



## Serbia

by Stephanie R. Olson

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2005, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Although there now exists an active gay and lesbian rights movement in Serbia, Serbia and its capital city Belgrade are very far behind when it comes to glbtq rights. There is only one gay club in Belgrade. And in 2001, a rally for gay rights in the heart of the capital turned into an anti-gay melee.

Gay rights were not on the radar in Serbia until the late 1980s when Jovan Cirilov, a well-known essayist, began to speak publicly about the subject. Arkadija, the first Serbian lesbian and gay organization, was founded in 1990; at the time, even its existence was illegal. Although homosexual acts between adults were quietly (and mysteriously) decriminalized in 1994, activists' efforts were overshadowed by the politics of the time, especially Yugoslavia's descent into civil war, and the accompanying rise of nationalism and economic woes.

Much of the peace activism in the 1990s in Serbia was conducted on-line. Similarly, glbtq activism is dependent on the Internet. Gay rights groups are web savvy and boast a large virtual community. The websites Gay Serbia, Queeria, Labris, Deve, and Belgrade Pride all provide information, resources, acceptance, and community, along with calls for activism, to Serbia's glbtq community.

The 1990s also saw the birth of gay publications including the newsletter *Arkadija* and *GAYTO*, a queer 'zine. These publications feature articles on legislation, politics, culture, and AIDS, along with poetry and fiction. Other milestones of the 1990s include the founding of the lesbian group Labris and a comprehensive Campaign against Homophobia.

In January 2000, Serbia's second largest city, Novi Sad, held its first lesbian and gay conference. Later that summer Belgrade held its own glbtq cultural festival. Its atmosphere of openness and freedom gave hope to many for better days to come. These hopes increased in the fall of the same year when Slobodan Milosevic's authoritarian regime fell.

However, these high hopes were rudely dashed on June 30, 2001, as the many people who gathered for the first public celebration of Pride Day were attacked by a group of over 1000 nationalist thugs (supported by many ordinary citizens) while police mostly watched on the sidelines. As Pride Day organizer Milan Duric put it, "it became clear to me that our celebration of pride, love, diversity and tolerance was being transformed into a manic melee of fascists, hooligans, extreme rightists, and nationalists." By the end of the day 40 citizens and eight police officers had been badly injured. Dozens of people were arrested, most of whom were acquitted or received very light sentences.

Due to considerable media coverage, Serbian politicians were forced to speak. Prime minister Zoran Djindic (who was assassinated by a nationalist criminal gang in March 2003) expressed his personal support for tolerance, but added, "I think it is too early to stand this test of tolerance in a country that has been in isolation for so long, and which has had a repressive patriarchal culture."

The attack on the Pride celebration put a damper on Serbia's nascent gay rights movement. Plans for a

march in July 2004 were eventually abandoned due to concerns about safety.

The climate for glbtq people in Serbia remains hostile. Although there have been no trials of anyone for being homosexual since 1994, there are reports of police raids and of gay people being taken into police custody where they have been beaten and humiliated. In addition, gay people face discrimination in employment, accommodations, and the military.

There are fairly organized anti-gay activities, including widespread homophobic graffiti, poster campaigns, and gay-bashings by nationalist gangs. Police and other officials offer little protection for glbtq citizens. In October 2004, Amnesty International issued a call for "authorities to act with due diligence to protect LGBT people from violence."

Still, thanks to the continued brave and hard work of Serbian activists, there is hope for improvement in the plight of glbtq people in Belgrade and Serbia. Serbia's desire to join the European Union within the next decade may also promise a brighter future. In order to join the E. U., Serbia will have to conform to the progressive anti-discriminatory standards of the Union.

### **Bibliography**

Boothe, K.L. "Gays in Belgrade Struggle to Find a Sense of Self." *The Advocate* (October 12, 1999).

[www.gay-serbia.com](http://www.gay-serbia.com).

[www.thegully.com/essays/gaymundo](http://www.thegully.com/essays/gaymundo).

### **About the Author**

**Stephanie R. Olson** is a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University. Her research interests include race, gender, and social justice issues. Her dissertation examines the political implications of women's self-defense. She is a co-founder of the Empower Program, a violence prevention non-profit organization in Washington, D. C. Olson is currently living in Belgrade, Serbia with her husband, a Foreign Service Officer, and their son Nicolas.