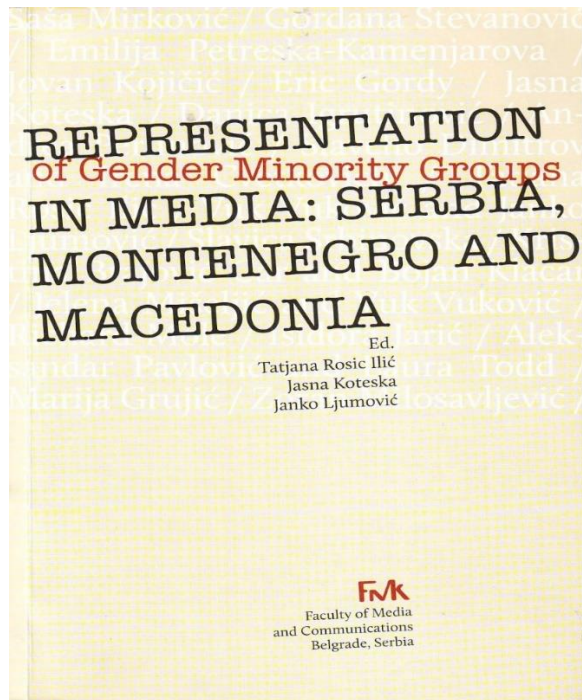


Jasna Koteska
Ss Cyril and Methodius
University Skopje
jasnakoteska@yahoo.com

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**Pride Week, Silence and Violence
(LGBTI in Macedonia, 2013 and 2014)**

Jasna Koteska



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I. Introduction: “Who Did This?”

A well-known anecdote talks about the occasion when a German officer visited Pablo Picasso's studio in Paris during the Second World War. After seeing Guernica, shocked by the modernist chaos of the painting, the officer asked Picasso: “Did you do this?” Picasso calmly replied: “No, you did this”. If applied to the Macedonian LGBTI context, marked by a sharp distinction between the acute media silence about the LGBTI communities, and the frequent public outbursts of violence against the same communities, to the media question: “Who did this?”, one should reply, like Picasso: “You did this. This is the result of your politics!”

Two features closely related to the Macedonian LGBTI communities in the past two years, consist of two opposites: the huge media silence about the LGBTI communities and their activisms, and the frequent explosions of physical attacks and hooliganism (as the most “vocal” display of one's opinion). How does this double-helix (“not recognizing them”, yet “recognizing them to its fullest physical presence” even taking an active violent stance against them) function in the Macedonian reality, and what is the role of the Macedonian media in creating this double helix?

The voice serves as the regulator of basic ethical rights. The ultimate image, also a practical demonstration of this fundamental logic, is Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* (1893). It is only when one is deprived of the voice, that one renders the ultimate anxiety. And vice versa, when the voice is vocalized the anxiety is released. But, what happens when individuals and whole communities are deprived of their voices and visibility; when the voicing of one's rights is silenced, and the ethical stance is no longer guaranteed by the public and by the media? The logical answer is that the ethical stance gets sort of “kidnapped” by groups which claim a higher “understanding” of the ethics, and of who are “us” as opposed to “them”: the religious right groups, the sport fans, the traditional family leagues, etc. This is than the case when the silence (rejecting the voice) forms a circular movement towards its radical negation: vehement, loud violence.

Context 1: Silence

In its 24 years of independence, since 1991, the Republic of Macedonia never held a traditionally organized Gay Pride. Although Gay Prides structurally differ from one country to another (from pride parades, marches, rallies, dance parties, to festivals of a few weeks and the so-called LGBT Pride Months), the events most closely related to the Gay Pride in Macedonia were the first ever organized Pride Week in June 2013 and June 2014 (22-27 June 2013, and 20-29 June 2014). The RRPP project Representation of gender minority groups in media: Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia was initiated in autumn 2014 with the purpose of investigating how the media (dailies, TV news, and internet) reported about the Gay Prides/ Pride Weeks in these three countries, in two

years (2013 and 2014), and with the following dynamic: two weeks prior to the events, during the actual events, and two weeks after the events.

The results of our analysis demonstrated a staggering silence about the Pride Weeks in the Macedonian media in both years, but not to the equal extent in each year. In 2013 in all five analyzed weeks, there were less than 1 per cent (0,93%) texts dedicated to the research topic. The silence is greater, if we take into account that most of the articles were not even related to the LGBTI issues or the Pride Week itself, but were either texts about “traditional values”: natality, traditional families, demographics, anti-abortion, etc., or they were published in the so-called “crime sections” of the newspaper (due to the violence related to the Pride Week). In 2014 an even higher silencing took place, with the total number of articles declining to 0.51%, with none of the printed articles directly mentioning the Pride Week.

There are many indicators according to which Macedonia could be classified as a so-called TV nation (meaning that the citizens prefer television to print media or the internet as a source of information). In the chosen television samples there is even greater silence about LGBTI activism compared to the print media. In all five weeks sampled in 2013, and on all 16 national television stations, the Pride Week was directly or indirectly mentioned eleven times. In just one case it actually involved an interview with an LGBTI activist (2:50 minutes duration), in five cases the anchor indirectly reported about the Pride Week, and in the five remaining cases the television news involved the topics of the traditional values: an interview with a mother of three children, an anti-abortion speech, the anchor’s statement that gay activism is sponsored by the Soros Foundation, and an interview with a priest. In 2014 there was no prime time news coverage of the Pride Week. The conclusion is that from 2013 to 2014 the interest in the LGBTI themes in the Macedonian printed media dropped from 0.93 to 0.51%, and in 2014 no prime time TV news covered the Pride Week.

Context 2: Violence

In 2013 and 2014 at least six organized attacks on the members and supporters of the LGBTI community took place in Macedonia. Three attacks included stoning, three were attempts to set fires at the LGBTI support center office, and in other cases individuals endured organized physical attacks, for example one being when a famous actor came out as gay. The attacks varied from the violence in language (derogatory slogans, death threats on the social media, etc.) to physical violence such as: throwing stones, glass bottles or bricks at the LGBTI Support Center, to the members of the LGBTI communities or to their supporters. In all cases, the attacks were organized, coordinated and planned; the attackers wore balaclavas, and in several instances people sustained injuries. Despite the continuous public protests by the LGBTI community, none of the organized attacks was ever prosecuted by the Public Prosecutor of the Republic of Macedonia, and all six cases remain unresolved to the present day.

In 2014 the European Commission wrote in its Progress report on Macedonia that: “The Law on Anti-Discrimination is still not in line with the acquis, as it does not explicitly prohibit

discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation”, (p. 37) and that: “As regards to the rights of LGBTI persons, the violence incidents against the LGBTI Support Center have not been repeated, nevertheless the perpetrators of these incidents are yet to be prosecuted” (p. 47). However in October, when the 2014 EU Progress Report was issued, another attack on the LGBTI support center took place in Skopje. Although the Macedonian Government declaratively agrees with the EU recommendations to promote anti-discrimination against LGBTI people, at the same time the Governmental representatives regularly speak in negative terms against the same community. One example is when the Minister of Labour and Social Justice (at the time), Mr. Spiro Ristovski, gave an interview for the national TV in May 2013 stating that: “Homosexuals cannot raise healthy children”.

According to a poll conducted in 2013 by the UN accredited ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) association, with 13 per cent tolerance towards the LGBTI community, Macedonia was the lowest ranked LGBTI-tolerance country in the Western Balkans (Serbia having 25 per cent tolerance), and near Turkey and Belarus with 14 per cent tolerance towards the LGBTI communities. Further marginalisation of the already marginalized communities was enacted in January 2015 when the Macedonian parliament approved a proposed amendment to the Macedonian Constitution which defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, something which the LGBTI Support Center rightly proclaimed not only discriminatory, but also redundant. It indeed is redundant, since the sole function of this intervention is to only further synchronize the regular rhythm of the otherwise heteronormative Macedonian governmental machine.

The first ever Pride Week in Macedonia was organized between 22 and 27 June 2013. Although the organizers repeatedly stated that they were not organizing a gay parade in Skopje, and instead decided to organize a Pride Week with indoor debates, public lectures, movie screenings, etc. The first calls for a counter-gay parade took place right after the announcement, and the first physical attacks on the LGBTI community took place on the very first day of the Pride Week, 22 June 2013. On 21 June 2013, a day prior the beginning of the Pride Week, the counter-LGBTI Facebook group was launched. Within one day, 500 people registered as attending the counter-protests, and the anti-parade Facebook page was filled with messages of violence, death threats, and comments containing Nazi and the religious symbols. The actual anti-LGBTI protests did not take place. The reports said that hardly 15 younger people gathered in the yard of the Macedonian Orthodox church in the city center of Skopje, revolted that “Skopje is becoming a city of LGBTI people”. According to the reports, since nobody organized or coordinated the group, the counter-protesters soon left the church, but on their way home and with no apparent reason, the group attacked and wounded a teenager in the Skopje city square. That very night, during the first workshop of the Pride Week, thirty to forty people with balaclavas attacked the LGBT support center in the Old Turkish market in Skopje. The counter-protesters were throwing stones and glass bottles at the Center, and one policeman was injured.

Context 3: Media (The Community, the Father and the Priest)

The violence never starts with the obvious signals of direct visible violence (physical attacks, crime, murder, terror, etc.). The violence starts with the violence of language, which is the entry point to the violence in real life. What follows are three different texts published in the Macedonian media between 21 and 24 June 2013, all of them related to the Pride Week, which could give us some of the elements that potentially link the attitude of the media to the outbursts of violence towards the Macedonian LGBTI community.

A)

On 21 June 2013, a day prior to the first attacks, a Facebook community page was launched, with a call for counter- protests against the LGBTI community. The invitation read as follows:

“We cannot allow in our Skopje, in our Macedonia, gays and lesbians to freely walk as in a ‘corteo’. We should not allow in any case that they should shamelessly get out and heinously to touch, kiss or do other disgusting things in front of our eyes, of us, the believers, in front of the children, in front of the old people who think they have left the fertile future behind them. We should not allow them to enter the holy God’s temple, to stand in front of an altar and to say that fateful ‘yes’ to each another. We should not allow for a small innocent child to have two mothers or two fathers for parents”.

B)

On 21 June 2013, one day prior the first attacks, an anonymous letter by a father was published by the Macedonian web portal, inpress.com.mk, with the title “Yes, it is true. You are gay, but I am not”:

“Let us get things straight. You can love your neighbor, even if s/he is of the same sex. Generally, I have no problem with it, because no one gave me the right to judge if I am to be asked. But PLEASE (capital letters in original - JK) do not enter my home!!! You will ask what this means. Well, it is like this. It is hard for me to believe that you will organize gay pride or the so-called Pride Week just for the parade or for the Week... Maybe I am wrong, but these parades (not just at our place, but all around the world) look like a certain ‘recruiting’ to me. Yes, yes, a true recruiting of the ‘future cadre’... My children are the only reason why I am writing this. They are my future and the future of my family. I want to make them real people... so please do not blame it on me if I feel an urge to take a baseball bat everytime my son asks me ‘Dad, what is this, who are these people?’, because in those moments, that urge is stronger than me. I know it is not right, but it is stronger than me, because in front of my eyes I have them, my children and your (potential) recruits.”

C)

On 24 of June 2013, two days after the organized attack on the LGBTI Support Center, the youngest member of the Macedonian Orthodox Holy Synod, the Bishop Josif Leshochki, gave an interview to the newspaper “Nova Makedonija”. Here is part of the interview related to the LGBTI community:

“I wonder why this is the only case where someone’s need, or mood, or even lifestyle has to be shown and approved by everyone else, in a way by insisting on that gesture of occupying other

people's peaces, spaces and understandings? What if those who are not gay, too, start to parade? What if with time, God forbid, other profiles of deviation, for example pedophiles, start claiming they too are oppressed? That some freedom of choice, or of a feeling, has been taken away from them, it is horrifying to think about it. Privacy has to remain privacy and not to be an issue for the general public. The church cannot shut this down, [the church] suffers when someone destroys his or her God's image, even if it is done away from the eyes of the world, while he or she functions normally day-to-day. The consequences will be visible everywhere, therefore we are called to always insist for people to come [to the church] for repentance, and for repairing".

II.

Violence in Language (Media Attitude towards the LGBTI)

What follows is an attempt to interpret and analyze the three discourses published in 2013 in the Macedonian press, with an aim to better understand how violence in language operates, and how the media contributed to the increase in violence towards the LGBTI Macedonian community in the past two years?

1.

The call for violence in all three texts is performed by those who claim to represent "humane" values. In all of them, the violence in language is performed by the identifiable agents: the Community (the Facebook call), the anonymous Father (who, thus, represents all fathers), and the Church (represented here by the interview with the Macedonian Bishop Josif Leshochki). It is not without a certain irony that all three instances (Community, Fatherhood and Church) are wildly known for their warm and deep humanity, which they share as a common trait; all of them are supposedly here to nurture humans. Therefore, the texts are almost identical, all perpetuating the same or similar traditional, ideological, political, and cultural beliefs; an idea that we are all humans, with the same hopes, fears, pains, dignity, etc. But from the texts it is also obvious that this habituality in addressing the humanity does not apply to everyone, and that the ethical concerns are not intended to cover all humans, but are restricted to closed circles.

Where does this contradiction come from: to support general ethical norms and rights, while refusing the same norms and rights to those outside the perceived communities of those who contemplate the norms? The Bishop's speech clearly states that not everyone is included in the symbolic religious community. The excluded ones potentially could be admitted into the community, but if only they perform two specific gestures of sacrifice. The first sacrifice is their visibility: the LGBTI people should adopt the role of remaining in shadow. The second sacrifice is an essential one: the LGBTI people should sacrifice who they are, they should sacrifice their identity, as the Bishop indirectly hints, in order to disavow the enjoyment in the eyes of the community.

But, here comes the twist. Both sacrifices, according to the Bishop, even though required, are still not sufficient. The Bishop assumes that even if invisibility is achieved, the sacrifice of one's identity is impossible, therefore it would only serve as a trick to deceive the community, and the Bishop is not convinced that the gesture of sacrifice would change them. (And surely it won't, since an identity is something I have, and not something I lie about having, or that I could change).

So, even if they voluntarily accept to remain in the shadow, the sacrifice would still be rejected by the Church. That is because, according to the Bishop, not only will they remain the same, but the community would still continue to wonder what kind of hidden treasures are in the possession of the LGBTI people, which makes them worthy of love to their fellow humans. Therefore the Bishop's final judgement is that the sacrifice is insufficient due to the mysterious and precious ingredient of "gayness", and that mystic ingredient would still remain an ambiguity within the Church's symbolic order and the Bishop concludes, that it is not enough if they sacrifice their visibility, it is not enough if they try to change who they are, what is needed is for them to join the holy Church for repentance, to be sanitized, to be sterilized, in short: to be repaired.

2.

What explodes in violence is first and foremost the set of symbols and images in language. When the American writer Gore Vidal was asked by a vulgarly intrusive journalist whether his first sexual partner was a man or a woman, he replied: "I was too polite to ask". This anecdote is a perfect example that the right response to intrusions in language is to immediately dismiss the vulgarity behind it. That is why we should not only look at the texts which call for attacking and stoning of the LGBTI members and supporters, but also at the arguments with which the hooligans justify their acts. Although all three texts call for a dialogue, debate, exchanging words, etc., their message is not only directed towards the absent and silenced interlocutor (as we previously said, what preceded the physical violence in Macedonia, was the silencing of the LGBTI communities in media), but also, all three texts constantly call upon their huge potential for violence. Namely, all three texts start by designating things and reducing them, but soon they continue by desiring more and more: 1) In the Facebook call: the LGBTI don't just want to parade, they want to enter our churches and marry each other; 2) In the letter of the anonymous Father: the letter starts with a declarative, religious endorsement: "I cannot judge them", but few sentences later it ends with the open violent threat: "I will beat you up with a baseball bat"; 3) In the case of the Bishop's interview, first he says that LGBTI people are entitled to their own privacy, but he continues that the Church cannot accept their privacy, since it will still be a threat to the community.

Violence always demands more. Nothing is enough, the violence in language never gets its satisfaction, it doesn't know how to stop itself, and there is no limit. We should note that the complaint against the LGBTI community in all three texts is structured in a way where the one who writes it acts as if he or she is inferior. The problem is not that the LGBTI community or the society as a whole treats them as inferior, but that they secretly consider themselves inferior. It is not that they are culturally different; the fundamentalists are "just like us", and also they secretly have already "internalised" the standards of the other people's identities. All major philosophers from Nietzsche onwards elaborated the idea that violence is based on envy that the other is having what I don't have and is enjoying it. Since it is not possible to impose equal enjoyment, what all three texts operate with, instead, is - prohibition. I cannot have it, so the others also should not be able to have it. And in order for the prohibition to function, there has to be some ultimate guarantor (our fathers, the church, our children, our nation, our religion, our believers, and so on), but always the impersonal "ones" who also share "our" values.

3.

In all three texts the call is similar: the Macedonian LGBTI community should not parade! Note for example that: 1) the Facebook page finds it disgusting that LGBTI people could freely walk as

in “a corteo” (the free ceremonial procession of people marching); 2) the Bishop wonders what if others, i.e. the heterosexuals, also start to parade; and 3) the Father’s letter concludes that the LGBTI community’s final goal is not just to parade. The Father knows there is some hidden agenda behind their wish to parade, and that other agenda is to enter his home and to “recruit” his children. Although the organizers of the Macedonian Pride Week repeatedly stated that they have no intention to parade outdoors, that they are not organizing the LGBTI parade, etc. (paradoxically, the only ones who did “parade” in 2013 in Skopje were the counter-protesters and the hooligans), it is interesting that the phantasmic call for the (nonexistent) parade to be stopped remained valid and operative in the media (“Even if they are not parading, I still feel the need to ask them to stay closeted”).

The paradox here is that in the weeks surrounding the 2013 Pride Week, the Macedonian LGBTI community (at least, on the spatial, visible level) actually remained an image of “the moving immobility”. With no intentions to go out and parade, they closely resembled our dream experiences, when in spite of our most frenetic activity we are still stuck in the same place. If we apply the famous Zeno’s paradox, we could say that for the Macedonian queer community to cover the given distance X (for example: to organize a Gay Pride), they know that they would first have to cover half this distance (for example, to become visible and recognized by the media), and to cover this half, they would first have to cover a quarter of it (for example, to become recognized and accepted by their closer families and friends), and so on. But the biggest paradox is that the queer community in essence, does not even desire to cover the given distance X; the essence of one’s identity is not that it needs some geographical goal to be reached. The essence of one’s identity (LGBTI or other) is not the goal, but the aim - the real aim of one’s identity is the way, and not the (spatial or any other) goal to be reached.

But, with the absent parading in the public space, the call for violence paradoxically grew even greater. Not only were the LGBTI people forbidden to perform the outdoors “parading”, not only were they pushed back into their homes and threatened, but from the three calls we see that the phantasmic threat is that the fewer they were and are, the more dangerous their existence becomes! Note for example, how the call for stopping them functions as if their “threat” grows in proportion to their diminution in real space. The logic is that the more we fight against them, the more their power over us grows! Therefore the desperate cry of the anonymous Father (the second text): “Do not enter my home, or I will have to use the baseball bat!”

4.

The problem could be also recognized within the realm of the gaze. Let’s take a look at the texts: 1) “We cannot look at gay people shamelessly getting out, touching and kissing and doing other disgusting things in front of our eyes” (the Facebook call); 2) “I have an urge to take a baseball bat every time my son [seeing them] asks ‘Who are these people?’”, the Father’s letter; and 3) “Why does their need, mood or lifestyle have to be shown and approved by everyone else by the gesture of occupying other people’s space?”, the Bishop’s interview. The skeleton of how the gaze fantasy operates is not just that other people celebrate their identity, but that the object of fantasy is not the scene itself, but the impossible gaze witnessing it: “Who knows how shamelessly they touch, kiss, and do other disgusting things when I am not watching?”, as the Facebook call has it.

The impossible gaze sort of “travels into the past” enabling the witness to be present before he or she was even present. The gaze posits itself retroactively; it sees more than it sees. Therefore all three calls act as reversals, nostalgic yearnings for the “natural” state when people, phenomena were only what they were, and we perceived them straightforwardly, our gaze had not yet been distorted by the enjoyment. We always perceive things in a distorted way, says Slavoj Žižek. The gaze signifies at the same time the power of the community which proclaims its love for the same sexes, and also the impotence on the side of those who gaze, who are thus reduced to the role of passive witnesses. The gaze is a perfect embodiment of the “impotent Master”, and since he or she is condemned to the role of a passive witness, she/he “revolts” from the position of supposed innocence and ignorance.

5.

Why are people horrified by the non-existent parade? We can grasp their resentment by remarking on the difference between reality space and fantasy space. The (nonpresent) parade functions as an empty space wherein everyone could project their fantasy enemy vis a vis the “honorable ones” (for example, “What would our ancestors say?”) Even when the LGBTI fantasy threat is reduced to our everyday reality, the fantasy “danger” still remains, and the name of that “danger” is the desire to punish, a process whereby the crowd hungry for normalisation is confronted with the void of the symbolic mandate (to diminish, to eliminate). The text which fully explains this logic is the letter by the anonymous Father. He says: “They do not only wish to conquer our streets, their inner wish is to enter our homes! And since they want to enter our homes, I am doomed to stand ready with my baseball bat.” The difference between the reality and fantasy space explains the lines of hysterical outbursts, from self-pity to sadistic responses. What works here is that surplus enjoyment, which has the power to convert phenomena into their opposites: those who parade outdoors are not in fact there to parade outdoors, what they truly want is to exit the outdoors and to enter our homes!

This is the logic that unites the anti-parade texts: they all narrate the traumatic encounter with desire, thus proving that desire has a formal nature, it is an empty form filled out by everyone’s fantasy (the Bishop’s question: “What if those who are not gay start to parade, too?”). The violent essence of the calls is the need for the space to be “taken again”, even if no one threatens it, in order to manipulate it again, to control the game from a kind of objective distance (our ancestors, our children, our God...). The split between the public and private never comes about without a certain remainder, therefore the Bishop’s warning: “Even when ‘they’ live away from our eyes, and function ‘normally in the everyday’, the consequences are still visible.” The Bishop essentially says that the social rules are always already penetrated by enjoyment, by the elements of private enjoyment, therefore he asks for the higher agency of prohibition: the LGBTI people need to come to the Church for the repentance.

Here the disproportion between inside and outside takes its final shape in forming the psychological “architecture” of the enemy: it is not that they are now outside (and coming out), but they paradoxically also appear inside, invisible to the outside view. This explains both the letter by the Father, and by the Bishop. The Father’s letter reveals that he needs this “surplus space”, as a constant motif of his worry; he needs the threat that the LGBTI people would enter his home and he would no longer be able to control that “surplus space”. The violence acts as if the public space has a certain “prehistory” preceding the “new” social reality which evades it. It also explains the

Bishop's conclusion that it is not enough if the LGBTI people practice their identity within their homes; the proportion is not possible to be reached, the disproportion is a necessity. It is a structural effect of the barrier which separates the inside from the outside, which could be abolished only by demolishing the barrier, something which eventually did happen on the night of 22 June 2013, when the opponents to the LGBTI movements came out and by demolishing the LGBTI Support Center for that given moment they indeed let the outside swallow the inside.

ABSTRACT

Pride Week, Silence and Violence (LGBTI in Macedonia, 2013 and 2014)
Jasna Koteska

The text "Pride Week, Silence and Violence (LGBTI in Macedonia, 2013 and 2014)" by Jasna Koteska analyzes the role of the media in the first ever organized Pride Weeks in the Republic of Macedonia in 2013 and 2014. The text analyses the complex relation between three related processes: silencing the LGBTI community in the media, the rise of the violence in language (derogatory slogans, death threats) to the actual physical outbursts of violence towards the members and the supporters of the LGBTI community in these two years. The text analyses several phenomena related to violence in language and physical violence: space, the gaze and the construction of the image of the "fantasy enemy".

KEY WORDS

Pride Week, LGBTI, Silence, Violence, Media, Macedonia.