

The Tyranny of the Majority (I)

Gays in Poland

Wendelmoet Boersema

Prominent Polish gays are pursuing a new solidarity struggle. They call themselves ‘love dissidents’ fighting for a tolerant climate. Poles have become more nationalistic and they make life difficult for gays. ‘When I was an adolescent in the Poland of the eighties, homosexuality was a regular topic of conversation during sex education classes. If I had been young in today’s Poland, I would have felt as if I was judged and that I immediately had to take a political point of view.’

Tomász Kitlinski is philosopher at Marie Curie University in the Polish town of Lublin. Together with his partner, Pawel Leszkowicz, art historian at the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, he frequently publishes on developments regarding homosexuality and homophobia in Eastern European countries, Poland in particular. In the past few years, Poland has made headlines a number of times in Europe because authorities prohibited gay marches and tried to implement anti-gay legislation. The government of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, twin brother of president Lech Kaczynski, tried to exclude homosexuals from education, amongst other things. When Donald Dusk took office as prime minister in November 2007 these legal drafts were frozen. Before the elections Tusk had promised to sign the European Manifesto for Human Rights, which prohibits discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation. His predecessor, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, had always refused to sign because, in his words, Poland is ‘culturally different’ when it comes to gay rights (and the death penalty). His brother Lech, who will remain president until 2010, is less outspoken but shares his brother’s opinion.

Tusk and his Citizen’s Platform party did not live up to their promise, much to the disappointment of gay activists. In his first speech to the parliament that lasted for hours, Tusk made no mention at all about the rights of sexual minorities and women. Kitlinski: ‘We were shocked that our new government followed in the footsteps of the old one in this matter. As if they too are afraid of contamination with “moral degeneration” from the West as the Kaczynski’s called it. We were really counting on change.’

According to Kitlinski, with the coming of the Kaczynski’s, homosexuality became an important political topic in Poland for the first time. ‘Their government consisted of a party with an anti-communist past and with a fascist anti-semitic history. To them, gays are the new shared enemy.’ Roman Giertych, former vice president and leader of the extreme-right Polish Family League, openly compared gays to paedophiles and pederasts, an opinion that was disseminated through television commercials on the public broadcasting channel, particularly in the lead up to the gay march of 2006. ‘And while both Polish and European legislation clearly prohibits such discrimination,’ Kitlinski observed,

'what worries us most is that there are no objections voiced in the Polish media. A Polish opinion journal even had a cover with chocolate letters spelling "Dictatorship of Equality!" accompanied by a photo of a heterosexual couple with tape over their mouths.' The gist of the article was that gays draw too much attention and demand too much. Now that Poland identifies itself more with the West, gays feel free to defend their rights, but their opponents are also active. According to Kitlinski and Leczkowicz, the recent revival of nationalism and the rise of nationalistic political parties, in combination with a Soviet past and a militant conservative catholicism, all serve to create a bigoted climate for minorities. Poland is the example of that particular mix of factors, but Lithuania, Romania and, to a lesser degree, Slovakia and Croatia fit into the same category. The fact that the Dutch ambassador from Estonia, whose partner is a black man, was pestered into leaving shows that homosexuality is not yet accepted in all member states of the EU.

Some anti-gay protesters in Warsaw, Poland, 2006. On the banners: 'Begone the insolent propaganda of homosexuals!'; 'Say stop to raping our morality under the name of freedom' - © Michal Zacharzewski, SXC



According to the two Polish scientists, accession to the EU and the pain caused by preparation for membership has reinforced the position of the nationalists and kindled a contrary reaction. 'In the eyes of these patriots, Brussels and its "love" for gays stands for decadency and moral decay that can "contaminate" catholic Poles or Romanians,' says Kitlinski. 'I don't think it is a coincidence that the gay march in Warsaw in 2004 was attacked for the first time a few days after the accession to the European Union, even though this march, with hundreds of participants, had been organised unnoticed every year since 1994.'

The church supports the 'moral revolution' that the Polish nationalists want to carry through to Polish politics. In Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Serbia the eastern orthodox church is even more conservative than the catholic church. The Russian orthodox church has open contacts with nationalistic, almost fascist, militias and groups of violent youths - the same ones that attacked the participants of gay marches in Moscow. The Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary and Estonia are significantly more liberal. Kitlinski and Leszkowicz attribute this to the great influence of the protestant church in those countries.

'In many Eastern European countries, religion cannot be seen as separate from issues surrounding sexuality,' says Leszkowicz, who last year organised an exposition of modern art in Poland under the title, *Love and Democracy*. 'For a Dutch man that is probably hard to imagine. In Amsterdam we saw that the gay culture has an apolitical, secular and, at times, even commercial character. I have avoided any reference to religion. I want to show art in the framework of the Enlightenment, freedom and sexual pluralism. That is revolutionary for Poles and East Europeans, while in Western Europe this development took place in the sixties. It says a lot that at first I could not find a single gallery or museum that dared to hold this exposition. Modern art is still a form of resistance here.'

According to Leszkowicz, the rigid position of the catholic and orthodox churches, or the 'language of the church' as he calls it, hampers a healthy dialogue in society. 'Advocates of equal rights speak in terms of freedom, equality or discrimination while opponents of homosexuality talk about "deviation, sin or illness". There is no connection at all. Would it be imaginable that those terms be used to speak about Jews or blacks?'

But that is the dark side of the story. Leszkowicz and Kitlinski do not view themselves as pessimists. They notice that the 'love dissident', as they call the gay activist, makes new allies. 'Poland has a tradition of strong resistance, of dissidence. In the early days they fought against the communists, now the "love dissident" fights for equal rights for everybody, man and woman alike. Indeed, as is so often the case, dissidents from the past are the established order of the present.'

Kitlinski makes a comparison with the struggle for gay rights in the US in the eighties under President Reagan. 'Those were real cultural wars, which we now wage here. It leads to a new solidarity that includes minorities abroad.' He offers the example of the Roma-activists who participated in a Romanian gay parade. In Warsaw, the liberal Jewish community supported the gay marches under the slogan 'minority for minority'. The environmental movement, new lefties and especially the feminist movement support the gay struggle. 'Because the current political elite is anti-feminist,' says Kitlinski, 'abortion practices are hushed up, discussion

quickly lands in the sphere of “our nation is going down if we do not bring forth enough children”. Traditional family values prevail over everything.’

The love dissidents use informal networks and modern media for their communication. ‘The Internet is the place where protest flourishes,’ states Leszkowicz. ‘When Roman Giertych became minister of education in Poland, in all big cities students went out into the streets to protest. Text messages and e-mails did the job. No wonder Giertych is an advocate of Internet censorship.’

Kitlinski and Leszkowicz hope that, in addition to the protest movements, the support of the European Union will be decisive in the struggle. ‘The Roma, the environmental movement in the East Block, have all been achieved largely because of Brussels,’ says Kitlinski. ‘The homophobia of the former East Bloc has already been noticed and condemned by the European Parliament. EU membership will ensure that democracy is slowly “internalised” in the former East Bloc. People realise that democracy may not be tyranny of the majority.’ Leszkowicz sees the first signals of that. ‘I saw a Polish Jesuit on television who said: “Being catholic does not mean throwing stones at gays.” And recently the leading Polish newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, wrote about the new prime minister’s refusal to sign the European Human Rights Manifesto, calling it “a disgrace. Poland, the country that, under the flag of human rights, tripped up communism and set the stage for the fall of the Berlin Wall should be leading in the protection of human rights.” It is that sort of thing that gives me hope.’

Wendelmoet Boersema (MA) studied Slavic languages, was correspondent for the Dutch daily Trouw in Russia and is now Foreign Affairs Chief of Trouw.

Notes

- (1) This is an up-dated version of the article ‘The Tyranny of the Majority’ that was published on 13 July 2006 in the Dutch daily *Trouw*.