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## Prospects for LGBTQ sports in Southeast Europe

Tue, 09/08/2011 - 2:51pm



Almost three decades after the pioneering developments of LGBTQ sport phenomenon in the USA and its spread in Western Europe in the 1990s, Southeast Europe is catching up - in an organized and determined fashion in Slovenia and Croatia, or as symbolic first steps in other countries. Change is inevitable. In view of the coming EuroGames 2012 in neighbouring Budapest, this region is offered an exceptional opportunity not only to take part but also add to the diversity and direction of LGBTQ sport movement in rapidly changing Europe. *Written by Željko Blaće.*

## Symbolic Steps at EuroGames 2011 in Rotterdam

After the EuroGames 2011, it is important to look at what opportunities are there for charting of new developments in the LGBTQ community in SEE and its transformative capacity in general.

Although Rotterdam did not make huge impact on larger LGBTQ sports scene, **some innovative practices** opened up a more space for future developments. As a big exceptional situation participants from all over SEE participated in Rotterdam. Even Kosovo was included through an American expat from Prishtina interested in networking and instigating activities in the region.

Slovenia has the longest tradition of taking part in organized LGBTQ sports, so this time their delegation was second biggest in the region with 9 competitors (bowling/10km race/swimming/chess), 1 volunteer and 1 supporter... and won a gold in chess. Most are members of **Out-in-Slovenia** recreational sports organization. Slovenia could have been even better represented, but badminton, dancing and volleyball competitors did not take part in these Games.

Macedonian participants, members of the **Women's Alliance** (thanks to Zorica Majic and COC in Rotterdam), took part in the bowling competition, which they took as purely social and learning experience, with the view on future networking activities. The same goes for Montenegro representative of Montenegro, coming from the **Juventas association**.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was represented by three participants (the team was supported by the Dutch Embassy in Sarajevo) in table tennis, athletics and basketball. The BiH representative in table tennis won the bronze medal.

The Croatian team featured a premiering women's basketball team CRO Divas, part of **qSPORT society for sport recreation** and, as usual, a few swimmers from Zagreb and Split. Two more participants were planned to travel to Rotterdam, but the judo and wrestling competitions were cancelled due to the low number of registrations. Soccer, volleyball, athletics, tennis and badminton participants from Croatia were missing out this time... Although they won a small number of medals, participants from the region made some progress in the networking and self-organizing area and held the first **regional coordination working meeting**. Naturally, they participated in a variety of socializing activities and the closing party program that lasted until late in the night.

## Self-organizing and self-empowerment

Cro Divas is a new team that gathered in the past 4 months around a larger group for informal weekend recreation in Zagreb. Soon, half a dozen girls saw their ambition growing and decided to take part in the EuroGames - so the frequency of training sessions increased last month to 3 a week. Preparations also included a fundraising party and efforts to locate support for members who could not cover their travel costs (the organizers of the Games approved Outreach stipend for registration and accommodation costs only). Girls purchased their sports uniforms with the contribution of the first sponsor, hoping that many more will join in the future! The team was mostly made of very young girls (most are not out yet) with experience in playing in student competitions and lower leagues. They were joined by an American player so they finally had a full team.

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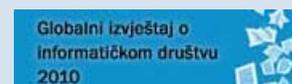
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**Basketball at the 2011 EuroGames**

However, playing for the first time together and in such a big competition, while collecting experience from few the games they played, even if they lost by a narrow margin, the team concluded that they didn't have enough training time together, they lacked the tactical acumen and preparation and at least one tall centre to be more successful. This time it was about getting together, organizing, overcoming nerves and stage-fright and just take part. Next try will be later this year, at a big LGBTQ tournament in Frankfurt that is exceptionally engaged over 'Outreach' support.

On the other side of basketball court, we had Alex (the only player from Bosnia&Herzegovina) joining a gay team without being gay. An exceptional person in a variety of ways, Alex – who is a trans man, is an activist and a student of defectology. He was playing competitive basketball seven years ago, in Mostar, in the women's division – and now for the first time as a male, he played for the Amsterdam gay team. The process of his transition is difficult to realize after 2 years of hormonal therapy, but marks him a very distinct exception in a conservative region. Now he feels stronger than ever and confident in himself – that was obvious to anyone who addressed him at the event and getting surprised to hear where he came from and how he fits an image of urban queer (he is also DJing electro music) rather than your average Eastern European participant trying to fit in within the known stereotypes.

While Western European athletes tend to be more relaxed and take LGBTQ sports for granted, for Alex this was an exceptional situation allowing him to go back to competitive sports.

#### **Towards EuroGames 2012 in Budapest**

By establishing secure social space of acceptance without necessity of political activism (addressing public visibility and acceptance or legal recognition and equality) LGBTQ sport has a possibility to work on self-empowerment, cross-generational solidarity and against auto-homophobia or trans-phobia within LGBTQ population.

Regional coordination of LGBTQ organizations, initiatives and individuals has almost a full year to network, connect, expand, grow and mature until next EuroGames and chance to establish this new form of activism in the region. qSPORT in Zagreb and Out-in-Slovenia will both organize promotional campaigns and informative presentations in following months to advance the situation further and include more participants in both countries and the region.

EPAS (the sports body of Council of Europe) already named 2012 year of fighting against homophobia in sport and together with EGLSF will organize a series of events in Europe, including a conference in March 2012 in the Croatian city of Split, that is to be co-organized by qSPORT.

EGLSF also decided to host it's annual conference in Split on following days, making SEE region a focus for the first time in more than 20 years of its existence.

Budapest organizers (with support of Rotterdam) innovated Outreach support of registration+travel stipends for participants from Eastern Europe. New system will include super affordable registration of 25eur per participant but also include their voluntary work during EuroGames 2012. In organizing first EuroGames in former Eastern Block countries Budapest organizers are in need of as much help as they can get - so fusing volunteers with outreach participants from the region seems like the best possible combination that will benefit both regional representation, atmosphere of collaboration and solidarity.

THE REGISTRATION HAS STARTED! <http://registration.eurogamesbudapest.hu/>

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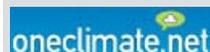
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