

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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ALBANIA

COMING OUT ONLINE IN ALBANIA



Civil Rights Defenders and One World Platform

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www.civilrightsdefenders.org/region/albania

www.oneworldplatform.net

Introduction

A new wave of activism flourished in Albania during the late 2000s with the founding of several new lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights activist groups. Most important was a Facebook group started by lesbian activists which grew into the largest LGBTI community in the country.¹ It also changed the way sexualities are expressed for Albanians online. This report will focus on the impact that the internet and in particular social networks have had on the sexual rights of LGBTI persons in Albania. It will try to explore this from a feminist perspective, paying particular attention to its impact on women.

Policy and political background

Albania is a small country in the western part of Southeastern Europe, along the Adriatic Sea. After World War II a communist regime held the country under a dictatorship for 45 years. Although the regime was overthrown in 1991, the country is struggling to achieve democracy – with little success, as corruption and unemployment are high. Given its strong patriarchal background, Albania is still a conservative society, although traditional, conservative values are being deconstructed and dismantled. However, change has occurred mostly in the capital Tirana and other major cities, and less so in smaller cities and rural areas.

In 2010 Albania approved a law for protection from discrimination which included, among others, sexual orientation and gender identity.² A commission was set up to ensure that the law was implemented, but its effectiveness is quite low. The law was passed under the auspices of the European

Union (EU), as Albania aspires to become a member of the EU, but the authorities do not seriously engage in the implementation of the law.

Albanian cyberspace is a very vibrant sphere with 60.1% of the country's population using the internet.³ The internet is free in terms of expression, unregulated, and there is no clear definition of unlawful online content and activities.

Hate speech is widespread online, especially targeting ethnic minorities, women, LGBTIs, and religious groups, among others. Amendments to the Albanian criminal code introduced punishment for encouraging hate crimes.⁴ However, the law has had little impact because it has not yet been implemented properly.⁵

Online journalistic reporting ethics are problematic. Women are widely objectified in images and misrepresented, especially by internet-based outlets that aim to increase their readership. Although some news portals and websites have ethical guidelines and moderate user comments, most do not, allowing users to express harmful hate speech that keeps the LGBTI community closeted and isolated. Albania has no self-regulatory or ethical body for journalists where a breach of ethics by journalists can be addressed.

Opening up online

In the late 1990s Albania was still a relatively “closed” society where the expression and enjoyment of sexual preferences for most LGBTI people remained a challenge. LGBTI persons were very isolated and lonely with few opportunities to meet each other and socialise. The situation changed with the introduction of the internet, a communications tool that was also embraced by human rights activists and used for civil society interventions. Because of the internet, LGBTI sexualities are now being represented and expressed more than ever by Albanian LGBTI persons.

3 www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm

4 Albanian Criminal Code 1995, amended in 2013. www1.fint.gov.al/images/Ligji_nr_144_2013_date_Per_disa_shtesa_dhe_ndryshime_ne_Kodin_Penal.pdf

5 Interview with Xheni Karaj, executive director of the Alliance against Discrimination of LGBT Persons in Albania, 3 July 2015.

1 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/aleancalgbt>

2 Republic of Albania. (2010). Law on Protection from Discrimination. www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_178702.pdf

The existence of social media and online communication outlets such as Facebook groups and chat forums has impacted the LGBTI community significantly. It all started in 2000, peaking in 2009, when a group of young lesbian girls created a Facebook group called the Alliance of LGBT and Straight Persons against Discrimination (Aleanca).⁶ The group was trying to promote the rights of LGBTI persons and encourage LGBTI activism. Within a very short span of time the group had thousands of followers.

In the early 2000s, the way to meet other LGBTI individuals was through chat rooms such as www.shqiperia.com.⁷ Due to widespread homophobia, it was at first unthinkable to have specialised chat rooms for LGBTIs. So LGBTI persons used nicknames that would clearly indicate their sexual orientation when looking for each other. Later on messenger services such as MSN, Yahoo Messenger, AOL and mIRC were used. “For a community composed of individuals who are afraid of who they are, the opportunities to get to know people in real life are very low,”⁸ says Kristi Pinderi, the director of an LGBTI organisation. In 2004, an organisation led by gay men called the Group for Social Integration (Grupi per Integrim Shoqeror, GISH)⁹ set up an online dating platform, which had up to 500 accounts. However, it functioned only for a few years. At the same time, specialised chat rooms started to appear, such as gay.al (Gay Albania)¹⁰ and the Albanian version of PlanetRomeo.¹¹ They facilitated the creation of a small community mostly of gay men, but no activism or mainstream media presence was achieved.

Before the “internet era” the LGBTI community was more hidden and subdued. Family pressure to live a heteronormative life, to marry and have children, is very high for both men and women, and many LGBTI persons are forced to marry. This suppression affected their freedom, and created low levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem. There were fewer chances to find trustworthy persons to engage with in sexual relationships. For instance,

Ledia,¹² a lesbian and LGBTI rights activist, and a member of the Aleanca Facebook group since its early days, admitted that she met another lesbian for the first time in 2005, online, in a chat room “because there was no other way to find out if somebody had the same sexual orientation as you,” she explained. “Before I used to hang out in chat rooms hoping to find someone to meet,” she added. “At times it worked. At other times it was very risky, as some men would pretend to be women.” Making connections in non-friendly chat rooms was problematic for the LGBTI community. “Before, I was using the regular chats, using names that would help people recognise that I am homosexual,” says Ledia. “Some of the girls I chatted with thought that I was a guy who was playing with them. I also would most of the time think that the persons I spoke to as girls could be curious guys.”

The opportunities to have sex and engage in sexual games were considerably limited in the early days of the internet. For instance, what was troubling was that the dominant view of male-to-male relationships was thought of mostly in terms of classical, stereotypical roles: passive/feminine male with active/manly male. At the same time, very few stories online concerned lesbian women.

The spread of internet access¹³ has brought self-evident changes in society in general and the LGBTI community in particular. In this context, a sort of sexual empowerment took place in the LGBTI community, and it mostly benefited lesbian girls and women. The Aleanca Facebook group facilitated the creation of a lesbian community, which was almost non-existent before. Obviously, the internet offers the possibility of unlimited communication between persons, despite location and time. It has been helpful in terms of creating a space for communication, connection and learning. It offers the opportunity to speak more freely, without fear of repercussions. Ledia believes the creation of the group has had a huge impact. It created the only space where LGBTI persons could find information and also at the same time feel part of a community. LGBTI persons say that being free online helps them understand their sexual orientation.

6 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/aleancalgbt/>

7 Interview with Kristi Pinderi, executive director of United for the Cause Pro LGBT, 10 July 2015.

8 Ibid.

9 A survey of the LGBT community conducted by GISH in 2006 is cited extensively in: COWI & Danish Institute for Human Rights. (2011). Study on Homophobia, Transphobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity – Sociological Report: Albania. Council of Europe. www.coe.int/t/Commissioner/Source/LGBT/AlbaniaSociological_E.pdf

10 www.gay.al

11 <https://www.planetromeo.com>

12 Her name has been changed as she wishes to remain anonymous.

13 According to Internet World Stats, the number of internet users in Albania was 1,815,145 as of 31 December 2013, which amounts to a 62.7% penetration rate, while there were 1,097,800 Facebook users in the country on 31 December 2012 (www.internetworldstats.com/europaz.htm#al); according to Internet Live Stats, in 2014, Albania ranked 101st worldwide and had 1,798,686 internet users out of a population of 3,185,413, with a penetration rate (% of population with internet) of 56.47% (www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country).

Apart from NGO websites offering information, Historia-ime.com¹⁴ has also become an important advocacy voice for the community.

While online exchanges have improved and intensified relationships among the LGBTI community, they have also created new types of risks. There have been cases of cyber bullying, threats of outing closeted persons, and the leaking of private images. Engaging in sexual relationships online in exchange for money is also growing.

The LGBTI community complains that websites like PlanetRomeo and Grindr have made communication more artificial, and less spontaneous. Offline meetings, such as in gay bars or other venues, are happening less and less. There is something very mechanical about the online apps that can make you feel objectified. Most of the online discussions start with the questions: “Hi. AP? Cm?” (Hi. Active or Passive? How many centimetres long?). Within such an environment it can be difficult to find somebody with whom to build a relationship.

There is general agreement that the lesbian community is not as visible as the gay male community. For example, LGBTI activist Elidjon Grembi says that applications like Grindr have “revolutionised relationships between same-sex persons.”¹⁵ But this applies mostly to gay men. Lesbian, bisexual or just curious women use it more rarely, even though a growing number of women are using apps like Wapa.¹⁶ According to Pinderi, whose organisation runs Historia-ime.com, men are more prone to look for erotic encounters online. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to seek information. For example, about 60% of the readers of the news section of Historia-ime.com are girls and women under the age of 30, compared to 40% men.

Conclusions

The internet has improved the possibility of accessing theoretical and practical knowledge for LGBTI individuals and groups. The queer community has also had a chance to “expand the spectrum of desires, needs and requirements of the Albanian citizens in general.”¹⁷ The internet has created opportunities for LGBTI individuals to explore their sexuality, and increased their chances of finding someone to engage in a sexual relationship. LGBTI activists have noticed that coming out anonymously online has helped the transition to sharing one’s

sexual identity openly in small, safe groups on social media.

Activism on the internet has been conducive to creating a larger LGBTI community, which has led to a collective momentum to change the attitudes of society. The actions of civil society organisations online have been fundamental to this.

It is interesting to note the connection between internet access and the changing life of the LGBTI community. The importance of “cruising areas”, or public spaces where the LGBTI community can engage, is reduced drastically. Nevertheless, these public spaces posed various dangers to the safety of the community, says Pinderi. In these spaces LGBTIs have been beaten, robbed and raped.

Social platforms have enabled the LGBTI community to interact with each other anonymously. Social media platforms also became the only means by which people could organise politically to start a movement. Xheni Karaj, director of the Alliance against Discrimination of LGBT Persons,¹⁸ thinks that the internet has played an important role in mobilising people from cities outside of the capital, primarily through the exchange of information.¹⁹ However, the internet has not solved the challenge of stigmatisation. Unfortunately, there are still LGBTI persons who think they are “ill” or who have difficulties in coming to terms with their sexualities, she says.²⁰

In Albania it is still taboo to talk openly about sexuality on TV or in other public spheres. While the internet has helped in challenging taboos, the objectification of sexuality continues to be misused by numerous online media platforms to gain more clicks. Typically they emphasise the very stereotypes that LGBTI activists are challenging.

Online violence has increased in line with LGBT issues becoming more visible on news portals and social media platforms through various debates. Unfortunately, although there is an article in the criminal code against hate speech, reporting this form of violence to the police has proved unsuccessful, as it is not considered a dangerous threat, according to Karaj.

Action steps

The following observations can be made for Albania:

- Sexual rights are fundamental to LGBTI and women’s rights. Feminist voices need to be strengthened. Existing feminist groups who

14 historia-ime.com

15 Interview with Elidjon Grembi, activist with the Alliance against Discrimination of LGBT Persons in Albania, 22 July 2015.

16 wapa-app.com

17 Interview with Xheni Karaj, 3 July 2015.

18 www.aleancalgbt.org/en/about-us

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

are active online need to be supported and encouraged.

- Dedicated spaces for women that offer information on sexualities and forums to connect with each other should be created.
- Scarce resources and patriarchal attitudes do not allow for the increased use of the internet amongst young girls and women. In the words of one lesbian activist, “If the economic conditions of a family allow for only one phone they would first buy it for their son and after that their daughter.” This requires campaigns for increasing internet access for women and girls, especially in remote areas.
- Dedicated online counselling and the sharing of information could help LGBTI people to help themselves and accept themselves.
- Specialised forums that combine information sharing about sexuality and sexual health, with blogs and spaces for discussion, as well as a dating or chat section, would be useful. A virtual space that allows persons to speak freely and openly is important.
- Registering on social networks with your identification number has been partly embraced by some LGBTI persons disappointed by the use of fake profiles online. However, this should not be encouraged as it breaches anonymity and the freedom to be oneself, at least on the internet.
- Activists need to better understand the use of the internet and how to reach out to isolated members of the community. For example, there is a need to increase information about transgender, transexual and intersex persons.

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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2015 Report

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