

#IESofia2022: Daily Report, Thursday Oct 20

[Blog, ILGA-Europe Annual Conference](#)

Our Annual Conference has well and truly kicked off in Sofia where hundreds of dedicated LGBTI activists from all over Europe and Central Asia are getting together to discuss ways forward for the LGBTI movement, under the theme 'Shaping The World to Come'. Here's what happened on the first day!

Hello from sunny Sofia, Bulgaria, where the whole ILGA-Europe staff, board and representatives of our membership are gathering this week for our [Annual Conference](#). We've waited three years to come to this wonderful city, and we're thrilled to be here!

Today, we had our Opening Session, hosted by our co-chairs Emina Bošnjak and Soudeh Rad, with speeches from Olena Shevchenko, European representative of ILGA World Board and founder of Insight Ukraine; and our Executive Director, Evelyne Paradis. Emina reminded us that the conference is "a place where many connections are made, where we share our experiences, where we learn from each other, and where we build the strength and energy of our movement".

Since we last met in 2019, the world has changed dramatically – we have gone through a pandemic, and this year the invasion of Ukraine has led to the largest refugee migration within Europe since the Second World War, all while democracy is eroding in some countries and far-right politicians continue to scapegoat LGBTI people and hatred against our communities keeps increasing.

The power inside our communities



Olena Shevchenko from Insight Ukraine, and European Region Representative on the ILGA World Board, speaking during the opening session. Photo by Marina Bandelyuk

“My life has changed completely since the 24th of February, when a full-scale war started in my country. But it took me six months to accept it and to admit it,” Olena Shevchenko told the gathered activists at our opening session. Olena has dedicated herself and her organisation Insight to support LGBTI people staying in Ukraine. She noted that LGBTI people have historically been the target of hate attacks, but at the same time are widely ignored.

“So what do we have, you might ask? We have our power inside our communities because our communities are our families. We know how to support each other. We did it through the centuries... When we are together, not fighting each other, we are the one force which is trying to make this world more human,” Olena said.



“There is nothing like the energy that’s sparked by being together.” ILGA-Europe’s Executive Director, Evelyn Paradis addresses the opening session. Photo by Marina Bandelyuk

Our Executive Director, Evelyn Paradis then took the stage. “The world is indeed going through a time of profound change and our movement has a real and present role as a proactive force in shaping the world,” she said. “LGBTI activists and queer activism have always been at the forefront of driving profound and positive social change. At this conference we want to look at how we continue to empower each other so that the LGBTIQ movement is core to a better future for all.”

Opening Panel: Building alliances in shifting contexts

Our first panel was moderated by Nancy Kelley from Stonewall, with guests Tymur Lysenko, the Ukraine Emergency Response Consultant at TGEU; Annika Ojala, Campaigner with the Greens/EFA party in the European Parliament; and Sabrina Sánchez, Coordinator of the European Sex Workers Alliance. Together they reflected on how we build alliances and work together to respond to crises and counter different anti-democratic and anti-LGBTI forces in ways that leave no one behind.



Nancy Kelley from Stonewall UK moderates the opening panel, 'Building Alliances in Shifting Contexts'. Photo by Marina Bandelyuk

Tymur spoke about their on-going work with humanitarian institutions in the context of the war in Ukraine, and the importance of building connections based in shared values. "In the early days of the war, I realised that trans people were going to need medicines," they said. Working in partnership with ILGA-Europe, humanitarian institutions are taking steps forward to provide medical aid to trans and intersex communities. "I want to ask all of you to create as many new contacts as you can, because to build alliances and partnerships you need to know the people, you need to trust them, you need to have shared values, you need to have mutual understanding, and you need to be able to explain to them what you need," Tymur added.

For Sabrina, to be an ally is to know where is your place. "You can be a sex worker and still oppress other groups, also when you are a part of an oppressed group yourself". She shared one ESWA recent achievements that happened precisely because different alliances striving from sex workers' different identities. 200 sex workers made history by "occupying" the European Parliament for the first time. "Usually when you are a sex worker, politicians make laws for you without you, just how it used to happen with LGBTI communities. But with these alliances we are showing that we know how to work together."

"Alliance to me is survival and the embodiment of our values," Annika said, "so that we are not only fuelled by anger but by love." She shared learnings from working with activists at the intersections of the LGBTI and climate movements and raised the need to decolonise the climate movement so that climate change is no longer seen as a problem of the future but one of the present, and indigenous communities can regain a place at the table. Alliances

can come also from within a movement, Annika remarked, when reflecting about how to find common narratives. “Intergenerational collaboration has worked very well in the past for the climate movement.”

Sabrina spoke about how cross-movement alliances are incredibly important for the advancement of all, but that we have to be in alliance while respecting and understanding our allies. “One hundred and seventy sex workers took the French government to the European Court of Human Rights for the blanket criminalisation of our work,’ she explained. ‘We built this case with the help and input of other organisations. Allianceship is knowing your place in the struggle of our ally.”

Today’s workshops

After the first General Meeting, with welcoming videos from European political representatives Helena Dalli, Didier Reynders and Christophe Lacroix, the first workshops began. Participants could choose between learning from the experiences of LGBT people in Ukraine; working in groups to explore ways of continuing LGBTI activism amidst anti-LGBTI noise, where some pointed towards the importance of finding atypical allies. Finding the narratives behind the messages and picking your battles were among other key elements of the work identified. The parenthood recognition workshop reminded participants that there is an on-going battle for all rainbow families across the region; and at the workshop on inclusive migration and asylum policies in the EU, the needs other than solidarity were discussed, as well as the need to reflect on who has access to asylum and who has been left behind.

Later in the afternoon, the conference was packed with more workshops: Alliance Building in Religious Contexts, where activists shared their learnings of Christian LGBTIQ+ groups at the gathering of over 350-member church representatives from all over the world in Germany earlier this year; Building Bi+ Alliances tried to identify what can LGBTI+ organisations in Europe and Central Asia do to improve the lives of bi+ people; at the workshop on LGBTI rights in Bulgaria, participants learnt more about key litigation cases led by activists in the country through European courts, which are yet to be implemented; at Transforming Alliance, participants discussed barriers and solutions to advance the human rights of trans people; and finally, activists led a workshop on public health and human rights.

We ended the day playing board games and watching films, before recharging our batteries for Friday, where more panels, workshops, and powerful exchanges will be taking place at our Annual Conference. Watch this space for the day’s report!