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Speech Andrew BOFF, United Kingdom (R, ECR), Rapporteur on LGBTI issues

Protecting LGBTI¹ people in the context of rising anti-LGBTI hate speech and discrimination: The role of local and regional authorities

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1352 words = 11 minutes

Dear Colleagues,

Before I present this report, I would like to warmly thank Ms Yoomi RENSTRÖM. Until her mandate in the Congress ended, we worked together as co-rapporteurs on this report as well as on the fact-finding mission to Poland.

I also want to thank our expert, Mr Robert DAVIDSON, for his work, and all the colleagues from different departments of the Council of Europe, namely the Commissioner for Human Rights, ECRI and the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity unit, who contributed to this report with their comments.

Six years ago, in its report on “Guaranteeing LGBT people’s rights”, this Congress stressed that local and regional authorities play a crucial role in protecting the rights of LGBTI people.

In this new report, we take stock of the situation, as, unfortunately, we have not made the progress that I might have hoped we would have by 2021.

¹ The acronym LGBTI is more and more replaced with the term “Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics” (SOGIESC) when referring to issues related to LGBTQI+ people. This being said, for ease of presentation and because it is better known by the public, the Rapporteurs have decided to use the LGBTI acronym in this report, when referring to both the issues and the people concerned.

First, allow me to explain what we say in this report. I will then move on to the Resolution and the Recommendation.

In the past decades, in many countries, LGBTI rights and visibility has taken giant steps towards more equality and freedom. But, recently, in Europe, we have begun to see **acquired rights being attacked through a number of tactics, which we outline in the explanatory memorandum:**

Firstly, language is being used to delegitimise LGBTI people.

- They are being referred to as an ‘ideology’ instead of as people, as citizens of our towns and regions. This type of language is dehumanising.
- Hate speech is increasing throughout Europe. This is not limited to one region or a couple of countries. This is a European issue.
- Just to give a few examples:
 - In Estonia, the Chair of the Conservative People’s party referred to Pride marches as ‘pervert parades’.
 - The mayor of Svetogorsk, in Russia, said that LGBTI people wouldn’t be allowed in his city.
- Online hate speech and cyberbullying are also on the rise, affecting LGBTI youth in particular.
- Radical extreme-right groups are especially active on social media. We see groups like Generation Identity growing in the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Austria and Italy. They refer to themselves as militants and use violent, war-like language.
- They don’t just attack LGBTI people, but also women, minorities and democracy as a whole. Worryingly, their members are mostly young Europeans.

Secondly, we see a rise in anti-LGBTI policies.

- So-called ‘anti-propaganda laws’ in Lithuania and Russia hinder LGBTI people from expressing themselves openly.
- Restrictions to adopt and marry, interfere with LGBTI people’s family life. These have been adopted amongst others in Serbia, Hungary and the Slovak Republic.

- Sometimes, even if equality policies are in place, they are simply not implemented.
- International agreements, such as the Istanbul Convention, are also increasingly being challenged.

Thirdly, civil society space for LGBTI organisations is shrinking.

- Their activities are directly attacked, for example when it comes to providing information to LGBTI youth.
- They are also often refused the funding they need to carry out their activities.
- In Hungary and Russia, so-called ‘foreign agent’ laws are crippling for LGBTI organizations who rely on funding from abroad. They require so much administrative work, that NGOs no longer have the time or people to carry out their activities.

All of this contributes to a rising anti-LGBTI sentiment across Europe. Worryingly, we also see this trend amongst our own peers. Today, across Europe, there are politicians who shamelessly say that “gays give off a certain odour” or who ban local Pride marches claiming that they are “provocative and repulsive”.

This is unacceptable. As elected representatives, we should set a good example and promote cohesion. Instead, these statements are sending the message that attacking LGBTI people is acceptable.

All of this has a serious impact on the lives of LGBTI people. Because of social and economic exclusion, they are at risk of poverty and depression. LGBTI youth are particularly vulnerable. They are often the victims of cyberbullying, both at school and in their homes.

In 2020, one in ten LGBTI people in Europe reported being physically attacked because they were LGBTI. For transgender and intersex people, these numbers were even higher.

This also has an impact on our societies, especially at the local and regional level. Hate speech and discriminatory policies divide citizens. They create in-groups and out-groups. It is at the local level that we first feel the effects of these cracks in our social cohesion.

There are also economic ramifications. By excluding LGBTI people from our communities, we miss out on their potential. They are less likely to start businesses, families and support the local economy.

Luckily, there are also many cities and regions throughout Europe that have been promoting the rights of LGBTI people. The report gives a range of inspiring **good examples**. It also gives examples of successful co-operation between different cities.

These deserve to be celebrated. They show that the local and regional level really can make a difference to LGBTI people's lives. They can take the lead where national legislation is lacking.

Today, we want to encourage towns, cities and regions to combat hatred and discrimination and give them the tools to do so.

Now, I come to the Resolution, in which we provide these tools. The resolution stresses that the protection of human rights is essential for our democracies. It also reminds local and regional authorities of their responsibility to protect the human rights of LGBTI people.

Regardless of political background, as mayors, city councilors and regional representatives, we have a duty to all our fellow citizens to create inclusive societies.

In the Resolution, the Congress invites local and regional authorities to take action on several fronts:

- **They can mainstream LGBTI equality** in their policies and implement existing anti-discrimination legislation. To monitor progress, they can collect data that includes questions on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- **They can combat hate speech and hate crimes.** For example, by implementing clear codes of conduct, applying to local administrations and organisations who receive funding from them.
- **They can promote the inclusion of LGBTI people** by consulting and working with local LGBTI organisations. They can also appoint a local expert on equality and diversity to help reach out to all stakeholders.

- **They can strengthen the social rights and well-being** of their LGBTI citizens. For example, by creating safe spaces where LGBTI people can access counselling and mental health support.
- **Young LGBTI people** are particularly vulnerable. To support them, cities can – as far as it is within their mandate – provide educational resources to educators and work with schools to address bullying.

This resolution calls on local and regional authorities to **promote dialogue and awareness-raising activities to bring citizens closer together.**

To help them achieve this, the resolution invites local and regional authorities to use their **national associations**. These can be platforms to exchange good practices. They are also a source of expertise to help cities and regions develop equality policies.

But the local level cannot do everything on its own. All levels need to work together.

Therefore, the recommendation calls on national governments to:

- **Develop national action plans against discrimination.** Local and regional authorities, as well as NGOs working with LGBTI people, should be consulted to develop these plans.
- **Implement the recommendations, resolutions and judgements of the Council of Europe.**
- **Gather data on hate crimes and discrimination** against LGBTI people in their countries.

Colleagues,

We are now going to discuss the resolution and recommendation. I don't doubt that it will be a lively discussion. However, I ask you to keep in mind the essence of the discussion:

We are not talking about dangerous movements or obscure ideologies. We are talking about **people**, and their desire to live openly, as full members of society. We are talking about human rights protection, at the core of the Council of Europe's mission.

All member States have committed to upholding human rights and combatting discrimination against LGBTI people and leave no one behind.

I invite all of you to adopt the resolution and the recommendation and send a message of support to LGBTI people across Europe and to the cities and regions that work so hard to protect their rights.

Thank you.