

What happened at the first Bulgarian Pride outside of Sofia? Young European Socialists Summer Camp 2019

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For some time now, the discord on major social issues between the progressive Social Democratic and Socialist parties in Europe, on the one hand, and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), on the other, has deepened. The BSP has been repeatedly criticized by the socialist family for its positions on migration, minorities, the Istanbul Convention, women's rights and LGBTIQ people. One of the issues that leads to the biggest schism is precisely gender equality and LGBTIQ rights. For years, some of the members and the leadership of the BSP have either attacked the queer community in Bulgaria or pretended they do not exist. Members of the Young European Socialists decided to respond to the attacks and silencing and to defend socialist values by opposing homo- and transphobia. It is mandatory that the cover up of the problem be removed once and for all.

From July 30 to August 4 2019, the [BSP Youth Union \(BSPYU\)](#) hosted the Summer Camp of the [Young European Socialists \(YES\)](#) in the seaside resort of Albena, under the wing of the Party of European Socialists (PES). The [program](#) included a series of meetings and events on gender equality, taking into account the current issues faced by women and LGBTIQ people. A Pride was also organized during the camp, which was the first march on Bulgarian territory outside of Sofia. Given the "conservative socialism" espoused by BSP's leader Kornelia Ninova, it is no surprise that the BSP did not want the organization to be involved with the event in public. Some specific steps were taken by the camp organisers to limit its visibility. Although the BSPYU had presented themselves as organisers and hosts of the whole camp in [a number of media outlets](#), they avoided the topics that were the focus of this year's program, namely those on gender equality and sexuality. The BSPYU decided to highlight one workshop (out of more than 30) as the main portion of the program - the one on the topic of Russia, probably seeking public sensation and further refusing to talk about inconvenient topics. Not only was the march not made public to the media, but it was planned so that it would, for the most part, [pass through a forest](#) so as to be out of sight. When we got to the beach, where we finally had some local visibility, we were instantly informed that we had to hide our posters, as there was no security available at that location. The BSPYU organized a volleyball tournament that ran parallel to the ongoing Pride. It was advertised by YES and thus established as an official event. Thus a much more significant event during the camp, namely the LGBTIQ rights march, was the target of the BSPYU's attempts to sweep it under the carpet.

Naturally, none of the queer people attending stood silent. On the very first day, I was able to expose Ninova's homophobia and xenophobia, and together with other activists, we were able to organise a small protest against the leader of the BSP during the speech she was supposed to give at the opening ceremony. She didn't make an appearance, but we nevertheless carried out our action against her deputy chairman Denitsa Slateva. We later found out that YES had condemned the aforementioned action and instructed the Heads of the individual delegations to disseminate the leadership's position. The demands of the queer community were never addressed in any way, and

Ninova only appeared unannounced on a half-hour panel at which questions were not permitted. Hours before Pride, I witnessed the seizure of some of the posters made for it. The reason: some contained messages against Ninova and others urged the BSP to fight for LGBTIQ rights. Ninova, notified of the posters, threatened YES with funding cuts and secretly banned BSPYU representatives from participating in the parade. This sheds new light on the events from 2018, when she issued [a public letter](#) against Sofia Pride and LGBTIQ rights, but claimed that everyone in the party was free to participate. Pride itself went through, although many of the queer participants felt threatened, were ridiculed several times, and there was no security after it ended. Disillusioned with the actions of the leadership, who rushed to search for the author of the posters (me) and frustrated by the attempts to ignore the LGBTIQ issues, we decided to act radically in the tradition of true socialist movements and women's liberation movements. At the political camp, after dozens of talks about the need for determination in the spirit of international solidarity, many national delegations joined us. We organized Operation Stonewall in Albena - at the closing ceremony we decided to storm the stage and... kiss.

What happened as a result was revolutionary. Organizations urged us to "solve" the problem of LGBTIQ-phobia quietly so as not to hurt the political family - as if image mattered when the BSP leader was busy fighting the so-called "gender ideology". They asked the impossible and received the inevitable. Moments before the start of the closing ceremony, our group of queer activists occupied the stage. In protest, we kissed and hugged each other, then read a statement condemning the attempts for censorship and lack of security, and urged participants to leave the event with us and prepare a LGBTIQ charter together. One by one, the leaders of the majority of the delegations came forward to state that they were leaving the event with their delegations in solidarity with the queer protest. We organized our own space in which we split up into small groups, with a guaranteed queer and FLINT (women, lesbians, inter, non-binary and trans people) presence in each. On a horizontal basis, the groups prepared separate demands and then we combined them into one. These much needed actions were justified by the long disregard and neglect of queer problems, which, when left unaddressed, escalated. We are determined not to give up even a fraction of the progress made over the years. It's time to say: Equality now! Kisses are a nice thing. Ninova will not be able to ban them. The right turn of the BSP is being called into question not only by the party's internal opposition, but also by an increasing number of non-official members.

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