



"Marriage Request gets a lot of Reactions in Moscow but only the Police were homophobic"

Gay.ru web staff evicted from their offices in the wake of an attempt to organize a same-sex marriage

On January 18th 2005, Ed Mishin, chief editor of Gay.ru and the Kvir (Queer) Magazine (right on the picture), and Edward Murzin, an MP from the Bashkortostan Republic of Russia, publicly announced their intent to challenge Russian law that restricts marriage to persons of the opposite sex. They applied for a marriage licence in Moscow. On the 19th, the Police came to the editorial office of gay.ru and Kvir Magazine, which also serves as the headquarters of the gay rights organisation Together.

Just one day after your request to marry Edward Murzin in front of the administration, the police had already raided your offices! Did you expect such a violent reaction?

Absolutely not! It is difficult to believe this is a coincidence. It happened the very next day Edward Murzin and I officially asked for marriage. The police asked to enter our offices because they claimed that we were disturbing our neighbours, but we realised later the statement they showed us came from people who do not live in the house. During their search they intimidated the staff and made homophobic comments.

Where do you think the order for the raid came from? Local officials or from higher circles?

I think it's from the local administration, I don't believe this kind of show could come from higher officials: they wouldn't be so clumsy as to send the police the very next day. I think they would have been more subtil. The policemen who came to our office did not hide the fact that they knew about the marriage. They first accused us of using the flat for pornography and sex work, then later backed down from those claims. They now say they want us out for improper use of the flat. Unfortunately, they are technically right: this is a city apartment and should not be used as an office. We're expected to move out in two to three weeks.

Let's talk about the marriage. Edward Murzin the man whom you were to marry is not gay... who approached the other one first? You, as a gay man or Mr.Murzin, a Human rights activist and politician?

He approached me first (laughs)... we met one year ago when he had made a request to change the law to allow same-sex marriage in the state of Baskiria, which generated very strong opposition. We were invited by a Moscow TV show called "Dual." Then, half a year ago,

Edward contacted me for support. He had been trying unsuccessfully to have the constitution revised to allow for same-sex marriage, but explained to me that he needed to find a man to marry. I offered to



Edward Murzin and Ed Mishin applying for a marriage licence in Moscow: "we only needed to get an official refusal from the court to bring the case to a higher court".

advertise it on our website. To my surprise, we got a lot of letters of support - but not a single response. Then I said, if people are not ready for this, I will do it myself.

So the LGBT community was not as supportive as you had expected? And what about civil society?

Some gay people told us that they thought we were starting too early, that society is not ready for it yet. But, I think that if we wait for it to be

ready, we'll probably have to wait forever! As for civil society, I can honestly say the only homophobic reaction we got was from the police. Recently, the radio show Echoes of Moscow organised a poll with its audience, mainly people in their thirties and forties: 30% said they were in favour of our action. I only expected 5 to 10%! Articles in the media were not negative: they were neutral if not supportive for some of them. This is very unusual. I guess it's because we do not look like freaks. Having a straight deputy and a gay activist created a lot of curiosity. We got much more media coverage than we had expected - even though that was not the purpose. We only needed to get an official refusal from the court to bring our case to a higher court. The very next day we got our refusal from the civilian register office, we have now appealed to the local court. We think it will take several months before we get another refusal from the local Moscow court. Then, we'll take it to the constitutional court and then maybe to the European Court for Human rights in Strasbourg...

What about civil unions, wouldn't they be more easily accepted than marriage?

People would not understand the concept of civil union here in Russia. Civil unions do not exist in this country, even for heterosexuals.

How can you claim that this is the first attempt for same-sex

marriage in Russia when another couple, Denis Gogolev and Mikhail Morozov, already created quite a sensation in 2003 when they were married by a Russian Orthodox priest?

Our action is totally different. Theirs was a provocation... the whole thing was quite counterproductive. The media presented it as two gays lying to a priest who was later defrocked... There had been another attempt, earlier, in '94 in the very same office where Murzin and I registered this year. Activists then were not even able to get into the office...

Do you have the impression the atmosphere under Putin is even more reluctant towards LGBT rights than it used to be in 1993 when homosexuality was decriminalized?

I don't think Putin does anything against LGBT rights, though I think he is himself homophobic and so are the people around him... Lately we've asked a press distributor in Saint Petersburg to distribute our gay magazine *Queer*. The company said they would ask their local retailers, I told them this was the best way to block us: retailers sell straight porno magazines, but they refused ours which is not porno at all. But it is more of a sort of self-censorship than state censorship. Homophobia is widespread in Russia, and it's getting worse. There have always been people getting beaten up close to gay discos. We used to have a few of those cases every year, now it happens every month...

news from Belarus *By Sementsov Svyatoslav / Vstrecha Gay Group. Feb. 4th 05.*

"We have to show our society in the near future, what 'they' (the European Union and the United States) are doing here, how they are trying to turn our girls into prostitutes, how they are feeding our citizens with illicit drugs, how they are spreading sexual perversion here, which methods they are employing."

Aleksandr Lukasheko, President of Belarus in a meeting of the Belarusian Security Council.

Only two days after making this speech, a "non-official" gay-demonization campaign began in earnest here in Belarus. The first step was the expulsion of a German embassy worker, being a foreign diplomat he could not be taken into custody, but his Belarusian boyfriend was arrested on the false pretext of drug use. The story was commented on at length on government-controlled national TV with a lot of homophobic rhetoric. It appears that the point of the story was to link homosexuality and drug usage as evils coming from the European Union, the United States, and the "West" in general. Another example of the campaign followed a week later when a diplomat from the Czech Republic was expelled from the country. In an attempt to accuse the embassy worker of paedophilia, national TV showed pictures of him in Minsk kissing other young men - who they claimed were boys younger than 14 years old. Of course this was ridiculous - to the general public as well - because the "boys" they showed were obviously more around 20 years of age than 14. This I can attest myself, as I personally know many of the "boys" pictured.

Yet the biggest shock for me was to see my own face and pictures flashed across the evening news. After a nice meal with my mother on a Sunday night in Gomel we sat down to watch TV. Following the story about the Czech diplomat, they showed unofficial gay weddings taking place here in Gomel. To my surprise, the images they used during the story were taken directly from my website, and featured me participating in the marriage ceremonies. Besides the fact that that night I was outed to my mother and a few other friends who did not know that I am gay, the fact that they used the articles and pictures from my website without my permission just demonstrates how clearly we live in a state whose government doesn't respect the law.

