

Attempt To Register A LGBT Organisation in Belarus Provokes Police Raids

Last month, police raided three gay club events in Belarus. It appears that the authorities have become increasingly nervous about the growing social activity of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community, especially following the largest Belarusian LGBT initiative to obtain the legal status of an NGO.

On the night of 11 January, about ten policemen, some plain-clothed, blocked the exits to Club 6A, the prime gay dance destination in Minsk, and took the personal details of over 100 persons present there. They said they were looking for a fugitive prisoner among the clubbers. The following day, the police spokesperson refused to provide journalists with any information about the reasons for and outcome of the raid.

More Raids of Gay Clubs

The following night, a Vitebsk club was raided by police special forces. They ordered all the guests to line up along the walls, the women separately from the men. They recorded everyone on video; asking for their name, home address and place of work.

According to witnesses who later spoke to journalists, the police behaviour was extremely harsh and threatening. Once again on this occasion, the local police spokesperson was unable to provide any information on the motives and results of the operation.

Two weeks later, the same Club 6A was raided by eight or nine policemen in plain clothes who requested the passport details of all present there; they detained about 40 people in order

to "establish their identities".

Before the use of mobiles was banned, those detained managed to report that the police attitude was rough, both to men and women. The detainees were told by the police that the raid was provoked by the activities of Siarhiej Androsienka, the leader of GayBelarus.

LGBT Visibility Makes Authorities Nervous

It is common knowledge that registration of non-governmental organisations in Belarus is almost impossible if the NGO has not been blessed by the state authorities beforehand. At the same time, any political or social activism without such registration is banned and can be classified as criminal.

In 1999 and 2011, LGBT activists attempted to register organizations, but were unsuccessful. Last December, the largest Belarusian LGBT organisation, GayBelarus, made another attempt. It held a convention in Minsk, in Club 6A, in which 72 delegates from all of Belarus' regions took part.

The application for registration of the Human Rights Centre Lambda was submitted to the Ministry of Justice. Why Lambda, not GayBelarus? The registration procedure is not transparent, and using a word like "gay" could become just one more reason to provoke a negative outcome.

Siarhiej Androsienka of GayBelarus said that he did not have any illusions: "if they register us, good; if not, we will continue working without registration." According to Androsienka, the authorities were aware of the convention at Club 6A. The club owner was called to the city police headquarters to provide information about the event and its organisers. At no point was it suggested to him to ban GayBelarus from his premises.

A week after the application for registration was submitted, people who signed it started receiving phone calls from the

Department for Drug Control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB inviting them for informal interviews. At least 60 signatories have been interviewed so far. Interestingly, no one has been invited for a formal interrogation. It appears the informal interviews are intimidation tactics rather than part of any specific investigation.

The interviewees were asked about GayBelarus, its leader and his partner. In addition, police officers were interested in the personal life and political views of the signatories themselves; some were asked about criminal cases investigated at that time and related, for example, to distribution of pornography, rape and sexual exploitation of minors.

In addition, Siarhiej Androsienka was detained by the Belarusian border police when he was coming back from Warsaw in the middle of January. His passport was confiscated and he was given a paper certifying that "the passport is on a list of falsified passports". In the last two years, confiscation of passports has become a widespread practice of intimidation towards political activists and journalists from non-governmental mass-media.

GayBelarus

The most visible LGBT initiative in Belarus is GayBelarus. It is best described as a very small group of people working on a number of highly effective projects realised with the support of legal entities like NGOs and mass media. For the last three years, GayBelarus has organised pride events in Minsk, every time with surprising creativity to avoid arrests and skinhead violence.

GayBelarus is a member of international LGBT associations and Belarusian pro-democracy and human rights networks. It describes itself as a human rights project. It works to realise the rights guaranteed by Belarusian law as applied to

LGBT people, to tackle homophobia and provide support to LGBT people, their families and friends.

In the last few years the organisation has managed to build good relationships with club owners who would normally avoid any involvement with activism.

What Do Gay People Want?

Homosexuality was decriminalised in Belarus in 1994. However, it was hardly noticed by the wider society, which remains deeply homophobic.

Belarusian LGBTs face the same issues as anywhere: the majority are not interested in politics or any kind of activism. They appreciate being able to socialise in a few gay-friendly clubs and bars, hook-up online and get a couple of weeks a year in gay holiday heavens like Simeiz in the Crimea or Sitges near Barcelona.

They have to navigate narrowly the unwritten rules: the law does not provide any protection if homophobic prosecution or discrimination takes place. Gay people generally keep quiet about their lives at work, in their interactions with the authorities and doctors or in such situations as renting accommodation. Homosexuality can easily be used to blackmail individuals, which was demonstrated by the Department for Drug Control officials who threatened the Lambda convention participants with sending letters to their places of work or study.

What Will the Authorities Allow?

Strictly speaking, the state authorities are not more homophobic than broader society. For two decades now, Minsk has not been without at least one gay or gay-friendly night club. They masquerade themselves as "art clubs" and "limited-access parties", but all who are "in theme" (a Russian euphemism for LGBT), understand the meaning.

The authorities are happy to keep the LGBT community in night clubs – there is no danger of political or any other kind of activism; at the same time they are a source of taxes and bribes. However, it seems that GayBelarus has become vocal enough for their "Enough" to be heard outside those clubs. Such grass-root activism is perceived as subversive by the authorities.

This explains the tactics of intimidation: harassing not only Lambda signatories specifically, but also ordinary gay club guests most of whom have no interest in speaking out for their rights and safety. The police have already spelled out the reason for their raids: Siarhiej Androsienka “does things which would better be avoided”. The GayBelarus website reports that the number of visitors to gay clubs has dropped recently as people are afraid of further raids. This is an effective way of setting the club owners and visitors against LGBT activists.

If the authorities prevail now, the prospects for greater protection and equality for LGBT in Belarus will be pushed back in time.

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