



The Balkan Peninsula is bordered by the Adriatic, Ionian, Aegean, and Black Seas. Image derived from The World Factbook published by the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency.

## Balkan States

by Tina Gianoulis

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Divided by religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences, the Balkan States have a long history of conflict and conquest. Though the states represent a wide variety of national and ethnic identities, they are all influenced by powerful and conservative religions: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islam.

Add to this the fact that embattled ethnic groups often place a high value on procreation, which is usually identified with heterosexuality, and the difficulties faced by Balkan queer people become apparent. Though many anti-gay laws have been abolished recently, true acceptance is a much longer process, and anti-homosexual violence is still common.

However, there are many brave and articulate gay and lesbian activists in the Balkan countries. Many of these activists not only work for gay rights in their own countries, but also reach across centuries-old barriers to form connections with queers of other ethnic groups.

### Geography

The Balkan Peninsula is bordered on the east and west by the Black, Ionian, and Adriatic Seas, and on the north and south by the Aegean Sea and the Sava and Danube Rivers. Though the peninsula stretches from mainland Greece to Hungary, the term "Balkan states" is most often used to refer to the turbulent nations that were once united under the name Yugoslavia.

These ancient lands, recreated as nations in the 1990s when Yugoslavia was dissolved, include Serbia/Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia/Herzegovina, and Slovenia. Many ethnic and religious divisions exist even within the borders of these countries. The other nations of the Balkan Peninsula, such as Albania, Macedonia, Hungary, Romania, and Greece are both closely connected to and divided from the former Yugoslav states by religion, ethnicity, history, and economics.

Historically, the Balkans have felt the influence of many powerful empires. Serbia was most affected by the eastern Greek Byzantine Empire, becoming strongly Orthodox in religion. Croatia and Slovenia, on the other hand, were influenced by the powerful Italian city-state of Venice to become largely Roman Catholic. The Ottoman Turks, who held the region for hundreds of years, were Islamic, and many Bosnians converted to Islam under their influence, often being seen as traitors by their non-Islamic neighbors.

### Serbia and Montenegro

Serbia and Montenegro are the only two of the former Yugoslavian states that chose to remain Communist. Serbia has a fiery history, both of violence and independence. During the Ottoman occupation, Serbs revolted against their Turkish rulers over and over, winning brief periods of independence before being re-conquered. It was Serbian ethnic unrest, combined with a precarious network of European alliances, that ignited World War I in 1914.

Anti-gay laws existed in Serbia until the 1990s. During that decade, the repeal of homophobic laws went hand in hand with a rise in gay and lesbian organizing. Several organizations emerged, including Labris, a lesbian political group, and Arcadia, a gay and lesbian lobbying organization, both of which were founded in 1995. Around the same time Deve, a glbtq center opened in Belgrade. Together, these groups organized the first gay pride demonstration in Belgrade in June of 2001.

Though some in government, particularly the Social Democratic Union party, support the idea of gay rights, many conservatives and nationalists do not, and Belgrade's first pride march was marred by violent attacks by anti-gay skinheads. Skinheads also broke into the offices of Queeria, a glbtq rights organization, which began a "legalization of same-sex relationships" campaign in 2000.

Many Balkan lesbians can be found working in the feminist peace movement in such groups as Women In Black, a women's peace network founded by Israeli women protesting their government's treatment of the Palestinians. Women in Black Belgrade was founded in 1991 to provide a peaceful, yet powerful place for women to speak out against militarism and violence against women. Outspoken lesbian activists such as Lepa Mladjenovic have been part of Women in Black Belgrade since its beginnings.

### **Slovenia**

In the northern Balkan state of Slovenia, homosexuality was decriminalized in 1976. By the mid-1980s, a thriving gay student organization called MAGNUS held its first MAGNUS Fest, a celebration of gay film, literature, and culture. In 1987 LL, a lesbian student organization, was formed. One of LL's early actions was to initiate a "Let's Love Women" insert for a progressive youth journal. By 1988, this had evolved into *Lesbozine*, Slovenia's first lesbian journal. LL also organizes dances, film festivals, and an International Lesbian Camp, which attracts dyke campers from several countries.

Slovenian society has been slow to accept its queer citizens, but gay and lesbian activists continue to work, both to create queer culture and to change laws and attitudes. Clubs such as the Roza Disco and Tiffany in the capital city, Ljubljana, provide gathering places, and there are groups organizing everything from safer sex workshops to "Pink Camp," a gay gathering. In 1991, Slovenia's first ever gay pride event was organized to protest a local café that discriminated against gays.

### **Croatia**

Anti-gay sentiment is also still apparent in Croatia, which is 88 percent Roman Catholic. As in Serbia, while anti-gay legislation was repealed in Croatia during the mid-1990s, a strong right-wing nationalist movement is quick to respond to queer activism with violence. However, Croatian gays and lesbians are organizing, courageously standing up to verbal abuse and beatings to speak out for their rights. Their work is slowly increasing their society's acceptance of gay and lesbian lifestyles.

The first Croatian gay and lesbian organizations appeared in the early 2000s. *Iskorak*, or "step forward," promotes gay men's rights, while *Kontra*, or "against" is a lesbian group. Both groups have spoken out for the legalization of gay partnerships and against discrimination. In 2004, they worked to publicize the anti-gay remarks of the national soccer team's coach and demanded an inquiry.

In 2002, *Iskorak* and *Kontra* organized the first gay and lesbian pride demonstration in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. The march attracted two to three hundred queer supporters and a number of skinhead hecklers, who shouted insults and threw bottles and eggs. In 2003, activists including Zvonimir Dobrovic organized Queer Zagreb, an ambitious week-long glbtq cultural festival. Queer Zagreb was so successful that organizers hope to make it an annual event.

### **Bosnia-Herzegovina**

The Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina has long been a focal point of ethnic and religious conflict. Almost half Muslim, with the remaining population roughly evenly divided between Roman Catholics and Orthodox Catholics, Bosnian society is fairly conservative. The cosmopolitan capital city, Sarajevo, does have a gay community, but it is largely closeted.

Although lesbianism was not mentioned in Bosnian legislation, sexual contact between men was illegal in Bosnia until 1998.

Bosnian gay men and lesbians are organizing. There is a Queer Bosnia website, which links with other Balkan gay websites, and activists such as Predrag Bosnjakovski work toward increased visibility for Bosnian sexual minorities.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.