What has 2021 meant to the LGBTI movement in Europe? Listen to our latest podcast episode to find out this year's highlights

Blog, Covid-19, Hungary, Poland, Strategic Litigation

> As 2021 comes to an end, we have collected some of the moments, events and trends that have marked the year in the latest episode of The Frontline, ILGA-Europe's podcast about LGBTI activism and lives in Europe and Central Asia. Read here some of the episode's highlights and find out reasons to stay hopeful in 2022.

2021 has been a year of further lockdowns, of new strains of the COVID virus, and the uncertainty they have brought, and most of all, enormous reverberations of the unprecedented events of 2020 on people's lives. For the LGBTI movement and communities in Europe, 2021 has also been the year of the growth of a perceived east-west divide in Europe over LGBTI rights, infringement procedures taken by the European Commission against Hungary and Poland because of their anti-LGBTI laws and programs, a sharp rise in the demonisation and isolation of trans people from the women's movement, and an overall rise in authoritarian regimes seeking to instrumentalise LGBTI lives to limit the rights of others. So, it's perhaps strange that our guest in this episode, ILGA-Europe's Executive Director Evelyne Paradis finds great hope for the LGBTI movement amid the storm.

Listen to The Frontline now!

How has COVID-19 continued to affect our communities?

For LGBTI communities, visibility is of top importance. In 2021 we've continued to reinvent ourselves while facing new challenges such as building alliances in the digital space with people you don't know.

The most marginalized ones in our communities have found themselves particularly isolated. On the flip side, many LGBTI activists and organisations across the region have been very resourceful and creative to meet the needs, which comes with a cost because it's a lot of work.

"I hope there's going to be of lightness in 2022 for activists," says Evelyne Paradis.

Is there a divide between the east and the west of Europe?

This year we've seen in media and elsewhere a growth of a perceived east-west divide, also when it comes to LGBTI issues. "It is not a real divide, but it is a divide," she says. "There is a politically driven effort to create multiple divides".

History shows that creating an 'other,' creating an enemy, can help other purposes. In 2022 the work will continue to be to stay attentive in order to not fuel that perceived divide.

Infringement procedures against Poland and Hungary

“We’re in a moment of hope with the EU,” says Evelyne Paradis. “The EU is taking a lot more concrete and bold actions based on their values.” In July, the European Commission announced infringement procedures against Hungary, concerning the censorship of a children’s book portraying LGBTI characters and the prohibition of the inclusion of LGBTI people in material in schools or in media for under-18s, and Poland, concerning a refusal to clarify whether LGBTI people are discriminated against in the labour market in the country’s so-called LGBT Free Zones

A year ago, to think about infringements seemed ambitious. Starting infringement procedures was important for LGBTI communities in these countries too, and the people supporting them — in that sense there’s no divide. Although we have to be careful not to create an “us vs. them” divide, Evelyne Paradis explains, we’re also in a moment when we have to assert and act in accordance to the values that hold us together.

However, Poland and Hungary are not anomalies. They are only the tip of the iceberg as scapegoating LGBTI minorities is spreading to other places. We are at a moment when human rights cannot be taken for granted.

“Times are hard for LGBTI people in the region, not just in Poland and Hungary,” she says. ILGA-Europe has reported a lot of LGBTIphobic violence this year. Now it’s the time for politicians to do the right thing.

Where do we find hope?

“I find hope in the reaction that the publication of our Rainbow Map prompted,” says Evelyne Paradis.

The message “it’s time to reboot” was heard by governments. Politically it feels that the situation is so bad that there’s no option but to act. Many politicians and representatives have contacted ILGA-Europe along 2021, and “it’s our job to tap into that opportunity.”

ILGA-Europe statement on gender

On March 8 ILGA-Europe published a statement on gender, to reaffirm our commitment to standing up against any discourse aimed at negating the rights of some people.

The decision came from observing how harsh the situation for trans people and communities was becoming, but also “from the deep sadness at observing how the beauty of human rights language, the beauty of feminism was been used and abused to divide groups and communities,” says Evelyne Paradis.

It was also a way of saying to trans individuals that we’re here, that a vision of gender that brings us all together is at the core of ILGA-Europe’s work.

Fighting for democratic rights

For a while now, the fight has moved again to be one of fight for democratic rights and freedoms, because in some parts of the region the authoritarian tendencies are very strong again. The freedom to be in the public space with no fear of arbitrary arrests cannot be taken for granted by LGBTI people and communities, as we’ve seen in the METU Pride trials in Turkey.

The clampdown of core democratic spaces is very real and that shapes the work ILGA-Europe does, which is making sure that groups can come together in the face of repeated attacks.

Activists groups need to reconvene, “they need the comfort of coming together.” In this sense, the COVID-19

pandemic is not helping. Spaces like ILGA-Europe's Annual Conference, that this year was moved for the second time to the digital sphere as an alternative to an in-person meeting, are spaces of restoration.

Strategic litigation as a way forward for LGBTI rights

It's been a reason for hope to see national and European courts moving in the right direction for some years now, Evelyne explains. Some successful examples in 2021 have been METU Pride trial and Baby Sara case.

However, not because there's a judgement it means there's going to be a change anytime soon. There are two caveats to consider. First, it is quite telling of the current context that LGBTI people have to go to court. Second, court judgments, as positive as they can be, rely on governments to implement them. Three years after the landmark judgment issued by the CJEU against Romania, recognising that the term spouse includes same-sex spouses under EU freedom of movement laws, Romania has not implemented the Coman case yet.

"We've had to do a lot more work," she says. "It's good to see that we can use the courts more but it also doesn't end there."

ILGA-Europe's Gathering Online

It was great to see that people coming together at the Gathering Online despite the screen fatigue. As in 2020, we hosted an online version of Europe and Central Asia's LGBTI largest conference in October. The main topics discussed along the week were racism, poverty and other forms of structural inequalities that affect the movement, the political context in which we operate, and the creative responses to it.

The main message, says Evelyne Paradis, was to go back to the essence, to the belief in the importance of creating a world that is fair and just, which is the reason why all of us keep standing up for human rights and the LGBTI movement.

It is also a week when solidarity was embodied. "This is where probably I get the most hope, that we are collectively getting into that space of really seeing each other as human beings."

Some hopes for 2022

"My hope is that as a movement we grow in sincere solidarity, that institutions and governments in Europe continue to find the courage to do the right thing and act."

Evelyne Paradis also hopes that more and more allies and coalitions become stronger and stronger, "that we turn the tides around."

"It's our priority to make sure that LGBTI organisations can do their work," she concluded.

Presented by ILGA-Europe, The Frontline is a podcast about LGBTI activism and lives in Europe and Central Asia. Deep-diving and analysing from a unique and informed perspective, The Frontline aims to bring you to the core of queer activism and give you an understanding on the complexities of what's happening, why it's happening, the wins and the losses, the challenges and commonalities, and the extraordinary ways in which the work of those on the frontlines continues in a rapidly changing world.