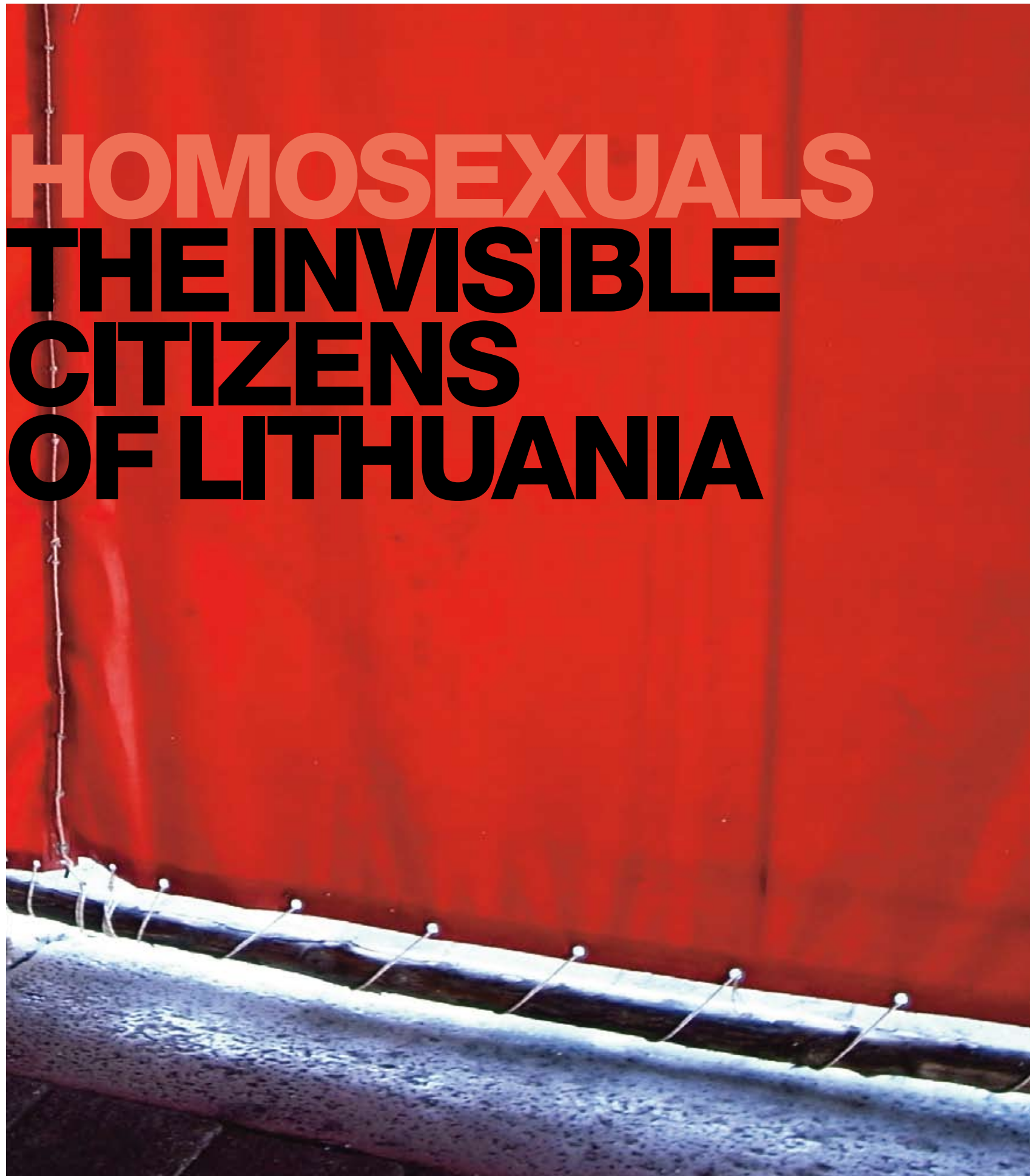


HOMOSEXUALS THE INVISIBLE CITIZENS OF LITHUANIA

PHOTO: LARS RODWALDR



The passing of a homophobic law in July 2009, which aims to protect minors from the negative effects of public information and prohibits the “advertising of homosexual, bisexual and polygamous relations”, has thrown the spotlight on the difficult situation faced by the homosexual community in Lithuania.

Inga is a young social worker in her thirties who lives with her partner, Greta, also a social worker. “We try to keep our distance from our neighbors, in order to avoid having to explain the nature of our relationship. I would prefer to not have to hide, to have people accept homosexuality as natural”, she explains. “But, on the other hand, I can’t bear the dirty looks anymore, the disapproval. I know exactly how people here react. They call us perverts, deviant. Everyone considers us to be pestilent”, Inga points out, sad and resigned at the same time.

According to a survey by sociologists specializing in gender issues, 38 percent of Lithuanians would distance themselves from a friend who revealed his or her homosexuality to them.

Vladimir Simonko created the Lithuanian Gay Association in 1995. Homosexuality had just been decriminalized two years earlier. Approximately 200 people joined the association as volunteers. There are almost no official members of this association. According to Lithuanian law, personal information pertaining to official members would have to be made public. No one in the Lithuanian gay community wants to be put on file in this way.

When he publicly revealed his homosexuality 15 years ago, Vladimir Simonko became a victim. He recalls having been physically assaulted in stores and in streets by people who recognized him, as well as having been verbally abused by neighbors. Since then, he is always on guard when going out, out of an instinct for self-protection.

“I am subject to far fewer acts of aggression directly aimed at me. But that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Homophobia is moving in a new direction. It’s becoming institutionalized. When deputies adopt homophobic laws, there are no assurances that the groups of hate-mongers won’t interpret this as a call to act”, he hammers out, alarmed at the decisions being made by deputies.

“These invisible citizens”, as they are termed by the sociologists who authored a large-scale survey on homophobia in Lithuania, are subject to several forms of discrimination, most notably in the workplace. They do not benefit from any legal recognition or organized communal life, because they are unable to form any type of partnership. For the time being, the formation of a legal, same-sex partnership is made impossible by a resolution adopted by the Lithuanian parliament that states that a family can only be defined as a married couple, composed of a man and a woman.

“The primary reason is a lack of education. Many still think that homosexuality is a crime, a disease; the other reason is the weight of the Catholic Church. The Church’s lawyers are involved in the drafting of laws. It is the Church’s position to denounce homosexuality”,

says Marija-Ausrine Pavilioniene, a social-democratic deputy. She has often publicly supported Lithuanian gays by marching alongside them in the gay pride parades of Riga and Stockholm.

Discrimination in the workplace is the most significant, and is still present, despite the introduction, between 2005 and 2007, of a program largely funded by Europe and Sweden and designed to educate employers and employees.

Vytautas Valentinavicius is the president of the Association for Tolerant Youth. He claims to have recently been a victim of discrimination when he requested a day off to participate in the Ilga Conference of the European Association of Homosexuals, held in Vilnius in 2007, and thereby revealed his sexual orientation. “My superiors are still in shock”, he says. He received slanderous messages through his work e-mail. He was also prevented from being promoted. The criteria for a management position excluded him de facto. He did not want to register a complaint with the National Board of Equal Opportunity. “How would I prove a discriminatory act?” asks Vytautas Valentinavicius.

According to Valdas Dambra, spokesperson for the Board, fewer than a dozen people every year register complaints of discrimination in the workplace due to sexual orientation. The concept itself was first created in 2005, in connection with a new law on equal opportunity. Prior to this date, the law only made guarded against discrimination due to gender. “The greatest sanction against employers occurs when discriminatory acts are made public, and we do receive complaints”, states Valdas Dambra. Nonetheless, he concedes that not much progress has been made on the issue during the last four years.

On several occasions, the municipalities of the larger Lithuanian cities have halted attempts made by the Lithuanian gay association to inform the public about homosexuality. The so-called Truck of Tolerance, an initiative funded by the European Commission, was denied entry into Lithuania in 2007. The following year, for fear of disturbances, the truck was relegated to the parking lot of a supermarket by the municipality of Vilnius. Homosexuals wanted to fly the rainbow flag, a symbol of their community. This request was denied by the authorities. In Kaunas, Lithuania’s second largest city, it was forbidden to affix large ads to the trolleybuses with the following slogans: “A lesbian can be a teacher”, and “A policeman can be gay”. During the Ilga conference in Vilnius, participants were victimized. Demonstrations championing traditional family values, organized by young, right-wing militants, were constantly being held – demonstrations that were sanctioned by the municipality.

Given the situation, as Vladimir Simonko remarks, many young homosexual Lithuanians “seek out places where they are safe to express themselves without discrimination and where they can be themselves, without hiding nor lying, and where they can imagine a future”. In other words, they emigrate.

Vytautas Valentinavicius contends that those who stay in Lithuania lead double lives. “I am personally

acquainted with many homosexuals who are married, who have families, and who go looking for sexual experiences in hiding. Our country, Lithuania, forces people to choose to lead a double life. The individuals who reveal their homosexuality at work will never progress in their career”, he affirms.

Upon assuming office on July 12, the new Lithuanian president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, promised to propose amendments to the discriminatory law against homosexuals. Several international organizations which defend human rights, like Amnesty International, had been voicing their outrage. On September 17, the European Parliament adopted a resolution inviting Lithuania to be vigilant in ensuring that their national laws remain consistent with international and European law, and stressed the importance of the fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Her team has recently proposed new amendments to this law to the Lithuanian Parliament. The article pertaining to the ban on homosexual advertising, in order, supposedly, to protect minors, will be replaced by a ban on all information which would compromise sexual integrity, particularly that of young children.

No date has been set for the re-consideration of the law, which is scheduled to go into effect in March 2010. The debates in Parliament could once again be tumultuous. If the adoption of the amendments appears to be taking too long, the Council of Europe could suspend Lithuania’s voting rights in the Council. The Council’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, made a point of noting during a recent visit to Vilnius that he would keep a close watch on this issue.

In the meantime, Lithuanian homosexuals do not want to lose hope. They still plan to organize, in May 2010, a Baltic gay pride parade in the streets of Vilnius.

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