



“LGBTI Rights AND Freedom of Religion”

‘Which practical roads to follow to counter the oppositional debate between the freedom of religion & belief and LGBTI Rights?’

**Side event organized by European Forum of LGBTI Christian Group and Human Rights Committee of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe
Strasbourg, room 8 Palais de l’Europe
9 April 2019, 13.00-14.00**

Concept note

In large parts of Europe, religious communities play an important role in setting the moral agenda. They are bodies, institutes, movements that speak with authority about a range of ethical issues, including the rights of LGBTI+ people. Numerous LGBTI+ people are part of these churches or communities, identifying themselves, at least culturally, with the mainstream religious tradition of their country.

In the last ten years, **tension** has grown over presupposed freedom of religion and the rights of LGBTI people. A recent example is the clash in Romania between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the local LGBTI+ activist organisations over the right or just concept of family, ending in a failed referendum that did not reach the necessary threshold to be legitimate (6-7 October 2018). Although there was no victory for any of the involved parties, a deep gap in society has been created and wounds have been inflicted that will take a long time to heal. How can this growing tension be overcome, in such a way that churches and other religious communities on the one hand and LGBTI people and their organisations on the other do not only or no longer find each other as adversaries in heated debates about presupposed contradictions in freedoms and rights?

The session ‘LGBTI in Europe – Think Together’ at the INGO Conference of the Council of Europe on 25 January 2018 started approaching the aforementioned tension in an inclusive manner, stating the possibility that freedom of religion does not have to be discarded in favour of the rights of LGBTI people nor does it have to be the case the other way around. **The aim of the proposed event** is to elaborate on this theme by reflecting on concrete examples and roads to follow.

An important basis for this exercise is working on the fundamentals of a ‘**shared values approach**’. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) acknowledges ‘European values’ also for its own policies and work (see for example *Advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief for All* (CEC, 2015) dealing within the framework of freedom of religion and the European migrant crisis), not only for the sake of societal cohesion, but also

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because many of these values, most of all those supporting human rights, are religious by nature (or even by origin). This side event provides a space for the reflection on identifying such shared values and how they could be fundamental and directional to the dialogue on human rights in general and LGBTI+ rights especially. Choosing for such an approach is inviting the churches and other religious communities into the public debate taking them seriously in the contribution they could make to furthering the cause of human rights. How could these values be a basis for a joint venture of ensuring rights for all? How could this create a synergy where there was opposition before?

LGBTI+ people of faith are a reality in all churches and other religious communities. Their voice has been around for decades already, but they are now gradually discerned and recognised as the persons that embody intersectionality in themselves. They, or most of them, know how to integrate their sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual expression and their religion. They also know where their ability to participate in the practice of their churches (the institutions), their religious communities or in public life (under the pressure of religious moral normativity) is obstructed and which isolation and harm this causes. It is therefore important to listen to their voices.