

COMMUNICATING FOR
CHANGE

**RESULTS OF THE ILGA-EUROPE
COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS ASSESSMENT
OF THE LGBTI MOVEMENT
IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA
FEBRUARY 2021**



“Communications for us is about what we do, who we are. Communications is about building relationships.

Communications for us is probably a way of advocacy as well, because the more we talk, the more they recognise us; the more we communicate, the more acceptance we get. The more we are accepted here, the more rights we have, the less stigma there is and so on.”

Trans Activist, Russia

FOREWORD

Communication is of strategic importance to the work of social and political change. How we talk about the issues that matter to us, how we tell stories to make people aware and get them to understand different lived realities, how we bring people into new and sometimes challenging conversations, how we debate with those who don't share our vision of society – these are all essential pieces to making change happen.

Communications has been at the heart of some of the biggest successes of the LGBTI movement in Europe and Central Asia over the past few decades, from equality wins in national referenda to legislative changes that value and protect LGBTI lives, along with wide and positive shifts in public perceptions. As a movement, we have come to understand just how much rests on our ability to shape the public and political discourse positively, to get people to understand better what the needs of LGBTI people and what their lives are like, to establish a dialogue with different and new actors in society, and to talk about issues that matter to LGBTI people in a way that leads to more respect and inclusion. This is particularly true at a time when many different actors are actively – not to say forcefully – pushing through negative stories and misinformation about LGBTI people and their lives, and when so many groups are fuelling divisive

rhetoric in our societies, often using false and harmful information.

Communications is also core to our ability to bring our communities together, to hold conversations we need to have on the different needs and experiences within LGBTI communities, especially those who are more marginalised and too often under-represented, so we can build inclusive communities and strengthen solidarity and alliances among different parts of our communities.

Activists in Europe and Central Asia have been talking about the strategic importance of communications for their work for many years now. At ILGA-Europe, we've observed the numbers of people signing up for events, applying for projects, and asking for information and advice on communications issues rise exponentially in the space of less than five years. From all of this, it's been quite clear to us that LGBTI groups are acutely aware of the central role that communications plays in their work, and that they want to know more and do more in this area. It also became clear that very few in the region have the means to take on this work fully, to do all they see is needed – whether it is as part of efforts to resist the tides of oppositions or to continue to advance on the equality journey.

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We launched this assessment of communications needs in the LGBTI movement in the region to better understand what is holding LGBTI organisations and groups back, so that we can identify where to invest in enhancing these strategic capacities. The main conclusion of this study, the largest-ever carried out in Europe and Central Asia specifically on communications in the LGBTI movement, is quite simple: existing capacities to undertake this work are currently inadequate.

There is a wealth of knowledge, experience and learning out there, but too little is done to support the potential of this area of work. Support is missing to enable groups to make use of existing means more strategically and to develop their competences in sustainable ways. In the overall context of their work, activists have limited opportunities to develop their abilities and organisations have limited space to express their potential. There are also critical gaps in the types of skills and knowledge within organisations. While there's been an investment made in strategic areas such as narrative development and message framing, gaps in developing foundational skills and capacity have gone unaddressed.

While the need for more funding is certainly a core message emerging from this research, we at ILGA-Europe see another equally important takeaway from this survey: there is a huge untapped potential of the movement's communications ability. There is a great wealth of communications knowledge and experience in the movement that is currently under-used and on which we can build to grow the movement's communication capacity.

Addressing the movement's needs to fully develop their communications potential is even more urgent now due to some significant changes in the landscape, including the fact that those who fundamentally oppose equality are armed with a wealth of investment in their own communications strategies. Last but not least, due to the COVID-19 crisis the movement is facing new challenges and needs to develop creative ways to hold public space, be visible and heard. All this leads to the core understanding at ILGA-Europe that now is a vital time to invest in supporting the movement to more effectively use strategic communications.



Executive Director, ILGA-Europe

INTRODUCTION

This document presents the main outcomes of a needs assessment on the current state of communications capacity with LGBTI groups and organisations in Europe and Central Asia. This in-depth investigation was launched in autumn 2019 with the aim of gaining insights into current strengths and weaknesses within the movement, and to identify opportunities for support and growth.

ILGA-Europe undertook this research at a moment of stock-taking in the organisation, having done significant work in the field of communications since 2014. Through various projects and programmes (our Framing Equality toolkit, Testing Guide, our Creating Opportunities programme, to name a few), we have been actively supporting the movement in its work on campaigning and framing narratives. Our original focus was therefore to assess the needs on strategic communications, as we were particularly interested in better understanding how the movement was having an impact on public narratives on LGBTI issues.

We quickly realised that we could not limit our analysis to LGBTI groups' capacity on 'strategic' communications (i.e. message framing, narratives, and audience research to shift public opinion). The picture that emerged proved to be a lot more complex and nuanced. We found some organisations with dedicated internal human and financial resources on communications who lacked skills and knowledge on strategic communications aspects, while other groups showed a great understanding of what's needed to share public narratives but were held back by lack of basic capacity. This assessment therefore took the view of understanding the range of skills, knowledge and capacity needed by LGBTI organisations.



“The pandemic has increased the need for the movement in general, and the most marginalised groups in particular, to hold public space and be visible and heard.”

This report provides insights as to how current needs can be effectively met and as such we aim to inspire grant-making strategies. We considered that LGBTI organisations can take on different roles when it comes to building communications capacity and resources within the movement. We therefore also offer ways to build strategies that capitalise on existing strengths of some groups, who could play a more active role in enhancing the capacity of others within the larger ‘ecosystem’ of the movement.

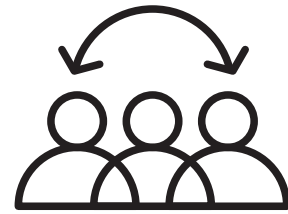
Whilst this research was largely undertaken pre-COVID-19, its outcomes should be seen as even more relevant in the current context. The pandemic has increased the need for the movement in general, and the most marginalised groups in particular, to hold public space, and be visible and heard. With so much of the work having moved online, we are at critical juncture to ensure that LGBTI activists can continue to hold spaces. In a context where opposition actors continue to gain in strength and momentum, the time for increasing our communications capacities is now.

METHODOLOGY

The communications needs assessment is the most in-depth investigation into the communications strength of the LGBTI movement in Europe and Central Asia. It consisted of various steps including interviews, a focus group, a survey, desk research and case studies that led to a comprehensive report that we hereby summarise.

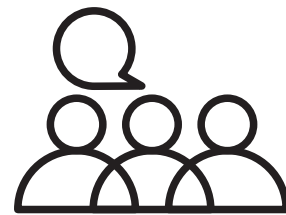
ILGA-Europe developed the research with George Perlov and Yulia Koval-Molodtsova (George Perlov Consulting), who conducted all phases of the research in English and Russian. An Advisory Group of funders' representatives, including: OSF, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, Oak Foundation and Astrea was consulted regularly and contributed to steering the project's overall strategy in cooperation with ILGA-Europe.

One of the key objectives of the project was to make the needs assessment as representative as possible of the diversity of the LGBTI movement in our region. ILGA-Europe engaged a massive outreach through different channels to ensure that groups and organisations of different sizes, registered and non-registered, formal members or not and from all the sub-regions, could be consulted. All communications and materials developed in the framework of the project were produced in English and Russian.



Survey

190 activists from 45 countries surveyed



Focus Group

With LGBTI organisation communications people



Interviews

20 x 45-to-60-minute interviews, conducted in English and Russian



Webinar

Presented preliminary results to 120 people, to consult with them on their experience

The research consisted of the following key steps:

- **Literature Review:** A review of the literature on communications needs assessments globally and other assessments of the regional LGBTI movement.
- **Pre-survey interviews:** Interviews with leaders at two organisations in France and Croatia to inform the survey, as well as a focus group of ILGA-Europe staff.
- **Survey:** A 25-minute survey of LGBTI organisations across Europe and Central Asia. The survey was fielded from October 21 – November 25, 2019. 190 activists from 45 countries completed surveys were received. The survey was available in English or Russian. The survey data analysis included a subgroup analysis based on three criteria: size of organisation, ranking on the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Europe scale, and presence of fulltime communications person at the organisation or not.
- **ILGA-Europe Conference Focus Group:** A focus group of LGBTI organisation communications people was held in Prague at the ILGA-Europe annual conference in October 2019.
- **Interviews:** A series of 20 45 to 60-minute interviews were conducted in English and Russian following the launch of the survey, from November 14 to December 3, 2019.
- **Case-studies:** the learnings of the survey and interviews were investigated more deeply in the beginning of 2020 in two countries, Finland and Ukraine, to understand what strategic support to movements in two different countries could look like. These countries were selected based on their demographic and political differences, as well as the LGBTI community in both countries being a target of populist attacks.
- **Webinar:** ILGA-Europe hosted an interactive online event to present the preliminary results of the project to activists and consult them on their experience. Representatives from ILGA-Europe, George Perlov Consulting and the Advisory Board intervened as speakers. 120 people registered.

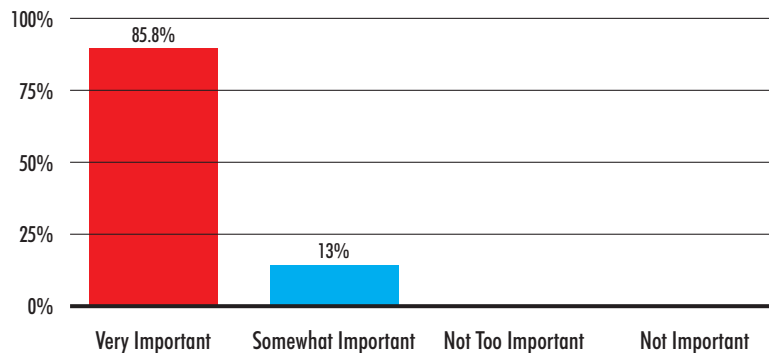
This is the largest assessment of its kind with LGBTI organisations in Europe and Central Asia, with participants from the following 45 countries:

Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and Uzbekistan.

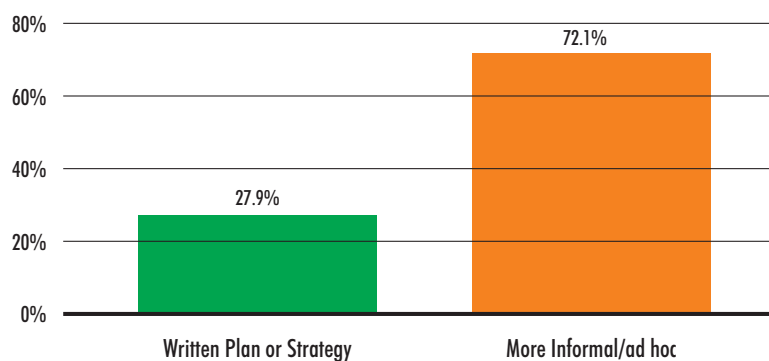


THE MAIN FINDINGS

How important is communications to advancing the mission or goals of your organisation?



Do you have a written communications plan or communications strategy in place, or are communications handled on a more informal/ad hoc level?



Communications is handled informally

While there was nearly universal agreement among organisations that communications is a critical capacity for LGBTI organisations to possess (86% of survey respondents say it is very important), the study found that a majority of organisations lacked critical skills and that communications were mostly handled in an ad hoc manner by 72% of organisations surveyed.

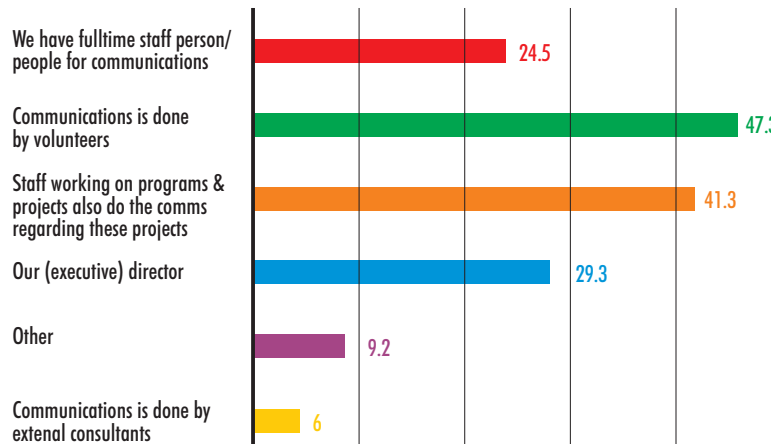
Fewer than 30% of organisations reported that they have a communications plan or strategy in place, the rest operating on a more ad hoc basis.

One major reason reported by activists for not having or sticking with a communications plan is due to time being diverted to deal with crises or anti-LGBTI attacks.

“Most of our communication is ad-hoc and non-professional, and we do not have a communication strategy. The main reasons for these are lack of financial support and human resources.”

Anonymous organisation

Which of the following best describes who does day-to-day communications activities in your organisation, i.e. maintenance of the website, outreach to journalists, creating media press releases? (Multiple answers were possible.)



Communications is run by volunteers

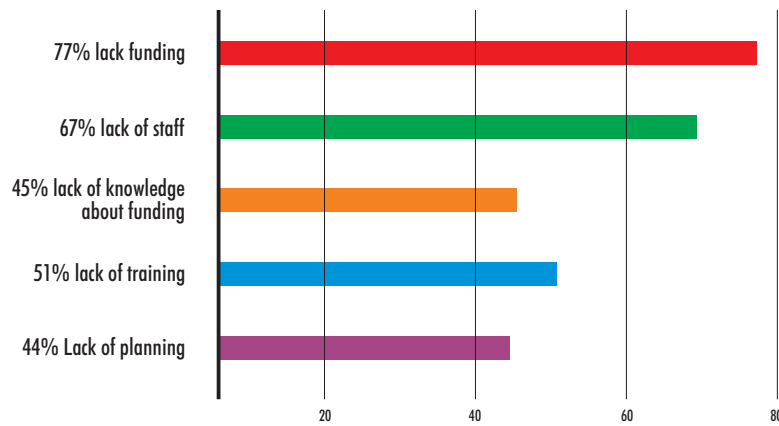
The vast majority of organisations have no paid staff and rely entirely on volunteer support. The subgroup analysis found that organisations in Western and Northern European countries were significantly less likely to have full-time staff. These findings tend to be contrary to popular assumptions about LGBTI organisations in larger, wealthier nations.

Only 25% of organisations surveyed have full-time staff working on communications. In most cases, it is a mix of volunteers (47.3%), program staff (41.3%), and executive directors (29.3%) who work on comms in a variety of ways. A reliance on non-comms staff to help with communications means that resources are further compromised as they are being pulled from their key work. There were a number of positive correlations between having a fulltime comms person and the ability to work better with outside agencies, handle crises, and have a communications strategy in place

“We have an upcoming marriage equality case and are expecting a negative decision. This means that we will need to stop work for two days, as we will be writing press releases, dealing with the media, etc.”

Organisation in Bulgaria

What barriers, if any, do you or your organisation face regarding communications?



Obstacles to effective comms

Activists cite a lack of funding (77%), staffing (67%) and training (51%) that keep their organisations from being more effective with communications. Lack of planning (44%) is also a factor.

In conversations, activists cited a number of other issues like not being able to sustain campaigns over time, or the successful transfer of institutional knowledge within the organisation due to turnover or burnout, as hindering their efforts.

“We did some good campaigns with the help of ILGA-Europe, but we don’t have the funds to really be sustainable in addressing the general population. We have a campaign and will do it for one month, two months and that’s it.”

Organisation in Slovenia

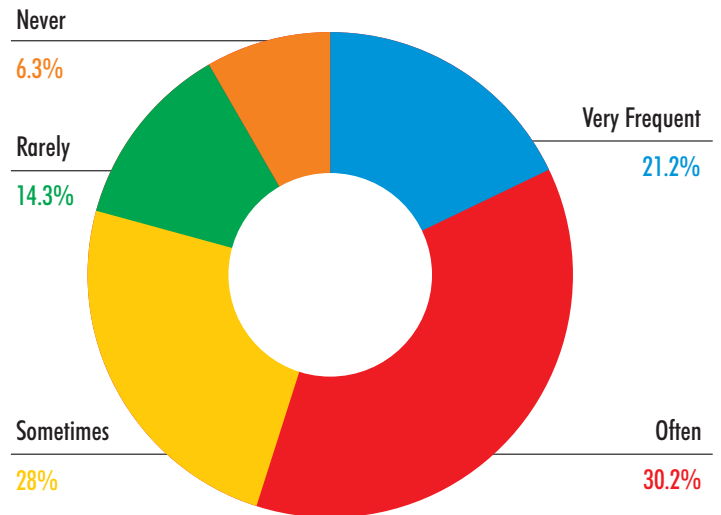
Response to crisis

Identifying a crisis and preparing successful communication responses can stop a crisis becoming a catastrophe. While about half of survey respondents reported that they respond to crises often or very frequently, four in ten felt that their organisations do not respond very well, or not at all. The subgroup analysis found that those organisations with a fulltime communications person and with mid-range budgets are more likely to frequently respond to crises. And those with a fulltime communications person and high-range budgets are more likely to be better prepared for a crisis.

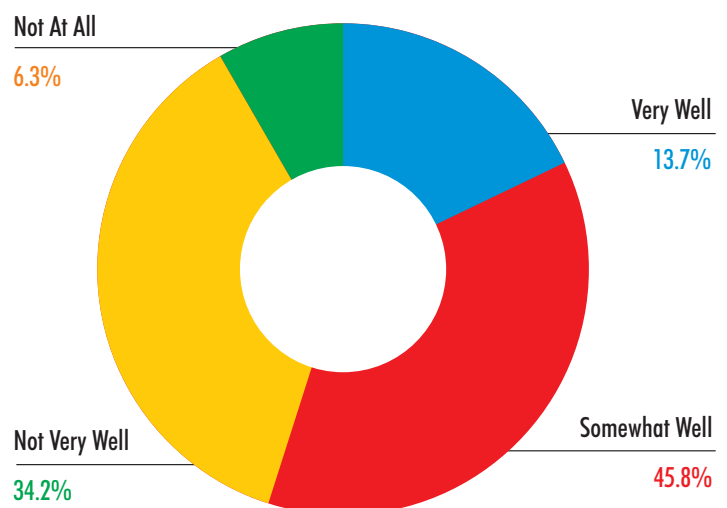
“We have an extremely pro-Russian newspaper and for no reason at all, a journalist will wake up and write something completely terrible, not connected with anything, and then we go: “Okay, we have to react: we have to do something.”

Organisation in Kyrgyzstan

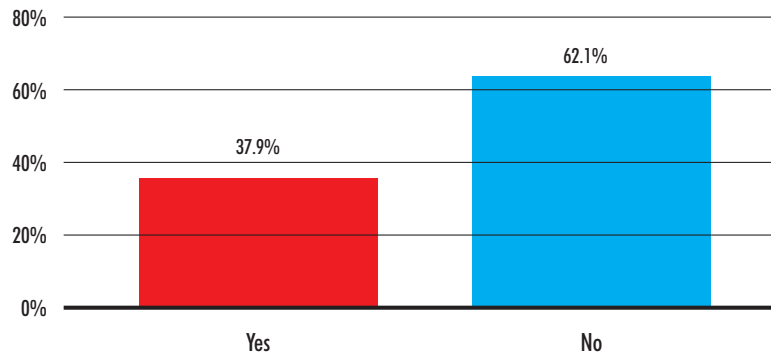
How frequently does your organisation respond to a crisis situation such as news coverage of the organisation itself, or LGBTI issues in the media?



How well would you say your organisation is prepared to address a media crisis or issue?



Do you typically get help from people outside your organisation for communications issues?



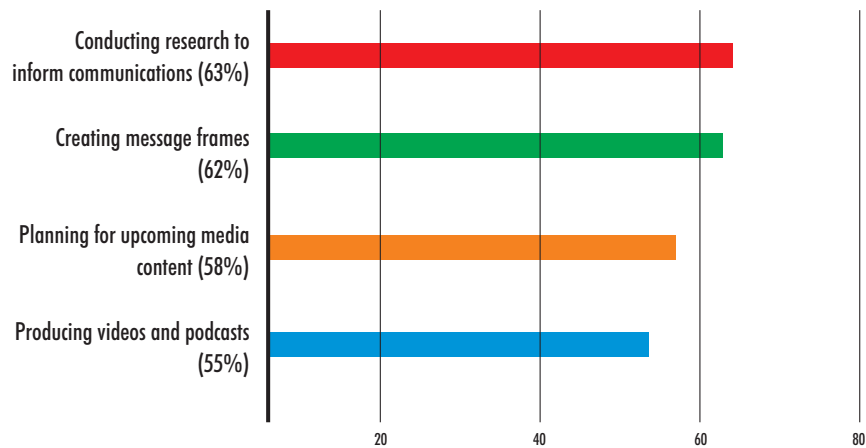
Limited use of external resources

Despite the need, few organisations reach out for external support or know how to access it. Only 38% of organisations surveyed report they get help on communications from outside resources. Some fear that it is extra work to bring a consultant on board and get them up to speed. While some activists described good working relationships with advertising and PR agencies, many felt they needed a lot of hand-holding in the process or didn't understand the sensitive issues involved in communicating LGBTI issues. Similarly, available resources on communications are often not known or not used due to other pressing work or lack of time to fully read, share and apply the insights and recommendations.

“Advertising agencies are used to doing commercial stuff. You cannot rely on them in terms of a communications strategy. We need to do the strategic thinking and what they are able to deliver is only creative work, even though some of them are gay too. It doesn't work. It's too commercial.”

Organisation in the Czech Republic

Strategic activities where over half of organisations are doing nothing: (Multiple answers were possible.)



Skills to boost

Technology and digitalisation require activists and organisations to develop new skills and enhance their capacity. Surveys and interview responses show technology and digital skills are preconditions to fully develop organisations' communications potential. Social media is central in this endeavour, while mainstream media is hardly mentioned – this absence was itself a finding, suggesting that media relations is such an intimidating field, multiple respondents did not even attempt it.

There is much need for improvement in digital skills, such as website and social media management, and more importantly, the strategic coordination of these tools. Social media was seen as critical. There was also interest in other skills like video and podcast production. On the strategic front, there is need for improvement, both in approaching the planning of communications from a thoughtful and coordinated perspective, and

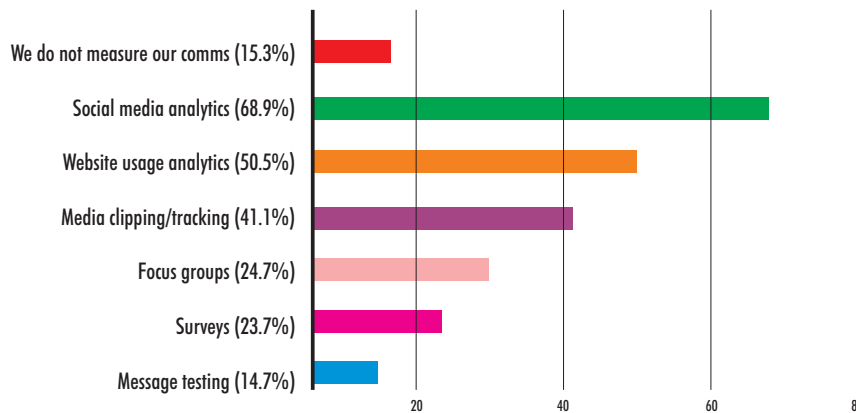
also in the evaluation of communications activities, which is where activists state they need the most support.

The survey data describes a number of strategic activities where over half of organisations are doing nothing: conducting research to inform communications (63%), creating message frames (62%), planning for upcoming media content (58%), producing videos and podcasts (55%) and developing values-based messaging (52%).

“Until 2018, our main social network was Facebook. Then our SM manager changed, and we started using Instagram, and this gave us a 50% growth, probably. In 2018, 5,000 people came to our Pride march. This extra 50% - it was just youth who came from Instagram. Then we added Telegram. Now we have plans for developing Twitter and YouTube. We use YouTube because we make a lot of videos.”

Organisation in Ukraine

What kinds of methods, if any, does your organisation use to assess your communications? (Multiple answers were possible)



Evaluation of communications work

While about one-in-six organisations do no evaluation of their work at all, easier and cheaper assessment methods are being used by the majority of organisations. These include social media analytics, used by nearly 70% of organisations, and website usage analytics which are used by about half. More sophisticated methods of evaluation like message testing, focus groups, surveys or external evaluations are utilised by very few organisations, mostly due to cost and timing considerations.

“They [funders] are asking for the effect of that program, but they don’t give us money to measure the effect. The traditional funders are not very eager to fund communications campaigns.”

Organisation in Turkey

Geographical perspective

We learned from country case studies as well as the subgroup analysis of the survey that while there are cultural, political and other social differences

between countries that would suggest more need for locally-based support, there are also many opportunities where organisations can build capacity and learn from each other or together across borders. Dealing with right-wing/populist governments and religious groups that scapegoat and target LGBTI communities seems to be an issue all ILGA-Europe countries are facing, even those Northern-European ones that had once seemed “safe” from such rhetoric.

Contrary to popular perceptions, the survey found that it was more likely for organisations at the top of the Rainbow Europe rankings (i.e., Western Europe) to be volunteer-led and have a budget in the low range. While English has become the default language of choice for international initiatives, many Russian-speaking organisations feel excluded when that is the only language available to them. Considering the nature of the communications challenges that Russian-speaking activists deal with, and the trend for anti-LGBTI communications tactics to spread from the Russian-speaking opposition, English-language communications support would in fact benefit from more collaboration too.

WAYS FORWARD

Based on the main findings of this needs assessment, ILGA-Europe identified the following areas of particular importance in strengthening the capacity and resources of LGBTI organisations and groups across the region:

- **Developing effective communications function within organisations using existing resources:** While it is not expected that all organisations will ultimately have a full-time comms person on staff, assessing current communications skills and capacity and identifying where communications capacity can be found (both internal and external) and supporting the building of that function, will allow communications strategies to be fully executed (especially for smaller groups).
- **Supporting capacity to develop a communications strategy or strategic work plans:** Recognising only a quarter of organisations have a communications plan or strategy, ensuring organisations have a comms strategy aligned with programs and activities will help make communications a more integrated and necessary part of organisations' activities (especially for larger groups).
- **Enhancing the capacity to strategically plan campaigns, which includes effective evaluation of impact:** As the research found that most campaigning by LGBTI organisations does not have a strong strategic base or use of message framing or testing, an evaluation of impact of communications activities will help improve the planning process and provide more tools for learning from campaign results, so that future efforts can be improved.


- **Strengthening skills and competences**

on crisis communications: As we have seen, crises and populist attacks on LGBTI people and the organisations that support them are not diminishing, and organisations report that these areas are often unfunded. Combined with proposed resource development for this area, this work has the potential to shift the movement from reactive situations to preparedness, and rapid response. Funding could include both development of a toolkit and trainings on crisis preparedness using real, recent experiences of LGBTI organisations in the region, as well as an emergency fund for those groups facing acute situations. Crisis response funding is typically available ad hoc, but organisations in countries with a very active opposition should be supported to establish structural and proactive comms functions.

- **Consolidating foundational/basic**

comms skills: While efforts to advance more sophisticated capacity in terms of message framing are important to the movement as well, the needs assessment research revealed that much needs to be done to help the basic operations of many underfunded groups. Technology and digital skills are also areas where groups need to fill gaps and build capacity. Considering comms as an essential part of general operating support may be a good start.

“Comms Tools” funding could support the active management of the array of resources currently available, and the commissioning of additional tools/trainings with cooperation of some of the larger, established national LGBTI organisations that have expertise they can share in this area. Organisations should be given the opportunity to include expert/external costs into their proposals, so that whenever it makes sense, they can access the services of local/national comms experts (whether they be commercial or civil society organisations themselves).




The needs assessment points to a significant diversity in the existing levels of capacity within the LGBTI movement in Europe and Central Asia. In this context, ILGA-Europe sees two overarching strategic priorities, which complement each other. First, as explained above, there is a need to strengthen skills and capacities of groups and organisations on clearly identified gaps in the area of communication. Secondly, there is an opportunity to further build up organisations that already have strong communication expertise, and which could take an active role in strengthening capacity of other groups in the region.

With this mind, we would suggest the following approach to strategically supporting different types of organisations in a sustainable manner:

- **For organisations that have current comms capacity and expertise (including dedicated comms staff) and have potential in supporting other groups:** Provide support for these groups to allow them to continue strengthening their leading comms programs, and also to use their expertise to support the work of other organisations as mentor/leader in a movement-wide capacity building network.

- **For organisations with less comms capacity but expertise to do campaigning work:** Provide support to enable them to strengthen their skills sets to do more comms and campaign work in the future. Grants shall support comms capacity through both general operating support and/or targeted campaign/comms support. It is important that funders stress that they welcome funding applications that include institutional comms costs as opposed to activity-based funding.

- **For organisations and groups with limited comms capacity:** Provide support through online resources, webinars, networks, etc., from which they can develop necessary skills. In these cases, support could target specific actions.



ILGA-Europe considers there is significant potential in providing resources to enable effective peer learning and exchange of knowledge within the LGBTI movement in the region. Findings of the report suggest that there is a huge amount of knowledge and capacity in the field, but that it is often not shared, while overworked comms leads don't have the time to actively investigate solutions.

One concrete activity named during this research was the creation of comms networks, which can serve as tools for active sharing of learning. A "comms network" could become an incubator for change in the region, provided that a group of network member organisations is supported to maintain and strengthen a strategic comms function for the coming years. It might serve as a 'test-learn-feedback' group that can enhance the larger movement in the region by actively sharing its learning.

Funding to this group of organisations not only supports their own work but also indirectly contributes to the development of the larger movement. Language challenges often preclude Russian-speaking organisations from participation in these efforts, so the opportunity to connect groups based on language should be encouraged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To Develop effective communications function within organisations using existing resources
- To support capacity to develop a communications strategy
- To Enhance the capacity to strategically plan campaigns
- To Strengthen skills and competences on crisis communications
- To Consolidate foundational/basic communication skills

CONCLUSION

Communication is central in the work of the LGBTI movement and has been at the heart of some of its biggest successes recently, including campaign successes like referenda and drastic shifts in public perceptions. But existing resources are inadequate. Activists have limited opportunities to develop their abilities, and organisations have limited space to express their potential.

Experiences of funding and capacity building in this area have focused mainly on strategic communication, narratives, and message framing, but did not sufficiently address the need to develop basic communications capacity and infrastructure. In addition, the growth of LGBTI organising expanded the number of groups having to centre communications in their work, raising questions about the role of funders and intermediaries in making their support more sustainable.

There is a great wealth of communications knowledge and potential in the movement which is often under-used, while there are different roles organisations can play in the comms ecosystem. It is crucial for funders intending to make sustainable investments in the region to support skills and capacities of groups and organisations on clearly identified gaps, and to develop distinct strategies to enhance communications potential. Building effective cross-movement communications functions will ultimately advance the cause for LGBTI equality, with a view to a world where all people are free to live their lives wholly as themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the 200+ activists from our wonderful and diverse movement who contributed in different ways to this needs assessment. The time they dedicated to the (quite long!) survey, the impassioned interviews, and their thoughtful input during the focus group and other side conversations were invaluable.

Thank you very much to George Perlov and Yulia Koval-Molodtsova (George Perlov Consulting) who conducted all phases of the research in English and Russian with enthusiasm and professionalism. We thank you for drafting the reports that are the bedrock under this report which summarises the findings.

Special thanks to the members of the Advisory Group - Greg Czarnecki (Open Society Foundations), Alli Jernow (Wellspring Philanthropic Fund), Mariam Gagoshashvili (Astrea Foundation) and Nina Spataru (Oak Foundation) - for the insightful input and for contributing to steering the project's strategy. Thanks also to Matthew Hart at the Global Philanthropy Project for proving support in the dissemination of the research.

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AUTHORSHIP

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