

ILGA-Europe Annual Conference 2019

Keynote speech by Dunja Mijatović Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Prague, 25 October 2019

Dear friends,

I must start with paying tribute to the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York city, which you celebrate this year. 50 years ago, those who had grown tired of hiding stood up against oppression. There have been considerable gains since then in securing the rights of LGBTI people, at least in Europe.

If today LGBTI people are more visible and their rights more respected, it is largely thanks to your relentless work. Pride marches have become a regular summer feature in many cities in Europe. Visibility of LGBTI people in all sectors of society is slowly improving, with at least 3 European Prime Ministers openly identifying as gay at this very moment. There are impressive advances in securing legal protection across the continent, including anti-discrimination and anti-hate crimes laws. 27 member states recognise and protect same-sex relationships, through civil partnerships or same-sex marriage. There is still much to do to catch up on trans and intersex rights, but these communities too are starting to be heard. It is encouraging that 7 Council of Europe member states have adopted legal gender recognition laws based on self-determination and 2 prohibit unnecessary sex-normalising surgeries without consent on intersex children.

I see you today and what I see first is the proud latest generation of activists in a rights movement that has achieved spectacular victories over the past few decades.

But if I made it a priority to be with you this year, it is also because I know that we are in the midst of a serious backlash against the rights of LGBTI people across Europe. Organised and targeted attacks are seeking to dehumanise LGBTI people, to drive you back in the shadows, to silence or even to erase you.

The reports of illegal detention, torture and persecution by law enforcement officials of gay men in Chechnya in 2017 and earlier this year are probably the most extreme case. Elsewhere, populist and nationalist leaders are manipulating existing societal prejudices, and fears borne out of lack of information, to scapegoat LGBTI people. The latest glaring example is Poland where hateful anti-LGBTI rhetoric has become a central feature of European and national elections' campaigns this year. The same playbook of pointing an enemy for political gain is used elsewhere, in Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Hungary.

Conservative church leaders and a powerful, well-financed international “anti-gender” movement are seizing all opportunities to block advances or even seek rollbacks of rights of LGBTI people in the name of “traditional values” and the “natural order”. Pride marches have been banned under the guise of morality and public safety.

LGBTI organisations are amongst those most vulnerable in the face of a worrying clamping down on free civil society. In several countries, LGBTI defenders are prevented from doing their work, or bullied online, intimidated, judicially harassed, while the funding for their organisations is being questioned or withdrawn.

Even in European countries that have been more open to the rights of LGBTI people, such as the United Kingdom and France, there seems to be an unstoppable outpouring of hate against LGBTI people, notably on social media, that seems to have opened the gates to daily acts of physical violence.

We must not accept this.

I see you today and I see your distress, caused by the rising intolerance and bigotry that are sweeping through Europe.

My promise to you is that I will continue to raise the visibility of LGBTI people through my work. I will expose the consequences of the general backsliding of human rights in Europe for your communities and continue to stand firm for equal rights.

I believe that the only solution to counter the negative trends is to work together in defence of a large progressive agenda. We need to join forces with representatives of other groups assailed by the bullies – women, migrants, Roma. We also need to join forces with those who don’t belong to any of these groups but believe in a just world and in democracy based on the rule of law and human rights. Only together and united will we be strong enough to defeat the demagogues and fear-mongers. Together we must show that diverse, inclusive, respectful and free societies are possible and that they benefit everyone.

And I see reasons for hope.

Your courage and determination give me hope. Sometimes in the face of grave dangers, you continue to stand up to oppression and to claim the right to full inclusion. If you are not defeated and afraid, how could I?

I also take hope in the victories that continue to come along the way. Last month, LGBTI people in my native Sarajevo had their first-ever Pride March. Just a few years ago, this would have been unimaginable. Until the last minute, the March was under threat. But it ended up being a wonderful event, a true celebration of freedom. A few weeks later, Muslim LGBTI people took to the streets in London in a joyful affirmation of their existence, against all prejudices.

And I take hope in observing that the outbreak of hate also results in new allies. In Sarajevo, many supporters walked alongside LGBTI people and the motto of the pride was one of solidarity: “No one is free unless we are all free.” In Poland, the targeting of the LGBTI community has had the effect of bringing people to identify and reject political manipulation. Opinion polls show rising level of acceptance and support for LGBTI people.

Freedom is a constant struggle. It is more important than ever that we keep working for equal and inclusive societies.