

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

*Sexual rights and the internet*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)  
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

## Global Information Society Watch 2015

Sexual rights and the internet

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### **Financial support provided by**

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APC and Hivos would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for its support for Global Information Society Watch 2015.



Published by APC and Hivos  
2015

Printed in USA

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ISBN 978-92-95102-41-5  
APC-201510-CIPP-R-EN-P-232

# BULGARIA

AZIS AGAINST ALL ODDS



## BlueLink Foundation

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### Introduction

An international music star at the peak of his career coming out as gay. His provocative music videos and posters contain graphic images of same-sex relations. Watched by millions online. Discussed by politicians and the media in his home country. Used as symbols of resistance against homophobic regimes abroad. This is the true story of Azis – the Bulgarian Roma super star whose record-breaking hits and drag-queen image conquered the popular folk music scene over the past decade.

Yet despite being the biggest celebrity in the Balkan region to have ever come out as gay, Azis receives anything from hostile ignorance to outright denial of his role by gender rights activists and analysts. They accuse him of being way too commercial, primitive, not genuine, unnecessarily presumptuous, and worse: of reinforcing popular, negative stereotypes of gay people, rather than confronting them.

With the popularity of Azis' music, videos and scandalous public image skyrocketing on local and international television and online, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movement appears to be missing a chance for an unprecedented breakthrough in the rigid homophobic and racist mass and social media sphere of Southeastern Europe. This article uses semi-structured interviews with activists and analysts to showcase the drivers and limitations in the popular politics of sex and sexual rights activism in Bulgaria that transpire in the story of Azis.

### Hostile terrain

Over eight years after joining the European Union, Bulgaria's political and media sphere is marked by growing intolerance and denial of human and minority rights, while classic liberal and democratic values gradually lose public support. The populist neo-conservative messages and nationalistic and racist hate speech that prevail in the news and

mainstream politics often target unrepresented minorities such as Roma, LGBTs and – most recently – foreign refugees. Sexism is tolerated and encouraged in all aspects of social life,<sup>1</sup> leading to what Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover describe as “post-communist masculinization of democracy”.<sup>2</sup>

Among other minorities, Bulgaria's LGBT community is subject to increasing pressure from far-right, nationalist and religious groups who exercise growing influence on mainstream politics and public perceptions. The gender rights movement is under-represented both in mainstream news and online.<sup>3</sup> An embattled Sofia Pride Parade organised annually since 2008 is faced with suspicion by most mainstream political parties and with aggressive hostility by nationalistic groups.<sup>4</sup> Apart from notable exceptions, such as actor Marius Kurkinski, gossip columnist Evgeni Minchev, or the late celebrity stylist Dim Doukov, few renowned public figures chose to come out as gay over the past 25 years since the country moved from state socialism to formal democracy and capitalism.

Negative and derogatory attitudes to same-sex relations are fuelled by a toxic media where the absence of a functioning advertisement market leads mass media owners to sell supportive news coverage to businesses and politicians who can afford it.<sup>5</sup> Ethical journalism is in decline<sup>6</sup> and most news coverage focuses on crime, scandal, gossip and celebrities. Dominated by reality and entertainment formats, sports, lifestyle and consumption, media content is predominantly sexist and prone to repro-

1 Ibroscheva, E., & Raicheva-Stover, M. (2009). MPs with Skirts: How the Popular Press in Bulgaria Portrays Women Politicians. *Observatorio*, 2009(8), 311-335.

2 Ibid.

3 Vroom, R., & Antonov, P. (2012). Bulgaria: Divided movements, divided rights. *Global Information Society Watch 2012*. Association for Progressive Communications and Hivos. [www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/womens-rights-gender/bulgaria](http://www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/womens-rights-gender/bulgaria)

4 Potts, A. (2014, 7 July). 7th Sofia Pride march blocked by Bulgarian nationalist protesters. *Gay Star News*. [www.gaystarnews.com/article/7th-sofia-pride-march-blocked-bulgarian-nationalist-protesters070714](http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/7th-sofia-pride-march-blocked-bulgarian-nationalist-protesters070714)

5 Trifonova Price, L. (2014). A Free Press: Time for the EU to Act. *British Journalism Review*, 25(3).

6 Antonov, P. (2012). Environmental Storytelling: Negotiating Travelling Norms in Post-Socialist Journalism. PhD Thesis, The Open University, Milton Keynes. [https://www.academia.edu/6048888/Environmental\\_Storytelling\\_Negotiating\\_Travelling\\_Norms\\_in\\_Post-Socialist\\_Journalism](https://www.academia.edu/6048888/Environmental_Storytelling_Negotiating_Travelling_Norms_in_Post-Socialist_Journalism)

duce male-chauvinist and religious-conservative views.<sup>7</sup> And while these trends stem from traditional commercial media, they are now upheld by a new generation of online commercial outlets.

### Music for the masses

A particular brand of music show business has flourished in Bulgaria's post-socialist environment over the past decade: pop folk – or *chalga*, as most Bulgarians refer to it. Having emerged as a folk-inspired dance music genre with influences from Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Serbian and Gypsy music, *chalga* evolved into a profitable and fast-expanding entertainment music industry in the decade after 1990.<sup>8</sup> And while musically it is clearly dominated by Balkan and Oriental tunes, both the vision and textual content of pop folk are characterised by vulgar consumerism, male and national chauvinism,<sup>9</sup> and excessive sexualisation of femininity.<sup>10</sup> Ina Sotirova puts it a nutshell for the BBC:

From its inception in the 1990s, pop-folk has glamorised easy money and shady deals, aggressive men and promiscuous women. Although the genre has evolved and diversified over time, its explicit lyrics and videos continue to idealise a femininity marked by an incessant

sexual and material appetite, artificial looks and submissiveness.<sup>11</sup>

With these features *chalga* responded so neatly to political and social trends in Bulgaria's society that some observers accuse it of actually shaping them,<sup>12</sup> while others go as far as conceptualising it as a reflexive “voice” of Bulgarians' perceived journey of catching up with Europe after 1989.<sup>13</sup>

As a music and entertainment genre *chalga* was originally ghettoised in specialised cable networks and radio stations in the beginning of this period. Since the end of the 1990s, it has poured into most mass media channels – both with its numerous music videos and with the overwhelming presence of its performers in various media content formats. Video-sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo.com, as well as online radio stations, expanded its reach further to predominantly young internet audiences during the 2010s.<sup>14</sup>

Among a myriad of *chalga* stars, Azis is the shiniest and most acclaimed at present. Born Vassil Trayanov Boyanov into a Roma family in the town of Kostinbrod, near Sofia, in 1978, Azis approached an already populated *chalga* music scene in the late 1990s. Gergana Petkova, who was well familiar with that scene as host of the first pop-folk music show on Sofia's general interest television channel Nova, explains his genesis as a star:

[Vassil Trayanov] was one of too many young starlets and felt that he needed to do more to be on the top. Pop-folk female singers are traditionally sexualised. But for male singers this is not easy to achieve. He chose sexualisation as a way to boost his star career and turned into Azis.<sup>15</sup>

The rest is history. Once named the “*chalga* gay king”,<sup>16</sup> Azis would leave no taboo unturned to defend his “royal” title. Vulgar lyrics. Provocative images. Flamboyant cross-gender clothing.

7 Kotzeva, T. (2011). Младите хора, джендър стереотипите и рекламите [Young people, gender, stereotypes and advertisements]. Съвременна хуманитаристика, 2011(2). [www.bfu.bg/uploads/pages/humanitaristika-broiz-2011.pdf](http://www.bfu.bg/uploads/pages/humanitaristika-broiz-2011.pdf); See also: Petkova, K. (2010, 11 December). Всички са равни, но само пред шоуто: джендър картината в българските риалити формати [Everyone is equal, but only for the show: The picture of gender in Bulgarian reality formats]. Семинар\_BG. [seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy4-tabloidnata-kultura/item/291-%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4-%D1%88%D0%BE%D1%83%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%8A%D1%80-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8.html](http://seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy4-tabloidnata-kultura/item/291-%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4-%D1%88%D0%BE%D1%83%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%8A%D1%80-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8.html)

8 Lazarov, A. (2004, 11 December). Попфолкът, истинският български шоубизнес [Pop folk: The true Bulgarian show business]. Капитал. [www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/12/11/229178\\_pop\\_folkut\\_-\\_istinskiyat\\_bulgarski\\_shoubiznes](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/12/11/229178_pop_folkut_-_istinskiyat_bulgarski_shoubiznes)

9 Rott, K., & Lilov, E. (2012, 19 April). Чалгизирането на България [The Chalgisation of Bulgaria]. DW. [www.dw.com/bg/%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F/a-15890682](http://www.dw.com/bg/%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F/a-15890682)

10 Stelova, R. (2007). Седемте гряха на чалгата: Към антропология на етнопопузиката [The seven sins of *chalga*: Toward anthropology of ethnopopmusic]. Sofia: Prosveta.

11 Sotirova, I. (2012, 10 February). Bulgaria's *chalga* pop-folk: A cultural rift. BBC News. [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21364650](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21364650)

12 Penchev, B. (2007, 4 January). Бетовен, Шилер и чалга [Beethoven, Schiller and *chalga*]. Дневник. [www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2007/01/04/303001\\_betoven\\_shiler\\_i\\_chalga](http://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2007/01/04/303001_betoven_shiler_i_chalga); and Rott, K., & Lilov, E. (2012, 19 April). Op.cit.

13 Livni, E. (2014). *Chalga to the Max!* Musical speech and speech about music on the road between Bulgaria and modern Europe. PhD Thesis, Indiana University. [gradworks.umi.com/3672900.pdf](http://gradworks.umi.com/3672900.pdf)

14 Savchev, G. (2009, 20 February). Чалга 2.0 [Chalga 2.0]. Култура. [www.kultura.bg/bg/print\\_article/view/15276](http://www.kultura.bg/bg/print_article/view/15276)

15 Azis: the phenomenon. Interview with Gergana Petkova, former anchor of Top Folk at Nova TV. 14 May 2015.

16 Novinite.com. (2011, 18 November). Chalga Gay King Azis Sick of Bulgaria, Moves Abroad Forever. *Novinite.com: Sofia News Agency*. [www.novinite.com/articles/134072/Chalga+Gay+King+Azis+Sick+of+Bulgaria,+Moves+Abroad+Forever](http://www.novinite.com/articles/134072/Chalga+Gay+King+Azis+Sick+of+Bulgaria,+Moves+Abroad+Forever)

Purposefully shocking public behaviour. Penis enlargement. Lip surgery. Rumours of a planned sex change and breast implants. Erotic photo shoot with breasts. A lavish “wedding” ritual with alleged boyfriend Niki Kitaetsa (aka The Chinese), even though same-sex marriage is banned in Bulgaria, followed by an amicable separation. A daughter born by “close friend” Gala, allegedly through in vitro insemination. Alongside Azis’ undisputed musical talent, all these scandalous facts amplified by a sensationalist mass media produced an international show business mega star of a scale unseen in Bulgaria since the glory days of 1960s European *estrada* icon Emil Dimitrov.

But unlike Dimitrov, who had been arrested in his time for alleged homosexual conduct by the then socialist regime’s authorities, but never publicly admitted to being gay, Azis turned his sexuality into a primary selling point of his career. There had never been a drag queen in Bulgaria’s mass culture before him, and Azis mastered his transsexual image purposefully and carefully, as a calculated step to advance his career, Petkova explained. She then describes Azis as remarkably diligent, devoted to his work and “boringly pragmatic”<sup>17</sup> – an important detail that might explain both his daring to pursue a seemingly impossible career as a gay Roma *chalga* singer, and his avoidance of any engagement with advocacy that could hamper his career.

### Gay idol or false idol

Ordinary LGBT people were certainly less than thrilled by the “pragmatic” rise of Azis to a “gay idol” role<sup>18</sup> in an inherently homophobic media and social environment. Victor Lilov, the first openly gay politician to run for the Sofia mayor’s office in 2015, is very negative about the role of Azis in shaping and fixing stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> “Azis exploits these stereotypes in a way that derogates the Bulgarian public’s understanding of gender minorities and affirms them as a subject of mockery,” Lilov explained. LGBT activists do not like to be associated with marketing projects that rely on scandal, explained Svetla Encheva, a Roma and gender rights activist and blogger.<sup>20</sup>

Calculated or not, the artistic actions of Azis came in sharp confrontation with the patriarchal nature of *chalga*<sup>21</sup> and persistently fuelled public debate around gender equality in Bulgaria and abroad. In November 2007 a promotional billboard displaying Azis kissing Kitaetsa was censored by the order of then Sofia mayor and present prime minister General Boyko Borissov under the pretext that it strayed from the limit of public morals. Bulgarian LGBT rights social movement Gemini objected to the removal of the billboard, while Genoveva Tisheva of the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation wrote in an op ed: “What is off limits in the graphic image of two naked male bodies is our heterosexual consciousness which Azis challenges yet again.”<sup>22</sup>

Further, Tisheva used the incident to question the right of white heterosexual men with power to determine which kind of sexual relationship is acceptable for artistic interpretation in public and accused them of applying double standards by not acting equally strictly against similarly explicit imagery popularly displayed to advertise products such as alcohol.<sup>23</sup>

The status of a gender emancipation icon assumed by Azis soon expanded beyond Bulgaria’s borders. His duo with rapper Ustata was described as “challenging not just musical conventions, but just about every traditional notion of masculinity” by Daryoush Haj-Najafi in his Men’s Fashion Blog in the *New York Times Style Magazine* in 2009.<sup>24</sup> Then in 2012 Anonymous used a video clip to Azis’s song *Мразиш* (“You Hate”)<sup>25</sup> to deface the website of the Khamovnichesky court where the members of the band Pussy Riot were convicted for demonstrating in a temple against human rights abuses in Russia.<sup>26</sup>

Milena Fuchedjieva, acclaimed author of screenplays like *Zen Porn* (2002), *Crisis* (2005) and novels such as *Sex Under Communism* (2014), called for support for Azis in the aftermath of the 2014 Eurovision song contest which was won by Austrian pop recording artist and drag queen Thomas Neuwirth,

17 Azis: the phenomenon. Interview with Gergana Petkova. Op.cit.

18 Novinite.com. (2007, 5 August). Bulgaria’s Gay Idol Becomes Father. *Novinite.com: Sofia News Agency*. [www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=83861](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=83861)

19 A fake idol. Interview with Victor Lilov, openly gay mayoral candidate for Sofia with newly founded liberal party DEOS. 1 September 2015.

20 The attraction of Azis. Interview with Svetla Encheva, Roma and LGBT rights activist and blogger. 20 August 2015.

21 Daskalova, K. et al. (2012). *Gendering Post-socialist Transition: Studies of Changing Gender Perspectives*. Münster: LIT Verlag.

22 Tisheva, G. (2007, 23 November). Кривото огледало на хетеросексуалното ни съзнание [The curved mirror of our heterosexual consciousness]. Дневник. [www.dnevnik.bg/print/arhiv\\_zh\\_grada/2007/11/23/400662\\_krivoto\\_ogledalo\\_na\\_heteroseksualnoto\\_ni\\_suznaniie](http://www.dnevnik.bg/print/arhiv_zh_grada/2007/11/23/400662_krivoto_ogledalo_na_heteroseksualnoto_ni_suznaniie)

23 Ibid.

24 Haj-Najafi, D. (2009, 12 May). Kitsch of the Day – Azis i Ustata’s ‘Tochno Segá’. *New York Times Style Magazine*. [tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/kitsch-of-the-day-azis-i-ustatas-tochno-sega/?\\_r=1](http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/kitsch-of-the-day-azis-i-ustatas-tochno-sega/?_r=1)

25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4hQ4J4BFOM>

26 Michaels, S. (2012, 22 August). Anonymous defaces website of court that convicted Pussy Riot. *The Guardian*. [www.theguardian.com/music/2012/aug/22/anonymous-website-court-pussy-riot](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/aug/22/anonymous-website-court-pussy-riot)

better known as Conchita Wurst. Fuchedjieva criticised LGBT activists for never giving credit to Azis for his bold stand against homophobia at home and in Russia.<sup>27</sup>

Conchita expresses a very different culture, embodying the activists' stereotype, Encheva says. "Azis seeks scandal, not just a manifestation of difference," she explained, acknowledging her respect for his talent and sense of scenic presence. She then praised his ability to hold the boundary between personal and professional identities. But Encheva refuses to acknowledge Azis's potential to alter public conventions in favour of LGBT people. "He plays with cross-dressing, with a drag queen [image], and with all the stereotypes that he can gather together, but this does not result in more tolerance," she commented.<sup>28</sup> Lilov also remains convinced that Azis cannot generate meaningful messages regarding the rights of the LGBT community.<sup>29</sup>

But such a conclusion contradicts documented statements of Azis in favour of gay rights and European values, like the one he made in October 2004 when one of his billboards was taken down in Sofia for the first time. Azis then explained in a media interview that the removal of the billboard might stand in the way of Bulgaria entering the EU. "One of the clauses of the EU says that if there is discrimination of homosexuality, origin, etc., we shall not enter the EU," he explained, and was then quick to steer clear of any possible engagement with gay rights activism: "They want to say that I am telling people 'Be homosexual!' While I am just advertising my new maxi single *Как боли* ('How It Hurts')." Still, the incident indicates that Azis is well aware of gay rights and of his potential as their advocate.

In 2011 Azis complained publicly for the first time against "the homophobia, the racism, the fact that the people here do not value my talent."<sup>30</sup> While of course this statement could easily be waved off as yet another media sensation, it might also be a rare occasion of Azis breaking his own pragmatic convention and voicing a truly personal account of the challenges he faces as a Roma gay musician in Bulgaria.

## Problems, opportunities and action steps

Both Encheva and Lilov agree that gender equality is in decline in Bulgaria. Opinion leaders, politicians and public figures are ever more reluctant to come out as lesbian or gay, which prevents the LGBT community from generating leaders who openly identify and demand equality. While part of the reason might lie within the reluctance of potential leaders to come out, as suggested by Lilov,<sup>31</sup> there are indications that Bulgarian society is slipping into extreme conservatism whereby the rights of one or another minority could easily be sacrificed. In Lilov's view such a scenario is systematically pursued by oligarchic media ownership, which aims to degrade European liberal values and promote a conservative Orthodox public moral that is more typical of Russia instead.<sup>32</sup>

The internet sphere, similarly, is increasingly reflecting the traditional media environment. According to Lilov, opinion leaders on social networks are unable to compensate for the influx of intolerance against LGBTs and other minorities that dominates online media content. Internet users who seek balanced, tolerant viewpoints need to refer to Western liberal outlets such as the BBC, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* or *Deutsche Welle*. But this is only true for a very narrow group of users on the social networks. The majority of people uncritically circulate the degrading messages planted by mainstream media, Lilov explained.

In this rather grim context, the story of Azis indicates that LGBT and other minority rights advocates may seize surprising opportunities and act upon them:

- It proves that pursuing an openly gay identity is not necessarily professionally damaging for a public person. In fact, with a great deal of discipline, hard work and intuition, it might turn out to be quite beneficial: something that Victor Lilov and other politicians and opinion leaders might learn from.
- While Azis has maintained a distance from LGBT activism, by exploiting different sexualities commercially there is evidence that he is aware of the plight of gay people and has been willing to speak about it. This demonstrates a great potential for galvanising public support and reversing the negative trends in gender rights, should he or other celebrities embrace this form of publicity more actively.

27 Fuchedjieva, M. (2014, 13 May). Война на красотата срещу „красотата“ [The war of beauty against "beauty"]. *WebCafe*. [http://www.webcafe.bg/id\\_1400902069/fpage\\_4](http://www.webcafe.bg/id_1400902069/fpage_4)

28 The attraction of Azis. Interview with Svetla Encheva. (2015) Op.cit.

29 A fake idol. Interview with Victor Lilov. (2015). Op.cit.

30 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmXwNwa\\_Tts&src\\_vid=zDM0xDwZZIM&feature=s2lp&annotation\\_id=pfC%3ACmXwNwa\\_Tts](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmXwNwa_Tts&src_vid=zDM0xDwZZIM&feature=s2lp&annotation_id=pfC%3ACmXwNwa_Tts); and Mihaylova, A. (2004, 7 October). Азис: няма да ни приемат в ЕС заради сваляния билборд [Azis: We won't be allowed into the EU because this billboard was taken down]. *Novinar*. [novinar.bg/?act=news&act1=det&mater=MTQxOTsZMA==](http://novinar.bg/?act=news&act1=det&mater=MTQxOTsZMA==)

31 24Hours (2011, 17 November) Азис напуска България завинаги [Azis leaves Bulgaria forever]. *24Часа.bg*. [www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1116465](http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1116465)

32 A fake idol. Interview with Victor Lilov. (2015). Op.cit.

- The case also speaks of the existence of vast unexplored areas in the public domain that appear alien and even hostile to rights discourses at first glance, but could be turned into allies for activists pushing for gender, minority, environmental and other rights. Relevant to this report is the unnecessarily stigmatised pop folk fan base of Bulgaria. Nothing indicates that it is necessarily prone to ideologies of hate and intolerance and it is up to LGBT and other rights defenders to successfully reach out to it.
- Finally, the story of Azis shows how interlinked the causes of problems experienced by different minorities are. As a talented performer of Roma origin, who publicly came out as gay, Azis has been forced to continuously break conservative taboos and overcome the inherent discrimination of gender expression and Roma rights alike. This suggests that further analysis of the possible synergies between ethnic and gender minority movements might be beneficial for guiding further practical cooperation in their activities, and media and web outreach.

# 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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