Q&A with our new Executive Director

Blog, ILGA-Europe

> On October 1, Chaber will become the next Executive Director of ILGA-Europe. As they get ready to step into those shoes, let's take a little time to get to know them, where they come from, how their activism progressed to this moment, and what they envisage for ILGA-Europe and the LGBTI movement in Europe and Central Asia in the coming years.

Hi Chaber! To begin with, tell us how and when did you first become involved in LGBTI activism?

I went to university in Warsaw to study psychology when I was 18. It was around the same time that I was coming out, so I started emailing LGBT organisations and asking for volunteer opportunities. No one really responded to my emails, so I went to the offices of KPH and asked if they needed anyone. There happened to be a meeting of a youth group that day, so I stayed for the meeting and then ended up staying in the youth group for the next couple of years.

What did LGBTI activism look like in Poland at the time?

Prides were met with violent opposition at the time. There were maybe two or three thousand people max at Pride in Warsaw, rather than the tens of thousands that go nowadays. The government was shifting a little, but there was no actual room for legislative progress or anything of that sort. As a youth group we were really focused on community organising and beginning to enter the public sphere for media campaigning, but in a very subtle way.

And what were you doing at the KPH youth group?

The work of the group was largely around the bringing together community members and creating a space for young people. It was done through organising exhibitions and parties, meetings, youth exchanges, things like that. So that's what I was doing at the very beginning of it, organising spaces for young queer people to meet in the belief that sexual orientation was not a private issue. In that sense, it was politicising private lives to a certain extent. I think that also the one of the objectives that was lying behind it was to kind of create this stronger, more self-aware, younger community.

So, how did you go from working at the youth group to becoming the Executive Director of KPH?

After about a year in the youth group, I became the volunteer coordinator for the entire organisation. There were 16 branches of KPH across Poland, and some of my job was also to coordinate a network of volunteers from all of those branches. I was still studying for my degree, and the work was not paid. Soon I started getting engaged in small projects, organising events, trainings, taking part in internal developments. I got a part time job that later changed into managing parts of financial affairs of the organisation.

I was 22 years old when the organisation was undergoing a leadership transition, and the general assembly vested the role of president on me. There was no set staff structure at the time, no separation between the staff and board. Over the coming two years, it developed into a much more clarified structure, and my role shifted from President to Executive Director. The work didn't change really that much, apart from the fact it became a full-time job and a

very intentional thing I was doing with my life.

Did you always have a personality that was leadership oriented? How would you describe yourself in that respect?

I don't think I ever had a huge drive for the visibility aspect of it, but I always had a drive for organising things, planning, making things work. Seeing how organisations could grow or how the structures grow, how we could become better and more effective at what we do, really shaping that strategic vision element of where we should be going. I always managed to surround myself with brilliant groups of people with whom we could carry out very ambitious work: from mobilising communities to engage with politicians, fostering a movement of parents, to legislative campaigns. All throughout my time at KPH, the people I was working with way more experienced activists from whom I could learn a lot. It was really a group effort in that sense. I've also spent the last six years on the board of the International Trans Fund, including as its Treasurer and Co-Chair, and there had a chance to co-create the strategy, structures and systems of a global grant-maker. The role was also an opportunity to grow personally in navigating colonial and racial dynamics and other systemic injustices we need to deal with as a movement every day.

You also were elected on to the board of ILGA-Europe during that time?

I joined the board in 2014. KPH and ILGA-Europe always had a close relationship, dating back to the early 2000s. Prides were being banned in Poland as that decade progressed, and ILGA-Europe were heavily investing in the development of KPH because it was the first advocacy organisation in the country. There were older groups in place, but largely focusing on providing psychological and legal support and other types of community work. KPH was founded to be a political player that invests in legal and societal change. And we continued to do so, just in new and creative ways, for all the following years.

In 2018, you became ILGA-Europe's Finance Director. What would you say you learned during your five years in that role?

One thing that is most precious to me is being in an organisation that has such a vast and engaged membership. The membership of KPH was made up of individuals, many spread out around the country, and to make the organisation more cohesive and effective, we also limited the membership to a smaller number.

Working in ILGA-Europe is a different reality. It's working in organisation that really puts a lot of effort into being driven by its membership, but also into directing where the membership and movement needs to go, where it needs to develop. From a Finance Director perspective, that was all around governance, around accountability, around helping to shape our programmatic work and regranting in a way that actually responds to needs and is conscious of realities of our members, and also building an ability to source information on the needs of the movement to funnel into the work. That was really a great piece of learning and something that I knew I wanted to learn when I was taking the job.

You've come from one of ILGA-Europe's member organisations to the top role at ILGA-Europe. How important is that for you?

It makes me feel very lucky for all the opportunities for development I've had, because looking at our movement, I know that it's very hard for people to progress and develop because of a lack of resources. The majority of our members do not have staff, do not have executive directors, do not have what they so badly need to do the work. It can be a much harder journey for some people than it was for me, with all the opportunities that I have had. But yet there's also a feeling of being honoured and proud, because I've been involved and the LGBTI movement and different shapes and forms for 15 years. I've managed to do a lot of things outside of KPH, and ILGA-Europe as well. I have managed to interact with very many different organisations, both in Europe and globally, provide strategic direction and shift the way things are done.

It has been hard work to get here. It's been 15 years of commitment and really putting all the energy, learning and capacities I have into the organisations I've worked with, to see them grow and develop and progress on their goals. The task of learning has been a continuous part of this journey and will continue for me. I think that's the only way we build ourselves as professionals, by being continuously open to that learning and searching for new ways of doing things.

With all that experience and learning behind you, what do you see as the way forward ILGA-Europe's work?

I think we're in a moment in time where on one hand we have a mounting opposition against LGBTI rights across the region, taking different shapes and forms. We have weakened democracies and weak political systems in many countries, and upcoming elections that may limit our opportunities in the coming years. And at the same time, we have a movement that is extremely stretched, where we see many organisations undergoing leadership transitions, where we see a lot of burnout. The role of ILGA-Europe is to navigate and bridge that gap, driving the movement to the progress that is possible, and pushing the policy changes and improvements that make a difference. Which means that we need to surround ourselves with a movement full of vibrant and well-resourced and organisations that have the capacity to make use of the opportunities that arise occasionally, and develop strategies that actually work in the current context.

We live in a very, very different reality than we did five years ago and many of the ways and methods of work that we see organisations doing are just not working anymore. So, there is a big piece of our role in being that strategic thought, leader and figuring out where the highway of change can happen in the current context.

That is not a small ask.

No, it's not, but we have a lot of building blocks in place because of the way that ILGA-Europe have been working and shaping its work through being really rooted in the movement, but at the same time having a bird's eye view on different approaches and strategies. With more consolidation and internal learning and more connectedness with the movement, we are able to shape more effective work with the movement or for the movement.

We also have the power to mobilise significant resources and carrying out our work in a way where we can make best use of those resources and focusing them on, for example, development of specific organisations and different ways where they can achieve the most is a way in which we can really kind of harness the power.

You mentioned the changing landscape, and the landscape is also changing in Brussels. What are your thoughts about working forward?

I think we will have to put a lot of effort into making sure the issues of the LGBTI movement are still high on the agendas during elections. Obviously in the upcoming European Parliament elections, but also in the longer-term process around political participation of LGBTI communities and the public discourse in national elections. Whether it is around gender based violence, whether it's about self-determination, bodily integrity and intersex rights, there are still elements of our political agenda and our benchmarks where we see there is an uptick on both regional and national level and that is something we need to continue to be pushing for.

What is your message for the movement as you get ready to take over the role?

It's a message of unwavering commitment. I am looking forward to working together to strengthen our bonds and adapt so we can seize all the moments and opportunities that are, and will become available to us as we move forward as a diverse, vibrant and well-resourced movement able not only to withstand any opposition, but to adapt, work together, and through that forge sustainable progress. I can't wait for my work in this respect to begin.