



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing:  
Sarajevo Pride – “Balkan`s last first Pride”  
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## **Sarajevo Pride – “Balkan`s last first Pride”**

### **Announcement and run-up to the Pride parade**

When LGBTIQ activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina announced in April that the first official Pride (LGBTIQ parade) will take place in Sarajevo on 8 September, it has since attracted mixed reactions on social media but very little official comments. The BIH Pride slogan “Ima izac”, roughly translated as Coming Out Now, corroborating popular cry when public bus misses to stop is conveniently used to start off Balkan`s last first Pride.

Main organizers have said on news conference convened (again with leering irony) on April 1, "it is high noon in this country when it comes to LGBTIQ people's rights". Sarajevo news portals also reported words of Lejla Huremovic, one of chief organizers who said that Pride parade is a “powerful political tool to achieve quick changes in the fight for freedom of all individuals and groups which face discrimination and violence and which are excluded from society in any way”.

As it was expected, reaction on social media following the announcement was highly divided. Just as in cases of the other regional capitals having the first pride parade preparations, social media and public commentaries primarily through Facebook/ Instagram posts attracted hundreds of responses ranging from open calls to violence against parade participants to support and promises to participate in Pride`s march. The first support, expectedly, arrived from international representatives, embassies in BIH as well as LGBTIQ organizations in the region. However, the support from the local public figures, liberal politicians and celebrities that was as staple of other regional Pride preparations was reported to be largely missing. Politicians were also shy to make any comments expressing their personal opinion and most retreated to dull official statements acknowledging the constitutional right of assembly and freedom of choice for every citizen.

Expected was the media coverage being given to the most extreme posts on social media. Supporters and shareholders that have ranged from LGBTIQ individuals, minor “liberal avant-garde” from Banja Luka, Tuzla, Zenica and other urban areas were largely quoted and shared on the main social media site, however those opposed to the parade attracted wider attention. The Facebook pages of some local info portals, right wing groups and football club supporters called for violence against Pride participants and urged to "drive this trash out of the city". On the same threads, open calls for lynch were intertwined with populist and conservative argumentations ignorant of homophobic discourse they advocate. Most of the comments were

‘generous’ enough to accept the right to live and right to choose sexual orientation, but opposed to “any” public display of sexual orientation or in typical twist claimed to be against “aggressively imposing” lifestyle that threatens to “normal and ordinary” people. By closely browsing into posts generated by anti-parade groups and sympathizers, one could detect that the gray area of BIH heteronormative majority is filled with mixture of feigned machismo and civic apathy so typical for other societies commonly denominated as belonging to Balkans.

Typical were also calls for organizing anti-protests. By early September, at least three anti-protests have been announced as a follow up to the September 8 Pride parade. Sanin Musa, a theologian from Sarajevo, called for peaceful protest at the same time as the Pride, claiming that it goes against the “fundamental tradition of a relationship between a man and a woman”, questioning whether “pedophiles, zoophiles and necrophiles” should also be allowed to protest. This theologian insisted for “peaceful and inclusive” anti-protests, implying that people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds are welcomed. Another conservative counter-protest was announced by a Sarajevo-based NGO called Svjetlo, also instigated by an attack on family values. “Young Muslims” have voiced their “disgust” and called the authorities to “allow to people to show what they really think about this parade”.

Although it was unclear until the last day whether there will be informal and more extremist gatherings of anti-protesters, the experience of organizing the first Pride parades in other capitals showed that seemingly peaceful anti-protests could serve as a springboard for various fun supporter clubs and other extremists to stir up violence. This was the reason why the local cantonal government demanded high security measures, around 1500 policemen were dispatched along the march’s route. Also, there were demands that the organizers ensure additional security measures and purchase concrete barriers. The issue created controversy that last to date. The activists and organizers felt that the local government should provide all means to ensure safety of the event, citing cantonal Law on Public Assemblies that states for every non-commercial event (protests) police is required to bear all responsibility for providing security of the event. However, cantonal officials then send some ambiguous statements about the need to ensure “additional” (therefore, financed by organizers) safety measures, triggering concerns that the parade could at the last instance be cancelled due to security concerns.

### **Lack of the support by non-stakeholders**

Comparing to region’s other first Pride parades, Bosnian first Pride ended without any incidents. Participants started off at Marshal Tito street and marched to BIH square (in front of the parliament building), as reported, around 500 people were in the parade, among which was significant number of LGBTIQ supporters from Serbia, Croatia and other countries in the region.

However, local media have noted that politicians, including incumbent officials, for the most part failed to comment on the announcement or during the run-up to the Pride parade. Comparatively speaking, every regional country had their share of reluctant or opposing leaders or officials, but governments rarely missed the opportunities to be labeled by European watchdogs as progressive and liberal and to relatively cheaply show to share the same Western community of values. During the inaugural pride in Belgrade 2001, Djindjic government was projected as staunchly “pro-Western”. Similar PR gained Croatian left coalition during Zagreb Pride in 2002, DPS government in Podgorica 2013 or, more recently, the SDSM government in Skopje in June this year.

So why BIH politicians are shy to show personal support? Reasons for this, also linked to the fact that BIH is the latest to mark its first pride parade (18 years after Serbia and Slovenia in 2001) and are generally ascribed to social re-traditionalization ongoing since the end of the war, prevalent ethno-nationalism slowing down the pace of social change and a fear of extremist pockets within the society.

Most of the professional opinion emphasized the second reason, claiming that ethno-nationalist elite instead of embracing socially progressive attitude following the war in the 1990s “cultivated a heteronormative, rigidly patriarchal, family-centered narrative” as means to support their nationalist agenda. As Bosnian journalist Aleksandar Brezar explains, “They [three ethno-nationalist political parties] convinced citizens that prosperity and progress were just around the corner — if they reembraced the nationalist, traditional values discouraged by the previous regime. In doing so, they essentially cast anyone who rejected their traditional, religion-defined norms and ethnicity-based identities as pariahs.” Although most of the Croat and the Serb political representatives choose to remain silent over the parade, only SDA officials were quoted expressing their personal distaste for Pride’s goals, the statements currying favor to traditionalist norms could’ve been heard from HDZ or SNSD members if the parade was to be organized in Banja Luka or Mostar.

As a result, general re-traditionalization of BIH society became ubiquitous, especially in smaller urban and rural areas. This exemplifies response by one anonymous person quoted by BBC, “it’s easy [to be gay] in Sarajevo, but try to come out anywhere else [within BIH].” In parallel, legal framework has also been slow to move up. The government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina only in October 2018 endorsed the legalization of same-sex marriages, which, as it was admitted by FBIH Prime Minister Fadil Novalic, was done solely as a part of obligations BIH has in the EU accession process.

That BIH is somewhat lagging being the region in terms of acceptance of LGBTIQ groups shows a study conducted in 2015 by Era. 72% of LGBTQ people admitted to have experienced

verbal abuse, among them 15% were victims of physical violence. Some media portals created polls on organizing Pride parade asking users to choose between “support”, “do not support” and “it`s all the same to me”. According to one of the first polls made by nationally influential N1 TV, less than 30 % expressed support, while 61.8% voted “do not support”. This is just a part of grim statistics of perception of LGBTIQ exposure in BIH.

Just next corner to re-traditionalization and uncooperative elites lies extremism, colored with religious or ethnic undertones and usually brought by football hooligans. The 2008 Sarajevo Queer Festival, an overtly pro-LGBT public gathering was a scene of attack by religious extremists and football hooligans. In 2014, smaller group similar attack took place against another queer festival. Most recently, in Tuzla LGBTIQ event was harassed by a local mob. Moreover, according to LGBTIQ groups, undocumented attacks, harassments and displays of homophobia are still significantly in higher occurrence.

Bosnian first Pride parade was successful in maintaining peaceful atmosphere without any provocations or incidents with opposing citizens. However, was it successful in shaking ethno-traditionalism by which BIH society is intoxicated throughout the last 20 years? This is a question that was left muted along with unexpectedly peaceful march. As a first parade in BIH it had challenging task to directly confront and endure threats and violence looming from social media, as a last parade in the region it was poised to dispel three-headed scepter surrounding stalled social progress in BIH. Coming out to street in Sarajevo in period of ongoing government crisis and ushering in the air of cosmopolitanism Sarajevo acquires following the Sarajevo Film Festival in August the first Sarajevo Pride parade acquired certain momentum to defy the first challenge. For the second one it takes time to see any changes.