

“GAYS AND TRANSVESTITES OCCUPIED THE HOUSE.”
A SNAPSHOT OF LGBT REPRESENTATIONS
IN THE BULGARIAN MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

“Gays and Transvestites Occupied the House” is the title of a recently published article in one of the national dailies *Standard* Newspaper,¹ which comments on the cohabitants in the third issue of the “Big Brother” reality show that started in mid-September 2006. Although social and legal changes in Bulgaria in the last few years have led to an increased number of neutral media texts related to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT), openly homophobic and transphobic articles like the above are still to be found in some mainstream media.

This article aims to present a snapshot of LGBT representations in the Bulgarian print media within one randomly selected month. The content is based on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) of texts published in Bulgarian press and on-line media in September 2006 that relate to LGBT. It also includes findings from four in-depth interviews of gay and lesbian activists from Bulgarian LGBT organizations, who have invested a lot of effort to modify media discourse on LGBT issues in the last three years, with the purpose to initiate positive changes in social attitudes towards LGBT people. According to Norman Fairclough (1995), one of the founders of critical discourse analysis, discourse is a potent element of social life, which is dialectically interconnected with other elements, and can influence social change. Based on this theoretical claim, this article focuses on the Bulgarian media discourse on LGBT identities with the purpose to outline existing assumptions that affect social attitudes towards LGBT people.

Press monitoring conducted by the Bulgarian Gay Organization Gemini in 2005 discovered that:²

¹ Martin Karbovski, “It Became Frightening to Watch Big Brother 3: Gays and Transvestites Occupied the House,” *Standard*, 23 September 2006.

² The Bulgarian gay organisation Gemini is a non-profit national advocacy organisation. The mission of the organisation is to strive for an inclusive social environment for homosexual, bisexual and transgender people in Bulgaria. The organisation stands for di-

Compared to previous periods (when the total number of articles for the year was approximately 300–400), in 2005 the number of publications on LGBT topics exceeds 1000.

Ten national newspapers were monitored, reviewing over a 1000 articles. It was discovered that the majority of the publications are neutral (presenting LGBT topics in facts by using politically correct language, without commenting), some are very negative (directly or indirectly portraying LGBT people in a less favourable light, sometimes directly encouraging hatred and discrimination towards them), and a few positive (where LGBT people or communities are presented as good examples or when the journalist comments on the topic in a supportive way). As well as this, contacts with the media were developed and viable working contacts were strengthened with key players in the mass media, including national television channels. Though it was not feasible to monitor television programmes, certain tendencies in attitudes toward LGBT issues were observed: one of the national television channels proved to be very open to social issues and presented the stories neutrally, to some extent positively; while another one was biased and provided negative coverage of any social issues related to LGBT or Roma issues. Barring a few exceptions, it is worth noticing that LGBT issues were not covered by mass media as scandalous or sensationalist news. In the last year it was noticeable that LGBT issues got "serious" coverage in the daily headlines" (Gemini 2005).

I am taking the conclusions of the annual press monitoring report of BGO Gemini for 2005 as a starting point in analyzing the publications concerning LGBT issues in September 2006. The research hypothesis is that the prevailing media attitude to LGBT demonstrated in the articles is neutral or positive, and the mass media have overcome the tendency to treat homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality as scandalous news or entertainment.

FINDINGS

The media sample included 23 articles, published in five national dailies (*Monitor*, *Standard*, *24 Hours*, *Trud* and *Dnevnik*) and one weekly newspaper (*Capital*) in September 2006. The majority of these articles appeared in commentary sections, followed by news highlights, and reports including excerpts of interviews.

There were 5 LGBT related topics covered in these media product during the examined period: the legal action against Volen Siderov MP³ started by Bulgarian LGBT organizations to limit his hate speech; the

minishing legal, social, cultural and economic discrimination and victimisation of LGBT people. It maintains good relations with Bulgarian and international organisations, Bulgarian governmental agencies and media.

³ Volen Siderov is the leader of the nationalist party Ataka that entered the Bulgarian parliament after the last general elections in 2005. He is notorious because of his hate speech towards Roma, Turkish people and homosexuals.

publicly announced informal gay wedding ceremony of the pop star Azis; Bulgarian semi-finalist in the international "Mr. Gay" competition; participation of Bulgarian sportsmen in the Gay Outgames in Montreal 2006; and the participation of two gender-ambiguous people (one being a cross-dresser and the other a former transvestite) in the "Big Brother 3" Show.

Each of these topics carried different weight in the print media. The court case of Volen Siderov and the semi-finalist in the international "Mr. Gay" competition were only briefly mentioned in news highlights columns of the examined newspapers. There were full length articles dedicated to the other three topics, and extensive comments from readers in the on-line forums of *Monitor*, *Dnevnik* and *Capital.bg/Blog*. The topic which drew the greatest public attention was the participation of transvestites in the Big Brother 3 reality show. More than half of all LGBT-related texts in the monitored period were dedicated to this topic. *Standard* Newspaper dedicated the largest space (altogether three articles) to the "Big Brother 3" reality show. The articles published in it by Lora Simeonova and Martin Karbovski were openly homo- and transphobic:

Vice sells best, and that is why, it will abandon the screen in the next 70 days. . . . The viewers will see a vicious Madonna who is 8-months pregnant, poetical hermaphrodite, former transvestite-aesthetic, a vagabond with homo-aura and a colourful grandma with a dirty sub-consciousness.⁴

Big Brother 3 entered into the terrible sample of politically correct speaking. Today, this way of speaking tolerates homosexuality and the total breakdown of the relation "man-woman," and does not leave even an edge of space where one can react against the imported boasting sexuality of the different.⁵

"In 'Big Brother 3' the abnormality is presented to us as a norm," concludes the author of the article, Martin Karbovski.

Standard Newspaper was the only one which took an openly homophobic and transphobic position while commenting on the participants in the "Big Brother 3" reality show, the other researched media aimed to remain neutral. However, the seemingly neutral articles led to the conclusion that the "Big Brother 3" show aims to maintain its audience by exposing weird persons who transgress social views of normality, and evoke shock and repulsion among the viewers. All newspapers agreed

⁴ Lora Simeonova, "It is a Shame, but Everybody Watches," *Standard*, 20 September 2006.

⁵ Martin Karbovski, "It Became Frightening to Watch Big Brother 3: Gays and Transvestites Occupied the House," *Standard*, 23 September 2006.

that the "Big Brother 3" show was seeking to expose "scandalous themes," such as homosexuality, transsexuality, extra-marital pregnancy, religious fanaticism, etc. For example, *Capital* weekly defined the mixture of personalities which took part in the show as "a mixture that is explosive and promises to evoke many debates" and also pointed out that the plot "moves on the edge of good taste."⁶ It is difficult to call such a position neutral: Although there was no harassing language, the expectation that the audience would react explosively to the personalities involved in the show brought stereotypes into play, shared by the audience, and obviously by the author of the article as well.

The topic that ranked second in terms of space dedicated to it was the "gay marriage" of the Bulgarian pop-folk singer Azis, who attracted many fans by making videos and live performances, in which he dressed as a woman, but wore a beard at the same time, gave birth on stage, and married himself. His personal life is one of the favourite topics of the entertainment columns of print media, and he is a frequent guest of Bulgarian TV entertainment shows. His broadly announced informal gay marriage was widely covered by all kinds of media. Besides topping the headlines of entertainment sections in the print media, he and his partner were invited to talk about their forthcoming wedding in some of the most widely watched talk shows and TV tabloids.⁷

The coverage of Azis' "gay marriage" unfortunately contributed to perpetuating common stereotypes about gay men as women in male bodies, instead of challenging them. The confession made by Azis in front of about 2 million viewers of the Slavi Talk Show on September 10, 2006, that he is a "woman inside," and "the wife in the family," and that his partner is not gay, but heterosexual, who saw his inner soul (that is a woman's soul), cemented the popular view that only the more feminine-looking of the two male partners was gay, while the other was "normal" and was only temporarily in this kind of relationship. There are several different stereotypes about gay couples in Bulgaria. The most prevalent one is that the gay couple imitates the male-female role division typical for heterosexual couples: one of the partners must play the female role. Another stereotype holds that the more masculine of the two partners is not gay and can equally well form relationships with women. Only the feminine-looking gay is 100% gay, and would never be able to have a "normal" relationship with a woman.

⁶ Borislav Kandov, "Big Brother—the Beginning," *Capital.bg/Blog*, 19 September 2006.

⁷ "The Slavi Show" led by Slavi Trifonov, every work day at 22:30 on BTV, and "Hot" led by Veneta Rajkova on Nova TV, a TV-tabloid every Saturday at 22:30.

Print media cited Azis' words in articles congratulating the happy couple, and wishing them luck. An article in *Capital weekly* commented on the fact that Azis' popularity was difficult to understand in a society characterized by prevailing intolerance towards homosexuals:

His (Azis') popularity continues to be mysterious—in informal settings the Bulgarians are intolerant towards minorities and towards showing of different sexual orientation. Nevertheless, when a man from Roma origin puts on a dress and heavy make-up, everybody suddenly begins to recognize his beautiful voice, his peculiarity, and most of all, his ability to entertain—in the same way in which the king's buffoon must entertain noble snobs.⁸

The third topic, the participation of Bulgarian sportsmen in the Montreal Outgames 2006 was covered by a long article in *Novinar Newspaper*,⁹ drawing attention to the main issues that concern gay sport: lack of state support to gay sport people who represent Bulgaria at international tournaments, and consistent fear of coming out of most sportsmen, which makes gay sport rather invisible. The article focused on the participation of Stanislav Tanchev, the leader of Gay Sports Club "Tangra" being the only one of the twelve club members that took part in Montreal Outgames to give an interview to the mass media.

The discourse analysis of print media in September 2006 outlines several key problems related to the media representation of LGBT people in general. First of all, we cannot talk of representations of all identities that comprise the compound LGBT. Although some articles included the words "lesbians" and "bisexuals" in conjunction with gays and transsexuals, the focus was on male homosexuality and on transvestism. Lesbians and bisexuals were not discussed in any of the articles. Second, male homosexuality and transsexuality were discussed predominantly in entertainment sections, which reflect on curious, scandalous or shocking themes. Political news, such as the court case of Volen Siderov, appear in front-page news, but the content of the news item itself (i.e. legal action to limit the homophobic and racist hate speech of Volen Siderov Bulgarian MP, member of the nationalist "Ataka" Party) presented a public scandal.

In the examined period, there was not a single article which reflected on LGBT issues in conjunction with a non-scandalous or non-entertaining piece of news. For example, there were no comments on how the new

⁸ Alexander Bojchev, "The Excitement of Tsetsa," *Capital weekly*, 15 September 2006.

⁹ Elena Boychinova, "Bulgarian Brought back 8 medals from Gay-Olympic Games in Montreal," *Novinar*, 2 September 2006.

maternity-leave policy would affect lesbian mothers, or how the proposed changes of the Family Law would influence homosexual couples. Last, but not least, in some extreme cases, as in the articles related to the "Big Brother 3" show of *Standard* Newspaper, homosexuality and transsexuality were openly discussed as abnormal.

ACTIVISTS' VIEWS

Gay and lesbian leaders of LGBT human rights organizations are among the few people in the country who have invested time and efforts to modify the media discourse on homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality in order to influence existing public stereotypes of LGBT. Their opinions are important because the strategy chosen by LGBT organizations to increase the social visibility of LGBT people in the mass media is one of the factors which forms the media discourse, and consequently—can produce social change. Mass media have built a steady relationship with some organization-affiliated resource people, who are called upon to discuss hot issues, or represent the "LGBT movement." Desislava Petrova and Aksinia Gencheva from BGO Gemini are the most often called-upon media resource people for LGBT issues in general, and not only about specific lesbian issues.

None of the activists who were interviewed were completely satisfied with the current media representations of LGBT people in Bulgaria. Petrova and Gencheva expressed most optimistic opinions about their current relationship with the mass media. They supported the overall conclusion stated in the annual media monitoring report of Gemini for 2005: that homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality are no longer covered in the mass media as scandalous or sensationalist news. Still, they mentioned, that there should be more space dedicated to LGBT issues in the mass media, and the media should consult with LGBT activists on all current political issues related to employment, social and healthcare, and education.

The other activists who were interviewed, Pavlin Stoichev, chair of the Managing Board of LGBT Idea,¹⁰ former chairperson of Gemini in the period 2004–2005, and Martin Tsvetkov, director of Queer Bulgaria,¹¹ expressed much more critical views of the media representations of LGBT

¹⁰ LGBT Idea is a newly-founded LGBT membership association that is still in the process of legal registration. It was founded in May 2006.

¹¹ Queer Bulgaria is an LGBT not-for-profit organization legally registered as a foundation for public benefit in 2004. More information can be found at <www.queer-bulgaria.com>.

people in the last few years. According to both of them, mass media have not yet developed a neutral attitude towards LGBT issues, and serve to maintain a stigmatizing discourse, which perpetuates public stereotyping of LGBT people as a social abnormality.

Stoichev was especially concerned about the continued feminization of gay identities in the mass media. Gay men are often jokingly referred to as people with "soft wrists" which implies a feminine feature in the Bulgarian context. This nick name ("the soft wrists") expresses a socially degrading attitude, because in the present-day Bulgarian context of rigid gender stereotyping these kind of references devalue the maleness of gay subjects. He also underlined that almost none of the mainstream media, with the exception of *Dnevnik* Newspaper, are interested to engage in in-depth analysis of issues concerning the social lives of LGBT people. He explains this with the nature of Bulgarian media, which are seeking to respond to the "average" audience, its tastes and attitudes to life, and not to change them. Similarly, Tsvetkov points out that there is no space for a serious discussion on LGBT social issues, and when they are exposed in the media, the focus is on the public perception of LGBT as scandalous, shocking, or ridiculous.

When talking about the possible strategy to achieve objective representation of LGBT people in the mass media, the focus of the representatives of BGO Gemini was on building a permanent relationship with the national media, and constantly "feeding" them with information about LGBT-related events. Stoichev from LGBT Idea expressed an opinion that a greater number of different people representing the LGBT organizations should appear in the mass media, when the organizations are invited to comment on a current issue. In his view LGBT organizations' media strategy has not been effective so far, because the organizations did not succeed in attracting a number of successful people with diverse professional backgrounds as their front-persons. LGBT organizations have appeared with a very limited number of faces in the mass media, which contributed to their low success in counterbalancing the existing heterosexist as well as sexist discourse reflecting rigid gender role stereotypes.

None of the interviewed activists thought that the creation of specialized media shows directed primarily to LGBT audience would solve the problems of representation. They would favour it if LGBT-managed media were more oriented to the broader public. There used to be a radio show produced by BGO Gemini running on Radio Net (in Sofia) for one and a half years. It stopped because the radio station closed down. Stoichev, who was the host of that show for several months, commented that

the hopes of Gemini had been for this show to fill in the gap of missing faces of ordinary LGBT people with different backgrounds and professions, who would help to mainstream the LGBT issues. Unfortunately, this goal was not achieved, probably because the show was hosted by a less popular radio station with a limited audience.

CONCLUSION

The press monitoring of BGO Gemini in 2005 draws a picture of an open-minded, predominantly neutral or positive mass media discourse on LGBT issues, which provides space for a serious discussion of LGBT identities, and promotes social tolerance. This view was proved not to be valid for the month of September 2006, in which the LGBT-related publications in national dailies (and one weekly newspaper) were mostly in the entertainment sections, focusing on curious or shocking news, scandals, and some of them even stereotyping LGBT as a social anomaly. The examination of print media products in September 2006 shows that LGBT media representations still suffer from a number of deficiencies, which contribute to perpetuation of rigid stereotypes about LGBT, instead of dissolving them.

The media discourse on LGBT is still male-centred, and excludes lesbians and bisexual people altogether. It is also entertainment-bound, and focuses on curious or scandalous news, while ignoring ordinary LGBT people altogether when some serious social issues related to education, health-care and employment policies are discussed. Another deficiency of the media discourse on LGBT is the lack of a great diversity of personalities to present. Although the main LGBT organizations have developed working relationships with the mass media, they have not managed to attract a large number of people with diverse backgrounds to help promoting LGBT rights in the mass media. LGBT organizations remain a rather low-impact factor when media discourse on LGBT is being formed. The "opinion-makers" about LGBT issues in the mass media are more likely to be pop-folk stars or night-life revellers or just randomly selected people, participating in reality shows, and not the activists, who aim to promote a non-discriminative attitude towards LGBT people.

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