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Armenian MPs call for trans activist to be burned alive after historic speech

Wednesday 8 May 2019, by [KAMALI DEHGHAN Saeed](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2019).

Landmark parliamentary address on LGBTI discrimination challenges reformist agenda of post-revolution government.

Armenia's first registered transgender woman has received death threats after making a historic speech in her country's national assembly.

Lilit Martirosyan became the first member of her country's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community [to take to the parliamentary podium](#), speaking out against discrimination at a session of its committee on human rights. A video of the speech has been shared around the world.

Martirosyan expressed solidarity with a community that has been "tortured, raped, kidnapped, subjected to physical violence, burned, immolated, knifed, subjected to murder attempt, killed, emigrated, and robbed". She said transgender people in [Armenia](#) are subjected "to stigma and discrimination in social, medical, legal, economic areas, and ... [are left] unemployed, poor and morally abandoned".

The speech, two weeks ago, has since sparked a backlash in Armenia, where homosexuality has been decriminalised but discrimination against LGBTI people is rife. There have been anti-LGBTI protests in front of the national assembly and verbal attacks made by some parliamentarians have included calls for her to be burned alive.

The prime minister and the main opposition have tried to blame each other for allowing Martirosyan's speech.

"This was the first time in Armenia when a transgender woman spoke from a high podium... of violence against transgender people," Martirosyan told the Guardian. "[A] transphobic man with a knife came to the national assembly to announce that he would kill me and that others like me must be killed, too ... I have received many messages via Facebook and email from various people telling that they will find and kill me.

"In the post-revolutionary Armenia, hate has no place," she added, referring to popular protests last year that ushered in a new era under Nikol Pashinyan, the former street politician who was elected prime minister last May.

Martirosyan said the home addresses of several people who work for Right Side, the transgender rights organisation she created in 2016, have been leaked and that her own home address has been spread across the internet by extremist groups who have threatened to "kill them if we find them". Nationalists, she said, have gathered outside her house, raising Armenian flags.

The [UN office in Armenia said](#) it was “concerned about the recent rise in hate speech and threats of violence against human rights and LGBTI activists”. “Neither threats of violence nor any form of discrimination against any group or individual can be tolerated,” read a statement.

The [EU echoed those concerns](#), saying “hate speech, including death threats directed at Ms Lilit Martirosyan, her colleagues and the LGBTI community as a whole ... amount to discrimination prohibited under the European convention on human rights and fundamental freedoms, to which Armenia is party, and which is reflected in the constitution of Armenia”.

Martirosyan, the first Armenian able to obtain a passport under a new name in 2015, told parliament that at least 283 crimes against transgender people had been registered up until last year. “For me, it means there are 283 criminals in Armenia living next to me and you. And who knows, maybe the 284th will commit their crime just tomorrow,” she said.

“I left Armenia because I was attacked and banished from my home - I fled, because there is no justice in my country.”

Hayk Hakobyan, founder, Rainbow Armenia Initiative

Her speech was condemned by the chairperson of the parliamentary session.

Vartan Ghukasian, from the opposition BHK party, was quoted by [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#) as saying “perverts” must be expelled from Armenia. “Send them to Holland,” Ghukasian said. “We want ... females to be females and males to be males. You can’t mix female with male. It’s shameful.”

Ghukasian told people protesting against Martirosyan’s speech: “[Imprisonment] is not enough. They should be burned in the square,” according to [a video](#) of the encounter.

Martirosyan said that she and many of her colleagues were in the forefront of the velvet revolution because “we believed that our rights would’ve been protected in new Armenia”.

Hayk Hakobyan, founder of the [Rainbow Armenia Initiative](#), was among several LGBTI activists [attacked by a mob last year](#). Some were injured by a crowd that threw stones at them.

Hakobyan has since been forced to leave the country, and is seeking asylum in the Netherlands. He told the Guardian that Armenian society is hostile. “I left Armenia because I was attacked and banished from my home. I fled Armenia because there is no justice in my country.”

Hakobyan said there had been no positive development for the LGBTI community since Pashinyan came to power.

“The corruption and arbitrary decisions within the juridical system continue [to exist],” he said. “The people who attacked me and my friends in August 2018 received a pardon for their crimes and are now free criminals that promote the idea of violence against the LGBT people. This [sets] a precedent where the people of Armenia can see that violence against LGBT is [left] unpunished.”

- This article was updated on 30 April 2019 to report more detail of remarks by Armenian MPs.

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