

COMMUNITY (SELF) ORGANIZING OF TRANSGENDER MOVEMENT IN WESTERN BALKANS REGION



Authors:

Lila Milikj, Lend Mustafa, Jovan Ulićević,
Aleksa Milanović, Vanja Cipurković, Livia Zotrija

**COMMUNITY (SELF)ORGANIZING OF TRANSGENDER MOVEMENT
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Asocijacija Spektra
Ulica Oktobarske revolucije 78
81000 Podgorica

Za izdavača:

Jovan Ulićević

Dizajn i grafička priprema za štampu:

studio liv

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Vecteezy



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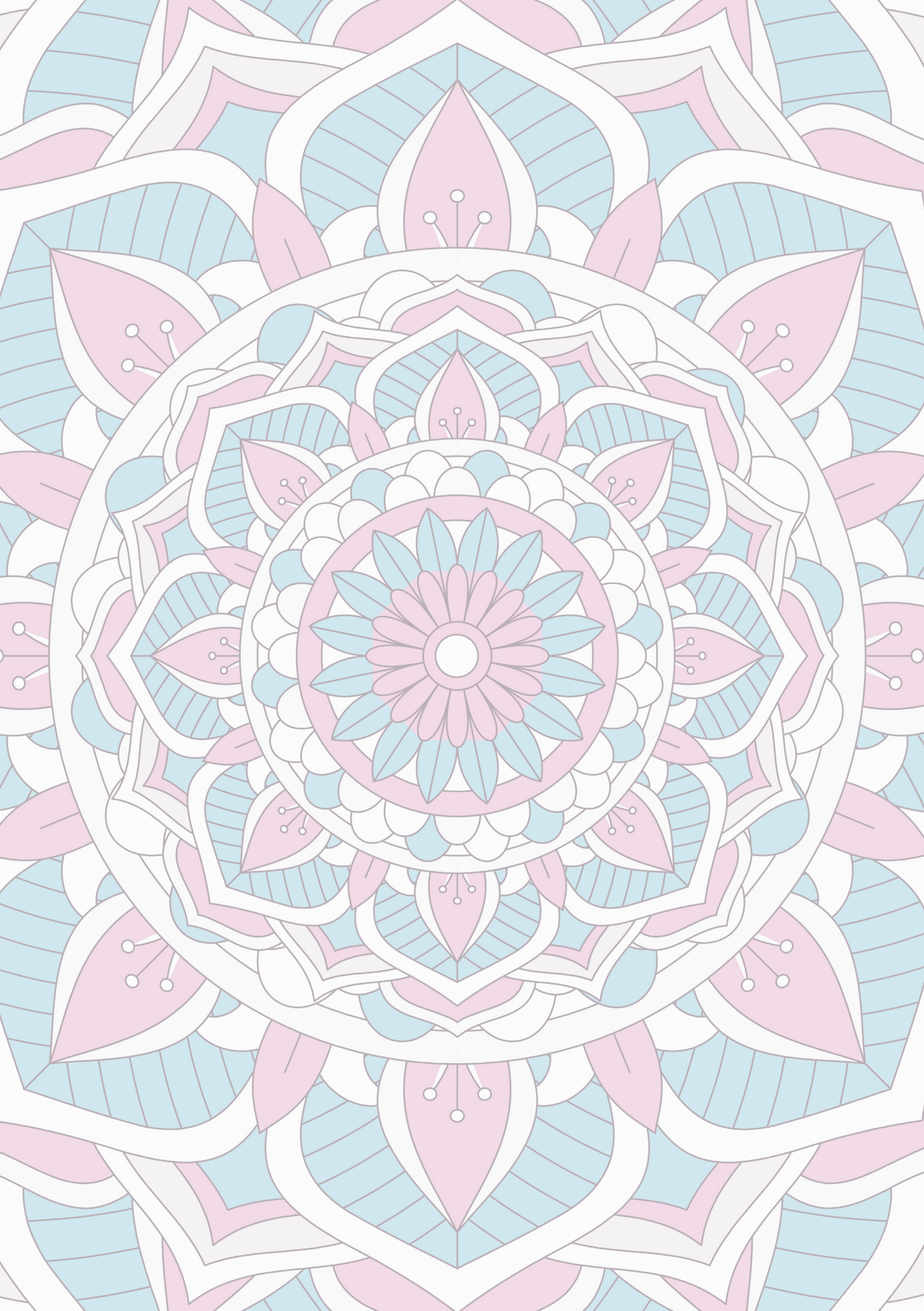
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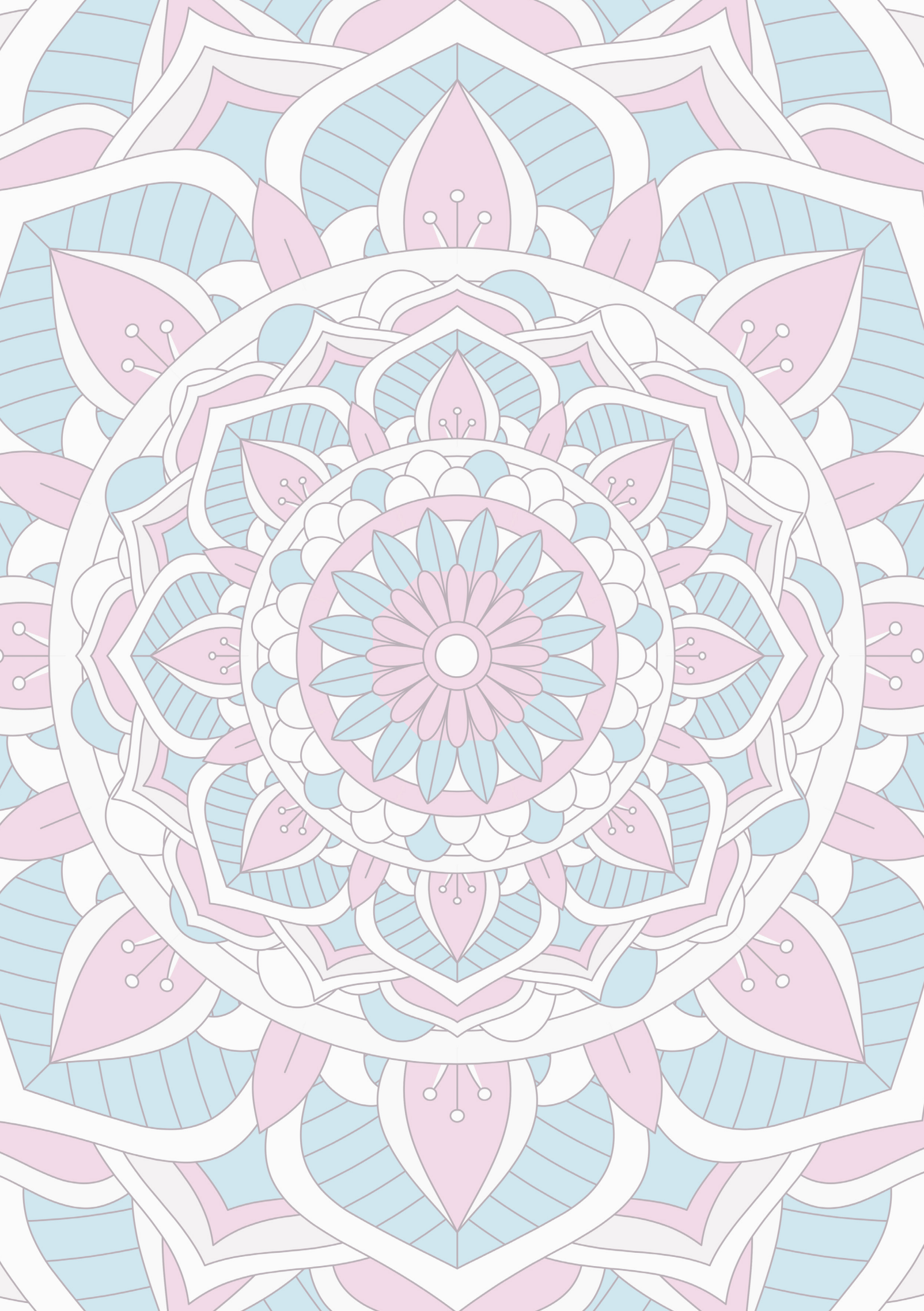
* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence





Editor's note

Content of this publication consists of six articles whose respective authors are trans activists from North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania. Each article represents a personal view of one's own activist work, as well as excerpts from both history and current situation concerning the domain of promoting and developing human rights of trans, gender variant and intersex people in a given local context. When speaking about the activist context the authors' positions are different, and so are the articles despite their similar underlying structures. Some texts contain prevailing detailed descriptions of trans activism in the given region, whereas in others these descriptions are rudimentary and in service to storytelling of the biggest obstacles that the local trans community is facing. Representation of respective authors' personal-professional ratio in speaking about the subject differs from one text to another. Thanks to that, the actual relevance of this publication isn't only reflected in dissemination and exchange of information about activist developments region-wise, but in the publication's fundamental potential to become a part of an archive of knowledge with history taken down, personal stories of people written, people who are a part of the trans movement and a part of the trans community they're writing about.



Lila Milikj

TRANS COMMUNITY (SELF)ORGANIZING IN NORTH MACEDONIA

My personal activistic position

I'm Lila Milikj, a transgender person and an activist who advocates for the rights of sex workers and transgender individuals in the North Macedonia. I got myself engaged in activism for the benefit of my own community. Given that it is highly problematic to be a sex worker or a transgender person in our society, I have made a decision to publically speak out about the problems and needs of communities I represent in the society I live in. In 2009, I started to become active in terms of protection and improvement of sex workers' rights in the North Macedonia by means of peer education in HOPS – Healthy Options Skopje¹ – which is directly involved with sex workers and persons who use drugs in their work. In 2013 I was given the opportunity to become a member of the First Sex Workers' Collective in the Balkans – STAR², where I am still actively engaged. In STAR I had the opportunity to work as a peer educator, and later on even as a journalist writing articles in the magazine *For Us By Us*³, which aimed at community members containing all the important information on sex work in the North Macedonia (articles were about laws related to sex work, usual everyday problems and needs, sexual and reproductive health, sex workers' rights, etc.). At a point I also became an operator of an informative telephone line within which I was to: provide information (to sex workers) pertaining to burning sex work issues, make healthcare services appointments, provide referrals to other relevant partner organizations, as well as info on pre and post HIV/AIDS and STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections) counselling. In 2016 I became a Program Assistant for the HIV Prevention Program⁴ for key populations financed by the Ministry of Health. In 2018 I joined the Initiative for Protection and Improvement of Transgender People's Rights in the North Macedonia TransFormA⁵, which succeeded in becoming highly visible and recognizable within a relatively short period of time. On my personal initiative and with investing significant efforts, we had the first Transgender People Visibility March in the North Macedonia in 2019, as well as several exhibitions

¹ Website of HOPS – Healthy Options Skopje is <https://hops.org.mk/>

² Website of First Sex Workers' Collective in the Balkans – STAR is <https://starsexwork.org/>

³ A magazine written by sex workers for sex workers.

⁴ A program sponsored by the Ministry of Health to tackle HIV/AIDS issues amongst key populations. Members included relevant civil society organizations and medical professionals.

⁵ Facebook page of TransFormA is <https://www.facebook.com/transformamk>

(professional photos of 6 trans people, who volunteered to be photographed, were taken and displayed in an exhibit hall opened for the public – surprisingly there was an overwhelmingly positive acceptance and interest by the visitors), interviews, etc. A total of 30 transgender individuals took part in the March, displaying no fear to visibly expose themselves publicly. The procession lasted for about an hour through the high streets in Skopje Centre and finished off at the doors of the Official Registry Service Department to convey a very clear message that we are here, we do exist and we are entitled to the same rights as all the other citizens, demanding dignity, acceptance and understanding.

If I sum all up, my activism entails striving for life without discrimination, stigma and judgement by the general population and institutions, by means of organizing various visibility campaigns for transgender individuals, interviews, etc. The support coming from my environment, i.e. my friends and family, is immense when it comes to my activism. I feel extremely fortunate that a sizable group of close friends has been fully supportive of my decision to start the transition process since day 1, providing me with much needed logistical and emotional support. The environment in which my family lives and where I grew up is not even aware that I am exactly engaged because I do not live with my family for a long time.s not even fully aware of that I am exactly engaged in as I haven't been living with my family for a longer period of time.

Beginnings of trans activism in North Macedonia

The beginnings of TransFormA date back to 2011. The initial meetings were in actual fact an opportunity for socialization and needs mapping. Back then, we were only known as a “trans group”, and the members utilizing their contacts in the civil organizations and supporters, began to create video materials, featuring personal stories and experiences, and manuals containing transgender identities' terminology. The group had its own developmental phase within the frames of the LGBTI Center for Support⁶, becoming a trans support group. This is the point at which the contacts and training are initiated with psychologists, psychiatrists, recommended by our partner LGBT Center organization and personal contacts, as well as with members of medical teams and activists groups from Belgrade. The contacts established with these individuals for the most part are being maintained to date.

After 2014, this group operated without an established location and it is not to this date yet officially registered at the Registry Office as an independent NGO, but rather it operates as an informal organization supported by various civil society organizations. However, there was a continuing cooperation with the Coalition Margins⁷ when it came to various analyses, research and other materials of value. An informal network of activist-oriented individuals was set in place. In addition, a group of people was mobilized including medical professionals of different specialities, which later on established an informal team, to which trans people can be referred in order to obtain healthcare services free of judgement and discrimination. For the time being this group of medical professionals operates only on the territory of the City of Skopje.

The cooperation with Coalition Margins is further expanded and as a result TransFormA was awarded its first project by the Global Fund via the Eurasian Coalition for

⁶ Website of LGBTI Center for Support is <http://lgbti.mk/>

⁷ Website of Coalition Margins is <http://coalition.org.mk/>

Male Health⁸. A number of training sessions for communication skills were conducted, as well as advocacy trainings in cooperation with the LGBTI Support Center. By the end of 2018, the second project began, yet again supported by the Coalition Margins. There we had the continuity in the training sessions for advocacy; workshops on creative activism, working groups were established, as well as an advocacy team in cooperation with members from other organizations-allies. In 2019, we were awarded two more projects. We were awarded the first project by the Open Society Foundation⁹ as a support for the Visibility March and training sessions for sensitization of medical professionals. The second project was funded by the Government of the North Macedonia in an attempt to aid individuals who were severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis, providing food and sanitation packages as an emergency response along with engaging social workers to address the immediate needs of these individuals.

The LGBTI organizations, ever since their official establishment back in 2004, are mainly focused on issues related to LG individuals. In the last ten years, issues have been raised in relation to the problems that gays and lesbians are faced with, however not about the problems of trans people.

When it comes to social welfare institutions and their attitude towards the problems of transgender and intersex people, our experience shows that, unfortunately, we can always expect discrimination, mockery, sarcastic questions and shaming in packed waiting rooms. Trans community is faced with discrimination on an everyday basis while renting apartments, seeking employment, waiting for service in the bank or in the post office, at the university – almost no access to goods and services, and most certainly no protection whatsoever.¹⁰

The media are always quick to publish sensationalist headlines when it comes to transgender individuals in the North Macedonia, which is the reason why TransFormA decided to translate the Guide for Journalists published by TGEU – Transgender Europe¹¹. The purpose of the Guide is to serve as a resource to journalists who would like to write about trans people issues in a clear and comprehensible manner. Unfortunately, the language used to refer to these matters may frequently appear as complicated and rather difficult to understand. This forces journalists to resort to simplifications, sensationalist arguments and stereotypes, by which trans people are dehumanized. Throughout the years, the articles and news in the media about trans people are focused on the medical details regarding the transition and surgical interventions. Even though some media outlets have begun to make positive changes, i.e. some journalists and media outlets abide by the standards put forward in the Guide and do tend to use more respectful tone towards trans people, this is still not the norm and is far away from becoming a commonplace standard, which yet needs to be overcome.

The attitude of the general population towards trans issues is rather divided. One part of the population supports and understands the problems and needs of the trans community, whereas a sizable portion of the general population remains judgmental, stigmatizing and discriminatory. This is also largely supplemented by hate speech, which is rather visible on social media comment threads by numerous influential individuals in their private accounts.

⁸ Website of ECOM is <https://ecom.ngo/en/>

⁹ Website of Open Society Foundations is <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>

¹⁰ These conclusions arise from my own personal experience, as well as the experiences of other people that I know.

¹¹ <https://bit.ly/3ogqHRo>



Overview of the current situation regarding trans activism

As we already said, in the North Macedonia there is an Initiative for Protection and Improvement of Transgender People's Rights – TransFormA which is directly involved in solving the problems and meeting the needs of transgender people. The organization has a self-support group which has proven helpful to many, and there is another group that works on creating a text of the law that if passed by the parliament would result in legal recognition of gender. Furthermore, we are currently working on a regulation of the medical recognition of gender which is to make all medical interventions trans people need easily accessible and affordable. We have also engaged a psychologist and a social worker readily available, and free of charge legal support provided in assistance with our previously mentioned partner organizations. The institutions have mainly retained the same attitude in the last several years, so there is no major shift in that respect, even though there has been some effort invested in terms of sensitization, the likes of which include training sessions with healthcare and social workers regarding the needs and problems of transgender community in the North Macedonia. When it comes to the media, we could say that there has been a slight positive change in the reporting, however, a lot more efforts must be made in order to conclude that the articles and content in the media are non-discriminatory and favorable for transgender people. As I have previously mentioned, the general population remains divided in terms of transgender issues. There is high prevalence of hate speech aimed at transgender people. Our highest priority at the moment is creating and passing of the Law on Legal Gender Recognition initiated by TransFormA and supported by Coalition Margins as it make transgender persons entitled to all civil rights as every other citizen in the North Macedonia already has.

The most important and the greatest problem that transgender people in the North Macedonia is in fact lack of legal regulations for gender recognition, which is of vital importance for our community. Despite having the very positive ruling by the European Human Rights Court¹² in Strasbourg and the initiative for drafting this particular legal text, the Registry Department in the North Macedonia hasn't done anything in terms of supporting such an endeavor. Currently there are working groups within the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health comprised by trans community representatives, lawyers and law professionals that are working on problems' solutions and passing legislature that is going to be beneficial for the transgender community.

Conclusion and future plans announcement

The activism for human rights of the trans community in the North Macedonia started back in 2009, having, at least at that point, an organized shape and form, within the structures of different civil society organizations that advocated for marginalized communities. The official and socially recognized transgender movement happened in 2019 when the Initiative for Protection and Improvement of Transgender People's Rights in the North Macedonia TransFormA, successfully organized the first Transgender People Visibility March (along with several exhibitions, interviews, etc.), which greatly contributed to transgender people's visibility.

The LGBTI organizations are mainly focused on issues related to gays and lesbians, overlooking the specific needs of transgender people and this was one of the reasons why trans community made an effort to create their own movement. Furthermore,

¹² Lawsuit filed by an individual X (transgender male) which was brought to its completion on 19th of January 2019.

institutions display even a lesser regard for trans people, subjecting them to extensive discrimination, stigma, mockery, sarcastic questions and shaming in packed waiting rooms which was one more reason for trans activism to grow. The media are largely focused on resorting to simplifications, sensationalist arguments and stereotypes thus dehumanizing the trans community. Throughout the years, the articles and news in the media about trans people were focused on the medical details regarding the transition and surgical interventions. The attitude of the general population towards trans issues is rather divided. A minority seems to support and understand the problems and needs of transgender people, whereas the vast majority of the general population remains a judgmental, stigmatizing and discriminatory. This is also largely supplemented by hate speech so we as a community certainly can say that we do not have media as allies.

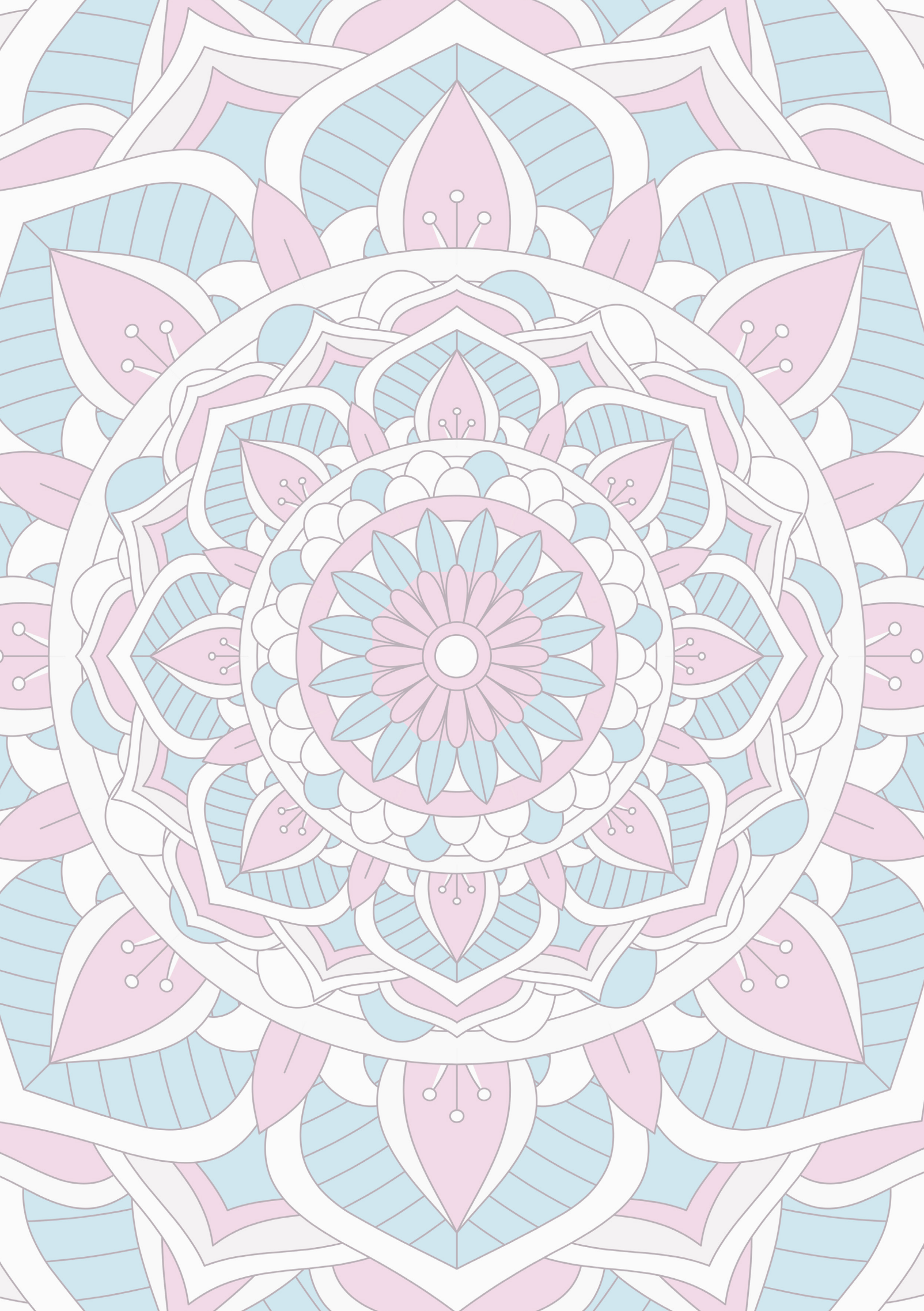
The most important and the greatest problem that transgender people face in the North Macedonia is the lack of legal regulation for gender recognition, which is of vital importance for this community, i.e. for them to be able to obtain proper documentation which is aligned with their gender identity and finally be entitled to all human rights as the other citizens. There have always been different opinions and attitudes within the community in terms of prioritizing what issue is the most urgent to tackle, but we are focused on solving this particular major problem we have (legal gender recognition) – in that respect we all think in the same direction and act unanimously.

Steps that need to be taken in order to improve transgender people's social standing and meet the needs for the benefit of transgender people's healthcare and social welfare include several crucial steps for which we think are highly feasible to be implemented in the next 5-year time span. These are:

- Designing transgender specific healthcare services;
- Raising general population's awareness regarding transgender issues;
- Legal gender recognition;
- High degree of visibility;
- Campaigning to alleviate stigma and discrimination;
- Gaining political support, which could later transfer into institutional support.

Despite all trials and sufferings that our highly stigmatized community has gone through, a shining beacon of hope is the Court ruling by the European Court for Human Rights in favor of Person X (transgender man), by which the North Macedonia is obliged to provide all legal documentation for this individual aligned with their gender identity. Upon taking this decision into account, the Ministry of Justice has finally opened their eyes and realized that the existing policies related to gender identity are obsolete, impractical and worst of all discriminatory. For this reason a process has been initiated to create a law that if passed by the Parliament would offer a true possibility for trans individuals for a dignified life.





Lend Mustafa

TRANS COMMUNITY (SELF)ORGANIZING IN KOSOVO

My personal position as a LGBTI+ activist

My name is Lend Mustafa, a 24-year-old activist from Kosovo. Being a transgender man has significantly impacted my life, thus pushing me to actively participate and engage in social society and seek equal rights and opportunities for everyone, particularly for the LGBTI+ people. During my adolescence years, I have faced numerous struggles in regard to my identity. Living in one of the most homophobic & transphobic societies in the Balkans - that does not promote nor provide much information for the LGBTI+ people - has made it harder for me to discover and accept myself for who I really am. Only when I was fourteen (14) did I start being more exposed to the LGBTI+ culture and meeting members of this community online. As I did not know any transgender or LGB person in real life at this age, to whom I could talk and exchange experiences, I began watching educational and inspirational videos on the internet. The courageous and fearless transgender people from around the world, especially from the United States, I got to witness in such videos sharing their journey, have motivated me to finally take the first step into exploring my gender identity and sexual orientation, free of judgment. This is how I started acquiring more knowledge about the LGBTI+ community. This self-education was quite empowering – shaping the way I see myself and the way I think and perceive things. My social life quickly turned around for the better once I came out to my friends and family and began involving myself in NGOs as a volunteer at the age of sixteen (16). Approximately after two (2) years, I was employed in QESh – Centre for Social Emancipation. QESh was a non-governmental organization that worked on promoting and protecting LGBTI+ rights. The respective organization was closed in late 2016 due to problems with donors and poor managing strategies which also lead to funding issues.

In May 2016, when I was a nineteen (19) year old, media coverage for the LGBTI+ community was very scarce and the visibility that we have today was almost non-existent. Having had a craving for our existence to be recognised and respected, I decided to come out publicly as a transgender man through a documentary for the very first time in Kosovar media. The documentary was directed by Leonard Kerquki – Editor-Chief of Gazeta Express in Kosovo who currently works in T7 Pressing – and I was interviewed by Artan Haraqija. The documentary was published in the YouTube channel of Gazeta Express and screened in Kohavision Television in the documentary program called

“Zona Express”. The creators of the documentary were very collaborative with the organization I am currently working in – CEL Kosova – so the approach towards the protagonists was respectful and correct, and the journalist was very well informed on LGBTI+ issues which made it even easier. The title of the documentary is “Mallkimi LGBT” which is translated as “The LGBT curse”. The title was criticized by the civil society for stigmatizing the community by calling it a “curse”, but the creators explained its meaning by saying “it is an ironic title”. However, the documentary got a lot of attention from different kinds of people around Kosovo. It got over 70.000 views on the YouTube channel and thousands of people watched it when it was screened on TV. My coming out was one of the most discussed topics throughout the whole month and I was receiving hundreds of messages. Some people texted me to congratulate me for the bravery to come out in a society like Kosovar, while some of the messages were death threats from strangers. It was a weird feeling as I didn’t know if it was safe for me to go out anymore, but being determined to push the society forward, I kept on living my life as always. People in the streets watched and talked, sometimes cursed at me out loud, but I never got physically attacked.

After that I became an employee of CEL Kosovo – Centre for Equality and Liberty¹ – where I was engaged in different projects, the main focus of which was empowering LGBTI+ people in Kosovo. The project I was working on was focused on educating the LGBTI+ community, mentoring them through their engagement in activism and community building. It has been a very fulfilling project and it trained my mind to continue working on community-strengthening outside of projects’ frameworks.

I believe that the principal goal of doing activism is unity, as cliché as it sounds. I believe that we, as marginalized people, should rely on one another for greater strength in our fight of continuously seeking our rights. There are few LGBTI+ activists in Kosovo and even fewer activists solely focused on trans rights, given the fact that trans people are one of the most discriminated against within the LGBTI+ community. We are few in number doing a lot for every person that identifies as LGBTI+.

Being amongst the forefront faces of the community and being professionally involved with social LGBTI+ issues, problems and challenges, I do my best to contribute to our institutions’ advancing education system and raising awareness among the general population. The previous project I was working on was focused on advancing the position of LGBTI+ people in society and it was mainly focused on training LGBTI+ people on advocacy and lobbying, training students of psychology, journalism and other social sciences, as well as training police officers, prosecutors and judges. This project also provided free psychological counselling for LGBTI+ people since it is very challenging to afford a psychologist who is well informed on LGBTI+ issues. Moreover, there was a community lawyer assigned to assist in reported cases or make sure community members are advised on their rights. Currently, I’m working on another project that is focused on awareness-raising and advancing activists who are also artists and are willing to use their talent to promote equal rights. Whereas, when I am at home, I work on community building and constantly connect with LGBTI+ people around Kosovo providing pieces of advice, meeting and finding solutions such as: finding jobs, finding temporary shelter in emergency cases, etc.

As an outspoken activist, I enjoy a respectful treatment by everyone in my circle. Having had the privilege to choose who stays in my daily life since the moment I came out and no longer needed validation, I am surrounded by other ambitious people who believe in me and my goal as an activist, and for that I am grateful.

¹ Website of CEL Kosovo is <https://cel-ks.org/>

Beginnings of trans activism and its development in Kosovo

The Trans Movement has commenced gradually in Kosovo. Following the Serbia-Kosovo war that started in 1998 and lasted until June 1999, our society has been rebuilding and recovering from the war ever since. The concept of gender identity, metaphorically saying, did not exist among the Kosovar population. Being expressive and outspoken as a transgender person at that time was outrageous. However, Qerkica, a well-known transwoman in our community and one of the oldest ones, has been fearless her whole life. Her existence has been revolutionary for many of us, although only a few understood her identity. Nowadays, she lives as a Roma transwoman in Fushe Kosova, a place unfortunately known as very transphobic, xenophobic and racist.

As far as I am concerned, based on what I was told by older community members, in the 2000's many LGBTI+ people would gather in underground spaces, drop-in centres or even private apartments with the intention of creating a safe space to express their sexual orientation and connecting with each other. Such gatherings were famous to happen in Prishtina, but in some smaller cities, people would gather in private places. It is said that there was another drop-in centre somewhere in Prizren, but it had to be shut down due to the homophobic environment. However, even in such surroundings, due to lack of information, even the LGB community members themselves (mainly gays and lesbians) were judgmental towards and not accepting of transgender people in such gatherings and thus shutting down trans individuals' attempts of expressing gender identity. By following the private gatherings organized by the community itself, the main events specifically aiming at the transgender community, in chronological order, will be listed in the text below.

Being outspoken as a trans person was out of option until 2012 when the sexual education magazine was launched and it included the LGBTI+ community in it. The launching of the KOSOVO 2.0² magazine named "Kosovo 2.0 talks sex" was attacked by groups of hooligans, as well as Muslim people, thinking that sex will be performed by LGBTI+ people in public. Life has been challenging for trans people due to stigmatization and sexualization, especially for trans women. Following such attacks, fear has appeared the whole LGBTI+ movement because of the media attention and incorrect coverage regarding this topic.

Back in 2012-2013, when I was a volunteer in QESh, I initiated activities with the aim of reaching out to more transgender people in Kosovo. These activities were not a part of any particular project of the organization, but they were important for us to reach out to transgender people and build a community - although they did not lead to any movements.

In 2014, Edona James – a Kosovar transgender woman living abroad – came out publicly in one of Kosovo's national televisions. Edona James' public coming out caused outrage among the general public and media as the Kosovar society was exposed to such a phenomenon for the first time. The interview with Edona James was screened in the Klan Kosova TV channel and in their official YouTube channel which got around 500.000 views because of the stigmatizing approach. As the interviewer, Vlorijan Halili, was a personal acquaintance of mine, I knew he was more informed than it appeared on TV. Later on, he admitted to the community that the intention of such an approach was to cause an outrageous reaction and get more views. The content in the interview, the questions and the promo constantly misgendered the transwoman and were using expressions like "HE crossed the rainbow" which is a myth in our culture implying that if you cross the rainbow, you switch gender.

² Kosovo 2.0 is an independent media organization which publishes print and online magazines.



In 2015, the Anti-Discrimination Law in Kosovo³ included gender identity and recognized transgender people with or without surgical intervention as well as provided safety for the later. Constitution of Kosovo⁴ guarantees the protection of human rights and equality against discrimination, as set out in Article 24 (1), which states that all people are equal before the law, and all people enjoy the right to equal legal protection, without discrimination, and moreover bans discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, as well as other personal characteristics, but in practice these guarantees are not appropriately implemented. People from the LGBTI+ community remain hidden from other components of society, as the institutions does not offer necessary support. Despite all the rights guaranteed by the Kosovo Law and the Constitution, relevant institutions continue to be discriminatory sometimes and do not prioritize LGBTI+ rights. The laws that were amended in 2015, namely the Anti-Discrimination Law, also provide high order guarantees of equality as well as ban discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender and gender identity, among others. Also, the Anti-Discrimination Law offers protection from discrimination in the public and private sectors respectively, offering support in many fields. On the contrary to equality principles that are set out in the Constitution, the Family Law limits acts of engagement and marriage, defining them as acts that involve only two persons of different genders, and as such it makes it illegal for people of the same sex to marry each other. On the other hand, the Law for Civil Status⁵ lacks bylaws provisions for the process of gender reassignment.

At the beginning of 2018, activist and transgender man Blert Morina challenged the law by submitting the request to change his name on his birth certificate, ID card and passport from 'Blerta' to 'Blert' and sex marker f-rom F (Female) to M (Male) at the Office of Civil Registry in his hometown of Gjakova. As the basis for formally changing Blert's name and sex in official identity documents, his application referred to the Administrative Instruction on the Conditions and Procedures for Personal Name Change and Correction, specifically the provision that states: 'Personal name hinders person's integration into society'. However, the official decision, quoting the recommendation of the Agency for Civil Registry's Commission, states that the application didn't meet the conditions of the Administrative Instruction. "The Commission decided that the offered reasoning from the applicant that filed the request doesn't stand ... as 'Blerta' doesn't hinder the person's integration into society."⁶ He was then informed by the Directorate for General Administrative Work in Gjakova's Office of Civil Registry that his request has been denied. The decision was issued following a negative recommendation by a Commission of the Agency for Civil Registry, a body within the Ministry of Internal Affairs that is tasked with making recommendations related to requests. On August 22nd Centre for Equality and Liberty (CEL) of Kosovo and Centre for Social Group Development (CSGD) announced the historical decision taken by the Kosovo Court of Appeals on the 2nd of August, 2019 which officially approved trans persons' request to change their name and gender marker in the Central Civil Status Register and Civil Status Principal Register.⁷ After that, the Basic Court in Pristina made a landmark decision in December 2019, affirming the right to change both name and sex marker in personal documents to Blert Morina from Kosovo.⁸

³ <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=10924>

⁴ <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=3702>

⁵ Civil Registration, <https://www.rks-gov.net/EN/f308/documents/civil-registration>.

⁶ Dafina Halili, "Landmark decision for transgender rights", *Kosovo 2.0*, 2020, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/landmark-decision-for-transgender-rights/>.

⁷ <https://www.lgbti-era.org/news/kosovo-court-appeal-takes-historic-decision-legal-gender-recognition>

⁸ <https://www.lgbti-era.org/news/landmark-decision-transgender-rights-kosovo>

The LGBTI+ movement in Kosovo distinguishes from those around the world and even in the Balkans. One factor that might influence the movement to be different can be the small number of activists and community members. We are a small community with only two LGBTI+ NGOs. There are other NGOs in Kosovo like Youth Initiative for human Rights KS⁹, Kosovar Centre for Gender Studies¹⁰, Civil Rights Defenders¹¹ that, despite not working directly with LGBTI+ people, show support and are willing to cooperate or join the movement when it is deemed necessary. There are also feminist activists who are quite educated with regard to the LGBTI+ movement, i.e. issues and terminology. However, this applies only to activists who are constantly active and living in more emancipated cities such as Pristina and Gjilan. It is very common for so-called feminist activists to be discriminatory towards transgender people, particularly for the fact that they exclude transgender women when it comes to women's rights. By definition, feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It's about respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to use full scope of their rights. People who discriminate and exclude trans women should not fight in the name of feminism. An example of transgender women being excluded and not recognized as real women is the challenge encountered in finding shelter and other services provided for cis women in institutions. Only one transgender woman managed to be accepted in a shelter for homeless and abused women. The person reached out to our organization – CEL Kosovo – asking for shelter and then was assisted with our staff to a women's shelter in the persons' hometown, Gjakova where she was first refused but then after an intervention and pressure from one employee of the shelter the transwoman was given an approval. However, she was mistreated by cis women living there as they did not see/treat her as a real woman, leaving her with no choice but to leave as it was no longer a safe space for her. Despite the negative approach of some feminists towards trans women and lack of education on gender(s), there are organizations who are cooperative with LGBTI+ organizations on such matters. Kosovo Women's Network is a network of feminist organizations empowering them on gender equality. Activists of the Network are very educated on LGBTI+ issues and especially transgender people, which makes us hopeful for a more inclusive feminist movement in the future. Moreover, Kosovar Centre for Gender Studies is an NGO working on Gender Studies with the aim to promote gender equality to the general population and is focused on educating our society on transgender issues, terminology and other information in a social context.

Despite social institutions' efforts to be politically correct are quite visible, they are hesitant in initiating activities, events or programmes beneficial to transgender people. Throughout the recent years, it was the NGOs and activists who pushed the institutions to become more vocal regarding the LGBTI+ community and undertake concrete steps of showing their support by participating in public activities such as the Pride March and IDAHOBIT.

Regardless of the inactivity shown in the past by the institutional level, this year, the Municipality of Pristina is implementing two projects that will immensely contribute to the wellbeing of the LGBTI+ people in Kosovo, especially the transgender people as they represent the most vulnerable group within the LGBTI+ community. The first project includes the renovation of a public abandoned space that will become a drop-in centre which is very necessary since there are not many public places that the LGBTI+

⁹ Website of Youth Initiative for human Rights KS: <https://yihr-ks.org/>

¹⁰ Website of Kosovar Center for Gender Studies: <http://kgscenter.net/>

¹¹ Website of Civil Rights Defenders: <https://crd.org/kosovo-en/>



community can visit freely. There are only 3 bars who are LGBTI+ friendly which is also not a guarantee that one won't experience homophobia or transphobia by other people present. The second project includes the allocation of a large amount of money to build a shelter for LGBTI+ people. A shelter dedicated for LGBTI+ people in Kosovo is the most needed project that has been implemented since the beginning of the movement. There are many LGBTI+ kids who are being mistreated, physically and psychologically abused by their families and have to tolerate such traumatic experiences because of not having another place to live in, pocket money and basic needs met such as food and clothing. This shelter will provide that kind of support for every LGBTI+ person living in Kosovo although the shelter will be located in the municipality of Pristina. As it was previously said, these two projects will drastically change the wellbeing of the LGBTI+ community for the better due to the fact that these two establishments will provide a range of services. More specifically, in the drop-in centre, the community members will be able to: a) receive free psychological aid; b) receive free HIV testing; c) pursue vocational training; d) participate in various training sessions and workshops; e) perform daily activities; f) organize artistic and cultural events, etc. Whereas, in the shelter, all the mistreated, abused and disowned LGBTI+ people will be provided with a safe space to live in and participate in special programmes to get prepared for independent living.

Another issue that has negative influence on the LGBTI+ community is the incorrect reporting of Kosovar media towards subjects of importance to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer persons in our society. The reporting is incorrect and disrespectful especially for the transgender community as the reporters and journalists are poorly educated on the transgender community and therefore misgender trans people by not using correct pronouns and confuse gender identity with sexual orientation. In some cases, the narrative is problematic and the whole story is consequently interpreted in a highly disrespectful context. Having the need for the transgender people to be decently represented, CEL has made numerous attempts for many years to change the way the media reports news and stories about transgender people and issues. By means of training sessions and constant monitoring and addressing hate speech or inaccurate ways of reporting, we have managed to make a difference in the way media reports about such matters. As a result, media such as RTK¹², KTV¹³, RTV21¹⁴, Klan Kosova¹⁵ and Dukagjini¹⁶ now are mostly correct or willing to correct or even remove stories, news and articles that contain hate speech or are offensive, degrading and discriminatory towards transgender people. Given the fact that media have had a relatively big impact and that the most outspoken activists are in fact transgender people, the general public has been quite exposed to different pieces of information about transgender community and at least are aware that such community exists among the Kosovar society and, one way or another, possesses basic knowledge of what are the differences between a cis and a transgender person. Nonetheless, the Kosovar society's approach towards transgender people remains transphobic as they refuse to accept and treat transgender people humanly. Considering that in Kosovo most of the society respect and cherish patriarchal values, there is a huge difference in how society treats trans men and trans women. To an extent, trans men are able to enjoy some of the privileges that come along with the patriarchal mindset, whereas this same mindset

¹² Website of RTK: <https://www.rtklive.com/en/>

¹³ Website of Kohavision: <https://www.kohavision.tv/>

¹⁴ Website of RTV21: <https://rtv21.tv/>

¹⁵ Website of Klan Kosova: <https://klankosova.tv/>

¹⁶ Website of Radio Dukagjini: <http://www.dukagjini.com/>

puts even more pressure and discrimination to trans women as it is more difficult to accept the idea of a socially-considered male's body to express femininity.

In recent years, namely a period of 3-4 years, the transgender community has received support mainly from public figures, more specifically from journalists, politicians and pop artists. As transgender activists are very outspoken for almost any movement and social issue, many important figures have approached the community by comprehending the situation the community is in and hence promoting transgender rights using their platforms. The difference between people of influence and random citizens is that a large number of citizens are provided with no education on such matters in schools, universities or by any other institution. Since the majority of population in Kosovo belongs to Islam religion, under the influence of some religious leaders many members of the Muslim population in our society promote homophobia and transphobia in the name of religion and sometimes even call for attacks publicly. Such behaviour is a consequence of lack of education on sexual orientation and gender identity which is not provided to anyone and most of school teachers also belong to the Muslim community and often times teach students what is aligned and allowed by Qur'an. Ex: they do not teach sexual education as it is considered a sin to talk about such matters. As a conclusion, it is noticeable that different categories of people have a different approach towards us as a community because of their background, education and region they come from. The region where Kosovars grow up is very important, as in Pristina the youth is way more advanced and educated on such matters. Since in Pristina you can see many LGBTI+ people in the streets being open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, it has made the situation more neutral and accepting for other citizens and their reaction is different compared to the reaction of citizens of different regions.

Overview of the current situation regarding trans activism

Kosovo has no trans specific organizations or informal groups advocating solely for transgender rights. Thus, other nongovernmental organizations working on human rights, specifically LGBTI+ rights, set priorities in respect to issues important to the transgender community and their rights. In recent times, LGBTI+ organizations are focusing on easing HRT – Hormone Replacement Therapy – procedures for transgender people living in Kosovo by training professional endocrinologists on such procedures. Our organization will fund and organize training sessions on masculinising and feminizing procedures for Kosovar endocrinologists. Such medical services are not provided in any hospital in Kosovo and professionals have shown no interest in monitoring people in transition. Similarly, the same applies to intersex people when born in Kosovo.¹⁷ Due to lack of professional background and negligence, surgeons and other relevant doctors convince parents to sign their child's surgery. Such surgeries are performed underhand, automatically violating the infants right of choice. Organizations working towards human rights in general, and specifically LGBTI+ NGO's, find it almost impossible to advocate and research regarding such cases since the phenomenon itself is stigmatized by the scientists and doctors so every procedure is done secretly and most of intersex people aren't informed about their situation until one experiences health issues related to being intersex.

¹⁷ Ardit Kika, "Intersex is not exactly 'breaking news'", *Kosovo 2.0*, 2019, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/intersex-is-not-exactly-breaking-news/>; Nita Gojani, "What does the 'I' in lgbti stand for?", *Kosovo 2.0*, 2017. <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/what-does-the-i-in-lgbti-stand-for/>



It is very challenging for Kosovar civil movements to include transgender people. This applies specifically to feminist movements due to the fact that feminist movements are intended to be as inclusive as possible and not discriminate trans women because of any possible traditional perception of a woman. There is a wide range of feminist activists. One category includes so-called feminist activists who refuse to treat trans women as real women, causing harm to the whole movement and repeating actions of the oppressor. There is the other category as well, which is the complete opposite of the abovementioned category. Well-informed and inclusive feminist activists who have accurate comprehension of what the concept of women in social terms really means.

Discrimination against trans women within the feminist movements is a real issue. This means that trans women are discriminated against even by the movements that are designed for the protection of women. However, there are still movements and NGOs that deny such an approach towards trans women, such as Kosovar Centre for Gender Studies¹⁸, Youth Initiative for Human Rights¹⁹, Kosovo Women's Network²⁰, Shtatëmbëdhjetë²¹, K2.0²², Termokiss²³, Kosovar Civil Society Foundation²⁴, QIPS²⁵, etc. In addition, the two LGBTI+ NGOs, namely CEL and CSGD, continue to put efforts into making improvements in regard to how trans women should be perceived but this still stands as a challenge on its own. On the bright side, more transgender people are speaking out publicly addressing the issue mentioned above. This is creating a social debate and thus raising awareness about issues encountered by the transgender community. Meanwhile, NGO's are working on raising awareness through campaigns and projects to ease the transitioning processes in Kosovo.

Precisely, transgender people's issues begin in their own homes where transphobia and abandonment are faced very often. The discrimination follows in public institutions, especially schools, but also workplaces. The Kosovar society, like many other societies in the Balkans, is not designed for a healthy living for transgender people. Thus, our community is not granted with necessary medical services, equal rights and equal opportunities to live properly and safely. To provide access to such crucial necessities, our organization CEL – Centre for Equality and Liberty, is currently working on creating a safe space/shelter for transgender people (including LGBTQ+) where the ones who are willing to transition will be informed about the procedures and will be directed to the trained endocrinologists to monitor their process. This will ease the lives of transgender people, considering that many of them hesitate to start transitioning and coming out all due to the transphobic environment. Some of the projects are being implemented in cooperation with other relevant organisations. Although, sometimes opinions or strategies can crash, there is always the will to find a common language and soothe the situation. For us, it is crucial to have good relations as long as the decisions taken do not harm the movement.

¹⁸ Website of Kosovar Centre for Gender Studies: <http://kgscenter.net/>

¹⁹ Website of Youth Initiative for Human Rights: <https://yibr-ks.org/>

²⁰ Website of Kosovo Women's Network: <https://womensnetwork.org/>

²¹ Website of Shtatëmbëdhjetë: <https://www.foundation17.org/>

²² Website of Kosovo 2.0: <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/>

²³ Website of Termokiss: <https://www.facebook.com/Termokiss/>

²⁴ Website of Kosovar Civil Society Foundation: <https://www.kcsfoundation.org/>

²⁵ Website of QIPS: <http://qips-ks.org/>

Conclusion

Overall, the movement has been developing slowly due to circumstances after war, as such topics were always outrageous. The society was more focused on recovering financially and emotionally from the traumas experienced during the war which put LGBTI+ people and issues into shadow. During the early 2000s, only few people were expressive and the movement was happening 'underground'.

Moving forward, slowly and safely, the LGBTI+ movement has evolved and been empowered throughout the years. The collaboration with various organizations of different social fields has been a great push to move forward and I am also very thankful for the continuous contribution of activists who started pushing forward LGBTI+ rights in Kosovo.

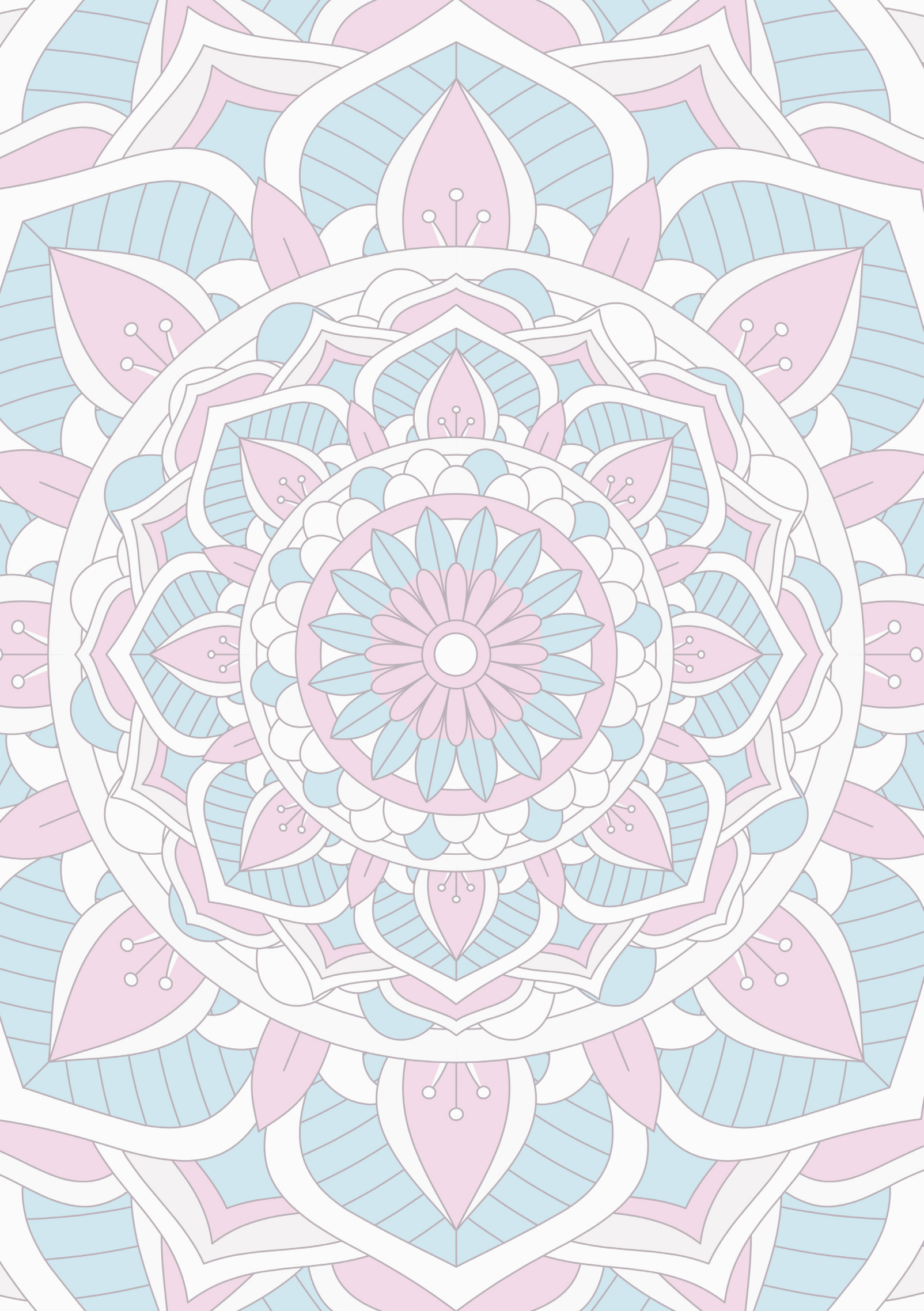
After the attack that happened in the event of Kosovo 2.0 when the magazine named "Talk about Sex" was launched, activists were exposed to the reality in Kosovo and allies together with activists were being vocal about such issues. Nowadays, such attacks don't happen anymore although Kosovar society still remains very homophobic and transphobic based on their reactions when we take space in public. To celebrate small victories and further address issues, we will continue to be visible through Pride Marches and demand equal opportunities for trans people living in Kosovo.

It is important to mention that without the support of NGO's from the region (Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and Albania), we wouldn't be cherishing this kind of freedom as trans men and women. As activists are being more vocal every day, we are aiming to unite and create a better place for every trans person.

While the laws in protection of trans people are not being implemented and respected by the general population, we will continue to educate the Kosovar society and advocate for trans rights.

We aim for a society that treats trans people equally and offers necessary services in order to live a healthy life.





Jovan Ulićević

TRANS COMMUNITY (SELF)ORGANIZING IN MONTENEGRO

Activism as a personal struggle

When I think about my identity, that is, about all those identities that make up my personality, the “activist” is one of the first that comes to my mind. This is especially interesting, considering that I did not want to engage in activism, but to stay in the profession I chose, to engage in science, biology, uninterested in social action. Or at least I thought so. Now from this position, things seem significantly different. Now I know that I greatly opposed activism, out of fear - of being visible and exposed, of the permanent life change, as well as the fact that being transgender will forever be my label from which I will not be able to escape. Today, I find strength in what was once my fear.

My activism started in 2012, along with the process of my coming out. After I decided it was time to do something about my life, it took me 7 days to disclose my gender identity to almost all people important to me. Soon, a desire to do something about the situation of the transgender community in Montenegro was born, which did not even exist as a community at the time. Amendments to the legal solutions made it possible, however only on paper, to cover the costs of the gender reassignment process by the Health Insurance Fund, and within the framework of NGO Juventas’ activities, I engaged, together with my colleague and friend Jelena Čolaković, to create the first initiative for legal gender recognition. These processes were also my first confrontation with obstacles in the system and the realization that the path to equality for trans people would be a “marathon hurdle race”¹, an equal to my personal struggle. At the end of 2012, at an evening coffee, Danijel Kalezić presented me with the idea behind the establishment of the LGBTIQ Association “Queer Montenegro” and asked me to be one of its founders. Although I hesitated due to overwhelming fear, I accepted, on the condition that I am not officially a founder on paper, thinking about consequences if someone had an insight into my name. The idea behind my engagement back then was to be there until another trans person is empowered to continue my work, while I keep on doing what I was educated for.²

¹ The term “marathon hurdles race” is exactly the term that Jelena Čolaković used to vividly show me what kind of path awaits me in Montenegro as a transgender man with the sentence: “Sun, this will be a marathon hurdles race, and not everyone will be able to see you off.”

² At that time, I was finishing my biology studies, that is, I was specializing in ecology.

However, my life went in a completely different direction. Soon, I started organizing educational workshops on transgender identities for the LGBTIQ community, after which I founded the first self-support group, which was, back then, comprised two persons, myself and another trans man. The group started to grow quickly, so by the end of 2015, it had 10 transgender people. We soon started talking about activism and in 2015 we created the first informal trans activist group “Transians”. The activists gathered carried out visibility actions, but also took over the logistics, preparation and meetings of the self-support group, which at the same time worked on strengthening the community, as well as strengthening its. At the time transgender people were rarely present in the media, and when they were, the representation held a pathologizing, normative and stigmatizing tone. Throughout the activities of this informal group, and then the work of the Association “Spectra”, the first trans organization in Montenegro founded in 2017, the narrative surrounding transgender people has changed significantly to more respectful and self-representative, reflecting diversity of identities and experiences within the community, although it did not completely erase the previous narrative, which was to be expected.

My public coming out took place in November 2016, marking the Transgender Day of Remembrance.³ This act was for me a step after which I felt there was no going back, and activism will take the center stage in my life. I wasn't wrong. However, I did not understand the extent to which my coming out actually represented coming out of my closest ones as well, so in addition to being personal, it was also a collective act of liberation and one of the steps towards strengthening not only my resilience, but also my family's empowerment and activism in their microcosm.

As trans activism developed itself in Montenegro, so did my understanding of activism. At the very beginning, a significant part of my work focused on strengthening and mobilizing the community. As a facilitator of a self-support group, I felt that only a strong community, which nurtures diversity, self-determination, and actively works to address internalized transphobia in a safe space, can be the agent of change that concerns it the most. Over time, I realized how demanding activism is, how consuming and how much it requires us to be always available, always willing to provide education, always open, smiling, vulnerable, yet strong, determined, strategists, in touch with ourselves and others, and most of all exemplary in care, both for ourselves and others. At the very least, a demanding task, which led to my burnout several times, as well as many friends' and comrades' weariness, but also to invaluable learning what activism is and what it can be.

Today, I separate activism and work in an NGO, although, of course, not completely. I learned not to romanticize volunteerism, but also to equate paid engagement with activism. Today, I believe in balance, and balance is both a skill and an art. I believe that there is no self-care without collective care, and that collective care is impossible without taking care of one's own wellbeing. Today, I am of the opinion that activism doesn't imply only direct action, nor its merely an implementation of activities, but also entails work from home, and emotional labor, which is often completely overlooked and marginalized. I am convinced that every trans person when out, and we do that (coming out) every day, all our lives, is an activist, and that the most important activism is the one we do in our environment, but also within ourselves, starting first from how we treat ourselves, to how we present ourselves to the world. For me, personal is political, and political is personal. For me, activism is not a job, but a life purpose and a belief that we

³ International Day of Remembrance for Victims of Transphobia has been celebrated on November 20, 1999. Since 2008, Transgender Europe (TGEU) has been monitoring the murders of transgender people around the world (TMM - Trans Murder Monitoring project). About the project available at the link: <https://tgeu.org/tmm/>

all have the power to influence our lives, as well as to shape the society which we want to be a part of.

The beginnings of trans activism in Montenegro: from invisibility to trans organization

The public discourse on transgender people in Montenegro began in August 2009, with the publication of a text in newspaper “Vijesti”⁴ about Marko Bojanić, a trans man from Podgorica, which is also the first story about an LGBTI person from Montenegro. This fact was not recognized when in 2011 Zdravko Cimbalević publicly came out as a gay man, claiming that he was “the first LGBT person to come out publicly,”. Insisting on this claim and its repetition of that narrative, completely marginalized the fact that the first publicly visible person from the community was a transgender person. Although Marko is not the first transgender person from Montenegro to go through the process of gender reassignment, his story was important for my very own understanding of my personal gender identity, but also for the visibility of transgender people in Montenegro,, and the fact that transgender people exist and it is possible to adapt the body to its own feeling of gender, but also to live (relatively) freely afterwards. Although the “friendly” tone is evident in the way Marko’s story is conveyed, sensationalism, pathologization, and normative representation of Marko as a “real man” whose transgender identity cannot be recognized in any way have contributed to further stigmatization of transgender people. The aforementioned article was soon followed by an article in which Dr. Sava Perović⁵ was interviewed, a doctor who performed gender reassignment surgeries in Belgrade and is one of the founders of this type of reconstructive surgery in the Balkans, as well as an article interviewing the Podgorica parish, Serbian Orthodox Church archpriest, Velibor Džomić⁶, who gave a statement that transgender people, after submitting “adequate medical documentation”, can use the services of the church, “from baptism to communion”. Marko’s story was the first and very significant story for the entire LGBTI community in Montenegro, both because it represented stepping out from the invisible, but also because of the inclusion of church with partially acceptable messages sent for the first time. From today’s perspective, the narrative of his story can be problematic, due to use of stigmatizing, normative and pathologizing terminology, as well as due to the fact it gave a platform to institutions that are partially or fully responsible for such a discourse. However, regardless of the mentioned above, Marko’s story should be remembered not only because of its visibility, but also because it signifies the beginnings of a representation that carried an empowering and self-determining spirit.

Pathologizing and normative narrative, accompanied the public appearance of Mira Bošković, the first transgender woman in Montenegro to announce her gender identity to the public at a press conference organized by the LGBT Forum Progress. Once again, Marko’s story was forgotten.⁷ Unfortunately, the story of Mira Bošković failed to create the momentum needed to promote the human rights and freedoms of the transgender and gender-diverse community in Montenegro.

⁴ “Man after four operations”, *Vijesti*, August 10, 2009, print edition.

⁵ “The disease must be treated - Professor Dr. Sava Perovic, the doctor who was the first in the ex-Yu area to perform sex reassignment surgery”, *Vijesti*, August 11, 2009, print edition

⁶ Novinar, “SPC: Darovi Crkve Hristove i za trans osobe”, *Novinar online*, 14.08.2009.

⁷ <https://lgbtprogres.me/novosti/u-crnoj-gori-javno-se-deklarisala-prva-transrodna-osoba/>



Legal reforms between 2011 and 2013, aiming to improve the legal framework for the protection of LGBTI people in Montenegro, included the introduction of a prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity within the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, as well as amendments to the Law on Health Insurance⁸, which will enable the coverage of 80% of the gender reassignment procedure costs by the Health Insurance Fund. Given the fact that this, as well as other legal solutions adopted in this particular period of time, was a result of a political will that was not human-right based, but motivated by achieving more positive points on the path to EU integration, trans persons had to wait 3 full years to use this right in practice.⁹ As the law itself stipulates that the law enforcement authority is obliged to create protocols needed for the implementation, the Ministry of Health created a working group to create protocols, which did not include all organizations dealing with LGBTI rights nor implied community representation itself. The Ministry didn't manage to create a protocol in the following 2 years of its work, which led to the conclusion that the process was obstructed, and that there was a lack of political will for the adequate implementation of the law. In relation to this, Queer Montenegro, which I was a part of, as well as Juventas, both set a priority to influence the creation of the protocol itself and enable the use of this particular right in practice. After 10 months of active advocacy, which included numerous announcements and anonymous interviews in domestic and regional media, submission of initiatives to the competent institutions and meetings with the Ministry of Health, a decision was made to create a protocol by the end of 2014. During this period, Queer Montenegro Juventas teams, managed to connect me primarily with a psychiatrist at the Center for Mental Health, who gave the first F.64 diagnosis¹⁰ within the Montenegrin health system. After I started my hormone therapy in Belgrade, I was connected with a council of urologists at the Clinical Center of Montenegro, which gave a recommendation to the Health Insurance Fund to approve the cost of gender reassignment surgery, which will be performed in early 2015 in Belgrade. The Rulebook on determining medical reasons for gender reassignment¹¹ was adopted in November 2014 by the Ministry of Health, after which it has been implemented to date in the case of 3 transgender persons, who expressed the need for a surgical process of gender reassignment and cost reimbursement by the Fund. In other cases, when people expressed the need solely for hormone therapy, a support system was created in cooperation with doctors of different specialities, which eventually improved health care for trans people in the Montenegrin health system.

This period was also characterized by numerous sensationalist announcements in the media that mostly dealt with the number of transgender people whose gender reassignment costs will be covered by the Fund, and some of the most prominent headlines read: "Three people are waiting for their sex change"¹², "A man from Montenegro

⁸ The amendments were adopted in March 2012.

⁹ Kalezić, Trans*, queer and intersex in Montenegro. *Proceedings: Trans, intersex, queer: review and new horizons*, Geten, Belgrade, 2016.

¹⁰ Diagnosis F.64. Transsexualism was established in 1993 within the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) within Group V, Chapter on Mental Disorders and Behavioral Disorders, in the subgroup Personality Disorders and Adult Behavioral Disorders (F60-69). The latest revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), officially confirmed on June 18, 2018, excluded gender identity issues from the chapter on mental disorders, and the diagnosis of gender incongruence is coded in the chapter on sexual health conditions.

¹¹ Rulebook on determining medical reasons for gender reassignment, "Official Gazette of Montenegro", no. 47 of 7 November 2014. Available online at: [https://mzdravlja.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=222988&r-Type=2&file=Pravilnik%20o%20utvr%C4%91ivanju%20medicinskih%20razloga%20za%20promenju%20half%20\(47-2014\).pdf](https://mzdravlja.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=222988&r-Type=2&file=Pravilnik%20o%20utvr%C4%91ivanju%20medicinskih%20razloga%20za%20promenju%20half%20(47-2014).pdf)

¹² Ana Komatina, „Tri osobe čekaju promjenu pola“, *Vijesti online*, 20.05.2015. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/180599/tri-osobe-cekaju-promjenu-pola>

becomes a woman at the expense of the state”¹³, “10,500 paid for a sex change of a man”¹⁴, “Three Montenegrin women want a sex change”¹⁵ along with many others in a similar manner. The texts provoked a heated discussion on the portals, which ranged from pathologizing pity, to condemnation and comparison with situations in which citizens cannot access medical examinations, medicines, as well as children forced to receive treatment abroad. Positive comments were rare.

In parallel with this process, I created a self-support group for transgender people as a part of “Queer Montenegro” activities, which was initially made up of two persons, a trans man and me, and we used this space to discuss transition, coming out, social support or lack thereof. At the same time, I started organizing educational workshops for the LGBTIQ community in the Drop in Center run by NGO Juventas, given that at that time there was little knowledge on trans identities within the community itself. Soon, some of the people who attended the workshops began to question their gender identity and then came out as trans or gender variant, which was accompanied by the growth of the self-support group.

The group grew over time, and by the end of 2014 it had 5 people, and by the end of 2015 10 transgender and gender-variant people. Self-support group formed the first informal trans-activist group “Transians”. The name Transians itself was created during the process of deciding on the name as a reaction to the text that one of the members found, and which was written by prof. Dr. Mila Alečković, who read “Does trans know what trans wants”¹⁶, in which the term “trans” is used for the first time in a derogatory sense, alluding to the extraterrestrial character of being transgender and its deviation with a distinguishing tone of denial and pathologization. The name “Transians” was a reaction to the invisibility of trans identities and inadequate treatment of trans people as beings who do not traditionally exist in Montenegrin society. The play on words alludes to the word “Martians”, and represented the appropriation of this term, who decided to show their visibility and existence. The name itself was suggested by Teodor Stojanović, one of the founders of the group. “Transians” as a group acted publicly for the first time on March 28, 2016 with a visibility action named “Let’s go under the rainbow together”¹⁷ which marked the Transgender Day of Remembrance¹⁸. As part of this action, trans and gender-diverse individuals who made up the group created posters on which they wrote messages, sharing their personal stories, but also educating the public about affirmative ways of treating TIGV¹⁹ people. One of the posters, which was a part of the action, read as follows:

Hello! You must have met a person like me by now. I, like many of you, have an Instagram profile, I adore Rihanna, my favorite songs are “Stay” and “Your

¹³ Vijesti online, „Muškarac iz Crne Gore postaje žena o trošku države“, *Vijesti online*, 01.03.2015. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/193335/muskarac-iz-crne-gore-postaje-zena-o-trosku-drzave>

¹⁴ Dan online, „Za promjenu pola muškarca uplaćeno 10.500“, *Dan*, 14.11.2015. <https://www.dan.co.me/?nivo=3&rubrika=Povodi&clanak=471280&datum=2015-01-14>

¹⁵ T. Š, „Tri Crnogorke žele da promijene pol“, *Kodex*, 13.12.2014. <https://kodex.me/clanak/74239/tri-crnogorke-zele-da-promijene-pol>

¹⁶ Dr Mila Alečković, „Da li trans zna šta hoće“, *Intermagazin*, 29.09.2015. <https://www.intermagazin.rs/da-li-trans-zna-sta-hoce/>

¹⁷ Redakcija, „Prva javna akcija trans zajednice u Crnoj Gori“, *Diskriminacija.ba*, 29.03.2016. <https://www.diskriminacija.ba/vijesti/prva-javna-akcija-trans-zajednice-u-crnoj-gori>

¹⁸ International Trans Visibility Day has been celebrated since 2009. It was started by trans activist Rachel Crandall as a reaction to the invisibility of the trans community within LGBT movement

¹⁹ TIGV is an acronym coined by the Trans Network Balkan to denote - transgender, gender variant and intersex persons.



song”, my favorite animal is a whale... I adore the confused look of people when they wake up, I love hoarse voices, the taste of squeezed oranges, I adore kiwi and bananas, I am fascinated by honesty and spontaneity. I love sunsets and men having had a fresh haircut. I am tormented by the same life questions as everybody else... Is there a God, is it a coincidence or a destiny, is there a life after death... nothing special. I’m a high school student. In the morning I go to the store, I’m saving for a tattoo and live for the day when I will live all of the above in the eyes of others as a woman and not as a man, as they perceive me, without asking if I feel that way...

This and similar messages were the beginning of own narrative creating by transgender and gender-variant persons in Montenegro, and the change of the general public discourse from pathologizing, normative and patronizing, to the one dominated by diversity, self-determination and empowerment. This action was followed by numerous other, with the aim of educating both the general public and institutions. One of those was named “Celebrating Human Diversity”²⁰, which also marked the Intersex²¹ Awareness Day²², as well as the International Day of Action for Trans Depathologization²³. This particular action aimed at institutions, academic and scientific public, created and sent materials that carried the message that being different in relation to gender and body appearance are not disorders and can’t be treated as such, but natural human differences. “Transians” also created numerous publications, which were intensively devoted to education. Some of them are “Gender, Sex and Frames”²⁴, which aimed at providing information to transgender community on the process of transition, self-care and support. It was followed by a series of brochures “Gender Diversity”: “Trans 101”²⁵, “Recognize Transphobia”²⁶ and “A Guide to Respecting Trans People”²⁷.

As a logical continuation in the self-organization and empowerment of the trans and gender variant community, my public coming out happened on November 20th, 2016 on the occasion of the Transgender Day of Remembrance.²⁸ The coming out itself provoked a strong discussion, both in public life and online. Many comments on social media followed, many of which were negative. Commentators tried to deny my gender identity, and then claimed that I wanted attention, that I was publicly out primarily to acquire financial gain, that my coming out was a “Western agenda”, so they downplayed the problems of transgender people by comparing them to poverty and injustice and

²⁰ <https://www.transbalkan.org/transovci-izveli-akciju-slavimo-ljudske-razlicitosti-u-podgorici/>

²¹ At that time, the term “intersex person” was still used.

²² The International Day of Intersex Awareness has been celebrated since 2003, in memory of the first public gathering of interpersonal persons in North America, on October 26, 1996.

²³ The International Day of Action for the Transpathologization of Trans Identity was launched in 2009 by the Stop Trans Pathologization Initiative, with the aim of advocating for the depathologization of trans identity.

²⁴ Jovan Ulićević, *Rod, pol i okviri: priručnik za trans i rodno varijantne osobe kao i njihove porodice i prijatelje_ice*, Kvir Montenegro. <https://asocijaciaspektra.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/trans-prirucnik-trojka-plava-jednobojna.pdf>

²⁵ Transovci, *Rodne razlonikosti: trans 101*, Kvir Montenegro, <https://asocijaciaspektra.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/trans-101-final.pdf>

²⁶ Transovci, *Rodne različitosti: prepoznaj transfobiju*, Kvir Montenegro, <https://asocijaciaspektra.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/transfobija-nesrecna-final.pdf>

²⁷ Transovci, *Rodne raznolikosti: vodič za poštovanje trans osoba*, Kvir Montenegro, <https://asocijaciaspektra.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/vodic-final-nu.pdf>

²⁸ Queer Montenegro: It is difficult to estimate the number of transgender people in Montenegro, News online, 20.11.2016. Available online at: [https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/Queer Montenegro: It is difficult to estimate the number of transgender people in Montenegro](https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/Queer%20Montenegro%3A%20It%20is%20difficult%20to%20estimate%20the%20number%20of%20transgender%20people%20in%20Montenegro), News online, 20.11.2016. Available online at 105159/kvir-montenegro-tesko-procijeniti-broj-transrodnih-osoba-u-crnoj-gori

many other. Such comments, although expected, were hurtful, and made the process of public coming out more difficult, which in itself is challenging in a small community such as Podgorica and the whole of Montenegro. However, no positive comments were left out either, and especially important were those addressed to my family, which significantly helped in their acceptance of both my transgender identity and activism, which for me as well as them was a way out of the closet and comfort zone.

Further development of trans activism in Montenegro reached a new level in March 2017, when “Transians” having the logistical support of Queer Montenegro hosted for the first time the only regional event that brings together transgender, gender variant and intersex people from ex-Yugoslav region – Transposium²⁹. This event was first organized by Trans Aid in 2014, and then handed over to the regional organization Trans Network Balkan in 2015. It was at that event that the Montenegrin transgender community announced that they were to establish the first trans organization that would deal with the protection and promotion of the human rights of transgender, gender-diverse and intersex people, called the Association Spectra. The news about the founding of Spectra did not resonate only in Podgorica, where it was founded, but also in other municipalities, as evidenced by the transmission of this piece of news on the “Youth of Berane”³⁰ portal. In order to get familiar with the idea and goal of forming Spectra, it is important to mention its vision, mission and values:

Vision of Spectra is a society in which all persons enjoy equal rights, in which all identities and bodies are respected and differences are celebrated.

Mission of Spectra is to eradicate gender-based violence in Montenegro through the creation of a strong, visible movement, advocacy, education and active involvement of trans, gender-diverse and intersex persons in the creation and implementation of policies that ensure equality and respect for diversity.

Spectra’s values are: pacifism, self-determination, feminist principles, intersectionality, respect for identity, personal integrity and experiences, work transparency, teamwork and dialogue culture, critical thinking and integrity.

Spectra was founded by 6 transgender and non-binary people (3 trans men, 1 trans woman and 2 non-binary/gender diverse persons). Since then, Spectra has grown, and now has 17 active members, all involved in strategic decision making, different actions and activities.

Decision making processes in Spectra have changed over time. In the beginning, organizational structure was only formally hierarchical. Without any experience and with no available funds, Spectra created its Statute based on statutes of 2 organizations: Queer Montenegro and Trans Network Balkan, with full respect of the national law requirements. In this arrangement, it had (and still has) an executive director (which was my role from the start and is at the present)), who was chosen by all founding members. Other members who were willing to be actively involved expressed their wishes to be coordinators of 2 programs: program of community organizing and program of visibility and art. The rest of the team wanted to be involved when possible and feel comfortable. This kind of structure, which was horizontal in decision making, worked in the first

²⁹ Redakcija, “Transpozijum krajem marta u Podgorici”, *Mondo*, 06.02.2017. <https://mondo.me/Info/Drustvo/a584749/Transpozijum-krajem-marta-u-Podgorici.html>

³⁰ Mladi Berana, „Osnovana prva organizacija TIRV osoba“, *Mladi Berana*, <https://mladiberana.me/osnovana-prva-organizacija-tirv-osoba-2/>



year, until Spectra got funds and certain obligations towards its donors. At the same time, presence of Spectra has increased in public and among institutions, which also increased the pressure on Spectra's team and lead to the decision that organization implements hierarchy to some degree, in organizational and management decisions, and to preserve non-hierarchical decision making in strategic matters . This model of decision making is still in place.

Despite all the challenges it encountered in its three year existence Spectra managed to raise the visibility of trans issues through many campaigns, story-telling events, performances, exhibitions and street actions, showing diversity in identities and experiences. During this period, 10 transgender and gender diverse people shared their stories: trans men (Teodor Stojanović³¹, Nikola Ilić³², Dante Ognjanović³³, Aleksa Radonjić³⁴, Jovan Ulićević), trans women (Hana Konatar³⁵, Lara Mirović³⁶, Vanja³⁷) and non-binary (Katja Jovanovic³⁸) persons. The diversity among visible community members is noticeable - trans men, trans women and non-binary people spoke, but also young people, people in mid and late 30s, people from rural areas, sex workers and people who migrated to Montenegro from other Western Balkans places (for example Serbia). There are still no publicly visible intersex persons and TIGV older people, as well as people with disabilities and TIGV Roma trans people, despite some of them being present within the community, which indicates there is still a lot of work to be done to fully express intersectionality in activist representation in Montenegro.

After the very establishment of Spectra, the organization acted more often and more intensively, reacting in certain cases of human rights violations of transgender people. Some of these cases include situations when a trans woman was denied the right to change her name³⁹, when the issue of intersex people was opened to the public

³¹ Tamara Cupać, „Priča transrodne osobe za FOS: I dalje se nadam da će me porodica prihvatiti“, *Fos*, 15.11.2018. <https://fosmedia.me/infos/drustvo/prica-transrodne-osobe-za-fos-i-dalje-se-nadam-da-ce-me-porodica-prihvatiti>

³² Analitika, „Podrška porodice ruši sve barijere“, *Analitika*, 01.09.2019. <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/344160--podrska-porodice-rusi-sve-barijere>

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNLskPBaj0c>;
Marija Mitrović, „Roditelji da nađu razumijevanje i bezuslovno prihvate djecu koja su transrodna“, *AntenaM*, 20.11.2019, <https://www.antenam.net/index.php/drustvo/140274-roditelji-da-nadju-razumijevanje-i-bezuslovno-prihvate-djecu-koja-su-transrodna>;

³⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBWtu71MeWo&list=PLhPKOxw5PeZCH6i_cOooWLdJvX2Ze_QGY

³⁵ Radio Slobodna Evropa, „Transrodna Podgoričanka: Kako sam saznala da sam žena“, *Vijesti online*, 03.01.2019. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/13898/transrodna-podgoricanka-kako-sam-saznala-da-sam-zena> ; Jelena Čorluka, „Hana je u procesu prilagođavanja pola: Pogledajte njenu priču“, *Vijesti online*, 14.04.2019. <https://www.vijesti.me/tv/381859/hana-je-u-procesu-prilagodavanja-pola-pogledajte-njenu-pricu>

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZIH9DCfcrQ>;
<https://www.facebook.com/asocijacija.spektra/videos/680462732600057/>;
Violeta Rovčanin, „Dođite da prošetamo u miru“, *Fos*, 21.09.2017, <https://fosmedia.me/infos/drustvo/lara-transrodna-osoba-dodite-da-prosetamo-u-miru-fos-video>;
Marko Komlenac, „Transeksualna osoba Lara Mirović: Podgorica me prigrlila kad me Beograd odbacio“, *Volim Podgoricu*, 13.04.2017, <https://volimpodgoricu.me/2017/04/13/transeksualna-osoba-lara-mirovic-podgorica-me-prigrlila-kad-me-beograd-odbacio-foto/>

³⁷ Damira Kalač, „Ispovjest trans osobe: Niko ne želi da me prihvati kao ženu“, *Vijesti online*, 14.05.2017. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/80993/ispovjest-trans-osobe-niko-ne-zeli-da-me-prihvati-kao-zenu>

³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp4hmQIONXU>;
<https://asocijaciaspektra.org/2020/07/21/ziva-biblioteka-sa-katjom-nebinarna-zena/>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAWCu8QqFzA>

³⁹ „Ulićević: MUP zabranom promjene imena krši građanska prava“, *Vijesti online*, 07.05.2017. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/81918/ulicevic-mup-zabranom-promjene-imena-krsi-gradanska-prava>

for the first time⁴⁰, when the World Health Organization depathologized trans identities⁴¹, when the right to privacy of a trans women in Public Health Center in Podgorica was violated⁴². when the amendments to the Health Insurance Act enabled a completely cost free gender reassignment procedure⁴³, when a trans man was attacked in Kolašin⁴⁴, as well as many other significant occasions. By raising a voice in such and similar situations, Spectra became a contact point for the media, which at the same time, as well as throughout years of Spectra's existence, that the existence of "Transians", slowly changed the narrative in relation to reporting on trans people. Apart from media appearances aimed at advocating for the human rights of TIGVs, as well as educating various actors in society (including the media), sharing of a personal story remained an important feature of Spectra's overall activism, which had the greatest effect in accepting trans people by the general public, but also the empowerment of trans people.

Most of Spectra's work is focused on several programs. Community organizing involves self-support groups as the most important space for trans solidarity, workshops aim to empower and educate, peer support (facilitating access to healthcare, social care and justice in cases of violence and discrimination), as well as various events focused on nurturing community care, exchanging resources, knowledge and experience. Advocacy work is focused on legal gender recognition, as well as depathologizing trans and intersex specific health care. Education program has been developed in response to high levels of trans people dropping out of school and low presence of TIGV people in high education. Throughout this program Spectra has conducted the first research that targeted specifically discrimination of trans and gender diverse students in high schools of Montenegro and started cooperating with high schools. Spectra's team is also educating other institutions and service providers, specifically through cooperation with other NGOs dealing with human rights of LGBTI persons, and some of these are: police officers, social workers, judges, prosecutors, health care professionals, psychologists and Ministries. By recognizing the transformative power of art, Spectra invested resources in empowering community based art and using it in raising visibility, but also, primarily to challenge and overcome norms. Throughout this program different exhibitions were organized, as well as the first public artist⁴⁵ performance "Masks"⁴⁶, the first gathering of transgender people in Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro, as well as the first artist performance performed by TIGV people in Montenegro and ex-Yugoslav region. Performance was also organized in one of the northern municipalities (Kolasin), as a reaction to the violence inflicted to a trans man⁴⁷ in this town, which is the

⁴⁰ Damira Kalač, „Jedna od 2000 beba je interpolna“, *Vijesti online*, 03.04.2017. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/86740/jedna-od-2-000-beba-je-interpolna>

⁴¹ Damira Kalač, „Transrodne osobe više nijesu na listi bolesnih“, *Vijesti online*, 21.06.2018. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/9101/szo-transrodne-osobe-vise-nijesu-na-listi-bolesnih>

⁴² CdM, „Medicinari ismijavali transrodnu osobu“, *CdM*, 12.03.2019, <https://m.cdm.me/drustvo/medicinari-ismijavali-transrodnu-osobu/>

⁴³ Damira Kalač, „Promjena pola potpuno besplatna“, *Vijesti online*, 22.03.2018. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/378825/promjena-pola-potpuno-besplatna>

⁴⁴ Vijesti online, „Asocijacija Spektra o prebijanju u Kolašinu: Zahtijevamo brzu reakciju i pronalazjenje počinioca“, *Vijesti online*, 31.08.2019, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/399022/ulicevic-o-prebijanju-u-kolasinu-zahitjevamo-brzu-reakciju-i-pronalazjenje-pocinioca>

⁴⁵ Artivism is a term coined by Slovenian theatre scholar Aldo Milohnić, a portmanteau describing hybrid artistic and activist practices (see 2015: 35), Milohnić, Aldo, "Artivistic interventions as humorous re-appropriations", in: *European Journal of Humour Research* 3.2, 2015, pp. 35-49.

⁴⁶ <https://asocijaciaspektra.org/2018/11/14/perfomans-maske/>

⁴⁷ Vijesti online, "Pretučen trans muškarac: Izvukli ga iz porodične kuće, bili ga dok se nije onesvjestio", *Vijesti online*, 31.08.2019, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/398990/pretucen-trans-muskarac-izvukli-ga-iz-porodice-kuce-bili-ga-dok-se-nije-onesvjestio>



first LGBTI public gathering in the north of the Montenegro. This performance inspired trans groups across the region to organize “Masks” in Belgrade⁴⁸ and Zagreb⁴⁹.

Spectra has been closely cooperating with Trans Network Balkan, particularly in organizing “Transposium” (the only regional event gathering TIGV people), as well as the first regional public gathering “Trans Intersex March” in Zagreb. Spectra is also collaborating with many human rights movements and NGOs, including political, educational, those working with people with disabilities and Roma people. Visibility of trans people was also ensured within the feminist movement in Montenegro, which resulted in Spectra’s participation in the March 8th 2019 program, organized by feminist organizations, which was the first time that trans topics were included in this program.

Trans activism today: challenges of the present and the future

Organization and decision making modalities

Despite all its achievements and successes, as well as all the diversity it represents, the trans movement in Montenegro is still young and developing. First of all, identifying the movement with non-governmental organizations can in itself present a challenge in self-organization and reacting when needed. Spectra as a non-governmental organization of trans people is very important and serves as a good example of self-organization. However, I believe that in the future it is necessary to explore alternative forms of self-organization, which are not necessarily formal, all with the aim of amplifying the voices of the TIGV community.

The way Spectra works, but also various questions regarding decision-making models and participation have not led yet to finding the best way which enables full community participation, and at the same time the survival of the organization, the receptivity of trans fights to different donors, but also communication with institutions. The highly hierarchical system of functioning of institutions and corporate models of functioning of most donors, thus the demands towards the “professionalization” of civil society organizations, make it significantly more difficult to create non-hierarchical models of organization with a strong community presence. One way to overcome these challenges is to experiment with a “hybrid” organization model, which implies partly a hierarchical structure and partly a horizontal model of functioning and decision-making. There are examples of such organizations in Latin America that are worth exploring. Whereas some critics have argued that NGOs as such have a depoliticizing and de-radicalizing effect on movement politics⁵⁰, there is an argument that feminist NGOs’ political hybridity enabled them to play a critical role in “advocating feminism” by advancing a progressive gender policy agenda while simultaneously articulating vital political linkages among larger women’s movement and civil society organizations.⁵¹

⁴⁸ <https://transserbia.org/vesti/1621-obelesen-dan-secanja-na-zrtve-transfobije-u-zajednistvu-je-nasa-snaga?fbclid=IwAR0D1SrMvAGYOX2IVQafmyDCs3IsuP3G1eLdcYM2j3Xaeb2EfXDWxDoomZ0>

⁴⁹ <https://asocijacijaSpektra.org/2019/03/27/performans-maske-izlazimo-na-ulice-i-borimo-se-za-svoja-prava/>

⁵⁰ Petras, James. 1997. “Imperialism and NGOs in Latin America.” *Monthly Review* 47(7):10-26; Ferguson 1994; Lang 1997; Pisano 1996.

⁵¹ Sonia E. Alvarez (1999): Advocating feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO “Boom”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1:2, 181-209

One of the special challenges is to strengthen the diverse representation within the movement itself. Despite the presence of different people representing diverse experiences, the visibility of certain identities can be significantly improved. First of all, intersex people are still invisible in Montenegrin society, although present in the community. Although present in the previous period, trans women are less visible than trans men. The visibility of TIGVs who are also marginalized on the basis of other grounds (Roma, migrants, persons belonging to national, religious and ethnic minorities, people living with HIV, sex workers, etc.) is still on a low level and additional significant efforts will need to be invested to make the concept of intersectionality, which is in its infancy, really come to life.

Economic sustainability of the trans movement and the TIGV community

The issue of finance is also a significant challenge, especially given the fact that many reports indicate that the scope for action is continuously narrowing globally, especially when it comes to women's, trans and intersex organizations. Despite the fact that many activities can be carried out without financial resources, as well as the fact that Spectra implements its social services (self-support and consultation group) regardless of the (non) existence and amount of funds, time and experience have shown that the burn out syndrome in activists is significantly more frequent if there is no material component that would enable them to meet at least the basic needs of life, taking into account that activism is a life vocation and work that consumes significant time and energy. In addition, working space and operating costs, as well as activities aimed at strengthening and gathering the community, are the ones which it is the most difficult to find funding for. This dependence on external funders redirects accountability upward towards the aid giver and away from the aid recipients of the NGOs 'so-called constituency'.⁵²

The issue of economic sustainability is further aggravated by the situation caused by COVID-19, which hit the global economy, so the recession of the Montenegrin economy is estimated at 14.3%, and will be the largest in the region, but also among the largest in Europe.⁵³ Such crises usually affect those who are marginalized the most, which was evident when subsidies for employees were given during the crisis, as well as compensation to all those registered with the National Employment Agency, which bypassed transgender people, as most of them work illegally and are not in the Employment Agency's register, due to inadequate recognition of gender identity. The UN in Montenegro states in its report that 50% of LGBTI respondents have completely lost their income or their income has been reduced by more than 50%. More than half (56%) expressed concern about their economic situation, 25% identified food as the most important need during the crisis, while 17% singled out shelter⁵⁴. Many trans people working on the black market have lost their jobs, being without any source of income, and faced the risk of homelessness, hunger and extreme poverty. Trans sex workers were either unable to work or risked their health and safety while working to provide the

⁵² Clarke 1996; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Fisher 1997; Mendelsohn and Glenn 2000, 2002; Ottaway and Carothers 2000

⁵³ Biljana Matijašević, Ivana Gudović, "Crna Gora lider po padu ekonomije", *Vijesti online*, 06.11.2020, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/483873/crna-gora-lider-po-padu-ekonomije>

⁵⁴ Report on the Rapid Social Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 outbreak in Montenegro, April–June 2020, UN system Montenegro. Available at: <https://montenegro.un.org/en/90471-report-rapid-social-impact-assessment-covid-19-outbreak-montenegro-april-june-2020>



income needed to survive. All trans people who use Spectra's social services live in rented apartments that are not registered, which makes them even more vulnerable to eviction and harassment by their landlords. All assistance to the community was provided by NGOs. Since the onset of the crisis, COVID-19, Juventas, Queer and Spectra have provided weekly food supplies for 20 transgender and non-binary individuals. Spectra also provided support in covering rent and utilities bills for 6 transgender people who were at risk of homelessness. All these activities were given a special permit by the National Coordinating Body dealing with the COVID-19 crisis in our society.

In response to the economic crisis, Spectra and LGBTQ Women's Association "Stana", are organizing different crafts' workshops aiming at economically empowering the TIGV and LGBTQ women community, which include learning the skills of knitting, wood-working and jewelry making. The idea behind learning these skills is that these particular crafts can be done in case of necessary isolation related to the epidemiological situation, but are also always needed and represent both an expression of creativity and a practice of solidarity, which is of great significance especially during hard times like these. In addition, economic empowerment workshops are planned to upgrade skills and introduce necessary tools to write a CV, engage in a job interview and apply for business opportunities. In the future, we are planning in the direction of researching alternative ways of work, production and solidarity, with the aim of food production, and exchange of various goods and/or services, with the aim to strengthen solidarity and sustainability of the community. In parallel with this process, we are planning to establish cooperation with institutions important in the field of labor and social protection, such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, the National Employment Agency, the Center for Education of Adults, etc. However, as the political situation changed, it brought the infamous restructuring of departments within the expert government. The integration of the Ministry of Finance⁵⁵ and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare into one is an indicator that work and social protection are viewed exclusively through the prism of social benefits which can significantly hinder cooperation in the field of economic empowerment of TIGV persons.

Economic empowerment is a freshly opened subject in the LGBTI movement, and the awareness of the connection between class and gender oppression is still developing.. In parallel with economic empowerment, it is necessary to strengthen awareness and critical thinking in relation to class and economic issues, in order to separate the TIGV movement from the neoliberal concept of identity policies and grow into a movement that has a significant potential to change the status quo and strengthen solidarity with other social movements.

Education as a basis for social participation

The problem of organizing TIGV people cannot be addressed without mentioning education and culture. The first and only research that targeted specifically discrimination against transgender and gender-diverse students in Montenegro⁵⁶ was conducted by the Spectra in 2019. The research shows a high degree of ignorance in relation to

⁵⁵ Biljana Matijašević, "Krivokapić: Prvi korak racionalizacija, želimo da finansije budu stabilne, ekonomija održiva", *Vijesti online*, 05.11.2020, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/483851/krivokapic-prvi-korak-racionalizacija-zelimo-da-finansije-budu-stabilne-ekonomija-odrziva>

⁵⁶ "M. Vlahović, J. Ulićević. *Da odzvoni nasilju: Smjernice za kreiranje sigurnog školskog prostora za rodne različitosti. Izvještaj o diskriminaciji transrodnih i rodno varijantnih učenika/ca u srednjim školama Crne Gore*. Asocijacija Spektra (2019). Dostupno na: <https://asocijaciaspektra.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/izvjestaj-da-odzvoni-nasilju-press-filnal.pdf>

the topics of gender, gender and sexuality, as well as ambivalent attitudes in relation to transgender people. According to the Spectra, only 3 transgender people out of 57 who use or have used social services during 2019 are in the process of acquiring higher education. Out of three only one person lives their gender identity freely. During 2019, 3 young trans persons left regular high school due to violence and discrimination, along with the lack of adequate protective response from the school administration. Due to experience of violence, trans people who participated in the research stated that their experiences in high school were “traumatic, painful”, “stressful and boring,” “brutal”, as well as “disaster, horror, sad in every case”. The reasons why they did not turn to professional services in case of need are the following: mistrust, fear of revealing their identity, fear that their parents will find out about their gender identity or sexual orientation, as well as insufficient accessibility of support systems provided by schools to students.

The last case of reported violence against a trans student happened in March 2018, when he expressed a desire for his gender identity to be respected at school and in the dormitory. Most teachers refused to address him in the desired gender, while he experienced constant verbal violence, threats, and ultimately physical violence from his peers, which resulted in minor bodily injuries. The case was reported to the police, who identified the attackers and handed the case over to the state prosecutor. The case was closed with two attackers reprimanded for their behavior, while the others were acquitted. This situation is not uncommon and is a clear indicator of the need for a comprehensive approach to the protection of gender-diverse students, and raising awareness both among institutions and among students. Also, during 2015, a trans student experienced violence at school in a way that a student from the class threw a chair at her before the class started. In this particular case, friends of a trans woman reported violence in high school, however, the student was not sanctioned.

Spectra also managed to start cooperation with institutions in the field of education, primarily through cooperation with the Ministry of Education, and then high schools from different municipalities. Numerous workshops with high school students have proven to be important, especially when they have the opportunity to meet a trans person and talk about personal experiences. The “living library” method, in which transgender people tell their stories and answer questions, influences high school students to change prejudices on the spot.⁵⁷ Secondary School of Economics “Mirko Vešović” from Podgorica is the first school that showed initiative and contacted Spectra with the aim of signing a Memorandum of Cooperation and engaging into joint work of creating a safe school space. Such initiatives, although rare, are valuable because they are strong positive practice examples in local communities.

The change in the departments of the new government has also affected the field of education, so that the Ministries of Education, Science, Culture and Sports have been merged into one department. The civil society sector also reacted strongly⁵⁸ to this decision, pointing out the dire consequences of merging the departments which are still in their developmental phase and are crucial for the growth of a democratic society. Regardless of institutional forms of education, community empowerment for political, civic and social participation can also be achieved through non-formal forms of education. In relation to that, Spectra, but also Queer Montenegro and NGO Juventas, are

⁵⁷ CdM, “Osnažiti učenike kako bi u školskom okruženju stvarali jednake mogućnosti za sve”, *CdM*, 24.12.2019, <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/osnaziti-ucenike-kako-bi-u-skolskom-okruzenju-stvarali-jednake-mogucnosti-za-sve/>

⁵⁸ *Vijesti online*, “Kultura korektiv: Protivimo se spajanju Ministarstva kulture sa resorima prosvjete, nauke i sporta”, *Vijesti online*, 08.11.2020, <https://www.vijesti.me/kultura/484537/kultura-korektiv-protivimo-se-spajanju-ministarstva-kulture-sa-resorima-prosvjete-nauke-i-sporta>



organizing numerous workshops dealing with the topics of the Pride Parade⁵⁹, mental health, critical thinking, and the plan is to increasingly deal with topics dealing with environmental protection and ecology, veganism and connection between speciesism and transphobia, as well as other oppressions, starting a reading club, organizing workshops for academic writing, etc. For the informal education of trans activists in the region, the Trans Network Balkan is of great importance, having its primary goal in the gathering of trans activists from Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania, Kosovo, Slovenia and the North Macedonia, providing educational opportunities, platforms for the exchange of knowledge and experiences, empowerment.

Mental health of the community

NGO Juventas, in close cooperation with NGOs primarily working on human rights of LGBTIQ persons, informal group of LBTQ women in Montenegro (later on established as “Stana”) but also mental health professionals, *did the first mental health related research among LBTQ women in Montenegro*.⁶⁰ The project provided a baseline on mental health and wellbeing of LBT women, which is also a key factor in TIGV self-organizing.

The survey reported that only this part of the community is ten times more at risk of anxiety and depression than the general population of women in our society. Such results of this and similar research are interpreted in the context of minority stress experienced by LGBTI persons, that is, unique chronic stress position that is a characteristic of those who do not fit into generally accepted societal standards such as heteronormativity. A large number of participants in this study clearly recognized violence, homophobia / transphobia, discrimination and stigmatization of the LGBTIQ persons, in a patriarchal and conservative social settings like ours. They also identify consequent internalized homophobia / transphobia as important factors in forming bad self-images. Exactly these experiences of chronic stress, lack of social support, as well as the perception and internalization of negative social attitudes are key risk factors in the significantly risen prevalence of psychological issues. This is a clear indicator of a need to invest more efforts in providing resources, especially to trans feminine persons for self-empowerment, required for engagement in the movement.

Legal gender recognition

Legal gender recognition in Montenegro is possible only with a proof of sterilization. This practice represents an arbitrary interpretation of the Law on the National Registry⁶¹, which regulates the possibility of changing the birth registry in terms of “sex change”, i.e. changing the personal data of transgender persons. Article 14 of the same law prescribes that the data entered in the registry be changed, supplemented or deleted on the basis of an executive or final decision of the body responsible for deciding on the change of personal status. The adoption procedure and decision-making criteria are not prescribed by bylaws, nor by the legal text, which leaves a legal gap regarding the application of the provision of Article 6 of the Law on the National Registry in the part

⁵⁹ These workshops are called “Prideshops (Prajdaonica)”.

⁶⁰ Colakovic J, Dakic T., *Minority stress and mental health disparities among LBTQ women in Montenegro*. Submitted for publication, 2019.

⁶¹ Law on Registry Registers, “Official Gazette of Montenegro”, no. 47 of 7 August 2008, 41/10, 40/11, 55/16

of changing the register in case of “sex change”. In practice, such a regulation means that the Ministry of Internal Affairs requires “evidence of sex change” or evidence of sterilization of a trans person, which is contrary to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

The Strategy for Improving the Quality of Life of LGBTI Persons in Montenegro for the period 2019-2023, adopted in April 2019 by the Government of Montenegro, a defines a measure implying the adoption of a normative framework of legal gender recognition that will be in line with international standards and obligations as well as best practices. The process of advocating for legal gender recognition based on self-determination began in 2015, by NGO Juventas within a project that has been implemented in partnership with Queer Montenegro and the program for the promotion and protection of human rights of trans people that functioned within the organization, and Institute of Legal Studies. This process has been continued by Spectra after its establishment, along with the support of organizations named. This advocacy included creating of the Draft Law on Legal Gender Recognition, cooperation with all relevant Ministries, decision makers, and their education with the aim of understanding trans identity, the right to self-determination and the importance of legal gender recognition. Taking into account the political changes in Montenegro, and the new governing structure in which there is a significant number of those who have a history of unsanctioned hate speech against the LGBTI community, it remains to be seen how the process of creating an adequate solution for legal gender recognition will proceed, i.e. how responsive will those who are in decision-making positions be to the obligations assumed by the Strategy.

Strengthening right-wing currents and clericalism

One of the most significant challenges that the TIGV community faces is precisely the strengthening of right-wing politics, as well as the evident strengthening of clericalism and influence of the church. Protests over the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion in 2019 showed the power of the Serbian Orthodox Church in relation to the mobilization of the population and its influence on political issues, as well as the outcome of parliamentary elections, as stated by the church officials.⁶² Despite certain problematic messages of support, which are described in this text, the strengthening of such ideologies poses a significant danger to achievements in the area of human rights of women, as well as human rights of TIGV persons and the LGBTIQ community in general. When signing the agreement between the three coalitions after the parliamentary elections, Zdravko Krivokapić, the proposed prime minister, when asked how he would prevent the possible influence of the Church on further building of a secular society with full respect for all human rights (e.g. LGBT rights and abortion rights), Krivokapić said that all the human rights related laws will be respected. “It is a simple answer, we will not endanger anyone, these are personal freedoms. We have exceeded the measure in everything and that measure must be the ratio of everything.”⁶³ He also adds: “As every man is a relationship of body and soul, so let this body be the state, the soul what the church cares for and it is the primary task of every church and every religious community, even if I know many people do not believe in that, but there are numerous proofs

⁶² “If we had received an offer to delete all three members, I think we would have had another course of social events in Montenegro.” Gojko Perović, rector of the Theological Seminary of St. Petar Cetinjski in the show “Clearly” on TV Vijesti, November 5, 2020. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLQ_I5ZfWtg

⁶³ Alisa Hajdarpasić, ““Ova vlada treba da bude sve što DPS nije bio”, *Vijesti online*, 09.09.2020, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/467649/uzivo-krivokapic-svaka-borba-protiv-korupcije-je-borba-za-crnu-goru>



that this is true, about our final salvation, that is, about that eternal life, because this one is short and passes quickly”⁶⁴. Such statements can be interpreted in several ways, but they are certainly not promising. The very fact that the “over-exposure” of the LGBTI community is particularly emphasized calls into question how further growth of LGBTI visibility and respective issues but also the community itself will be treated, as well as further advocacy for the promotion of human rights, given that the prime minister stated that only the human rights achieved will be further preserved.

Through the previous examples, it is clear that this narrative aims to accept only those LGBTI people who conform to the norms set by the same discourse, so one of the potential future problems is the high risk of “pink washing” practices. One of these practices was noticed during the protest of café owners and caterers and workers in cafés and catering facilities, when 2 people from the LGBTI community (who were not *publicly out* until that particular moment) went to the protest to provide support with banners “Close churches, not cafés” and “ I am not kissing the corpse of Amfilohije in a café”⁶⁵, expressing their views in a “provocative” way, on the occasion of the National Coordination Body’s decision to close restaurants due to the worsening of the epidemiological situation, and after being silent throughout holding a mass gathering on the occasion of the funeral of the Orthodox Metropolitan that passed due to COVID-19 induced consequences. At the protesty, they were attacked by other participants who tore up their banners. The event was soon followed by LGBT Forum Progress⁶⁶ issuing an announcement distancing themselves from the protesters from the community, indirectly confirming their sexual orientation and not taking into account that the two persons mentioned were not publicly out , but were forcibly outed by various nationalist and clero-fascist groups on social media. The fact that the same organization condemned the attack on these two persons fell into the background, as the focus of the statement was on distancing from community members and banners they held, not on being critical of the violence that happened. Such an example indicates the heterogeneity in relation to the policies represented by different LGBTI organizations, but also the instrumentalization of the LGBTI movement for political purposes.

Finally: A growing sprout

Based on all the things said above, it can be concluded that in less than a decade, a significant shift has been made in relation to trans (self) organization. From complete invisibility, to diverse visibility and the opening of different areas of everyday social and public life, the trans movement has gone through a dynamic period. However, it is still in its developmental phase.

The empowerment of the trans movement in Montenegro also owes a great deal to its allies, such as Queer Montenegro, NGO Juventas and Trans Network Balkan, who selflessly provided their capacities and resources with the aim of fully reflecting the diversity of the LGBTI movement. This, I believe, is due to the awareness of those who made these organizations, and their idea that without solidarity, diversity in the

⁶⁴ AntenaM, “Lideri tri koalicije potpisali sporazum: Bez promjene državnih simbola, neće povlačiti priznanje Kosova; Vlada prije kraja oktobra”, *AntenaM*, 09.09.2020, <https://www.antenam.net/politika/170768-lideri-tri-koalicije-potpisali-s-porazum-bez-promjene-drzavnih-simbola-neze-povlaciti-priznanje-kosova-vlada-prije-kraja-oktobra>

⁶⁵ CdM, “Napadnut zbog parole: Zatvorite crkve, a ne kafane”, *CdM*, 06.11.2020, https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/napadnut-zbog-parole-zatvorite-crkve-a-ne-kafane/?fbclid=IwAR3AO6CIfMcGCd-dYuOgt0TnYpT3pRCyJ2FSf-101h0KBZD_

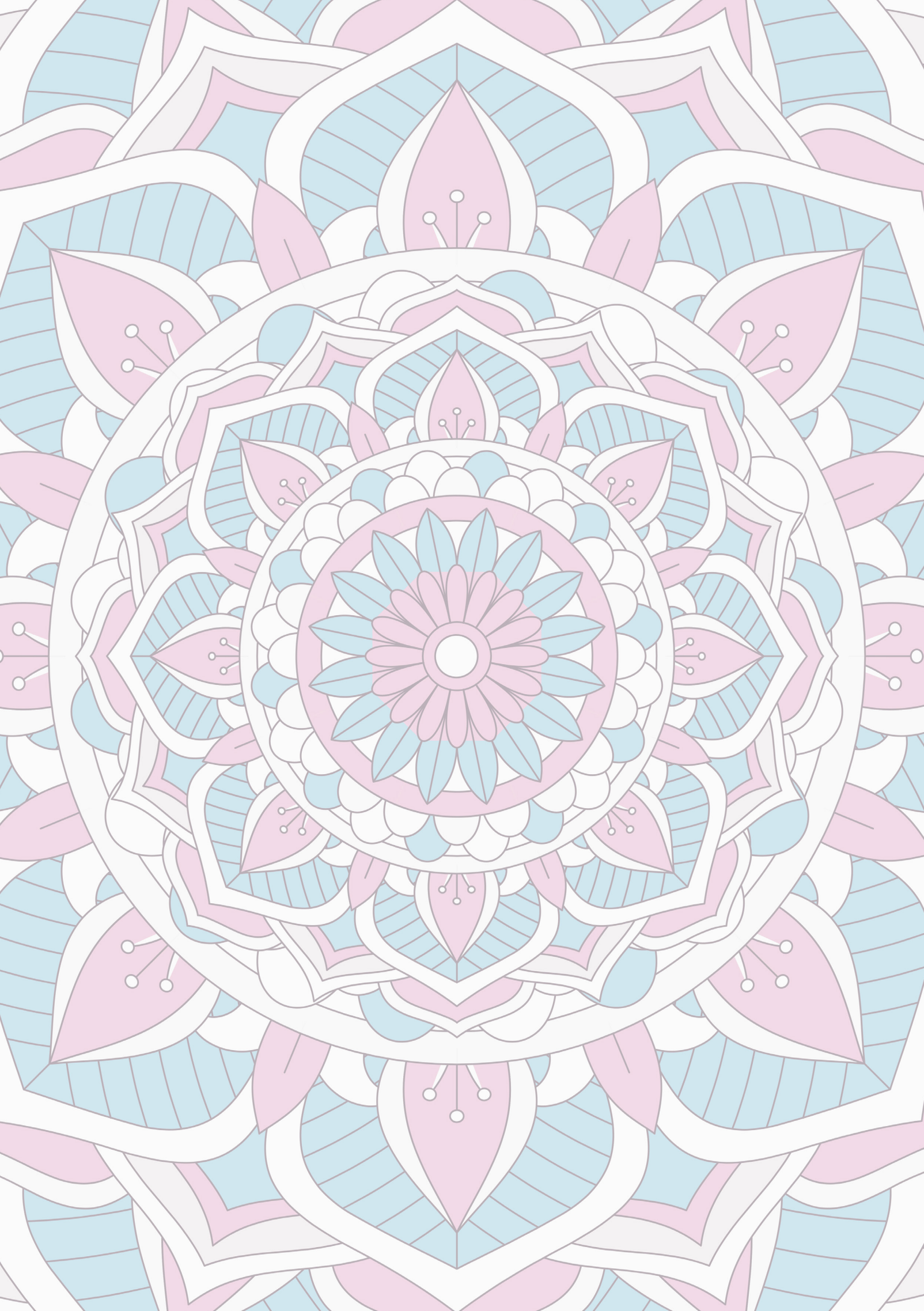
⁶⁶ An organization in Montenegro dealing with human rights of LGBTI persons.

movement, as well as constant questioning of the way of organizing, it is not possible to talk about the movement, and thus its potential.

Despite numerous challenges, only some of which are described in this text, I believe that the movement itself is very ready to respond to them, and that these challenges will only strengthen it and make it more resilient. In Montenegro and its cultural milieu, in which anti-fascism and the struggle for freedom are centuries-old historical values, defiance, pride and non-acceptance of any shackles are deeply integrated into the politics of the majority of the LGBTI movement. The trans movement within the larger movement has its autonomy, but is also an integral important part of the wider LGBTI community, so it does not separate, but solidarizes and cooperates with the goal of contributing to strengthening a truly queer movement as well as society as a whole.

The future is always uncertain, and for those who read it, this text will be able to serve as a reference point for a later analysis of what will be the present, past and some other future of the trans movement.





Aleksa Milanović

TRANS COMMUNITY (SELF)ORGANIZING IN SERBIA

My activist work

I think that my activist work started the moment I came out to my surroundings. At that time, of course, I did not define it as activism, but in fact it is one of the possible forms of putting that particular effort, regardless of the fact that in the very beginning it was aimed at only a dozen people from my immediate environment. It all started in January 2007, when I came to my friend, an anarchist, who actively listened, understood and supported me. I presented the information on her political orientation in order to illustrate my own blindness caused by fear of society's reaction to coming out, because I was obviously wary even of those people whose political views certainly did not coincide with the dominant mainstream ideology. After that first coming out, all other persons I was in contact with immediately followed. At the time, I did not know people who belonged to the LGBTIQ community, nor people who engaged in any form of activism or were in any way engaged in the fight for human rights. Therefore, it was quite logical that I was engaged in the intention to become a part of the community to which I believed I belong. In just a few months, I met a large number of LGB people, but unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to meet any trans people. For that reason, I tried to become a member of the Trans Self-Support Group, which operated within the Geten organization.¹ At that point, I was told that if one wants to be a part of the group, they have to bring a medical certificate from a psychiatrist which confirms they're trans. I wanted to join the group and finally I did so by becoming a member in the early 2008. It was not as easy to join the group then as it is today, so some of us were waiting for a couple of months for our first meeting. That is why Labris² was the first activist organization whose premises I visited. During that period, Labris employees had a positive and supportive attitude towards transgender people, which landed me an opportunity to be a participant of Labris' seminar entitled *Starting with a letter...L (Na slovo, na slovo ... L)*, which was held in Donji Milanovac, in 2008. Shortly afterwards, I applied for the seminar *Gender Based Discrimination and Domestic Violence*, which was organized by the Autonomous Women's Center and held at the Faculty of Political Sciences in

¹ Geten is an organization founded in 2001 in Belgrade under the name Gayten - LGBT. Website of Geten is <https://www.transserbia.org>

² Labris is a lesbian human rights organization founded in 1995 in Belgrade. For more information on Labris please follow the link: <http://www.labris.org.rs>

Belgrade. By participating in this seminar, for the first time I was outed to people I didn't know until then, who don't belong to the LGBTIQ community. My personal impression, after seminars mentioned, was that I managed to bring the trans topic closer to other participants, or at least most of them, in a positive way. In September 2008, I applied to volunteer at a festival organized by the Queer Belgrade³ collective. All these events, which I was a part of, empowered me, and by November 2008, I spoke in Novi Sad at a public discussion organized to mark the Transgender Day of Remembrance, by Novi Sad Lesbian Organization (NLO).⁴

Between 2008 and 2011, I volunteered for several different LGBT organizations and regularly attended Trans Self-Support Group meetings. I have never been employed in any of the activist organizations, nor did I have the ambition or desire to become employed, and since 2012, I have stopped applying for volunteer work, but also to go to the meetings of the Trans Self-Support Group. The reason for this are the numerous disagreements with the policies advocated by activist organizations in Serbia, as well as the saturation with one and the same content of the Trans Group meetings. I realized that, over time, going to the meetings became an increasing burden for me, as I was forced to explain over and over again to the new membership why I did not want to start the medical process of transition. The meetings did not have a pre-designed content, but discussed news from life in between the two meetings. Over time, the membership changed because people who completed medical procedures left the group, while those people who were just starting the same came to the group as they needed information related to that particular process. The group meetings were an opportunity to exchange experiences after medical procedures or to learn new information regarding administrative or medical problems faced by people who are in the medical process of transition or planned on starting it.

In the meantime, I met a large number of trans people from the region, many of whom became my best friends, and my meetings and conversations with them replaced what I expected to find at group meetings. I was lucky enough to be at a seminar named *The Road to Transversity - Workshops for transsexual and transgender people from the region*, organized in Rijeka (Croatia) by the association LORI⁵ in November 2011. At that seminar, I met a large number of trans people from the region and connected with them since we had very similar understandings and approaches to trans identities and activism. That meeting motivated me to engage in activism, but I still felt alienated from most LGBTQ organizations in Serbia.

In February 2012, I agreed with three friends whom I met in previous years at the Trans Self-Support Group, to organize a humanitarian action to raise the money for a Bosnian activist needed for the operation. The humanitarian action was called *Everyone for Alex*, and an exhibition of Alex's photographs called *Transition* was set up within it. We designed the badges ourselves, from the sale of which we collected money and sent it to Alex. To provide space for the exhibition, we contacted Labris, which helped us reserve space for the event. At that time, I believed that self-organization was possible and that such actions were easiest to perform in cooperation with a small number of people gathered around the same goal. However, I realized that in practice it is much

³ Queer Belgrade collective was founded in 2004 in Belgrade.

⁴ NLO – Novi Sad Lesbian Association founded in 2004.

⁵ The website of the LORI association (<http://www.lori.hr/hr/>) contains a description of the project which included the workshops I attended: „The project 'Road to Trans-versity' aims to inform the public about the human rights of transsexual people and transgender people, the problems and discrimination that these people face in society, and sensitizing the public to better accept trans people. The project is also aimed at empowering transsexual and transgender people themselves and providing the necessary support to the Trans community in Croatia, but also in the region.“ LORI implemented the project during 2011/12, <http://www.lori.hr/hr/put-u-prostranstvo>

harder and more complicated to do if some already established organization is not behind you. For that reason, I became less and less involved in activist work which includes cooperation with others. I decided to write and publish theoretical papers in the domain of trans topics, and I dedicated myself to academic progress and scientific research in the field of queer and transgender studies.

In April 2013, I was invited to Sarajevo to facilitate the workshop “Gender, Sex and Sexual Orientation” as part of the seminar of the *Workshop for Transsexual and Transgender Persons from BiH* and to be a co-facilitator of the workshop “Legal Regulation and Access to Medical Services in the Region (Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia)”. I have always enjoyed socializing and working with trans people from the region, and in that I found motivation to dedicate myself to activist work as well. Accordingly, in 2014, a group of friends and acquaintances invited me to join the initiative to create a regional trans activist organization. I gladly accepted the invitation and participated in the establishment of the Trans Network Balkan, whose coordinating team I am still a part of. In the last five years I published two books and eight scientific texts that deal with transgender issues, and I hope that in this way, despite everything, I remained an activist.

Development of trans activism in Serbia

The establishment of the Trans Self-Support Group in 2006 within Geten can be considered the beginning of an organized gathering of the trans community in Serbia. At the very beginning, the membership of the group was reduced to only four people, but that number increased in the following years. As I mentioned in the introductory part of the text, the work program of this group included organizing meetings where trans people exchanged personal experiences related to gender identity, dealing with transphobia in the family and the environment, and most of all for the purpose of acquiring information on the medical aspects of transition. During the period when I was a regular participant of the group’s meetings, there were no initiatives to include its membership in activist endeavors. As a small number of group members has been engaged in activism from its very beginnings, it was clear that self-organization and empowerment for activist work was not on the list of this project’s goals. In addition to creating and leading the trans group, Geten implemented other projects related to the promotion of trans people’s human rights in Serbia. One of the most important roles of Geten was to engage in issues concerning the legal aspects of trans people’s lives.

Among the activist groups and organizations that were active during the first decade of the 2000s, which promoted, among other things, issues of the trans community, the initiative Queer Belgrade collective should certainly be mentioned. Between 2004 and 2008, this collective organized queer festivals once a year, along with publications as kinds of “transcripts” of the festival programs. One of these publications was published under the title *On Trans Issues and Sex Work*⁶ since the main topics of the festival held in 2007 were Transsexuality/Transgender and sex work. Queer Belgrade is one of the few activist groups in Serbia that at that time did not advocate a firm and exclusive identity policy when it comes to gender and sexual identities.

What distinguishes and sets Serbia apart from other Western Balkans places when it comes to trans issues is the existence of medical experts with decades of experience working with trans people who are entering the process of gender reassignment. Thanks to that, a large number of trans people from the Western Balkans region, but

⁶ *On Trans Issues and Sex Work*, edited by Majda Puača, Milica Jeremić, Ksenija Forca, Jet Moon, 2008.



also from different places around the world, visited Serbia in search of surgical interventions. The work of medical experts in this domain was legally unregulated until 2011, when the *Law on Amendments to the Law on Health Insurance* was introduced, which put medical procedures of gender reassignment in the legal framework for the first time in Serbia.

Of course, this does not mean that all existing problems related to medical procedures have disappeared, because even today a large number of trans people in Serbia complain about issues related to scheduling appointments or surgeries, unacceptable attitude towards them in surgeries and hospital corridors, problems with drugs' shortages necessary for hormone therapy, referral to private clinics for observations that are not related to the process of medical transition and the like. In Serbia, it is very rare to meet a trans person who is satisfied with the treatment they have encountered by entering the medical process of transition. It seems like the trans community speaks of difficulties encountered only when we come to this particular topic. However, despite all problems that can be named, the lack of initiative to address all of these is still quite noticeable. One of the reasons is certainly the generally poor health system faced by all citizens of Serbia, and it often seems that some problems are impossible to solve. Certainly another important reason lies in the disorganization of the community and lack of initiative to initiate specific actions that would lead towards solving the problems mentioned.

Considering that Serbia is known for medical experts who deal with trans issues, the trans community that lives here is quite invisible to both the foreign and the domestic public. Media coverage of this topic has always been characterized as sensationalist and offensive to trans people. The printed and online media are occasionally interested in the personal stories of trans people, but they do not come into contact for interviews through activist organizations but through private acquaintances. A number of trans people gladly accepted the invitation for an interview in the hope that in this way they would bring the story of trans issues closer to the general public. Unfortunately, they were almost always disappointed with the outcome, most often due to a sensationalist title, an inappropriate photograph that is placed next to the text or some answer that is taken out of context and as such especially emphasized. During the first decade of the 2000s, several shows and television reports were recorded on trans related issues. In such shows, experts dealing with medical aspects of trans persons' lives, as well as representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, are almost always invited as guests. When it comes to trans people who were guests in these shows, only people who no longer live in Serbia were guests without hiding their faces and changing their voices. One of the shows that can be said to have presented the process of gender reassignment in an affirmative way, especially if we keep in mind that it was broadcasted in 2008, is the show named "The Key" (Ključ). What distinguished this show from many other that dealt with the topic of trans identities or homosexuality at the time was that it was not designed as a forum where one part of guests represented positive attitudes on the given topic, while the other part was an extreme opposite. Considering that it was broadcasted in the evening on the RTS 1 (national public media service), this show had a large audience. Since this is a talk-show type of a programme the host invited medical experts in the field of psychiatry, endocrinology and surgery who dealt with trans issues, but also a trans activist from the United States of America, Jamison Green. The show also covered two short stories, one of which is related to Justin McAllister, an American who came to Serbia to perform a gender reassignment surgery. The second one was a short conversation with a trans man from Serbia who has been living in the USA for a long time. Trans people living in Serbia were not guests in the show, nor were

they in the audience, and thanks to that, the local trans community remained practically invisible. What was even more interesting was the fact that no domestic activist organization has tried to get in touch with Jamieson Green, who is one of the most important figures of the trans activist movement since he was one of the most publicly visible out trans activists in the world during the 1980s and 1990s. This is another example that supports the conclusion that the trans community in Serbia at that time did not have the potential for activism nor did it receive encouragement and motivation for activist work from non-governmental organizations.

At some point, the organization Egal appeared on the domestic activist scene, stating the “improvement of trans* and LGBTI people’s quality of life in Serbia”⁷ as one of its goals on organizations’ website. In 2015, Egal, in cooperation with the organization GLIC⁸, organized the first trans pride march in Serbia called the Pride of Trans Persons. This gathering was organized on the same day, but starting an hour earlier, as the Pride March organized by the Belgrade Pride organization. The representative of Egal and GLIC highlighted the intention to point out the bad position of the trans community in Serbia as the reason for organizing the Pride of Trans people, but also stated “dissatisfaction with the previous organization of the Pride Parade in Belgrade”⁹ as one of the reasons. As this fragmentation between LGBT organizations is something very common for the activist scene in Serbia, it is not unusual for the community itself to usually stay aside without any motivation to get involved in the fight for their own rights.

If we analyze the involvement of the trans community in the trans activism in Serbia, it can be concluded that in 14 years, i.e. from the first gathering of the trans community in Serbia until today, the situation has not changed much. This is quite worrying when compared to the situation in other parts of the region, where in less than 8 years a community has been gathered, actively engaged and as such reached a high level of visibility in a very short time. In addition, it should be borne in mind that Serbia has a significantly larger population than, say, Montenegro or Croatia, so it is expected that it will have a relatively larger trans community. However, despite this, only a small number of trans people in Serbia are engaged in activism, and thanks to that, the community is completely incoherent, unorganized and invisible. When it comes to the global trans movement and increased visibility of trans people, it is clear that during the last decade there have been great and significant changes, which of course have been mostly happening in the Western world. Such changes are almost always accompanied by a higher prevalence of transphobia in a society. This pattern of behavior also appeared in the Balkans.

The organization that certainly stood out in the last few years in the public manifestation of transphobia is certainly Marx21, whose feminist section advocates hatred and intolerance quite loudly, primarily towards trans women, but also towards all other trans and gender-variant persons. Thus, the majority of the society and right-wing organizations were joined by persons from left-wing and feminist organizations who advocate transphobic views, using them as arguments in defense of the gender-binary norms. They are known by appearing at public discussions, workshops and other public events where trans issues are discussed. Since there are not many of such events during the year in Serbia, which is bad for the visibility of the trans community in itself, the appearance of transphobic outbursts presents as another obstacle to public gatherings of the trans community. In such a social climate, it is clear that the first place on

⁷ Egal website: <http://www.egal.org.rs/sr/o-nama/o-nama>

⁸ GLIC website - Gay Lesbian Info Center: <http://gayecho.com/glic/>

⁹ J. Diković, “Pride and Trans Pride Separately”, *Danas*, 2015, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/prajd-i-trans-prajd-odvojeno/>



the list of priorities should be occupied by local community empowerment serving for its membership to be more engaged in the public sphere, but also in all segments of the fight for their rights. In addition, empowerment and support is needed for both trans and gender-variant individuals who do not want to engage in activism.

My personal assessment of the situation in activism and in general of the existing activist environment in Serbia additionally motivated me to look for activist cooperation in the region. Accordingly, as I have already stated, in 2014 I participated in the establishment of a regional activist organization called Trans Network Balkan (TNB). From the very beginning, the network began to gather trans and gender-variant people from the region, at first through social networks, and soon at an event called Transposium, which TNB took over from the organization called Trans Aid¹⁰ from Zagreb in 2016. Taking Transposium over was prompted by the idea of transferring this important event to other Western Balkan places with the aim of gathering and strengthening TIGV communities from different areas. Transposium brings together about 60 trans, gender-variant and intersex people from the Balkans, it can be classified as one of the most important regional activist projects. As a part of the fifth Transposium in Zagreb, the first Balkan Trans Inter March was held in 2019 under the slogan: “My body - my temple! My identity - my business!” In cooperation with the Association Spectra¹¹ from Montenegro, and within a project named *Empowering transgender communities in Western Balkan region* TNB held a “Community organizing training” in Podgorica in February 2020. The training gathered trans, inter and gender-variant persons being up to 30 years old and living in the territory of North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania and Montenegro. After this event, trans people from Serbia who participated in it, showed initiative and desire to get involved in activist work, and as a consequence, an informal activist group called TOTA - Trans Organization of Trans Activists was established in Serbia in the spring of 2020. It is interesting that this very name, proposed by one of the founders, was voted on, suggestively indicates that the trans community in Serbia needs an organization that will be led and represented by trans people. My participation in the founding of the TOTA group was driven by my desire to finally create conditions in Serbia for the inclusion of trans and gender-variant people in trans activism, as well as conditions for strengthening the local community that would have enough capacity to cooperate with Trans Network Balkan and eventually organize Transposium in Belgrade in the near future. Since I do not deal with activism professionally, but try to fill my part on my spare time, I will participate in the development of the TOTA group in accordance with my abilities and relying on the capacities’ building opportunities offered to new groups by the TNB.

Concluding remarks

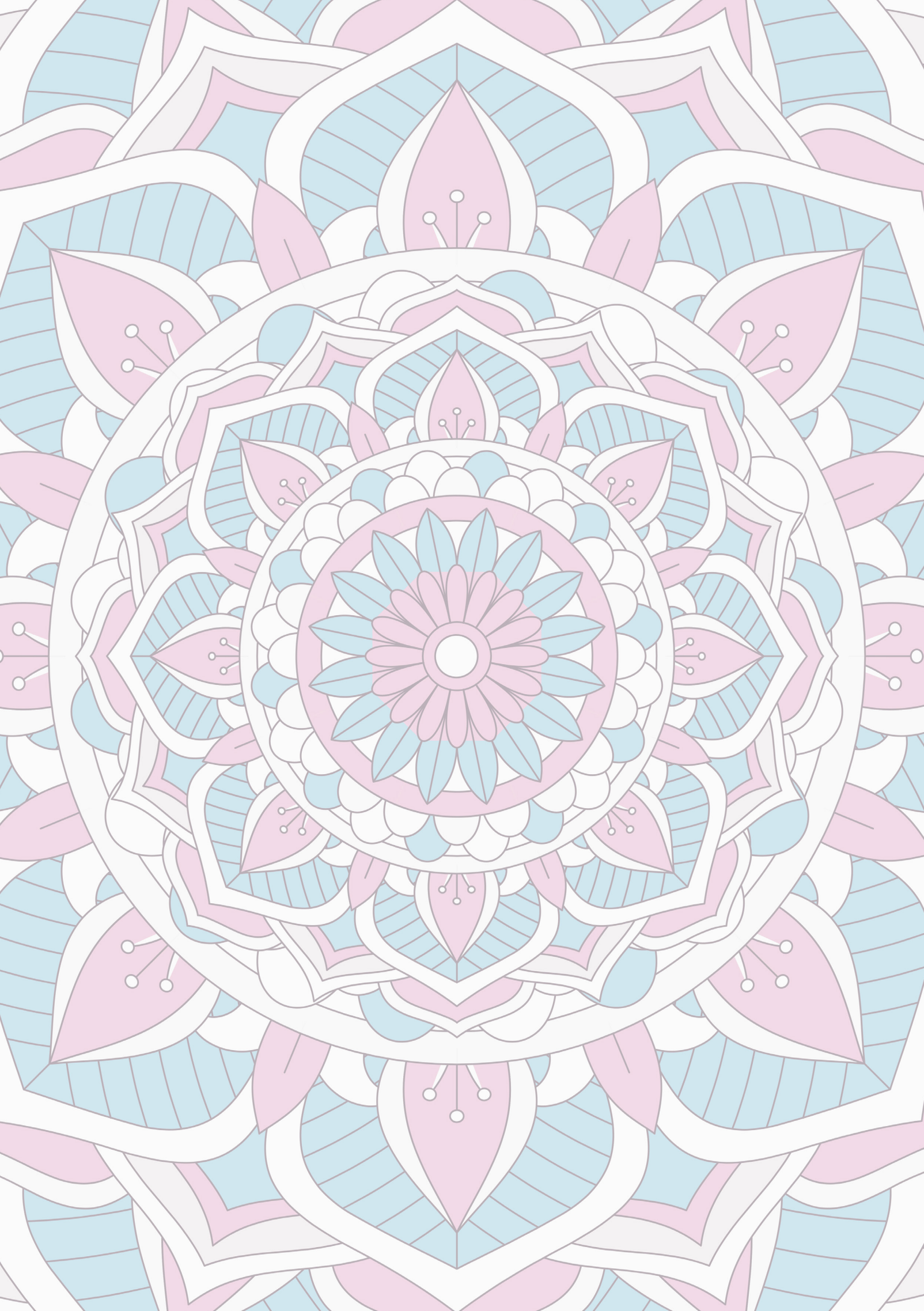
This text represents my personal review of the emergence, development and obstacles to the development of trans activism in Serbia. As I would not like to end the text in a pessimistic tone, which seems to dominate the previous text, I will try to look at the current situation in a positive way. Regardless of the fact that trans activism in this area had a lot of unutilized favorable factors that could have been used to accelerate its

¹⁰ Trans Aid is an association for the promotion and protection of the rights of trans, gender-variant and intersex people. This organization, which was registered in 2012 in Zagreb, founded and organized the first Transposium in 2014. Organization’s website: <http://transaid.hr>

¹¹ The Association Spectra, which promotes and protects human rights of transgender, gender-variant and intersex people, was founded in 2017 in Podgorica by an informal group of trans activists, which operated within the LGBTIQ Association Queer Montenegro called “Transovci”. For more information on Association Spektra please follow the link: <https://asocijacijaspektra.org>

growth, it does not mean that now or tomorrow is not the time to use new opportunities and existing conditions for self-organization and empowerment of the trans community in Serbia. We enter the fight for rights, freedom and a dignified life when we feel we have the strength to resist the pressures of a society that discriminates us in various ways and discourages us from opposing that discrimination. It is important to be aware of that we don't have to be in this struggle alone and that we, in fact, are not alone, and we are a part of a community whose members face very similar problems and obstacles on a daily basis. This community is growing every year thanks to the decades of dedicated activist work and efforts invested by trans people around the globe. People coming out and all the personal stories we have heard influenced us and our understanding of our own identities, our own personal determination to come out and live in accordance with our own needs, desires and sense of self. In that sharing of courage, fears, determination, problems and solutions lies the strength of one community. My personal activist engagement has always been motivated by the desire to hear how it is possible to fight for myself in this society, but also by the desire to share my own experiences and strategies of combating transphobia that I face almost every day. Therefore, I believe that in trans activism, every person can and should ask the following question: what can my activist work do for me and others? This actually means that the goal of our activist action is to create a better social environment both for ourselves and for our community.





Vanja Cipurković

TRANS COMMUNITY (SELF)ORGANIZING IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

My place in activism

I believe that some people who from the very beginning do good deeds and fight for the rights of certain marginalized groups see themselves as activists. At the very least, they feel a passion to fight for others, and therefore themselves, if they belong to that group. Personally, I didn't feel like an activist, nor did I see myself in that field of work. Essentially it all started with a desire to build a community where I could identify with others based on the same or similar identity labels. I haven't had the opportunity to meet any other trans person through direct communication until 2008, although I knew about a couple of them through acquaintances. Fortunately, they got in touch with me thanks to our mutual acquaintances. At the time, the LGBTIQ community in Tuzla, my hometown, was quite hidden and only did small gatherings/parties on rare occasions. There were no official organisations nor activist groups in town until 2012 when the group "Lgbtq Tuzla" was formed, which was later renamed into Tuzla Alliance of Independent Queer Activists (aka TANKA¹).

Joining TANKA marks the very beginning of my involvement in any kind of activism related to LGBTIQ rights. The group primarily organised movie watching events and a few parties, along with a couple of guerrilla actions in support of important LGBTIQ dates to raise visibility and hopefully expand our community. As it is very prevalent in the community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the group in fact became smaller due to many members emigrating (a topic I will touch upon further in this text), and eventually we ventured more into "artivism"² by designing t-shirts with queer and feminist messages in order to raise visibility subtly through fashion. Then in April 2013 I received an invite from my friend Aleks Gosto who was trying to gather trans people from the region for some workshops and connect us with each other, which led to me being more involved in the upcoming years with LGBTIQ organisations in Sarajevo. That was the very first workshop I attended specifically for trans persons and it was quite empowering to see

¹ From their website: "TANKA is an independent activist queer collective which combines illustration, design and activism in raising visibility of queer art, culture and identities. Our main focus is on creating content through multi-media, fashion, poster, fanzine design and print. This way we want to spread queer messages of love, diversity and resistance, challenging traditional gender roles and promoting feminism through design and visual art", <https://ultratanka.com/pages/about>

² Artivism is a blending of the words art and activism. It refers to the practice of promoting a social and/or political agenda through acts considered to be art.

a multitude of people with experiences similar to mine. We ended up forming the informal group Trans BiH³ within Sarajevo Open Centre (SOC)⁴ in 2014 as a means to empower the community to come forward and join us in events targeted primarily towards trans people from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina. My contribution consisted of peer support and very few public appearances at human library workshops, closed panels and one radio interview where I talked about my identity and what it means to be transgender in Bosnia. While I was fairly open about being trans, not everyone in my family was aware of it, including my father and his side of the extended family; therefore I kept myself out of the spotlight. Although it is important to note that I was lucky enough to have their support in every way when they finally found out, I did not need to hide my real identity nor any of the events I had attended or been a part of. My cis friends would also show support by participating in any way they could.

To be frank, my activism in Bosnia had been short lived in a way - as of mid-2015 I decided to step back and focus on other things as the lack of initiative from others in the local trans community did not indicate any change in the near future. However, a year later I decided to become involved again, but this time through trans-led organisations, finding my place within the Trans Network Balkan⁵ whose coordination team (funnily) consisted of four people, myself included, from Bosnia who had emigrated. As of this moment, I still cannot call myself a “real activist“, not in the same sense as my colleagues who are fully involved with the community, are visible and outspoken in their fight for the rights of trans, intersex and gender-variant people. On the other hand, I do see my contribution through simply speaking about my work and gender identity, as a form of visibility activism, to the general public who may never come across this information in their usual day-to-day lives.

The development of trans activism

I would like to preface this by saying that I can only speak from my own experience, which is not very broad in regard to activism in Bosnia. However, I also believe that it largely stems from the fact that the T (transgender) and especially I (intersex) have been the most silent letters of LGBTIQ conversations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Trans related activism first and foremost had no footing as there was no established community; trans people were so invisible that if you asked a random person on the street, to them we practically did not exist. Of course, that was far from the truth. The aforementioned Aleks Gosto, who organised the first trans workshops, was probably the most visible trans person in Bosnia at the time. He wrote about his experiences on social media, queer-friendly portals, and, if a trans person contacted an LGBTIQ organisation, they would often be referred to Aleks. Afterwards, he and I were in touch with several trans people across Bosnia and Herzegovina, but when it came to all of us gathering in one place the turnout would be minimal. If someone showed interest at first, they would end up not joining us out of fear of being “found out about“. The general environment breeds apathy, discouraging people from being true to themselves, which is especially difficult for trans people who seemingly have no support system to rely on.

From my knowledge, the very beginning of trans-led trans specific activism started with the aforementioned gathering in 2013 where six of us present were still living in BiH. However, that event significantly helped in establishing a network of support along with people from the region who would later on participate in organising educational

³ Facebook page of Trans BiH: www.facebook.com/transbih

⁴ Website of Sarajevo Open Center: www.soc.ba

⁵ Website of Trans Network Balkan: www.transbalkan.org

seminars as well as training for a peer support group. In 2014, Trans BiH was established as an informal group within Sarajevo Open Centre consisting of five members who tried to emphasise the necessity of more trans-related activities and community-building efforts. The majority of LGBTQ organisations or groups within Bosnia and Herzegovina had no trans people in their teams as far as I was aware, plus LGBTQ activism was still quite small and limited to a few people who were juggling everything and trying to gain some sort of traction on a larger scale (in institutions, among lawmakers, etc.). I cannot say that the TIGV issues were pushed aside, but they were certainly not a priority, as the LGBTQ activism itself was just getting started. It is safe to say that the Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina have many shared values and traditions which stem from a heavily patriarchal and conservative standpoint, so naturally queerness in and of itself is not accepted in the society overall. Therefore, entering institutions to create some change and better the position of LGBTIQ people is almost a Sisyphean struggle. It is also important to note that many, if not all, larger queer events have been met with massive backlash from the public, governmental and religious figures, of whom the latter two were the most vocal in their opposition. The most publicised incident happened in 2008 when Association Q organised Queer Sarajevo Festival, the first of its kind, where the opening day saw a protest and violent attacks against the participants⁶. In the same vein, violent attacks happened during another queer film festival - Merlinka⁷ in Sarajevo 2014, where the attackers broke into a closed space during a panel, injuring several people. Additionally, prior to the 2013 workshops for trans people, a group of activists from Okvir⁸, the organisation that was lending us their space, were physically assaulted so the workshops had to be postponed. These are only a few examples, but unfortunately tragedies of this sort are not rare.

In 2013, SOC published a report on the legal position of trans people in BiH⁹, which, to my knowledge, is the first publication of its kind in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It marked an important point where trans-specific issues were brought to the forefront, along with the organisation giving us a space to create our group in 2014, which unfortunately did not quite jumpstart the trans movement itself once more - due to the lack of interest or time, fear, an overwhelming feeling of apathy and/or apprehension. Several other publications had since come out, but one I would like to reference here is the 2015 "Living outside of the norm – Transgender in Bosnia and Herzegovina"¹⁰ which was a research presenting data on all important aspects and issues that trans people were faced with. When asked about what they think how much LGBTIQ organisations represent the interests of trans people, the responses were quite evenly split to 50-50%, which I believe to be very representative of the state of mind of the community itself. Those who were indirectly involved (or not at all) had a relatively positive opinion. On the other hand, most trans people I spoke to who were directly involved did not think the organisations were doing enough to improve their position. A common thing most persons had a problem with was the fact that it felt that certain trans-related events were being used as tokens to create the illusion of being all-inclusive, that trans people

⁶ Amnesty International, "Eight injured as Sarajevo Queer Festival attacked", 2008, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2008/09/eight-injured-sarajevo-queer-festival-attacked-20080926/>

⁷ Elvira M. Jukic, "Sarajevo Queer Fest Violence Condemned", *BalkanInsight*, 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/02/03/sarajevo-violence-over-queer-fest-condemned/>

⁸ Okvir, "Press release on attack committed against LGBTIQ activists of Association Okvir", 2013, <http://www.okvir.org/content-saopstenje-za-javnost-povodom-napada-na-lgbtiqa-aktivistkinje-i-aktiviste-udruzenja-okvir/>

⁹ Vladana Vasić, *Izveštaj o pravnom položaju transrodnih osoba u BiH*, Sarajevski otvoreni centar, 2013, <https://soc.ba/izvjestaj-o-pravnom-polozaju-transrodnih-osoba-u-bih/>

¹⁰ Damir Banović, Jasmina Čaušević, Slobodanka Dekić, Ryan Finn. *Život van zadatih normi - Transrodnost u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Sarajevski otvoreni centar, 2015, <https://soc.ba/zivot-van-zadatih-normi-transrodnost-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/>



were not actually being given a platform to speak for themselves due to a clear lack of any trans members in any prominent LGBTIQ organisations. Furthermore, the work that trans people did was mostly on a volunteer basis which was frustrating considering the fact that it was (and still is) already extremely difficult to find employment as a visibly trans person. Undeniably, cis allies are extremely important and can help create a space for the community and empower them in different aspects, but it is equally important to have trans voices leading the way. Credit where credit is due, some of these allies have brought the topic of trans issues into institutions through educational training which even led to a trans activist publicly speaking at the Parliament in 2017. This was a very big step in regard to trans activism as it raised awareness of the sheer existence of trans people in the Bosna and Herzegovina. However, as it seems to be a common occurrence, this has not resulted in any positive changes towards better regulations of trans specific issues to this day.

Even though certain laws are set in place¹¹ which can apply to trans people as well, for example the ability to change one's name and/or gender marker in legal documents, the application of these laws by government institutions is extremely uncoordinated, which leads to discrimination by the employees of these institution against people who come with such requests. If a person were to successfully change their name and gender marker, they are met with the issue of changing it on their diploma too, for example, as there are no regulations in regard to that procedure. Another large issue is the lack of medical services for trans-specific healthcare, something many people have expressed to be their main problem, as they cannot go through medical transition within Bosnia and Herzegovina, consequently having to spend large amounts of money to seek these services across the border, either in Belgrade or Zagreb. Obviously, these expenses are not covered by health insurance but by personal budgets, leaving behind every trans person who cannot afford it. In response to this, SOC has organised several educational trainings for healthcare providers, as well as released a publication¹² for medical professionals and health workers on the provision of services and support to trans people in the transition process, but there is still a lot of work left to be done. All in all, local institutions are not favourable to LGBTIQ people, and therefore it can be said that they are deprived of basic human rights, and the true image of democracy is best reflected in the most vulnerable groups, such as trans people.

This overall underrepresentation of the TIGV community leaves very little space within media where trans voices can be heard and spread among the general public, which further erases us from society itself. The stories that can be found are few and far between, often coming from the same people who feel comfortable enough to share their life and experiences. Apart from the *lgbti.ba* portal whose primary audience are people from the community, other media outlets and journalists have not made a lot of effort to present TIGV issues in the best possible ways, often leading to sensationalist headlines and uneducated (borderline transphobic) quotes such as “woman trapped in a man's body”, “born in the wrong body”, “once a woman, now a man”, etc. This is highly problematic as it sends the wrong messages that everything about gender identity revolves around one's body, and not the constructed societal norms and perception of gender. It is also problematic for trans people themselves who have limited sources of information and may recognise themselves in those phrases, which they continue to use,

¹¹ Registry law <http://www.fbihvlada.gov.ba/bosanski/zakoni/2012/zakoni/18.html>

¹² Asmira Topal, Jovan Džoli Ulićević, Liam Isić, Iva Žegura, Tea Dakić, Velimir Altabas, Srećko Budi, *Medicinski aspekti prilagodbe spola: Priručnik za medicinske stručnjake_inje i zdravstvene radnike_ce o pružanju usluga i podrške trans osobama u procesu tranzicije*, Sarajevski otvoreni centar, 2018. https://soc.ba/medicinski-aspekti-prilagodbe-spola-prirucnik-za-medicinske-strucnjake_inje-i-zdravstvene-radnike_ce-o-pruzanju-usluga-i-podrške-trans-osobama-u-procesu-tranzicije/

further spreading misinformation that there is something inherently wrong with them. On the other hand, positive representation seems to go under the radar since it comes from smaller media outlets, leaving the community as an obscure concept.

The current situation in activism

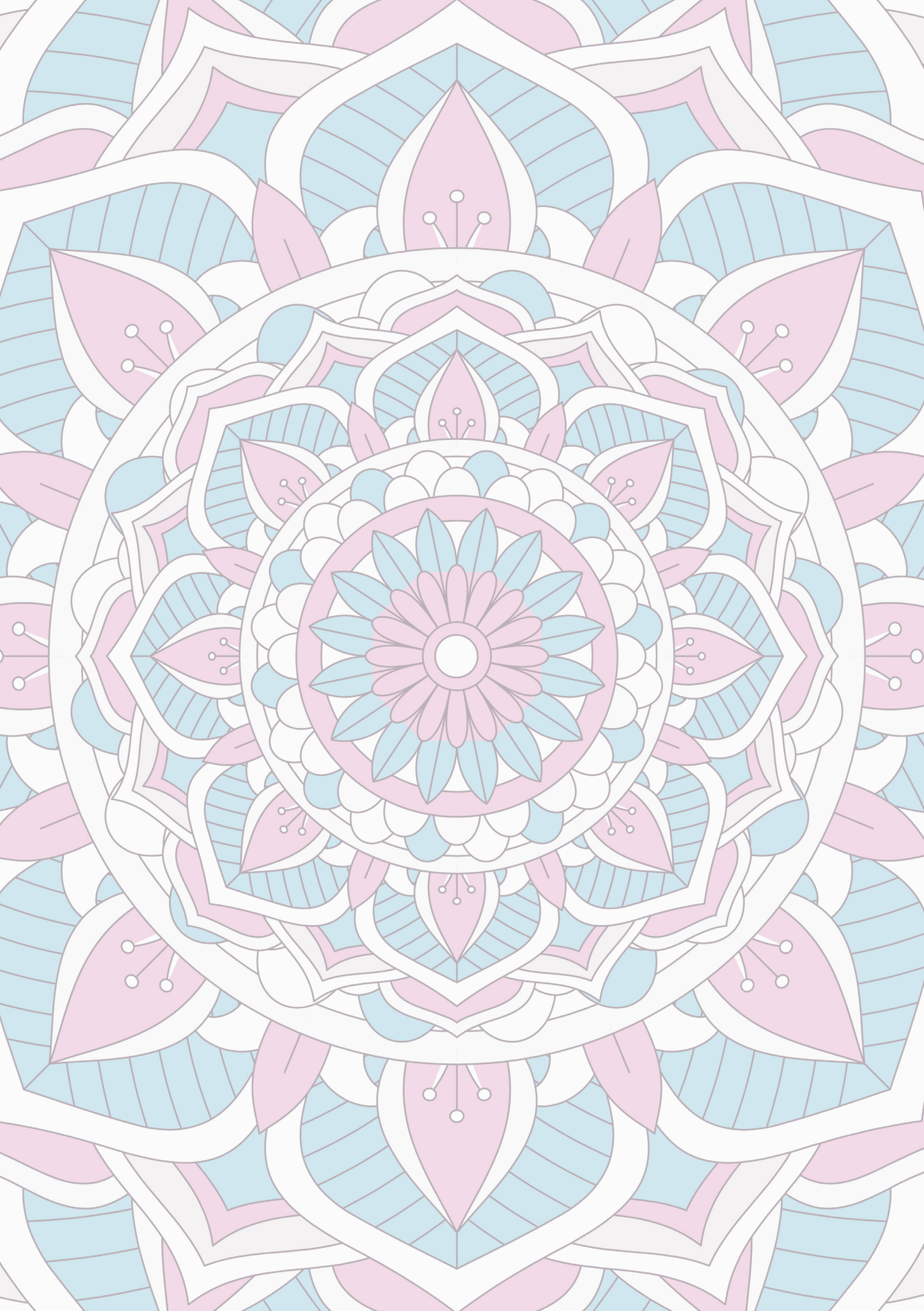
Everything mentioned so far remains more or less the same. At the moment, there is still no established community nor a trans-led organisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Now only a member of Trans Network Balkan, Trans BiH as a group has, for the lack of a better word, dispersed all over the world, with some of us still working in activism, and those who have remained living in Bosnia and Herzegovina have either parted ways completely or deal with the topic of trans issues as part of their own projects. LGBTIQ rights are still perpetuated as being irrelevant among all other problems that population in this society deals with on a daily basis. This was proven by Bosnia and Herzegovina being the very last place in the Balkans to hold an official Pride in 2019, which truly emphasised and brought to light all the hateful attitudes the Bosnian and Herzegovinian people have against the LGBTIQ population. It is no surprise that any departure from the established norm is seen as unnatural with everyone sticking to the status quo that things simply cannot be changed for the better for anyone, including marginalized groups. Not to paint everything so negatively, LGBTIQ activism has clearly been on the rise, thanks to small groups of activists who refuse to give up. Additionally, the social climate has changed as well to some extent, but this is still mainly due to international pressure, rather than a change in the social paradigm. To my knowledge, SOC and, more recently, Tuzla Open Centre (TOC) have continued organising activities regarding TIGV issues, mostly educational training for health professionals, but they still hold LGBQ rights as a priority. TOC has recently included a new trans activist into their work, however, and are planning on doing more for raising awareness, which could potentially reactivate Trans BiH as a more local group.

Conclusion

It saddens me to repeat over and over again how all of the downsides of the activism for TIGV rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the past seven years have stayed practically unchanged. We have still not formed an actual community, we have no unity, just as Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided in so many different aspects. The national, religious, and financial divide that has been prevalent in our society ever since the 90s has left those on the margins to fight alone for their mere existence, and if they manage to achieve something, such as medical transition, they've invested so much that at that point there is no energy left to invest for the benefit of others. Those of us who have managed to escape the struggles of daily life emigrating elsewhere to live as our true selves, unfortunately, can only do so much remotely. The number of young people emigrating rises each year, which plays into the never-ending cycle of there being not enough people left to continue the fight.

The biggest obstacles have yet to be conquered. TIGV people are in dire need of regulations and legislations that will provide them with straightforward access to basic necessities such as identification and legal documents corresponding with their correct name and gender, access to healthcare providers that can take care of their trans-specific health requests without any additional expenses, and a general sense of community they can proudly be a part of without any shame or reasons to hide who they are. Without local activists whose primary focus are these issues, very little can be achieved, which is why I have always insisted on creating a genuine community whose members can support one another. The strength is in numbers after all.





Livia Zotrija

TRANS COMMUNITY (SELF)ORGANIZING IN ALBANIA

My personal activist position

I absolutely see myself as an activist. Activism is a very important part of my life as I feel I am able to contribute to bringing change into Albanian society and touch people's lives. My motivation for being an activist stems from the desire to fight injustices in the world and seeks to change the norms and attitudes that tell people that life can be lived one way only. I started my activism in 2014, one year after I came back to Albania from Germany where I lived for about 9 years. Being back as an adult I noticed that Albania hadn't really progressed in many different areas and that justice, freedom and all the other key aspects necessary for a fulfilling life are not a common ground available to everyone. I realized that without engagement and fights change would potentially never come. This pushed me to become more eager, to learn more and act in order to bring the change I was missing.

LGBTI rights in Albania

On January 20th 1995, after international pressure from the Council of Europe and ILGA Europe, Albanian Parliament decriminalized consensual same-sex relations. The Constitution of 1998 broadened the protection of human rights with a specific clause on anti-discrimination, including gender as a prohibited ground for discrimination. The Law on Protection against Discrimination (LPD), approved in 2010, prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Constitution of Albania¹ establishes comprehensive rights for citizens. It provides protection from discrimination in general, including discrimination on the grounds of gender, but not specifically on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). Today, current legislation doesn't impose a ban on same-sex relations. The rights of LGBTI people are protected by recent changes in the Penal Code.² The Penal Code was amended in

¹ Constitution of Albania, Law No 9904, date 21.4.2008, last amended by Law No 76/2016, date 22/7/2016, Article 18 states: No one can be discriminated against on the grounds of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, language, political, philosophical and religious beliefs, social, educational and economic situation, and parental status. Official Journal: <http://www.qbz.gov.al/kushtetuta.htm>

²Loloçi, Krenar (2014) *Study on Homophobia, Transphobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Legal Report: Albania*, commissioned by the British Embassy in Tirana.

2013 and includes sexual orientation and gender identity as aggravating circumstances in cases of hate crimes (Article 50j). According to 2017 Intersex Research study³, legal provisions⁴ assert that the parents bear primary responsibility for the registration of their children, and in case this procedure fails, it falls onto the institutions to carry out this procedure. A medical multidisciplinary team working with intersex babies and children does not exist. Few specialists participate in the process of medical treatment and verbally agree on which tests and analyses to conduct. However, at the end of June 2020, Albanian Ministry of Health approved a protocol⁵ that stops parents and medical professionals from enforcing surgical intervention on intersex babies. Prior to this protocol, it was left to parents to decide on whether an intervention should take place, and what sex the child would be assigned. Now, this can no longer happen and surgical interventions can only take place if it is deemed necessary for health reasons. If parents do not follow the protocol and guidance of a doctor, the Child Protection Unit⁶ will be informed. If doctors deliberately do not follow the protocol, they can risk losing their license and face criminal charges. There are no provisions that specifically address the human rights of intersex people. Within LPD, sex characteristics are not listed as possible grounds of discrimination. The only current legal cases concerning intersex children are about changing the sex marker in the identification documents. Local institutions and stakeholders still do not recognize intersex persons at any level in the system and there is a complete lack of services for the intersex community.

Despite advancements in relation to human rights of LGBTI persons, trans people in Albania do not fully enjoy rights related to their gender identity and are still the most marginalized group within the LGBTIQ+ community. Though it is important that there are no laws that criminalize gender identity and trans identities in particular, there is no legal gender recognition or other laws that are exclusively applicable to trans individuals. It is important to emphasize that for the last ten years of Albanian LGBTIQ+ movement, the only civil society organizations that have been vocal regarding human rights of the trans community were the local LGBTIQ+ organizations. Due to this reason, the organization Alliance LGBTI⁷ established and functioning in Tirana has been offering capacity building training for women's rights organizations working throughout Albania in order to not only understand that the gender system is not binary but also to make it possible for them to advocate for human rights of transgender people by providing a safe space for trans community living outside of the capital city. Even though local LGBTIQ+ organizations and transgender activists have been raising their voice and advocating for many years, there are still no specific services or clinics for trans people. There is no hormone therapy and no gender reassignment procedures. Trans community members can use publicly available health services, but often face discrimination or refusal of the same based on their gender identity coming directly from health professionals. Medical staff at all levels lacks training and understanding of basic concepts related to trans identities and for that reason trans people are usually perceived with suspicion and treated differently. Trans persons usually have to ask for healthcare and

³ Intersex Research study 2017 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia: <http://www.lgbti-era.org/sites/default/files/pdfdocs/Intersex%20Research%20Study-ENG.pdf>

⁴ The registration of children in Albania is regulated through Law No. 10129, dated 11.05.2009, "On Civil Status", as amended.

⁵ Alice Taylor, "Albania Approves Protocol to Stop Medical Intervention on Intersex Babies", *Exit News*, Published 27-06-2020, <https://exit.al/en/2020/06/27/albania-approves-protocol-to-stop-medical-intervention-on-intersex-babies/>

⁶ Website of State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child <http://femijet.gov.al/al/njesite-per-mbrojtjen-e-femijeve>

⁷ <https://www.aleancaalgbt.org/>

accompanied by individuals (activists) or organizations. They are often denied appropriate healthcare if they come asking for a trans specific medical service alone⁸.

Overview of the current situation regarding trans activism

Transgender people in Albania face a huge amount of violence and bullying because of their non-conforming appearances and strictly defined gender roles of Albanian mentality and culture. Due to systematic discrimination and exclusion from the society many homeless transgender people are forced to engage in sex work online and on the streets of the capital city to earn a living and often maintain their families as well. Since sex work in Albania is prohibited by the law, these community members continuously stare in the face of danger coming by the clients and the police. Transgender sex workers are victims of rape and other forms of brutal sexual violence, harassment and sexual harassment. Due to this situation most cases of violence and rape targeting transgender sex workers are not reported to the police since with the report they can actually incriminate themselves. For example in 2009, a transgender woman was stabbed by a client who claimed to have been shocked to learn that the sex worker was not a “real woman”.

Another issue that transgender people face in their everyday life is homelessness and the difficulty in finding a rented apartment because the owners refuse rent after seeing that the client is from the transgender community. Also, in cases when the owner of the apartment accepts to rent, the situation becomes difficult with the community and neighbors so most of the transgender people who try to live in Tirana are forced to change location and apartments every month or every other month. Although the law on housing has been amended and LGBTIQ+ people are benefactors amongst other communities for the past two years, the government has failed to provide service to the community in general, but to the transgender community especially. This failure in providing social housing first of all is a result of horrendous and difficult applying procedures that almost no one from the community can follow through. In addition, no one from the LGBTIQ+ community trusts no municipality worker to come out as LGBTIQ+ for the application of social housing.

Even though Albania has adopted the Anti-Discrimination Law, the life and dignity of the transgender community continue to be endangered and not fully respected. The staff of the Alliance LGBTI has been working closely with professionals of different areas and service providers from public services but also from civil society organizations from different municipalities in Albania. During this work we have seeing a huge lack of information among school professionals in relation to transgender community and as a result there a huge amount of school drop outs from this community which consequently leads to a greater marginalization and exclusion. Due to the fact that Albania is a patriarchal society it is very difficult for non/binary individuals to express their gender freely. Therefore, they easily become direct targets of bullying, discrimination and violence which has been leading to exclusion, poor mental health and high numbers of self harm and attempted suicide cases.

Alliance LGBTI which is a grassroots organization and supports many transgender individuals throughout Albania, has raised the attention towards all the transgender cases which are forced to live a double life and have never been able to express their gender identity openly and freely. This is a severe situation which causes trauma in the

⁸ Based on PINK Embassy, Alliance and Pro LGBT annual internal reporting, and Joint-report on the implementation of the LGBTI Action Plan in Albania, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2018.



psyche of the individual, a trauma that is almost impossible to overcome. It is of great importance to mention that the only initiatives undertaken to change this difficult situation in Albania are from the local LGBTIQ+ organizations which have been working for almost a decade to change the perception of the general population on issues important to the LGBTIQ+ community and specifically the transgender community. There are no initiatives from the past or current government to educate and inform the general population with regard to this community and the fact that they should have been protected by the existing laws. Even though Albanian Council of Ministers has adopted a National Action Plan for inclusion of LGBTIQ+ community in 2016, there have been no initiatives at all from their side to inform and train psychologists, social workers, teachers, police and other service providers on the needs and issues of the transgender community in Albania so as a result they greatly fail in doing their work the right way and end up causing even more problems when dealing with cases concerning transgender individuals⁹. Alliance LGBTI publishes a report on discrimination of LGBTIQ+ people in Albania every year where all the cases that have faced institutionalized violence, homophobia or transphobia found its place.

Albanian audiovisual media should be one of the main stakeholders in the education of the general public when it comes to human rights in general and human rights of LGBTIQ+ persons specifically. Unfortunately, there are very few cases where the media portrays such news ethically and without any human rights' violations. During the last three years there have been at least three transgender people which have chosen to publicly come out in different Albanian TV programs to discuss their own situation and the situation of transgender people in general. Public appearances of transgender activists are generally seen as positive from the perspective of LGBTIQ+ activists or other transgender people since only by coming out and raising their voice they have the power to change general opinion of the population regarding issues the community finds the most important. However, in all these public appearances the moderators of the programmes have shown neglect in respecting them with what it seems a deliberate misuse of pronouns, offensive personal questions or even with tricking them into a debate with religious representatives that a-priori do not accept and condemn the existence of LGBTIQ+ individuals and purposefully misinform the public by calling transgender people sick. Unfortunately, after these shows are uploaded on youtube or even on official news portals, the comment section is each time exploding from hate speech comments which no one from the designated portal cares to filter. This shows that Albanian media are sincerely not interested in portraying the needs and issues of the community correctly but instead are interested in making a sensationalist show by creating unhealthy debates.

⁹ Redaksia, "Publikimi i raportit vjetor të organizatave kundër diskriminimit të komunitetit LGBTI në Shqipëri", *Historia Ime*, 2019, <https://www.historia-ime.com/lgbt/publikimi-i-raportit-vjetor-te-organizatave-kunder-diskriminimit-te-komunitetit-lgbti/>;

Historia Ime, "Situata e LGBTI+ gjatë pandemisë, rritje e papunësisë dhe nevojës për strehim e shërbime", *Historia Ime*, 2020, <https://www.historia-ime.com/lgbt/situata-e-lgbti-gjate-pandemise-rritje-e-papunesise-dhe-nevojes-per-strehim-e-shepbime/>;

Kevin Jasini, "Implementimi i Objektivave të Zhvillimit të Qëndrueshëm në kontekstin shqiptar/Perspektivë LGBTI+", *Historia Ime*, 2020, <https://www.historia-ime.com/lgbt/implementimi-i-objektivave-te-zhvillimit-te-qendrueshem-ne-kontekstin-shqiptar-perspektiva-lgbti/>

Problems faced by people who engage in trans activism

Trans activism has been thriving in Tirana due to the hard work that Alliance LGBTI has been doing in the past decade in empowering the Albanian queer community by offering different socio-cultural activities and creating a safe environment within the organization for community building of different kind. Throughout the years within the organization we have identified and welcomed every person that has shown the interest of contributing in activism and we have been investing in them to empower these individuals enough so they can raise their voice for their own human rights. This initiatives have been successfully particularly with the transgender community. For many years now we have been organizing different capacity building trainings with the focus on self organization of the trans community where we have not only been collaborating with Albanian activists but also with queer activists from the region which gladly shared their experience. Also our focus has been in empowering the transgender sex worker community to self organize and advocate together with other LGBTIQ+ activists to the current Albanian government for changing the law that criminalizes sex work, but also making conditions for gender reassignment law to be a part of the legal framework. As LGBTIQ+ activists we have made sure that , in many occasions we met with representatives of the Albanian government, transgender activists who are willing to speak for themselves and raise their own issues are sitting at the table. However, transgender people still remain invisible. Regardless of our efforts and positive achievements in empowering transgender community in self organizing, it has been difficult to reach sustainability of the process due to the remaining daily challenges this community faces like homelessness, difficulties in finding a job, school drop outs due to transphobia and bullying, but also engagement in sex work which can all be quite overwhelming and prevent trans people from investing their energy into activism.

These remaining daily challenges have pushed a huge number of transgender people to lose interest in activism since their terrain is much more difficult than for other human rights activists, and search for a better life by seeking asylum to other European countries.

Another very important Albanian NGO has been working on empowering transgender community. That is “Streha” shelter¹⁰, the first non-public residential centre in Southern Eastern Europe, which helps the LGBTIQ+ community in emergency of housing and accommodation. It started as a pilot project of two main LGBTI organizations in Albania, Alliance against LGBT Discrimination in collaboration with United ProLGBT Cause and the Shelter opened its door in December 2014. It supports youth who is in a situation of homelessness as a result of violence and discrimination coming from families and/or local communities where they live. Streha serves not only to LGBTI people from Albania, but also community members from other Western Balkans places, such as Kosovo and Montenegro. Streha not only offers residential services, but also mobile services, especially in areas outside the capital, where the reality for LGBTI people is even worse and where they face constant violence and discrimination. The mission of Streha is to support LGBTI youth through multidisciplinary services that empower these young people to overcome barriers and difficulties they face while living in Albanian society. These services are provided 24 hours a day, 7 days per week, by 9 staff members. During the pandemic period Streha supported both beneficiaries in the shelter and outside the shelter by subsidizing rented apartments and providing food and medication.

¹⁰ Facebook page of Streha <https://www.facebook.com/strehalgbtAlbania/>



PRO LGBT¹¹ has been also working through the past years through its media outlet called Historialme¹² to improve the image of the transgender community for the general public by offering the transgender activists a safe news space to express themselves in different ways¹³ about their lives, issues and rights.

For this past year due to the pandemic of Covid-19, Alliance LGBTI and Streha have been the only organizations which have offered direct support to the transgender community which have suffered the most pandemic's consequences. Many cannot satisfy even their most basic needs for food, shelter, and medication. Transgender people and transgender sex workers in Albania are at increased risk. The pandemic has severely worsened their situation that is already difficult. Being in contact with clients is now extremely dangerous as it increases the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Considering that many also have other health conditions, such as sexually transmitted infections, and face numerous barriers to access health care in Albania, the risk of having to face complications related to COVID-19 within a hospital system is nearly guaranteed. Starting on March 12, 2020, the government forced the closure of all businesses (except supermarkets, pharmacies, and banks), leaving most of these youths unable to afford the costs of daily survival. Given that these youth have zero family to fall back on; their financial safety net is nonexistent. Since March 2020 Alliance LGBTI and Streha have provided assistance to make sure they have sufficient food, safe shelter, reimbursement for medication or any other emergency needs.

Conclusion and future plans

Although there is a difficult situation in Albania with regard to human rights as well as lack of Albanian government willingness to de facto work on improving lives of transgender people we as activists remain firm in continuing on putting our efforts on not only offering services to the trans community, but also in empowering them through different initiatives as we have been doing for the past decade. For the moment, and this is important to mention, we have supported a group of transgender individuals that are ready to undergo hormone therapy, which is still impossible in Albania since there are no professionals to assist them in this long and difficult journey, but also the legal framework does not allow it de Jure. In order to change this reality, we have started a series of meetings with different medical professionals and psychologists to assess their willingness to work together with us. Also, in 2021 we are going to have an election year so our main focus during electoral phase will be to advocate in the current government the legal changes and advancement of transgender rights specifically, but also challenge the opposition by motivating their decision makers to identify possible focus on human rights of LGBTIQ+ people in their election programs.

¹¹ Facebook page of Pro LGBT Albania <https://www.facebook.com/ProLGBTAlbania/>

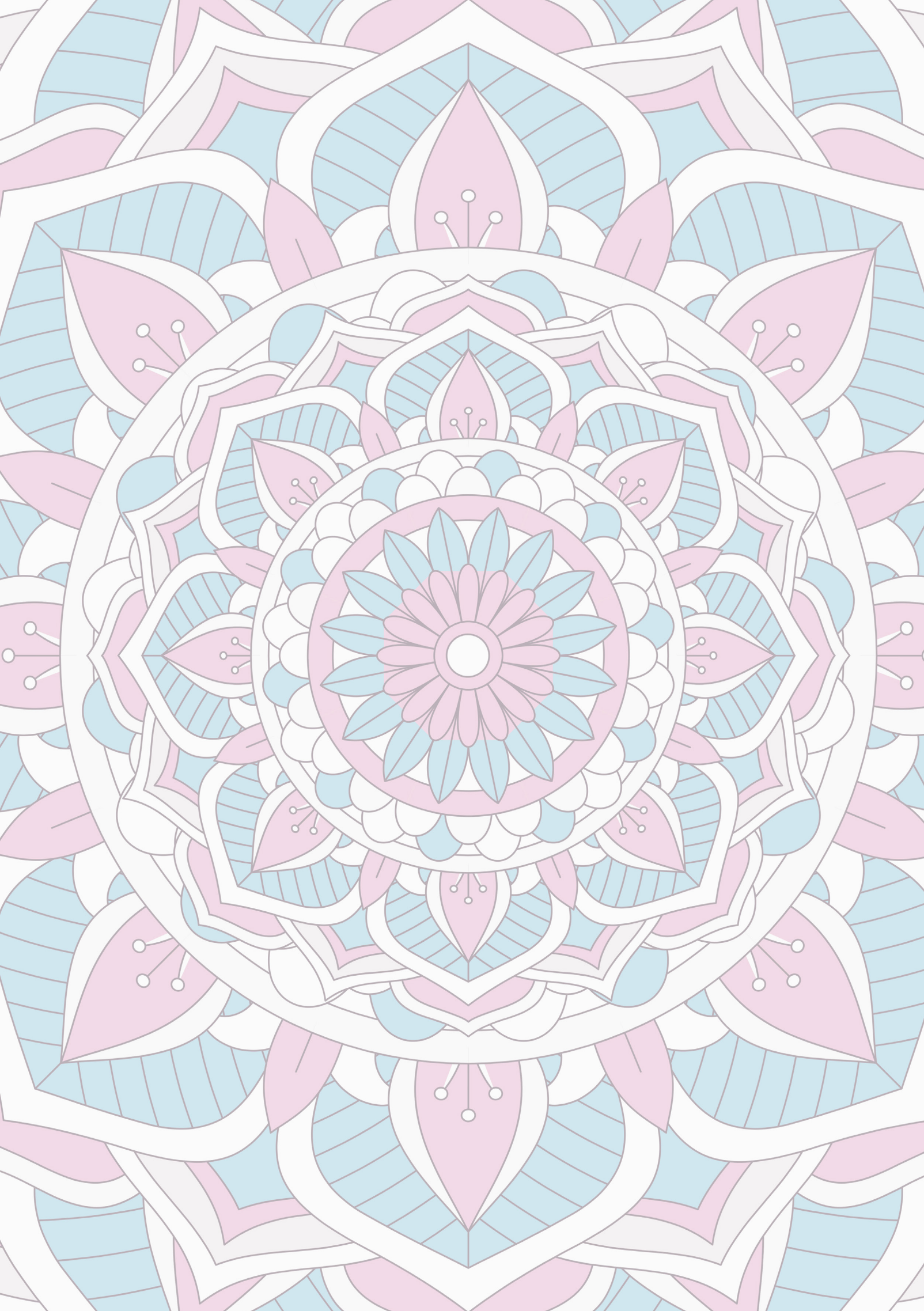
¹² Website of Historia Ime <https://www.historia-ime.com/>

¹³ Historia Ime, "Lola: 'Dikur e pranoja veten si një gabim, tani e di se kush jam dhe jam gati t'ia tregoj gjithë botës'", *Historia Ime*, 2017, <https://www.historia-ime.com/lgbt/lola-dikur-e-pranoja-veten-si-nje-gabim-tani-e-di-se-kush-jam-dhe-jam-gati-tia-tregoj-gjithe-botes/>;

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ABOUT PROJECT

Project “Empowering voices of transgender communities from Western Balkans region” which is funded by RYCO- Regional youth cooperation office and UNPBF - United Nations Peacebuilding Fund and implemented by Association Spectra in partnership with Coalition for Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalized Communities Skopje, Geten - LGBT and AleancaKunderDiskriminimit LGBT, aims to promote and support the empowerment and sustainability of trans movements in shaping public debates on democracy, human rights, social and economic inclusion and rule of law and building capacities to influence policy and decision making processes. Beneficiaries from this project will be trans and gender diverse persons from Western Balkans region, as well as wider LGBTIQ communities, CSOs, allies and general public. Main activities include implementation of capacity building trainings and visibility campaigns, with the goal of building capacities of trans activists from the region, as well as promoting human rights of trans persons.

INFORMATION ABOUT PROJECT DONOR

Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is an international organization, founded by the Western Balkans governments: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, aiming to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region through youth exchange programs.

The Agreement on Establishment of RYCO was signed by WB6 Prime Ministers during the Western Balkan Summit held in Paris on July 2016.

For further information, please visit RYCO website www.rycowb.org

*This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 AND THE ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

INFORMATION ABOUT SPECTRA

Association Spectra is the only organization in Montenegro that deals with the protection and promotion of the rights of trans, inter and gender variant persons. Our vision is a society in which every individual has equal rights, in which all identities and bodies are respected and all of our differences are celebrated. Our mission is fighting gender-based violence in Montenegro through building a strong and visible movement, public lobbying, education and active engaging of trans, gender-diverse and intersex persons in creating and implementing politics which ensure equality and respect of differences. Our values include: pacifism, self-determination, intersectionality, respect of identities and experiences, transparency, team work and culture of dialogue, critical approach and integrity. Through our work we are focused on several important areas: Community building, advocacy, education, art, intersectionality. Our work is guided by needs of the community, which are assessed through meetings or online surveys.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTNERS

The Coalition MARGINS promotes protection and respect of the fundamental human rights of marginalized communities, with focus on LGBTI people, people who use drugs, people living with HIV, sex workers and marginalized women. The Coalition focuses on advocacy, research and analysis, inclusion of the marginalized communities in the creation and implementation of the policies, education of all the relevant actors, promotion of the cultural practices of the marginalized communities, as well as networking and building alliances with the civil society. The Coalition MARGINS promotes a world with equal people, without discrimination, a world where everyone can enjoy the universal human rights and where respect of diversity and the right to choice are the basic principles of a democratic and free society.

Transforma has been an informal initiative since 2011 which moved through several forms and is now operating in cooperation with Coalition Margins, implementing projects as an initiative group under the name TransFormA. There are 20-30 people (there is no official membership), but among them very few (2-3 people) are engaged in activism. The group's needs are met through organizing various meetings, trainings and events. A strong emphasis is put on practical solutions, health rights and the topic of sex work is also included. Publications are being issued to give people practical information regarding the transition process (documents needed for ID changes, health rights etc.). Legal aid and psychological support are provided free of charge by the Coalition Margins and their associates. The group continues to meet on as many occasions as possible, and last year it started 2 activities which are planned to become traditions: the Trans Visibility March and the Transgender Day of Remembrance, both on their respective dates.

Geten (formerly Gayten-LGBT) is the first and the oldest all-inclusive organization in Serbia, founded in 2001 which derived from Arcadia – the first Serbian organization. Our name comes from the Ursula LeGuin's novel and the fictional planet of gender fluid beings, a world without wars and conflict called Gethen (Serbian Geten). Our vision is full integration, affirmation and respect of LGBTIQ human rights, culture and existence, with special focus on trans, intersex and queer. Multiple discrimination and intersectionality based approach is essential to the organization's work and activities. We have received 3 international awards for our work, and Geten is among the first organizations regionally to build platform for gender identity advancing the rights, existence and culture of trans, intersex and queer/gender non-conforming people. Our work is multileveled and it ranges from grass-roots, building and empowering communities, providing direct psycho-social and legal support through services such as trans support group, LGBTIQ SOS help line and other, community and social events, arts, culture, research, publishing, translating up to creating and advocating for legislative changes and laws, such as Model Law on Gender Identity and Rights of Intersex Persons.

The Alliance against discrimination of LGBTI (Aleanca LGBTI) is an Albanian non-governmental organization that envisions a free, open and equal Albanian society that embraces diversity and is inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Aleanca LGBTI had been created on March 2009 by a group of young LGBTI people who had been working as volunteers for three years to change the reality for LGBTI people in Albania. In 2011 with the support of Civil Rights Defenders Aleanca managed to open the first LGBTI community center in Albania. From its beginning till nowadays Aleanca has preserved its grassroots character. The main areas of our work during these years have been the following: Community Building, Awareness Raising, Advocacy and Lobbying.

Aleanca has set up during these years a system of monitoring and documenting cases of discrimination towards LGBTI community members and has used these data's in national and international reports like CEDOW shadow report, EU progress report, American Embassy Human rights report etc. Aleanca has been working very closely with woman organization to train them on LGBT issues so they could serve as focal points in other towns for LGBT members of community, when they need a safe place to go to or when they need psychological or legal support.



