

Standing strong against discrimination and the violation of human rights - the question of Town Twinning Advocacy

Given the recent increase in media spotlight on anti-LGBT hate in Poland, and the police violence and arbitrary arrest of LGBTI people over the weekend of 7-9 August 2020, we are very happy to see that more and more stakeholders, including municipalities and local governments, are considering how they can support the LGBTI community in Poland and take a clear stand against discrimination and for human rights, including the rights of LGBTI people.

The question then often comes up if towns which have twinning agreements with Polish towns which have signed a Family Charter or LGBT-phobic resolution or declaration should consider ending their twinning agreement. As much as it might seem like a very strong and statement against discrimination and the violation of human rights, **Polish activists advise against ending twinning agreements as they are afraid that this would push them further into isolation.**

The suspension of town twinings does not have any advocacy potential because it would be a symbolic gesture of rejection rather than anything else. Only in some cases twinning is backed by significant funding or leads to other concrete benefits. In most cases it is rather a framework that opens up and formalises opportunities for cooperation and dialogue. Therefore, in most cases, suspension or cancellation of this relationship will not have tangible consequences, but will limit opportunities for alliance-building or low-key advocacy for CSOs.

Moreover, withdrawal of EU or U.S towns from these relationships will strengthen the Polish course towards self-isolation and the idea of the so-called 'West' as antagonist.

Together with Polish activists, we ask towns not to end their twinning agreements, but to use these agreements as ways to conduct constructive dialogue with the Polish towns,

with the aim that they cancel their participation in these discriminatory Charters/resolutions/declarations.

Supporters of LGBTI rights should be in touch with policy-makers in Poland and start a dialogue, highlighting why these measures are extremely discriminatory against the LGBTI community and their direct harmful impact on Polish citizens' lives and demanding a response on how municipalities and the government plan to ensure non-discrimination and safety of the LGBTI community in the light of these developments. **This can be done from local level, especially through municipalities who have twinning or other arrangements with Polish cities**, or MEPs through their political families, country visits or other occasion. **Polish activists clearly ask for creating a dialogue with Polish authorities on local and national level, rather than stopping cooperation such as twinning arrangements as that would only further isolate the communities.**

Maintaining the twinning relationship leaves room for dialogue and support for civil society. The concept of twinning is based precisely on horizontal links between citizens, on "citizens' diplomacy" and on the possibility of resolving contradictions through civic engagement.

With reference to the purpose and mission of town twinning relations, there are ways to promote the understanding of human rights and equality for LGBTI people through these relationships.

We should promote the understanding (and usage) of town twinning to advance understanding of human rights, non-discrimination and the values of a vibrant civil society, including in relation to SOGIGESC issues (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics). We do not support suspension or cancellation of twinning relations between towns and cities.

Town twinning relations offer the following opportunities/spaces that could be used for low-key advocacy and awareness-raising:

- official visits;
- official projects (including exchange programs for professional groups) within twinning relations;
- anniversaries of twin town relations;
- business cooperation within the framework of twinning relations.

Advocacy activities may cover, but are not limited to:

- making sure that programs of official visits include meetings with civil society organizations, including LGBTI organizations;
- encouraging formal requests for information on the human rights situation, inclusive of LGBTI people and other minorities (e.g. ethnic minorities) before implementing programs;
- facilitation of exchange/cultural visits for groups, and inclusion in their programs of events dedicated to diversity and equality, including LGBTI, as well as ensure a diverse composition of participating groups;
- twin city Pride activities to build solidarity with local activists e.g. holding an activity on the same day in two places, or inviting a speaker from the twin city to the other city's event (can also be online).

Best practice example from Ukraine:

Munich (Germany) and Kyiv (Ukraine) are twin cities, and from that the [Munich Kyiv Queer contact group](#) emerged. Back in 2012, when this initiative was formed, Ukraine was on a very different path from the one it is on now. It was before the Maidan revolution. This group is a cross-border cooperation project that enriches people-to-people contacts between Germany and Ukraine, facilitates activist and cultural

exchange, and strengthens LGBTI activist efforts in both countries. More on how they work: <https://munichyivqueer.org/what-we-do/>. Here is an exhibition that they have just launched: Twinning Cities Scenes, highlighting moments of cooperation and the spirit of this initiative <https://www.liebe-kennt-keine-grenzen.de/>.

Best practice example from Russia:

Kirkenes (Norway) and Nickel in Murmansk oblast (Russia) are twin cities, and a great cooperation emerged from this relationship in 2017 in the form of **Barents Pride**. Barents Pride is an important community mobilization platform that defies the impossibility of organizing a proper Pride in Russia by bringing Russians and Norwegians together just by the border. Similarly to Munich Pride, cooperation is not limited to this big event. While Kirkenes' twin town Nickel is not engaged in this much, the presence of this twin town relationship was a factor in this initiative.

Other relevant resources:

- The German Russian Exchange <https://www.austausch.org/about-us/> is an example of sustainable cross-border cooperation in support of democratic development. In Russia, it played an important role in supporting active citizenship, people-to-people contacts, learning opportunities for Russian emerging civil society activists, solidarity campaigns, etc.
- Paper on [city twinning as local foreign policy](#).
- More info about the “LGBT-free zones” and how you can support, [here](#).

Please reach out to ILGA-Europe if you would like to connect with any of these initiatives: Belinda@ilga-europe.org

You can also direct municipalities to KPH who are happy to advise on strategies for specific towns. Please reach out to Magdalena Świder at: mswider@kph.org.pl