



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.
East and Southeast Europe

ONE DAY OF PRIDE



A Comparative Study of
LGBTI Prides in Georgia,
Serbia and Bulgaria

ANALYSIS

Imprint

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What matters at Prides is empowerment!

Tbilisi Pride, Belgrade Pride and Sofia Pride – these three events represent a huge step forward for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual (LGBTI) people in Georgia, Serbia and Bulgaria. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom supports Prides all over the world because they draw attention to the human rights situation of LGBTI communities and are an effective and visible instrument for civil society. Since Prides are often initiated directly by these communities, NGOs encourage and support these public events. Prides function as an awareness-raising mechanism for LGBTI rights and the situation of local LGBTI activists. A Pride day or week highlights the ongoing violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity within a society. Additionally, Prides can facilitate change or influence laws in the countries where they take place.

Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger



Although Georgia, Serbia and Bulgaria have each already held at least one Pride, there is still much room for improvement in promoting LGBTI rights in these countries. In Georgia, the Orthodox Church calls the LGBTI lifestyle a "sin" that goes "against the Christian faith, traditional religious teachings, and moral values." In Serbia, the Pride march was suspended for twelve years due to security concerns after the first Pride in 2001 was attacked by far-right nationalist agitators. In Bulgaria in 2019, a man broke into the LGBTI community centre "Rainbow Hub" in Sofia and two LGBTI women were violently attacked.

There is a need for further improvements in these countries' fulfilment of LGBTI rights. This short study will analyse the Prides in Serbia and Bulgaria compared to the first Pride in Georgia in 2019 by examining the following questions: How are the Prides used as a human rights mechanism? What approach do the various activists take? Who supports them? What opposition are they confronted with? 19 interviews with LGBTI activists were conducted in order to compare their personal experiences of the Prides in Georgia, Serbia and Bulgaria.



Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger

Former Federal Minister of Justice

Deputy Chairperson of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

Summary

While a legal protection framework for LGBTI communities is in place in Georgia, Serbia and Bulgaria, the implementation of these laws remains relatively weak, which leads to a lack of social acceptance. There is still a strong need to improve social perceptions and to implement public programs geared towards changing public attitude towards LGBTI persons. In all three countries, activists unfortunately face the same challenges: despite the governments' strong desire to integrate into the European Union, the political will of national and local authorities to improve the situation of the LGBTI community is weak. This is often coupled with strong anti-LGBTI influence and rhetoric exercised by Russian authorities, including the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church and disseminated through political and media channels to local audiences in Georgia, Serbia and Bulgaria.

Interviews with activists from all three countries reveal that all three Prides share the same goals: Firstly, a Pride should act as a political instrument. Secondly, there is a need to increase the visibility of the community and raise awareness for the problems it faces, which are mainly political in nature like the right to marry, to adopt children or to gain gender recognition. All interviewees divided the challenges the LGBTI community is confronted with into two main categories: Legal aspects and social perception. While laws protecting LGBTI people are formally in place, the lack of societal acceptance of LGBTI people in all three countries is of greatest concern.

The mass media plays a major role in the formation of social perceptions and opinions and unfortunately, many mass media outlets still use their platform to ridicule LGBTI activists or Prides by creating stories based on fake interviews or misinterpretations.

In 2019, Prides took place in all three countries, but they varied widely in how they were conducted. While Tbilisi held its very first Pride, with just 20 participants and faced with the challenge of striking

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a balance between safety and visibility, 2,000 people participated in Belgrade's eighth – and sixth consecutive – Pride. Famous pop-stars took to the stage and amongst the participants was the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, who is still not actively supportive of the LGBTI community despite being the first openly gay person to hold that office. In Sofia over 6,000 people marched in the city's twelfth Pride.

What activists in all three countries share are the conditions they face. These include a small number of active people, limited acceptance of the LGBTI community by the rest of society, the governments' lack of political will to improve the situation, the activity of conservative groups, including the Orthodox Church, a lack of funding, and Russian influence, which generously finances organizations that promote traditional family values.



ILGA Europe 2019 – Ranking on LGBTI equality laws and policies





Tbilisi Pride

GEORGIA

In general, Georgia has good and comprehensive legislation in place to protect the LGBTI community including a gender equality law, a law on combating domestic violence, and most recently a law on combating sexual harassment in line with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention. Furthermore, Georgia is the only country in the region that mentions sexual orientation, gender identity and even gender expression as protected grounds in its framework law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination. Activists agree that Georgia's legislation is very progressive but that a huge gap remains in its implementation.

According to an assessment by the Pan-European LGBTI organization ILGA Europe, Georgia is ranked 26th out of the 49 countries for which a study on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people was conducted. The severity and frequency of hate crimes against LGBTI people in Georgia remains a challenge despite the progress made in recent years. The gap between crime statistics gathered by NGOs and the numbers reported by law enforcement agencies confirms that most of these crimes occur without legal ramifications for the perpetrators. Official statistics from 2017 highlight that the motive of homophobic bias was explored in 12 criminal cases and that of transphobic bias in 37 cases. However, reports by NGOs reveal much higher numbers.

A 2018 UN Expert report showed that among the LGBTI respondents, 84.4% (N=216) have experienced some form of abuse by family members. Over a third of the interviewees stated that they are victims of permanent psychological violence by family members, while 37.5% have been subjected to physical abuse at least once since 2015. To cope with

the effects of domestic violence, 78.8% of the respondents noted that they needed psychological assistance (20.7% sought out this service); 17.4% required medical care (though only 5.8% applied for it); 40.3% needed legal assistance (only 5.2% applied); 39.5% needed social assistance (6.7% applied), and 21.8% needed shelter (but only 2.4% applied for it).

In the survey for this short study, the activists themselves confirmed that the main problem concerning the Georgian government is not the process of adopting legislative initiatives, but their implementation. Virtually no work is being done by the government to ensure the availability of information about LGBTI rights to the broader public, moreover, there are no activities to improve the welfare of LGBTI persons in the government's current three-year Action Plan (2018-2020), although the government promises to amend the next period's plan.

In 2013, antipathy towards the LGBTI community culminated in large-scale violence surrounding the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) on 17 May. The long-term consequences of this traumatizing event for the LGBTI community reverberate until today.

ALTHOUGH THE FIRST PRIDE IN 2019 WAS SMALL IN SCALE, ONE NOTABLE SUCCESS IT HAS ACHIEVED IS THE INCREASED VISIBILITY OF LGBTI ISSUES.

Violent events of IDAHOT 2013

A peaceful assembly on 17 May 2013 for IDAHOT was violently attacked and dispersed by thousands of counter-protestors. Many activists were injured and hospitalised and the fact that nobody died that day can be described as a matter of pure luck. In the run-up to IDAHOT, the Patriarch of Georgia had called on people to prevent the LGBTI community from assembling. The government promised - but failed - to ensure the safety of activists, as did the organizers.

As a result of the large-scale violence, 32 people applied to the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR), after their applications to national law-enforcement bodies, asking the perpetrators to be punished on the grounds of violating freedom of expression and public assembly rights, yielded little to no results. During the court proceedings, only a few of the activists were considered as victims; most of them had the status of witnesses. Until today, none of the hundreds of attackers were convicted of these crimes; very few have been charged an administrative fine of 100 lari (around 30 Euro). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that national authorities never considered an evacuation plan for activists during the march. This further exemplifies the institutional attitude towards the LGBTI community and contributes to the widespread conviction that the Church had more power than the government and more resources for the mobilization of people. In June 2013, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) published a survey showing that 52% of Georgian society approved of organizing anti-gay counteractions and that 30% felt that the violence of 17 May 2013 was acceptable.

27%

of the society responds that protecting the rights of sexual minorities (LGBTI persons) is important.

44%

of the public stated that protecting the rights of sexual minorities is not significant.

NDI survey July 2019

Despite the violent events of IDAHOT 2013, the empathy of wider society for LGBTI activists remains low. This explains the above-mentioned lacking implementation of legislation to protect the LGBTI community by the government and contributes to a constant increase in aggression by certain individuals in society, especially during the period of traditional nation-wide actions.

In 2014 – and a year after the violent events of 17 May 2013 – the Patriarch of Georgia officially declared May 17 as the “Family Holiness

Day". Consequently, a homophobic majority now dominates the streets and thousands march through the city each year – led by priests. Besides religious symbols, their posters often depict violence against members of the LGBTI community and anti-LGBTI rhetoric. One activist describes the situation as follows:

"I was not able to walk along the city street for two months because of the tension from radical groups of people. I got a lot of personal threats through private messages during this period of the year".

LGBTI activists have used IDAHOT to continue to raise awareness for their situation through various means and forms of protest since 2013. In May 2014, under the slogan "Invisible Protest" they placed shoes in a central park in Georgia to highlight that they had been deprived of their right to assemble peacefully. In the following years, they repeatedly attempted to hold assemblies but encountered many obstacles, ranging from refusals by the government to provide security guarantees, to serious restrictions to their right to assembly and arrests of LGBTI activists.

In 2016 Georgian police – while using homophobic statements – arrested ten LGBTI activists for illegally writing on walls in Tbilisi and opposing police officers. The activists were denied access to lawyers and police withheld information from the Ombudsperson's Office regarding which police unit the arrested were taken to. The court acquitted all ten activists of the charge of opposing the police and fined them for illegal writing on the walls.

In 2017, an assembly took place under serious restrictions by the government: the protesters were not allowed to gather in the central Rustaveli Avenue, the assembly was surrounded by police and the Ministry of Internal Affairs tried to control the messages on the posters. In total, the march lasted about an hour.

In 2018 the organizers had to cancel the planned assembly at the last minute due to threats by fascist organisations to attack and disperse any gathering by force. These examples further illustrate the growing influence of right-wing groups across Georgia and how campaigns of discrimination are carried out against activists. Research by the Democracy Research Institute (DRI) shows how far-right groups draw on Social Media to spread pro-Russian, anti-western and anti-LGBTI rhetoric. Furthermore, quotations by activists are frequently taken out of context and fake materials are created using real names and photographs of people with words these people never spoke.



TBILISI PRIDE

The Official Logo of
Tbilisi Pride



Pride 2019 – Small successes but overarching problems remain

Despite the many – and continued – attempts to curtail the activities of LGBTI groups, their efforts culminated in the Pride 2019, which was the first to take place in Georgia, as beforehand only events to mark IDAHOT had been organised. Undoubtedly, the bloody events of 2013, which prompted many activists to quit from total burnout, and the lack of a government investigation, have created a tense atmosphere among LGBTI representatives. As in previous years, in 2019, right-wing groups and the Church once more announced counter-protests and called on the government to prevent the activities from taking place. In spite of these threats and all the obstacles, in 2019 the LGBTI community managed to conduct some very important activities during the Tbilisi Pride Week, highlighting the important role of Prides as a human rights and awareness-raising mechanism. Amongst the activities was the theatre play “Caucasian Metamorphosis” – a story about a member of a sexual minority who struggles against the rejection by his family and society as a whole. Furthermore, various international forums and conferences, which raised awareness about the issue of LGBTI rights, took place. Additionally, participants of the play filmed a documentary about the theatre project, which was submitted to international film festivals and received warm reception, despite the fact that Georgian society largely still holds very negative attitude towards representatives of sexual minorities. Today, an increasing number of people in Georgia reject the violent actions of far-right activists. This is also illustrated by

In 2019 the LGBTI community in Georgia managed to conduct some very important activities during the Tbilisi Pride Week, highlighting the important role of Prides as a human rights and awareness-raising mechanism



Tbilisi Pride's organizer Giorgi Tabagari during a roundtable discussion with Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger and Peter-Andreas Bochmann, Head of South Caucasus Office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom during the Tbilisi Pride Week

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Giorgi Tabagari, organizer of the first Tbilisi Pride

the fact that the Georgian Premiere and all other screenings of the film "And Then We Danced" chronicling the life of a gay dancer were sold out.

Although the first Pride in 2019 was small in scale, one notable success it has achieved is the increased visibility of LGBTI issues. The coverage of the violation of the right to assembly in May 2019 and the attacks by far-right groups spurred a growing public interest. A Facebook post about the 2019 Pride reached 350 likes, while over a thousand people viewed a video produced about the Pride. By national standards for this kind of human rights organization, these numbers represent a great success. According to the Pride's organizer, Giorgi Tabagari, a certain level of conviction is an integral part for such events. In Tbilisi on July 8, 2019, about two dozen protesters, including human rights activists and members of the LGBTI community, protested outside the Interior Ministry while holding signs and rainbow flags. The rally lasted only 30 minutes due to reports that extremist groups were on their way to disperse protesters. "Smaller in numbers but we managed to get out safely," Giorgi added.

Despite this small success in 2019, less than 20% of this short study surveys' respondents now support the idea of a Pride in Georgia. They mention the need for activists to build a common strategy to raise awareness for their rights, based on an evaluation and the continued search for successful methods and approaches. For example, nearly all survey participants agree on the use of an intersectional approach and an alliance with other social groups to break down the barriers in Georgian society by public and politically meaningful actions.

More importantly, one of the respondents highlights the continued distorted representation of the Pride idea in Georgian society, presented "traditionally" by the media as a parade, a carnival, and a show. Activist Nino Kharchilava from the "Women's Initiative Supporting Group"

shared her opinion about the Pride being an extension of the bloody 2013 IDAHOT. Most Georgian activists currently share her feelings:

"For me it is not the visibility of the community that increased on that day but the visibility of the violent society we live in and a demonstration of the power of the Church as a fundamental institution in Georgia. Each year on May 17, instead of IDAHOT there is an anti-gay march sugar-coated with the title 'a day of the purity of family'."

Years have passed since IDAHOT 2013 but it still arouses feelings of defeat, failure, anger, guilt, and fear. It is necessary to transfer this experience – and the lessons that can be learnt from it – into institutional knowledge and pass it on to the next generation of activists. New activists have inherited the LGBTI movement. Its achievements are still incomplete since political parties continue to misuse homophobia to divide Georgian society. A big gap remains between the artificially adjusted, seemingly attractive and progressive legislation and the vastly different attitudes found in society.

The "peaceful" demonstration of May 17, 2017, although very limited in time and space, could have been reported to international society as an achievement of a precedent-setting "safe LGBTI demonstration" but it can better be described as just a formality. Instead, activists describe the event as feeling like being in a cage surrounded by police officers for less than an hour. **Visibility politics have the function of defeating homophobia in society.** If instead it results in more polarization, more violence, and more victims, it will not bring positive changes – neither for the LGBTI community nor for the whole of society. This opinion is widespread among the LGBTI community and activists in Georgia.

A theatre play "Caucasian Metamorphosis", staged during Tbilisi Pride Week, is based on the story of a transgender person from Georgia. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus produced a documentary film on that. A special screening was organised for the LGBTI community in the Foundation's office.





Images by Vesna Lalic

The history of the Pride march in Serbia is one in which the development of open events – as in Tbilisi and the relatively long-standing tradition of Pride marches in Sofia – are intertwined with both the openness, courage and perseverance of its participants as well as the aggression by radical conservatives. Despite the participation of Ana Brnabić, Serbia's first openly gay Prime Minister, in the Pride 2019, the situation of the LGBTI community in the country remains far from satisfactory. Among the European countries, Serbia was ranked 30th out of 49 by ILGA Europe in 2019.

According to Human Rights Watch, in 2019 attacks on members of the LGBTI community remained a concern. Between January and August 2019, the NGO "Da Se Zna!" recorded 24 incidents against LGBTI people – 17 violent attacks and five threats. Furthermore, according to Amnesty International, there are no official statistics documenting crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and only one case has ever reached court. Judges seem to be unaware of the existence of the relevant laws and judicial framework. It is practically impossible to conduct training on SOGI for lawyers and others because Russian propaganda exerts a strong influence on Serbian politics and society. Furthermore, the Kremlin's rhetoric reinforces and promotes the narrative that foreigners are fragmenting Serbian society.

Commenting on the gap between legal provisions and societal perception, Belgrade activist Stefan Šparavalo of Da Se Zna! says:



The activist
Stefan Šparavalo
of Da Se Zna!

"Nevertheless, laws, regulations, and provisions, whether only enshrined in legal architecture or fully translated into everyday reality, do not necessarily change the societal landscape, hearts, and minds. Serbia has fifteen laws containing anti-discrimination provisions, and the legal framework tackling fundamental human rights is mostly in place. LGBTI people still suffer from violence, deprivation, and exclusion and are still at risk of permanent homelessness."

The first-ever Belgrade Pride took place in 2001. As the march progressed through the city, it stopped due to violent clashes between protesters, counter-protesters and police. Members of right-wing organisations and sports fan groups attacked the small number of participants that gathered at Republic Square. The number of police forces was insufficient, unprepared and inadequately reacted to the violence. More than forty people were injured and the Government failed to respond to the violence. After these events, almost a decade went by until the next Pride took place in Belgrade. When the parade returned in 2010, thousands of right-wing counter-protestors attacked the march and violently laid waste to the city centre. The counter-protesters hurled petrol bombs and stones at the police protecting the Pride march, injuring about 78 police officers and 17 protestors, with 101 people arrested. None of the marchers were injured. Despite the large-scale violence, many activists today agree that the 2010 march nevertheless embodies a victory for the Serbian LGBTI movement as around 1.000 people participated and were accompanied by close to 5.000 police officers.



The Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić together with her partner during the Belgrade Pride 2019

After a four-year hiatus due to repeated threats of violence and security concerns, the Pride returned to Belgrade in 2014 and has taken place every year since then – however usually under immense military-style security. Nevertheless, things are gradually improving. The 2011 movie “Parada” addressed the subject of Prides and LGBTI issues in Serbia and was generally positively received and reviewed by Serbian media – although some were quick to dismiss it as little more than a cynical marketing ploy.

One of the unique features of the Belgrade Pride is the fact that it brings together multiple organizations to develop a joint strategy, based on an online survey on the Pride’s theme. Of particular note is the campaign that activists started in 2019 under the slogan “I am not giving up” (#NeOdricemSe). This campaign is based on an old Serbian tradition, once common in rural areas, where - when problems arose within or between families - people often published a short note as a written witness in a local newspaper – “I am giving up the family of a father, or my son, my daughter”. Activists adopted this custom and LGBTI parents published notes in newspapers along the lines of “I am not giving up my gay son, gay daughter, etc.” On September 17, 2019, thousands marched through Belgrade under this slogan, once more guarded by heavy police presence. According to observers, the number



The 2019 Belgrade Pride's campaign "I am not giving up" (#NeOdricemSe)

of counter-protestors in 2019 was smaller than in previous years. Protestors called on government institutions to improve the rights of LGBTI members – including a registered partnership law and the adoption of gender identity. The march marked the end of Pride week with around 60 events.

Stefan Šparavalo illustrates the importance of the Pride marches:

"Pride marches are one of the most visible tools for raising awareness for what LGBTI people face on a daily basis. Sure, an annual march seemingly cannot change much, especially in countries where homo- and transphobia are still alive and well, as in Serbia."

According to Šparavalo, legislation, the adequate and consistent implementation of the law, and vocal and unambiguous support from the responsible authorities, including highest-ranked officials, are the most important tools in reaching equal legal footing. He emphasizes that it would be hard to name all the reasons that lead to the widespread invisibility of the LGBTI community in Serbia. However, fear of exposure

51

anti-LGBT+ cases of discrimination, harassment, and violence between January and October, of which

22

were physical attacks.

Hate crimes against LGBT people, documented by "Da se zna!"

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is an important reason why only a tiny percentage of the LGBTI community is out of the closet in Serbia. Consequently, ordinary citizens are often unaware of the existence of LGBTI people, even though "we are everywhere, as a close neighbour, a cashier at the grocery shop, a secretary in the municipal council, a son, a daughter, or even a brother", adds Šparavalo.

According to the Serbian activist, the invisibility of LGBTI people further contributes to their societal alienation. **"When you are not aware of the existence of the "other", you perceive the "other" as something unknown, something obscure.** The "other" is different than we are. It is something not genuinely yours, something coming from abroad that is imported," adds Šparavalo. The goal of changing that perception of the "other" is the main reason why Pride marches matter as a human rights mechanism and why the Friedrich Naumann Foundation has decided to support partner NGOs and activists in their endeavour to promote the visibility and rights of LGBTI communities.

When asked why he has joined the LGBTI movement, Stefan Šparavalo says:

*"I march because the people of Serbia need to be fully aware that we are here, that we do not intend to leave our country, that we struggle for our rights and at least once a year, the streets are ours, the city is ours. We have a single solitary day to pass through streets without the fear of being beaten or harassed. One day not to be afraid or ashamed. **One day to be proud of ourselves.** One day, until we manage to make Serbia a place where everyone, irrespective of difference or identity, will be able to walk and live freely. **Live freely every day of the year.**"*





In contrast to Georgia, where in 2019 the country's first Pride took place in Tbilisi, Bulgarian history of Pride marches is both older and more and more peaceful. Since the first Pride in 2008, LGBTI people and their relatives and friends have participated in the event. From early on, the Bulgarian Pride has functioned as a transformative social and political instrument, used to improve the rights of LGBTI people. The very first march drew 120 people and was met – similarly to Prides in Georgia and Serbia – by opposition, aggression and violence by nationalist groups. However, the police prevented participants from being injured and arrested the initiators of the violence.



Archive picture from the first Sofia Pride in 2008, when the activists were attacked with Molotov cocktails by skinheads

More about the development of LGBTI rights in Bulgaria through the history of the Sofia Pride one can find in the documentary titled "We Are Here" (17') produced by the Project Office for Southeast Europe of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation



Since then, the number of participants has steadily increased every year, the formats for participation have multiplied and diversified and even embassy representatives have joined the Pride. In 2019, in Sofia's 12th Pride, a record number of more than 6.000 people participated in the march – twice as many as in 2018. Amongst them were around 25 diplomats and representatives of international organizations, as well as prominent artists such as Galena, Michaela Fileva, and Netta, the winner of the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest. National authorities still did not participate in the Pride and nationalist groups organised counter-protests.

In general, there is a need to improve both the situation for LGBTI communities in Bulgaria as well as the legal framework to protect them. Due to the lack of recognition of same-sex families, LGBTI people who live together are deprived of over 300 rights, according to a report published by the LGBTI youth organisation Deystvie. The Bulgarian Penal Code does not contain any protection of LGBTI people and does not recognize LGBTI-related hate crimes. The longstanding refusal of the Bulgarian legislature to recognize homophobic and transphobic motives as elements of the crime – which would enhance the penalty – often entails a complete refusal by authorities to investigate or prosecute such crimes. Bulgaria does not have a gender recognition act, which leads to uncertainties regarding the change of gender markers of

transgender people. Currently, they still need to go through complicated and drawn-out court processes to change their gender. An assessment by the pan-European LGBTI organization ILGA Europe, ranked Bulgaria as 38th of 49 countries concerning the situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex rights. This ranking is particularly alarming given that Bulgaria has been a member of the European Union since 2007. This ranking can partially be interpreted as the result of recent large-scale pro-Russian and evangelical campaigns against women's and LGBTI people's rights and freedoms. Due to these campaigns and the lack of adequate legislation, discrimination, hate speech and violence against the LGBTI community is on the rise.¹ Examples abound but several need to be noted.

As in Georgia and Serbia, social acceptance of LGBTI members in Bulgaria remains low. According to a 2018 study by the GLAS Foundation², the number of those believing that LGBT people should not be able to live their lives as they wish, has increased from 18 to 25 percent since 2012. Furthermore, a recent poll by Eurobarometer found that 71% of Bulgarians do not find same-sex relationships "normal" and 74% oppose same-sex marriage.

In Bulgaria, LGBTI activists experience online harassment and threats to their private lives. In order to promote the rights of LGBTI people, their work requires a certain degree of publicity. However, the personal attacks

More than 6.000 people participated in the 12th Sofia Pride

1 According to data of Youth LGBT Organization Deystvie

2 <https://glasfoundation.bg/en/call-it-hate-the-space-for-the-lgbti-people-in-bulgaria-is-shrinking/>



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hate crime and hate speech incidents in 2019, documented by Deystvie

they experience can have individual psychological consequences while simultaneously narrowing the working field. In 2019, the NGO Deystvie recorded 22 hate crimes and hate incidents against LGBT people. Furthermore, the Rainbow Hub – Sofia’s LGBTI community centre – was attacked five times in the past year.

One of the biggest obstacles to achieving social acceptance of LGBTI groups is the longstanding conservative attitude of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the government – and the growing influence both institutions exert on social life in Bulgaria. In Plovdiv, politicians from the local Bulgarian Socialist Party and the right-wing VMRO (Bulgarian Nationalist party) threatened a Balkan Pride photo exhibition – despite the fact that Plovdiv was the European Capital of Culture in 2019.

The most illustrative and representative example of rising homo- and transphobia and the “traditional” and conservative values propagated in Bulgaria is the government’s refusal to adopt into law the principles of the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention. In 2011, 46 European countries – including Bulgaria – signed the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. However, in 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled by an eight to four vote that the Convention’s principles were unconstitutional because its definition of gender as a social construct “relativizes the border line between the two sexes male and female as biologically determined”. Before the ruling, nationalist politicians – with the support of religious groups and the Church – had carried out a large-scale campaign in defence of “traditional family values”. In a press release following her visit to Bulgaria, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, called on the government to address misinformation campaigns surrounding the Istanbul Convention.³

Despite the opposition – or because of it – Bulgaria’s experience also highlights **the role of Prides as an awareness raising and human rights mechanism** and the continued importance of engaging in activities like Sofia Pride to achieve gradual change and acceptance. The high number of over 6.000 participants in the 2019 march and the emergence of new grassroots organisations indicate that a growing number of – especially young – Bulgarians accept the diversity of society and are increasingly expressing this openly. This observation is supported by a 2019 study by the Pew Research Center, which found that 45% of 18-34 year olds agree with the statement that homosexuality should be accepted by society – compared to 19% of those aged 60 and above.

Sofia Pride demonstrates the success of a strategic approach of both openness and visibility. Moreover, activists noted that the 2019

Result of a survey in Bulgaria: LGBT people should not be able to live their lives as they wish,

increased

from 18 to 25 percent since 2012

Study by GLAS Foundation 2018

³ <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-bulgaria-from-25-to-29-november-2019-by-dunja-m/16809cde16>

Pride marked the first march where people who were not actively participating, but watching from the side-lines, welcomed, cheered and waved to Pride participants. However, getting to this point is the result of a long journey, as noted by Simeon Vassilev of the GLAS Foundation:

"It's a long way and I learned to be patient. As a PR manager, I am used to getting immediate results but that approach doesn't work for activism."



Veneta Limberova,
Chairperson of Youth
LGBT Organization
Deystvie

*According to Veneta Liberova from Deystvie, a LGBT Youth Organisation: **"Pride is an affirmation that 'I am not alone' in this country. The last day of my double life, I was pregnant, but decided to join the first Sofia Pride regardless. I was discouraged, I had a lot of fear and doubts, but in the end, I decided to go with my friends"**. However, she also highlights that a large number of police officers accompanied the activists and that still "some people looked at us like we were monkeys, and I felt like a partisan in the war".*

Furthermore, Liberova draws attention to the fact that police threatened the organisers that they would be severely punished for failing to provide security if any of the participants were injured. "But when they saw me pregnant, they were scared and began to show more vigilance in protecting the Pride. **What matters at Prides is empowerment.** Because when you are coming out, you think you're the only person who's gay. You feel clueless as to what you are, what you can identify with. Seeing that there is such a thing as a 'gay community' – even if, back then, it was very small – makes a big difference. That is why Pride is so important.

THE FRIEDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION FOR FREEDOM AND
ITS PARTNERS DO EVERYTHING IN THEIR POWER TO ENSURE
THAT 'ONE DAY OF PRIDE' TURNS INTO 'DAILY PRIDE' FOR LGBTI
COMMUNITIES ALL AROUND THE WORLD

Recommendations to LGBTI activists

1

Develop a joint (multi-group) Pride strategy.

2

Use the local context and intersectional approach for the Pride idea where possible.

3

Create annual activities where the Pride will be the logical end of some activities and the beginning of new ones.

4

Donors should support organizations involved in the organization and conduct of the Pride cycle, as well as provide funds for the rehabilitation of activists and support for their mental and physical well-being, especially within the Pride preparation period and after.

5

It would be healthy and helpful to have a series of events for LGBTI activists, which will allow the evaluation of the experience of past years to assess the prospects for future public events and to develop a plan of joint actions, even if some organizations are not going to be involved in Pride activities directly.

6

Increase the number of allies, including among political parties, democratic movements and NGOs, parents of LGBTI people, religious leaders, psychologists, teachers, etc., who are willing to work together on several issues, including intersectoral ones.

Abbreviations

IDAHOT	The International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, on May 17 annually.
ILGA Europe	European region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (or in some cases, questioning)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SOGI	Sexual orientation and gender identity

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