An evolving movement: What we learned from Europe’s largest LGBTI Gathering

Blog, ILGA-Europe Annual Conference

> The virtual replacement for ILGA-Europe’s annual conference, The Gathering Online 2020, was the largest coming together of LGBTI activists from across Europe and Central Asia since Covid-19 began, and a new collective agenda became fully apparent. ILGA-Europe’s Executive Director, Evelyne Paradis, reflects on a ground-breaking experience.

In March of this year, as most of the world came to the realisation that pretty much no large-scale events would be taking place during 2020, we had to take the difficult decision to cancel ILGA-Europe’s Annual Conference for LGBTI activists from across Europe and Central Asia, which was supposed to take place in Sofia this October. However, it quickly became very clear that some kind of replacement event would have to be held. There are so many important questions that we have to ask ourselves as a movement at this moment in time. We have found ourselves in a crucial period of history where so much is changing, and changing rapidly. At ILGA-Europe we knew it as extremely essential to come together, even in an imperfect format, to pull our experiences together, to pull our thinking together, and to pull together the questions that have arisen over the past eight months.

The thinking behind our Gathering

Over a period of time and discussion, we came up with a virtual event, The Gathering Online 2020, which we held over the course of a week, from October 19 to 23. We called it The Gathering Online, as opposed to the Annual Conference Online, because we wanted to be clear that we weren’t going to be able to recreate the entire feeling of the conference. Although there’s an awful lot that you can do online, you can never replace in-person meetings and events. Having said that, we know just how important the annual conference is for so many activists, as a space where they can connect, reconnect, and feel like they’re part of something larger. It’s a place where LGBTI activists can get that sense of solidarity, of belonging, of hearing about how others are doing the work, how they’re coping and how they’re making change happen. We know just what the conference represents every year, so it was important to try to create a space where a version of that could happen.

How do you convey the sense of connection? How do you create a space to have really complex conversations? We wanted to do this in a way that felt true to ILGA-Europe, which is to do it in a way that was as accessible and participatory as possible. It was a very ambitious proposal and from a practical point of view, we had to learn how to do it from scratch. It’s a testament to the ILGA-Europe team how much learning was done in such a short amount of time. At the Gathering Online itself, or ‘GO’ as it became to be known in staff communications, we learned by doing and we delivered something very close to our original vision. The formal evaluation has yet to be appraised, but based on initial feedback and a preliminary glimpse into the evaluation, it looks like we succeeded in what we set out to achieve.

A journey towards hope and action

The idea quickly became about taking participants on a journey throughout the week, one that would move towards a positive outlook for the movement. We started with acknowledging the very complex trends and developments in

our world at this moment in time, not all of them negative. The mobilisation that we've seen around Black Lives Matter, for instance, is a complex issue and brings its share of challenges internally, but is clearly a long-overdue and positive development. But we also had to start with naming some incredibly heavy issues and acknowledging not only how these have translated into in real terms for people in their daily lives, but how they are specifically affecting activism.

The point of going through this stock-taking exercise was that in knowing where we're at, we could then ask ourselves: How do we move forward? How do we continue to make positive change? So, the second part of the journey was about looking at the many ways in which people have already been adapting and learning, developing creative ways to adjust to the current situation. It was also about looking at some of the strategic questions that are arising in terms of how we need to come to look at things slightly differently so that we can continue to advance.

Then the final part of the journey was bringing it all to the political actors we need on board and who we also need to ultimately be making decisions that will shape the direction we need.

Dividing lines and alliances

The most salient theme that arose from The Gathering Online was the growing emphasis on socio-economic inequalities, and how what's happened in the last eight months is the realisation of just how deeply economic inequalities and social injustice impact LGBTI communities. We can see more clearly than ever the stark dividing line between those who've been benefiting from everything that's been getting better for some LGBTI people in Europe, and those who are completely left behind. Those socio-economic inequalities also deeply intersect with other forms of oppression, largely race and gender. This is also connected to inequalities in funding and resources, and how organisations are equipped to do the work. Through The Gathering, we've all said, 'We need to put this at top of our collective agenda'.

The other question that was very present throughout the week is how to continue to make positive change happen in increasingly challenging and harsh political contexts. During the week, we named the further rise of populist forces, the use of COVID-19 to curb people's freedom, the scapegoating of LGBTI people and backsliding on their rights, the polarised political discourse, and anti-gender movements, to name a few. A huge part of these conversations pointed to the importance of working in alliances to resist authoritarian tendencies and to develop compelling narratives in response to populist discourse that targets marginalised groups. Alongside this challenge, it is also clear that we must ensure that LGBTI issues do not fall off the political agenda completely at a time when the pandemic monopolises so much of the public and political attention, and that LGBTI people continue to have access to politicians and decision-makers, that they can have a say in policy-making which affects their lives.

Our week-long coming-together was not about finding all the answers to the many questions that arose. Day after day, week after week the world is changing and we don't know where it's all going to land. There's so much going on in our world that few of us have the space and time to process what's happening. What we did want to do was to give people a chance to take a step back and reflect on what they have been going through. In the end, one of the benefits of The Gathering was precisely that; through exchange and hearing from others, many of us actually took time to begin processing where we're at and what it means as we go onwards.

So, what's the way forward?

In our work at ILGA-Europe with activists and organisations across Europe and Central Asia, it's been proven time

and time again that people can find the way forward for themselves, if they are given the space and the means to do it. People find solutions for their communities at the most immediate level. What emerged clearly from The Gathering is that we need to sustain LGBTI groups and organisations, because if they fall it's not just support at a community level that will dwindle and stagnate, but all the political work and gains will fall backwards and so much will need to be rebuilt.

I think we're at the place where collectively we understand concretely what it means to act in solidarity with one another. It's no longer just a theoretical thing or a principle that we should be working together. At The Gathering we all acknowledged the need to do much better at making sure that all voices were heard and represented in developing a vision that includes everyone. I also heard a strong desire to be striving together with humility and mutual respect for the greater good. Our common humanity was shining through.

At the end of the final plenary session, I surprised myself over how emotional I became. I didn't know it was possible to find that feeling we find at the end of the annual conference at an online event, where people were in their own living rooms instead of together in one physical space. It showed me that we are a movement based in real feeling, in respect and love for each other. And that gives me great hope, because that deep feeling and that respect for humanity will give us the resilience we as we move forward into what is undeniably going to be a difficult time.

There are so many questions pending for next year's conference, never mind 2022. We have no idea what kind of conditions will need to be met to be able to hold large-scale events a year from now, what we'll need to do to ensure our collective and individual safety, never mind how many of will be able to travel, or will have the means to travel. But while we are being realistic, we fervently hope to be going to Sofia next October and to be meeting with our beautifully diverse and vibrant community of activists there. In the meantime, at ILGA-Europe we will be taking all we learned at The Gathering Online 2020 and translating it into the coming work.

Evelyne Paradis is the Executive Director of ILGA-Europe.