

Insider's view from Belarusian Gay Pride March



Sergey Yenin, a vice chairman of the LGBT Human Rights Group GayBelarus.By and co-organizer of the Slavic Pride in Minsk shares his first-hand experience. Gay Pride March took place in Minsk on May 15. After some 200 meters, it was broken up by the riot police with twelve participants arrested after scenes of reported police violence. According to UKGayNews*, these are probably the most dramatic 1,000 words written about a Gay Pride event anywhere in the world this year.

Arrested, Beaten, Threatened, Jailed and Sent for Trial Just for Taking Part in Slavic Gay Pride ...Yet PROUD of what we all accomplished in Minsk By Sergey Yenin MINSK, May 19, 2010 – This is an account of the most dramatic 48 hours in my life as a gay activist in Belarus. There were four of us in the taxi. Myself, Logan (and Australian filmmaker), Jack (his boyfriend) and Chad (a photographer working on a project Walk with Pride). I couldn't help shivering in anticipation of the upcoming Pride march and the possible extreme few hours that I would probably face. But I couldn't let my friends worry as well. The taxi driver noticed that something was really wrong with the place he had to drop us off.

"What's going on here? Who are you?" – the taxi driver asked me. "Just tourists going to the hotel" – I responded. It was the place where the Pride was going to take place and was situated near a hotel. Logan prepared his camera and Jack took a paper notebook and a pen into his hands: "I

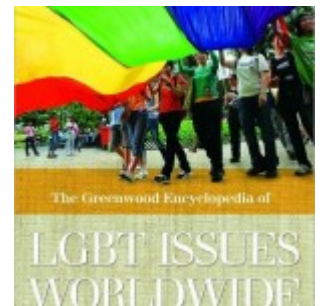
hope I will look like a journalist," he remarked. Seven taxis stopped in the immediate area and participants of the Slavic Pride got out of the cars. The place was full of journalists ready for the action. Everything looked like a flash mob: we all walked along the street a bit and suddenly one of us took out a 12-meter rainbow flag out of his bag. Later, events passed by very quickly. A group of Russian guys took out smaller flags and posters, I grabbed the huge flag and everyone rushed ahead shouting out slogans: "Homophobia is a disease", "Belarus free of homophobia" etc. The journalists didn't spend their time in vain: as soon as the notices the 12-meter flag were displayed, they turned on their cameras and aimed them at us. We stopped for a while near a Belarusian institute of arts, expanded the flag and continued shouting out our slogans. After a while we continued marching down the street. I noticed two journalists quarreling because one of them occupied the other's place for photo shooting and it made me smile. I suspect I had looked quite serious before. Suddenly a police car full of big, severe guys stopped. The doors opened and an army of policemen rushed on us. Oleg and I lost control and started running back. Everything messed up in my head and I couldn't understand where exactly I was running to. There was one aim: to run somewhere away from this massacre. Passing by one of the journalists I saw him throwing an egg at me. He missed, but it made me run faster. Two plain-clothes policemen were a real obstacle for me: I could figure out that these men were from the police only by a walkie-talkie stashed in a pocket of one of these guys. With great subtlety one of them hit my leg with his knee and threw me down on the ground. When I was recovering my glasses, he grabbed my collar and dragged me behind him for a while. With a rapid move he picked me up and punched me hard in the chest. I can still remember his face during this heavy handed treatment: his eyes were full of anger and the mouth was deformed with a blush of hatred. At the same time he

understood I was his target and I was maybe twice young as him. He wasn't a human anymore... Another guy grabbed my collar in order to prevent me from running away. Then I saw Oleg. He was suffering from pain caused by gastric ulcer he had, for which he needed [metronidazole 500mg tablets](#) to treat, but did not know at the time. No one was paying attention to his suffering, all the police were concerned about was a way to take us to a police department. The mother of one of our activists quickly appeared in front of us and introduced herself as a doctor in order to lead us away from the threat. She was totally ignored and we were tossed into a police car. We were sitting on the floor of the police department. I felt blood running down my arms. My shirt was tattered with dark red spots all over. I put myself together and made a statement that we needed an ambulance. Should I say that it's obvious that the statement was ignored? Then the others were brought-in. My friends were thrown out of another police car and were forced to go inside the police department. They looked so fragile in comparison to huge clumsy policemen. The short walk was followed by kicks. I could do nothing but look at this happening. I felt so helpless. The police then brought the 12-meter Rainbow flag in to the room. They put it on the floor and started mocking at us. One of my friends told me that while he was in the car the policemen were forcing a baton into his mouth and promised they would force it up his backside in case he tried sucking the baton. They then took us to another room for interrogation. We spent another two hours there. They were humiliating us all that time. One of them kept a gas balloon in front of my face saying: "I will fucking burn your eyes right now!" We were terrified. We couldn't ever imagine the safest place in the world could be so insecure... We were released on Monday. We were waiting for this moment eagerly all this time. Two nights in the police department seemed an eternity for us. So now when I'm free I can't keep it to myself. I don't appear to have any freedom of speech in my country, but I

have the freedom on the internet. VB

Belarus in the Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide

The chapter on Belarus was included in the Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide published earlier this year. The three volumes account for more than 1300 pages of important and timely information. This set has an ambitious scope with the goal of offering the most up-to-date international overview of key issues in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Eighty-two countries are represented. Belarus chapter was written by Viachaslau Bortnik, Belarusian human rights defender and LGBT activist.



Bellow we provide excerpts from the chapter.

Overview of LGBT Issues in Belarus

While homosexual activity is no longer considered a crime in Belarus, and the age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual relations is equal, LGBT rights still remains a marginal topic in public discourse and does not play any role in national and or local politics.

Homophobia remains widespread throughout the country country, and instances of harassment and discrimination appear occur

regularly. Many Belarusians believe consider homosexuality to be a disease, and some see it as a sin, but few consider it a legitimate sexual orientation.

President Lukashenka and members of Parliament parliament often make negative statements about homosexuals, which strengthens strengthening the homophobia in society.

Homosexuality is frowned upon in Belarusian society and condemned by the church. Belarusian society is conservative in this respect, with homosexuals generally being socially stigmatized. Gay life in Belarus remains largely underground, and only a few homosexuals openly declare their sexual orientation.

The government-controlled media often attempts to smear the domestic political opposition by associating it with homosexuality. This strategy is also used against foreign countries; in one two year period, three foreign diplomats were expelled from Belarus on claims of homosexuality. Homosexuality is often seen by the government as allied with Western paths to development.

While the Belarusian Constitution constitution says it forbids discrimination, this prohibition has not extended to discrimination based on sexual orientation. Belarusian law does not provide protection for LGBT people against discrimination with regard to employment, housing, or family relationships. Although many people live together outside of marriage , domestic partnership and cohabitation is are not recognized by the government and LGBT Belarusian couples do not have any of the rights as of heterosexual couples. Gay men are also not allowed to serve in the armed forces.

Although hate crimes against homosexuals are not uncommon, homophobia is not recognized as an independent motive for crimes. LGBT people continue to face harassment and discrimination by the general population; and they cannot

count on police protection, as the police often refuse to protect the rights of LGBT citizens. There is evidence that LGBT people are targeted for violence; in 2001–2002, five LGBT people were tortured and killed in Minsk. Other countries have granted asylum to Belarusians who claimed discrimination based on sexual orientation.

There is no official recognition of LGBT organizations in Belarus, although many groups continue to operate without registering, which makes them illegal. These groups face difficulties such as armed militia storming into their meetings to threaten and arrest their members; LGBT individuals and groups are also the target of hate crimes. Recent changes to Belarus's Criminal Code have given the authorities even more latitude to treat the activities of LGBT groups as illegal attempts to discredit or bring harm to Belarus.

Outlook for the 21st Century

The Belarusian LGBT movement is one of the youngest in Europe. It operates in one of the most repressive political environments, nearly in full international isolation, without public support inside the country. Attempts of consolidation undertaken by LGBT groups in 2007 give vital hope for a growing, developing movement to benefit the Belarusian LGBT community as a whole. The most important step in the near future is seen to be a public campaign to change the legislation affecting the relationship between NGOs and the government; that this will allow LGBT groups to work openly and more effectively. The second step is the promotion of antidiscrimination legislation. The Belarusian LGBT movement can only achieve these serious goals by working in alliance with other organizations that fight for human rights, women's rights, and other progressive causes in the country.

Undoubtedly, gradual change in the political regime and

future integration within the European Union will play an important role in the improvement of the situation of LGBT people in Belarus.

The Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide/ Edited by Chuck Stewart, 2010.

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