

# The stark situation for LGBTI rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

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Hungary and Poland have been in the spotlight a lot for their anti-LGBTI policies, but they are not the only countries where political leaders are acting against LGBTI communities. Here, we take a look at the political situation for LGBTI people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the first half of 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic and anti-LGBTI forces have deeply impacted the LGBTI movement in Europe and Central Asia. Some governments used the health crisis against human rights defenders by limiting their use of public space, while the same restrictions have not applied to many of the activities of the anti-LGBTI movement. As a result, the pandemic has accelerated deterioration of the human rights protection systems, disrupted effectiveness of monitoring and documentation, and made the work of activists even more precarious. The worrying trends that began in 2020 continue to grow this year as a number of laws proposed and adopted in different countries limit the ability of civil society to answer to current challenges and political crackdowns.

The [Dignity for All: LGBTI Assistance Program](#) is a consortium formed by ILGA-Europe and seven other leading human rights and LGBTI organisations around the world. It provides emergency assistance, advocacy funding, and security support to human rights defenders and civil society organisations under threat or attack due to their work for LGBTI rights. Since 2012, the program has provided emergency assistance grants to human rights defenders and civil society organisations in 95 countries and territories.

Thanks to this program, we've been able to support the movement in the region for almost a decade. The number of requests for emergency assistance in the first six months of 2021 has considerably increased. A lot of requests were related to the repercussions of anti-LGBTI actions, the pandemic, and wellbeing issues, along with the usual security assistance provided by the program.

Through this work, we've been able to assess the context in the region and provided funding to civil society organisations to respond to developments like those described below.

Take a look at the political situation for LGBTI people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the first half of 2021:

## **Albania: hate speech and hate attacks**

In mid-June a trans activist in Tirana was physically attacked one week after heavy hate speech in the media around a discussion on LGBTI family rights. The debate was manipulated with headlines such as "The LGBTI community aims to remove the word mother". Other activists in Albania received hundreds of targeted death and rape threats. This clearly shows the trend of online hatred spilling over to the real world when the perpetrators feel encouraged by hate speech to physically attack activists and the LGBTI community.

## **Armenia: ground-breaking judgment for LGBTI people**

While the LGBTI movement continues to deal with the shockwaves of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a ground-

breaking judgement was delivered in Yerevan, Armenia in May, finding discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation in a case concerning denial of access to a sports club services to two trans people and a gay man. For the first time the court applied the Armenian Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights and the case law from the European Court of Human Rights on discrimination in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination. The decision sets an important precedent for national case law and is a milestone in ensuring equal rights to accessing services as well as other areas of life for LGBTI people living in Armenia.

### **Belarus: amendments to the law could backfire against LGBTI groups**

In spring, amendments to the law 'On Counteraction to Extremism' were adopted. The new definition of extremism is formulated in a vague way and could be applied to LGBTI groups' activity. The wording goes: "Extremism is considered incitement to hostility or discord, including against public order and public morality, property, health, personal freedom, honor and dignity of the individual, and the structure of family relations." The draft was not published on official websites for consultations until it was signed by the President. It is currently in force in a context that is increasingly unsafe for any dissent.

### **Bulgaria: anti-LGBTI rhetoric and threats to events**

As in previous years, right wing parties used anti-LGBTI rhetoric to misinform the population and win voters ahead of the elections that took place in July. After LGBTI activists received threats to their physical security and to their events, they requested additional security measures during Pride marches.

### **Kyrgyzstan: Constitution limiting human rights**

In April, Kyrgyzstan adopted a new Constitution following a nationwide referendum. Nearly 80% of the voters backed the new Constitution containing provisions that could potentially restrict LGBTI activism. One of them, aiming to ensure financial transparency of public associations, is very similar to the law on "foreign agent" in Russia, which has significantly restricted the activities of human rights organisations. Another harmful provision reads: "in order to protect the younger generation, activities that contradict moral and ethical values and public conscience of the people of the Kyrgyz Republic may be restricted by law". This provision might prohibit any LGBTI community organising and movement-building activities in Kyrgyzstan. A video was released demonising an LGBT+ organisation, revealing the names of most of the staff members, misgendering and publicly outing them.

### **Latvia: LGBTI family rights move backwards**

In January, the Latvian Parliament passed a draft law to restrict the definition of family in the Constitution, ruling out same-sex partnerships and same-sex families. This contravenes international human rights law and European jurisprudence, as well as Latvia's Constitution and the decisions of its Court. Latvia is one of only six countries in the EU that provides no recognition of partnership for same-sex couples and while there have been promising developments in the last two years, this vote is a worrying step backwards.

### **Turkey: official hate speech and withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention**

On 27 December 2020, the Turkish Parliament passed a new NGO law called "Bill on Preventing the Spread and Financing of Weapons of Mass Destruction". However, only six articles include means and regulations to combat financing of terrorism. The rest grant the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the President wide authority to restrict the activities of civil society organisations. According to the law, the Minister can suspend the board members of NGOs and apply to the court with an immediate request of shut down the organizations, NGOs might not be able to access funds and grants from abroad upon the decision of the Minister, and official audits can be conducted by any civil servants who usually don't have competence and loyal to the government. Many organisations have already received notes of upcoming audits just weeks after the law came into force.

Hate rhetoric from authorities against the LGBTI community and activists continues in 2021, creating an atmosphere of LGBTI hatred in society. President Erdoğan has declared: “There is no such thing as LGBT. This country is nationalist, spiritualist and is walking to the future with these values” and “let’s not worry about what lesbians say”. Another prominent figure in Turkey, the Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu was banned on Twitter twice after saying “LGBT perverts”. He also referred to LGBT as “perversion” during a live broadcast on Haber Global television channel and added “this LGBT thing is something that is being propagated to us from Europe and the USA. This thing can break our family structure.”

In March, Turkey announced its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention by a Presidential decree, without debates in Parliament and society at large. This is a huge step back for protecting women’s rights and a negative precedent for other countries that are signatories of the convention.

In June, Istanbul Pride was banned for the seventh year in a row. In protest, the march took place on Saturday, 26 June. Police arrested almost 50 people, including journalists, violating their right to freedom of assembly and expression. Several hours later people were released and no charges were pressed.