

Gay Kosovars Flirt With Danger

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Fierce homophobia forces members of Kosovo's gay community to lead double lives.

Veton is at ease amongst the well-groomed, watchful young men who frequent the more flamboyant bars of London's Soho district.

The 27-year-old left Kosovo ten years ago. Sitting in a Soho bar on a Sunday afternoon, he says he has no intention of going back to a violent, prejudiced society where he would be regarded as a criminal.

However, unlike most Albanians living in London, Veton is not a victim of ethnic conflict.

Nor is he part of the minority involved in the vice trade – the Albanian gangs which, London police say, now dominate the capital's underworld.

The reason Veton prefers Soho to Kosovo is his sexuality – he is openly gay.

"I cannot live there because my lifestyle with my partner would be seen as shocking and abhorrent. No one's harassing us here," said Veton, whose name has been changed at his request.

Homosexual relationships, though technically not illegal, have always been a matter of shame and taboo in Kosovo. Gay men who do not want to become the pariahs of this fiercely patriarchal society make sure they keep their relationships secret.

Gay rights activists say the situation has not improved, despite the post-war influx of western money and values. They receive regular reports of men being beaten up or intimidated on suspicion of being gay, while homophobic views are routinely published in Kosovo's newspapers.

But they say the problem has failed to attract the attention of human rights groups in the area because fear of being "outed" stops most gays from reporting hate crime to the authorities.

Kosovo ombudsman, Marek Nowitzki, told IWPR he had not been informed of any such attacks during the past two years, but added "there are cases which are not usually reported to the police".

"We are dealing with a very traditional society here... there is no tolerance for homosexuals at all," said Nowitzki.

Kosovo's gays are at a critical point in their struggle for acceptance – encouraged, on the one hand, to be bolder by their exposure to western media and values, while on the other hand, still bound by the expectations of a fiercely conservative society.

Experts have tried to explain Kosovo's antipathy towards gays by looking to the Code of Leka Dukagjini, the law that has guided Albanian clans since the 15th century. Although the code makes no direct mention

of homosexuals, it heavily emphasises masculine honour. To this day, men who deviate from their customary role as husbands and fathers are accused of bringing shame and stigma upon the entire family, if not the clan.

“Men are expected to act as real men – strong and macho,” said Martin Berisha, president of Kosovo’s first gay and lesbian association, Elysium and Sappho. “That is why the Kosovo Albanian community will not accept someone who does not behave as a man in the way the patriarchal society thinks he should,” said Berisha.

While Kosovo’s gays try to keep a low profile, their enemies have become increasingly brazen.

The daily newspaper Zeri recently produced an article backed by comments from various academics and religious leaders, putting forward the view that homosexuality was unnatural.

Kosovo’s top imam, Sabri Bajgora, caused particular offence in gay circles by warning that Islamic law regarded homosexuality “as a disease which needed to be healed and prevented”.

The article also claimed that the leading human rights group in Kosovo, the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms, had no clear stance on the matter. A spokesman for the council, Ibrahim Makolli, confirmed to IWPR that they did not “have any defined attitude” towards the subject.

Martin Berisha said the council’s neglect was disappointing, adding, “If they, as human rights activists, don’t have a clear stance on this issue, then what can we expect from religious extremists or even the common folk?”

Observers say attitudes towards homosexuals within Kosovar society may also have hardened because of the recent conflict with Serbia, during which machismo was held up as a patriotic virtue.

Worryingly, some Albanian conservatives believe this virtue is once again facing an external threat – not from the Serbs, but from the westerners who now live and work in Kosovo.

In an article published last September, the daily newspaper Epoka E Re spoke of the “dangerous ways and behaviour brought by the foreigners”, before naming a restaurant near the university in Pristina as a popular meeting place for homosexuals.

According to the OSCE’s media advisor in Kosovo, Willem Houwen, three members of Kosovo’s gay and lesbian association were beaten up immediately after the article was published.

Houwen, who helped the association to become registered in Kosovo, told IWPR that when one victim reported the assault to local police, he was mocked and verbally abused. No action was taken against the perpetrators.

As Kosovo has no hate crimes law that distinguishes between an attack on a homosexual and an ordinary assault, gays are loathe to report homophobic attacks to the police. But whether such legislation were introduced or not, society would immediately seize upon any such complaint as an admission of homosexuality – a disaster for the many gays who lead dangerous double-lives as devoted husbands, fathers and sons.

At a private party in Pristina, such men are happy to discuss and discard their disguises.

A 25-year-old man from northern Kosovo speaks of how he lies to his parents every time they ask him why he hasn't found himself a girl to marry. His boyfriend, an American, adds that his partner is deeply paranoid of being discovered.

A 40-year-old from Presevo in southern Serbia spends every weekend with his lover in Pristina after telling his family he has left town on business.

Another young man kisses his lover and says, "Doing this in our office or anywhere outside would be suicide."

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