

“The Impact of the Pandemic on LGBTI+’s”

Counsel Meeting with the Members of Solidarity Network for Human Rights Defenders

Outcome Report

17 November 2020

Prepared by: Anjelic Kelavgil

The global Covid 19 pandemic, experienced by the LGBTI+'s in Turkey in an atmosphere of discrimination shaped by smear campaigns, hate speeches and the institutionalization of anti-LGBTI+ policies. While LGBTI+'s, whose very existence was criminalized, faced difficulties in accessing safe areas during the pandemic, the increasing pressure brought this need for safe space to a much more vital threshold. The anti-LGBTI+ media, which has also generated justifications for the policies that target and narrow the area of civil society, reached a new peak.

Kaos GL and SPoD came together with the members of the Solidarity Network for Human Rights Defenders within the scope of Kaos GL's Pandemic Meetings, and exchanged ideas on the effects of the pandemic both on the societal level and on the LGBTI+ community.

Representatives from Life Memory Freedom Association (Yaşam Bellek Özgürlük Derneği), Civil Rights Defenders (CRD), Turkish Human Rights Litigation Support Project, Amnesty International, Association for Monitoring Equal Rights, Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA) and Memory Center attended the meeting organized online on November 17th.

İdil Engindeniz presented Kaos GL's "How did the Diyanet's khutbah reflect on the media?" as the first act of the meeting. Then, Cem Öztürk explained the "Pandemic Report" of SPoD LGBTI+.

Pandemic in the Midst of Hate

The pandemic period brought concerns about security and right to life in addition to concerns on the pandemic as the institutionalized hostility against LGBTI+'s reached to new peaks. The events that took place following the hate khutbah in which the President of Religious Affairs Ali Erbaş targeted LGBTI+'s, free women and those living with HIV and the reflections of this hate spiral in the media revealed the severity of the situation. Debates on having multiple bar associations and the Istanbul Convention, which turned into an anti-LGBTI+ campaign after the statement of Bar Association of Ankara, wrapped the pandemic period with a mist of hate against LGBTI+'s.

The widely sampled "How Diyanet's Hate Khutbah Reflected in the Media?" report, which examines national and local publications through keywords, also reveals how various LGBTI+ related keywords have evolved in the process. Even though the justifications for LGBTI+ hatred have changed, both the polemics on Netflix series and the supportive attitude of public institutions towards hate in these polemics engraved this process to our memories. During this time only a small number of ethical journalism examples could find a place for themselves while hate journalism was being promoted; this situation revealed that the Turkish media has a very suitable ground for hate.

The fact that hatred towards LGBTI+ is presented by blending with the debates on the Istanbul Convention also revealed the method of the mainstream Turkish media of associating all the "dissidents" with LGBTI+'s. The media, which diversified hatred by establishing an LGBTI+ illusion on every dissident group, sees no problem in becoming a propaganda tool of a worldview symbolized by the words of Ali Erbaş.

The fact that the hateful language used by columnists is often fraught with an approach that criminalizes LGBTI+ identities reveals that the media is deliberately broadcasting to socialize the hate and spread it to the masses.

On the other hand, the fact that the LGBTI+ related news from international media are being deliberately mistranslated into Turkish opens up a new space for devaluation.

The biased language of the press, which ignores the subjects, subject organizations, ie the addressees of the issue, sets the media's black propaganda approach in concrete.

LGBTI+'s Under the Grip of Pandemic and Hate

The Pandemic Report prepared by SPoD reveals the difficulties that LGBTI+ people face in this period with various analyzes.

Focusing on the first 3 months of the pandemic, the report presents a wide picture of the pandemic experience of LGBTI+ subjects through observations derived from SPoD's areas of service.

The number of applications for domestic violence and social assistance has doubled in the first three months of the pandemic. During this period Alo 183 - Social Support Line was observed to be insufficient in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity and HIV. Alo 144 - Social Assistance Line was unable to respond to incoming calls effectively due to the intensity. Therefore, the institutions are observed to lack information on LGBTI+'s due to their not-inclusive policies yet still not taking restorative steps in this regard.

In the first three months of the Covid-19 Pandemic, individuals who were not open to people they are living with, people who were open but faced pressure, had difficulty in accessing psychological support. Although SPoD suspended the Sunday Talks, which served as a safe space meeting on every Sunday at the association's office, it has brought these meetings online under the name of Spaceless Chats. The Spaceless

Chats were opened to the participants outside of Istanbul in this way and attracted great attention due to the pandemic.

In the first 45 days of the pandemic, SPoD's hotline received 214 applications. The hotline received 244 applications in 45 days following the discriminatory statements of Religious Affairs Administration Chairperson Ali Erbaş against LGBTI+'s and those living with HIV. After the aforementioned khutbah, the 100% increase in applications on gender identity and sexual orientation-based discrimination has revealed the pressure of right-wing populism on the LGBTI+'s.

During the first three months of the pandemic, SPoD provided support to 60 people on legal issues. The meetings were conducted online and the discrimination and violence that LGBTI+'s had been exposed to in the homes of their families drew attention during these consultancies.

At the meeting, which emphasized the need for rights-oriented non-governmental organizations to stand side by side since the anti-LGBTI+ policies are turning into a justification for the shrinking the entire civil space, civil society's role of being the driving force towards the transformation of society was once again underlined.

The meeting, which emphasized the importance of observing international examples and internationalizing the spirit of solidarity that spreads from local to national, concluded that strategy and tactics should be reorganized in a way that does not undermine the civil sphere under current conditions.