vision, like the famous Serbian female impersonator *Karamela* or Jack and Will, the two main gay-characters from the TV-series *Vil i Grejs* (*Will and Grace*). Yet, the acceptance of homosexual elements as displayed in this popular show, which during my stay in Belgrade was broadcast every weekday at six and ten pm on B92,² does not extend the entertainment factor. On the contrary, the presence of the series on Serbian television illustrates the dual attitude of many Serbs once more. A great number of my informants stressed that I must not mistake the popularity of *Karamela* and *Will and Grace* for tolerance:

Will and Grace is a comedy, a movie, and Jack is just a character. He is funny and he makes us laugh; it is his part, he is an actor. But if he would be like that in real life, people would say: "Eeew, he is a faggot" (Milica, 29).

So, as Gerd Baumanns Southallians "engage the dominant discourse as well as the demotic one" (Baumann 1997, 214), in Belgrade people generally engage in the dominant heterosexual discourse of Serbian society as well as in a demotic discourse towards their homo- or bisexual friends. Ambiguous expressions are for instance to be found among Ivan's friends who do not always take his bisexuality seriously, for they still consider him a "straight guy wandering off." Not sure how his friends really feel about his homosexuality, Žarko does not force his homosexuality on his heterosexual pals either:

Basically I don't know what my friends think about it. They are pretty open-minded, they don't care when you're gay. Still I don't know what they really think; whether they think it is normal or just go about with it. And I am not forcing it on them. If they ask, then I tell them about it. I don't mind talking to them, but I do not like an active imposition of my ideas on them. I do like to make jokes about it, and my straight friends make jokes about it too. They are not offended by that (Žarko, 24).

By doing so Milica, Žarko and a great number of my informants seem to conform to the idea that homosexuality is a private matter, and respect the attitude of a great number of Serbs who "do not care" about homosexuality as long as homosexual men and women "do not interfere in their lives."³ Many young homosexual adults in Belgrade feel less free among their straight friends than among gay, lesbian and bisexual friends. Consequently, a great number of my informants indicate that

² B92 was founded in 1989 as youth radio broadcasting to Belgrade audiences and has since grown into a company which includes—among other things—a national television network. B92 Television at present reaches more than ninety per cent of the total population of Serbia. It is known for its independent journalism and advocacy of human rights.

³ Interview with a female gender advisor, 29 February 2004.

they neglect their heterosexual acquaintances, because they feel better understood by, and more connected to their homo- and bisexual friends. Žarko for instance admits he tends to fail his straight friends:

In the gay world there is no censorship. I am not evoking my gay and lesbian friends and I don't feel like I am imposing my ideas on anyone. You can talk about anything sexual, while with my straight friends that would be grotesque. I feel much more open among gay people; I am a lot looser and more comfortable in that environment (Žarko, 24).

Similarly Tijana says this about her gay and lesbian friends:

With them I feel good. We all share experiences; experiences of hiding and being fed up with hiding for instance (Tijana, 22).

Ana too, pays less attention to her high school friends than she did before she had met other homo- and bisexual people. She explains that she prefers spending time with “the girls” over being with straight people, because it is “so much more relaxed”:

I am in touch with my gay and lesbian friends every day now. I hardly see straight people from high school any more, maybe once in two months. Before, I saw them every day. But if they call me and one of the girls calls me, I choose the girls, because that is so much more relaxed. For my straight friends I often think of something, like: “No, I am busy, I have things to do.” And when it becomes really critical, I get in my car drive around and sit with them. That's easier than to explain what I am really doing. I always find some excuse, but I don't know how long before someone asks: “Ana, what are you really doing?” (Ana, 25).

Marko, Milica and Jelena admit feeling less relaxed among heterosexual people too. They sense they can not be “openly gay” in front of their straight friends and talk about their sexual orientation, because they do not want to shock them or, as in Jelena's case, because they have not informed their friends at all:

I have straight friends, but I can't talk with them about everything; I can't tell them I had that guy in my bed one night and another guy the next. That would be a shock to them; it is freaky (Marko, 24).

I just can't feel relaxed here. If I make a party there is always somebody who doesn't know about me and about my relationship with Marija. Then I cannot relax. And even if everybody knows they are not too relaxed if I hug Marija. Well, maybe if they were drunk they would be. . . . With gay people it's different; we are all the same, they don't look strangely at you (Milica, 29).

A while ago I went to a dinner party of one of my straight friends. It was so silly, all those couples and me. The girls can just bring their stupid husbands who have no money or education, but I cannot bring my girlfriend (Jelena, 26).

A final story concerning the dual attitude of straight friends comes from Marko. He indicates that he is his best [female] friend's "freaky friend" for whom there will be no space once she gets married and has a child, for she is afraid her child will grow up as a homosexual too:

My best friend is cool about me being gay. She even advises me on my homosexual relationships. But she is not OK with my boyfriend and with me kissing him for instance in front of a child. She is afraid the kid will grow up as a homosexual. So basically I am her freaky friend, and for now that's OK with me. But I do wonder, what happens after graduation? She will have a job, a husband, and she would want to have a child. There will be no place for me in her life any more. . . . I know my friend will even give me the child in my hands to hug and kiss, but the child must not know that uncle Marko is a homosexual (Marko, 24).

Evidently, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, very few gays and lesbians in Belgrade are eager to fully come out and express their homosexuality in public, for they fear shaming their family, losing their parental support and being deserted by their friends. The following paragraph illustrates why my informants unanimously voted for the Internet as their "saviour"; their "liberation."

"I WOULD BE ALL ALONE IF IT WASN'T FOR THE INTERNET"

I've known I am gay since I was eight, but I was all alone and on my own. And I still would be if it wasn't for the Internet. . . . Originally I am from Bosnia, but when all the shit came down there my mother and I moved to a very small village in Serbia. It was the kind of village where if you kissed one girl you had kissed the whole village. So until I discovered Internet chat I lived in a black hole. I knew nobody. You can see a lot of people on for instance gay-serbia.com who are not from Belgrade, but from the villages in the country side. They have neither money nor suitable reasons to travel to Belgrade and meet people. The chat is the only thing they have. When I came to Belgrade in 1998 I didn't know where to look, where to go and what to do. I knew not a single gay person before the Internet, not one. I had suspicions: "Maybe he is," but then I thought: "No, it must be desire that rears its ugly head." Basically I had the impression that there weren't so many gay people here. But then I went on-line. I met people and heard about Klub X, and things changed. I had always thought that I would never find anyone, but I was not pessimistic, I didn't despair. I planned on going out of the country one day to find my happiness there; to have my fun somewhere else. Then there was the Internet, and it became the most important thing of all, although all the time I had the impression someone was watching. My mother used to work in a high position, and she always told me to be careful; not to drink drinks that haven't been opened in front of you, stuff like that. It was very paranoid during the Milosevic times, and since it is always possible that someone monitors your logs on-line I felt slightly paranoid too. So

I started off slowly, by checking websites with men's underwear. Later I downloaded some things, and I peaked at *gay-serbia.com*. I left some anonymous posts on the *gay-serbia* forum, and a year ago I decided to register. When I heard there had been a forum meeting, I posted and said to be disappointed not to have been invited. A little later I got a message from one of the boys who wrote: "I heard you wanted to come to a forum party. Well, the next one is on April the 26th." So I went to that gathering; it was the second party of forum members ever, and I met my boyfriend there. He was a forum member too. Actually his mother thinks he is in a cult. There are a lot of cults in Serbia, and one of them is called Forum. Forum. . . . Forummers. . . . You see? (Žarko, 24).

Evidently the Internet changed a lot for Žarko and his fellow gay, lesbian and bisexual Serbs. The World Wide Web suddenly granted people access to information on homosexuality, and also enabled them to get in touch with like-minded people in a rather simple way. Communication became more simple, easy and safe than ever before. As sexologist Tea Nikolić explained in an interview: "Internet changed a lot, not only for gays and lesbians, but also for instance for fetishists, SM-lovers, etc. Making anonymous contacts suddenly was much easier because of the Internet."⁴

Not only Žarko but all my informants, whom I too had met on-line or via the people I knew from the message boards of *Gayten-LGBT*⁵ (*gay-serbia.com/forum*) and *Dečko*⁶ (*decko.campware.org/forum*), indicated that the Internet had changed their lives. Unanimously they mentioned the net as the number one source for information on homosexuality, on gay and lesbian life, and on parties and events as well as the best opportunity for getting in touch with other gays, lesbians and bisexuals from all over Serbia. The references made to the Internet being someone's rescue were numerous. Tijana once exclaimed that internet was "her liberation!": "Fifty percent of gays I met through the Internet." Ana too argued more than once that the Internet was "her saviour." Before she logged on she said to "never have met gay persons," she "only went out with straight people." That changed when she discovered gay websites in

⁴ Interview with Tea Nikolić from Deve, 27 January 2004.

⁵ *Gayten-LGBT Centar za promociju prava seksualnih manjina* (Centre for the Promotion of LGBT Human Rights; <<http://www.gay-serbia.com/gayten-lgbt>>) that started to operate from the beginning of 2002. Its premises are located in Belgrade. In July, 2002 *Gayten-LGBT*, together with Lesbian Human Rights Group *Labris*, received the European Pride Award for the Gay pride 2001 in Belgrade (see Veur 2003).

⁶ *Dečko - Straight Friendly Magazine* is a monthly magazine issued by the Novi Sad-based LGBT organization *New Age/Rainbow*. It is the only gay magazine published in Serbia-Montenegro. Although in Serbian *dečko* means "boyfriend" the magazine is not merely directed at gay men, but deals with issues that concern the entire Serbian LGBT population.

general and the message board of gay-serbia.com in particular; a forum which she now secretly visits on a daily basis:

My father and I use the same pc, but he doesn't speak English. On the Internet I found the site of Diva, an English magazine for lesbians. They had a link to gay-serbia.com, so that is how I found the forum. For a long time I used the site of Diva magazine as a link. But now my father has his own pc, and I have a perfect room to myself. My computer is on the one side and the door on the other, so I can quickly click the x when somebody comes in. Because the big letters that say Gay Serbia are stupid. On the homepage it is okay, but on the forum. . . . In an internet café there is no way you can use it (Ana, 25).

The Internet changed Kristina's and Goran's life too:

When I got a computer I discovered there were other girls like me. I remember exactly when I got it: it was on the 21st of February 2001. I discovered gay-serbia.com and I found my first girlfriend over the Internet. My mother even blames the Internet for everything that she thinks is wrong with me. I started to live and found information on everything I was interested in. Not just girls, also piercings, tattoos, music and on my future job in TV-production. Of course I was afraid to be discovered, so when I got my PC I started to lock myself in my room. My parents were afraid I was taking drugs, and when they eventually forbade me from locking my door I started surfing at night. Before all that I was kept in the dark. We had only one TV in the house and my parents are very, very religious and traditional. Even with the scenes of straight people kissing they change the channel (Kristina, 21).

The Internet was very, very important, because it made me feel better and more relaxed in contacts with people and it got me to meeting so many others like me. All the people I met on-line are so different from the ones I met before, face-to-face. The people I had met in Karađorđe Park and in Klub X showed such narrow interests; their interest was mostly sex-related. The people I met on the Internet show a wider interest, and I find it easier to relate to people rather than to sex. And I met so many more of them on the Internet, than in the X-klub. It so much is easier to communicate on-line than eye to eye. All the people I know and hang around with I met through the Internet (Goran, 20).

Besides providing Serbian gays, lesbians and bisexuals with information and social contacts difficult to obtain elsewhere, the Internet offers them recognition, freedom and above all, inclusion. In a society where homosexual people are confronted with heterosexual dominance and an anti-homosexual attitude and where the majority of gays, lesbians and bisexuals fear socio-economical exclusion to a certain extent, forums and chat rooms on gay websites serve as scenes for inclusion. Meeting like-minded people on-line and assembling with them in cyberspace as well as in real life opposes feelings of alienation and exclusion from soci-

ety. It not only offers recognition and the conviction that one is “not alone,” but also provides a certain extent of independence and the freedom to move beyond the restrictions of heterosexual society. As Marija explains her motivation to search for other homosexual women and men on-line:

I had never met other gay persons before, except my girlfriends. I no longer wanted to feel totally strange in a heterosexual world. I always felt like a stranger, even with my straight girlfriends. They adore me, but I always have some feeling like I am an alien. I wanted to meet some other people (Marija, 27).

The threshold to entering gay cyberspace is low; every person can subscribe to a forum or chat room anonymously. Consequently, the Internet provides Serbian gays and lesbians with an alternative space where they can be who they choose to be. And although the majority of the members of, for instance, the *gay-serbia.com* forum know each others' real names, forum nicknames remain important in interaction, even outside cyberspace. The first time Žarko contacted me, for example, no “real names” were mentioned. Answering my mobile phone with “Hallo?” the caller responded with: “Hello, its Adrenochrome, is this Destiny speaking?”—Basically nicknames offer an alternative identity; a name to a double life, actively deployed by the people involved in it. The use of them not only guarantees mutual recognition, it also enables safe communication which cannot be understood by eavesdroppers. This importance of anonymity and nicknames is even reflected in two events organized by *Gayten—LGBT* in 2000 and 2003 called *Coming Out With Nick*. According to *Gayten*-activist and COWN-organizer Deivan the name of the event was inspired by “the influence of the Internet” and “the fact that you can't be openly gay” in Serbia: “Lots of people here live double lives and use nicknames. They are afraid of coming-out, for instance because of the economic consequences it can have.”⁷

On the other hand, only a very small percentage of the Serbs has Internet access.⁸ For the majority of homosexual men and women in the Serbia, especially in the country side, the Internet is inaccessible. Consequently both the on-line- and real-life gay scenes in Serbia are very small, and gay life is characterized by tight social control, an “everybody-knows-everybody mentality,” and a *lot* of talking and gossiping. Many informants pointed out these restrictions and, inherently, the difficulty of meeting a potential partner.

⁷ Interview *Gayten—LGBT*, 9 January 2004.

⁸ In 2004 24.4% of households in Serbia and Montenegro had Internet access. See <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/mexico04/doc/doc/14_BIH_e.pdf> (10 October 2006).

The gay scene is so small. It is a little circle. At the Pride-parties in Can Can are all the people that have Internet access or that can find about it some other way. That is a maximum of about seven hundred people; the biggest party attracted seven hundred people. While in the whole of Serbia live 10 million people and in Montenegro another 450,000. We all know each other. After four years I know of all girls with who she was, and I can't stand it any more, everybody is talking (Tanja, 22).

I am so fed up with the scene; it's so small. A while ago I put an ad on-line. I got four responses, but three of the guys I already knew (Ivan, 26).

Evidently, the Internet was the most important way for meeting people for many young gay, lesbian and bisexual adults in the year 2004. But where should you go to meet like-minded people in Belgrade if you do not have Internet access at all? How to meet other gays, lesbians and bisexuals outside of cyberspace? In the next paragraph I will indicate the limited options available for living a gay life in the Serbian capital, and show how above all how, according to the vast majority of my informants, the *Association for Promotion of Human Rights of Sexually Different People—Pride* and their so-called Pride-promo-parties stirred up gay life as well as the discussion on publicly coming out in the Serbian capital.

“IT IS LIKE MARCHING AGAINST MILOŠEVIĆ”

I am definitely not going to the Pride parade. After the murder of our prime-minister Zoran Đinđić in March 2003 the political situation in Serbia worsened. There is more fear, more frustration. The Pride on July 17th would not only attract ten queer people and a hundred cops, but also over a thousand hooligans. Maybe I would go if the event was organized in a private space, like Sava Center or Dom Sindikata, the biggest cinema in the city that can fit in a thousand to fifteen hundred people. Of course there is a chance your face will be on television when you go there, but that is also possible when you go to the Pride in the streets. A closed space would prevent a massacre. Actually it is like marching against Milošević: I would like something to happen, but I don't know if I would dare to go (Marko, 24).

In 2004 *Pride* gives a new dimension to gay life in Belgrade. From January 2004 onwards the association organizes what quickly becomes know as “Pride-parties”; large-scale, police-protected parties meant to promote and raise money for a second gay parade to be held in Belgrade on July 17th 2004. These promo-parties not only offered an addition to the limited options in Belgrade for meeting friends and flirting with strangers, according to Marko they also provided an unprecedented freedom:

Pride is doing something. Their promo-parties are a chance to walk into a disco in Belgrade among hundreds of people and feel free. There are other parties, private parties, but they are much more risky, because there is no police (Marko, 24).

Yet, contrary to the positive responses to the popular Pride-promo-parties, my informants' attitude towards Pride's main goal, i.e. organizing a second Pride parade in Belgrade, was much less enthusiastic. The displayed reserve is not necessarily to be explained only from a fear of another violent sequel as happened after the previous Belgrade Pride, although for Marko and Goran fear of alleged brutality *is* an important reason not to participate:

No way am I going to the Pride in July. It is going to be another massacre (Marko, 24).⁹ I am convinced that if Pride were to go through that it would be the same or worse than last time. If I was to attend a parade and the shit would come down I would run as fast as I can. Of course, in spite of that, I would want to be as violent as the attackers, but I know I can't. I'm quite gentle and fragile (Goran, 20).

Risking a coming-out to the entire country by participating in the Belgrade gay parade is also an explanation for resilience among my informants:

I am not going to the Pride, because I do not want to be seen on television by my relatives. I do not want my parents to be ashamed by seeing me on TV in a gay Pride, so it is a part of responsibility to my parents (Kirstina, 21).

Early in 2004 there came an end to the discussion on who would and who would not go, on why or why not. By the end of April 2004 Pride decided to cancel their Parade. Pride-member Tanja explains the cancellation of the Pride can be brought back to a lack of money and a lack of substantial support:

We had to decide to cancel the Pride. Although the majority of the gay organisations in Belgrade supported us, they did not give us enough substantial help. Besides, we did not have enough money to pay for security and offer people coming from abroad places to stay (Tanja, 22).

Pride-Chairman Boris Miličević argues the main reason for cancelling the Pride was that the organization "didn't manage to get funds for private security": "That was eighty percent of the reason. The other twenty percent is a lack of resources, basically human resources. We can't organize a secure and real parade in which everything would go smoothly

⁹ The first (and so far the only) pride parade in Belgrade was organized in 2001. The participants of the parade were attacked by nationalists, football fans, Church leaders and others. The organizers of the parade reported around 40 injured civilians, 11 of them sought medical help. The police reported 8 injured policemen. 32 men were detained by the police (six of them under 18), but were not charged or found guilty. See <http://www.labris.org.yu/en/index.php?optionfiltered=com_content&task=view&id=84&Itemid=57> (10 October 2005).

with the four people who are involved full-time at this moment; we would need fifteen to twenty people to work for Pride full-time. There are two problems though. In the first place there is a coming-out problem. Soon everyone will know you are organizing a gay pride. Another problem is that there simply is not enough money to pay people.”

As a result of the cancellation of the Pride Parade an end came to the Promo-Parties as well. The final party organized in *Can Can* on May 21st 2004 was therefore called *The Last Party on Earth*. Although the Pride initiative rooted a great number of private alternatives, the cancellation of the police-protected *Pride* parties is much to the regret of for instance Marko:

Pride now also wants to stop the parties. At the last party in Can Can there were only 350 people. That is only one-third of the place's capacity. I'd say "Fuck the Pride"; I don't care about a Pride parade, but the parties. . . . My social life has been much improved by the parties, and not by a Pride. Maybe some social and judicial stuff is coming from Pride, but I need the police. . . . I've heard that skinheads on forums are trying to figure out where gays hang out, so they can go there to beat them. It happens often enough that they wait in front of Klub X for gays and lesbians to leave the place, so they can follow them and assault them. And security doesn't do anything about it as long as they don't damage the club. Nobody cares about us, except for the police. At Can Can skinheads won't come near, because they can see there is police protection (Marko, 24).

Nevertheless the vast majority of my informants agreed it was a smart decision to cancel the Pride parade. For example, Žarko believes that a Pride parade in July 2004 would result in a violent clash:

On a forum a skinhead actually wrote: "Now with the situation in Kosovo people need to release their anger.¹⁰ The gay parade would be the perfect opportunity." For once a piece of scum said something smart (Žarko, 24).

¹⁰ On Wednesday March 17th 2004 fights between Serbs and Albanians in the Kosovo city of Mitrovica resulted in the death of at least ten people. Over three hundred people were reported wounded. The fights were the heaviest since 1999. The reason for the riots was reporting in the Albanian media about the drowning of two Albanian children. Serbian kids would have chased them into the river Ibar. A third Albanian child was reported missing. The story was recounted by a fourth child, who was said to have made it ashore. After hearing the news hundreds Albanians from Mitrovica's south bank stormed to the north bank of the city which is inhabited by Serbs. The situation escalated rapidly, and lead to a wave of violence throughout Kosovo, which in the evening also spread to Serbia. Tens of thousands of people demonstrated in the streets of Belgrade, angry about the intolerable situation for the Serbs in Kosovo. The mosques in Belgrade and Niš were set on fire. In the city centre, which was blocked for in and outgoing traffic from nine PM onwards, the façades of MacDonalds and the American Embassy were defaced. Ultra-nationalistic leaders called for the Serbs to support their fellow country men and women in Kosovo, and the following days several remembrance ceremonies were organized on

In a conversation Milica, Marija and Ana advocate that their fellow country men and women are not at all ready to deal with the presence of homosexuality in their country, let alone with the public expression of it in a gay parade. While deliberating, they unintentionally describe the core of the civilization debate by picturing Serbia as a homophobic Balkan-country as opposed the modern, gay-friendly West:

Ana: We've had war for fifteen years and people think we don't have time for the gay and lesbian issues now. Maybe in ten years we do, but now it is all about finding food. People here need more time for other issues. It is a part of Europe that eventually will come to us.

Milica: But until then we are a Balkan country, a communist country, and people here think everything bad comes from crazy Europe, from the West. The "gay problem" is one of the ways for fucking up the population.

Marija: Yes, people here think the US and the West hate Serbs, because of the war etc.

Ana [nods]: Hmm-mmm, we are butchers.

Milica: And Western-Europe brings misery. Having homosexuals in Serbia means we will not have an increasing population, because gays don't give birth. It's a conspiracy theory: gay people all over the world are part of that conspiracy. Accepting homosexual relationships would destroy our culture.

Ana: Basically people do not want to deal with homosexuality. We have been in isolation for so long, there are already problems enough. People don't want to deal with one more thing. It is bad for us, but what can we do? If Pride can't even manage to do a Pride parade, then how can they expect us to come out and say: "Hey I am a lesbian?"

That same night Jelena calls to inform me about the political discussion on *Klopka*, a talk show broadcast on BK Television. Summarizing the show, she says:

Klopka was on last night, you know, that political talk show on BK. A few of the candidates for the Presidential Elections spoke about the Pride, because a student from the audience asked about it. It was really bad. One candidate, who is a famous kick boxer, the vice-president of Arkan's Party of Serbian Unity, the Stranka Srpska Jedinska and Ceca's kum, her best man, actually said that he is going to beat the gays on July 17th. Another candidate was the president of the Party of Serbs living outside Serbia. He currently lives in France. He said that although in France it is normal, he does not like it. The third person was the president of the peasant party. He said that although homosexuality is not normal he would allow the Pride to take place, because he is convinced it would not change anything. Well, at least the presenter opposed them. She said: "How can you say that? How can you be against them? They are also voters." And when they said: "No, they're not," she replied: "Are you really saying that they are not

Belgrade's Studentski Trg (Students Square) as well as in front of the temple of Saint Sava. Sunday March 21st was declared a day of national mourning in Serbia.

citizens, like us? How can you be so intolerant?" Then the show ended and the kick boxer guy said: "See you on July 17th." He didn't know the Pride was cancelled.

From the course of the political discussion in *Klopka*, and the cancellation of the Belgrade Pride-parade to the necessity of negotiating and hiding a different sexual orientation in front of friends, colleagues and costudents, and the dual, resigned acceptance by parents of their homosexual child; from the limited options available to meet gay friends, flirt with like-minded strangers or be intimate with your lover and the worries to be publicly labelled as homosexual to the violent course of the Pride in 2001 and the insults and attacks on homosexual men and women in Belgrade; the many stories and examples presented in this chapter suggest that Ana, Marija and Milica's analysis might be rather close to the Serbian truth.

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