

ILGA-Europe Annual Conference Ljubljana 2023: “Rising to the moment”
Plenary and panel discussion: The practice of solidarity – Reflections on unity, trust and true connections

Opening remarks by Dunja Mijatović
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

27 October 2023

Good morning, it is a pleasure to be with you all, and I am sorry that I cannot be present in person.

In 2019, when I last was able to address this conference, we could not have foreseen some of the events that have since unfolded. A pandemic, war and conflict, have only added to the formidable challenges faced by human rights defenders and activists. Populism meanwhile continues to gain ground across Europe, while anti-LGBTI backlash and hatred increase.

I therefore cannot think of a more fitting or urgent theme for this conference than “rising to the moment”. But I have seen many times throughout my mandate that the LGBTI movement is indeed capable of “**rising to the moment**”, and of remaining **resilient** in the face of adversity.

My term as Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights will end in the spring next year. Now therefore seems like an opportune time to **reflect** on some of the key work done, challenges identified, and lessons learned.

In particular, I would like to share with you the ways in which I believe my Office, and other international institutions, can show **solidarity** with the LGBTI movement, as strong allies – and by ensuring that civil society and human rights defenders remain key partners in our work:

First, your voices must be listened to and amplified.

You are the experts on what you need and the challenges you face. Throughout my mandate, it has been important to **make space** for this; through meetings, a [roundtable](#) on the situation of LGBTI human rights defenders, or through otherwise meaningfully consulting for any work.

At the same time, it is important to recognise diversity, differing needs and different voices, within the LGBTI movement. Many people face multiple, **intersecting** forms of discrimination – if we ignore these experiences, we risk leaving the most marginalised behind. Part of my work has sought to draw out the specific needs of LGBTI people who [seek asylum](#), or who additionally face racism or sex and gender-based discrimination. In the coming weeks, I will also seek to highlight intersectional discrimination faced due to engagement in sex work.

Listening, however, is not enough. It is also vital that I use my voice to **shed a light** on your experiences, lives and work. During the past year, I have been raising awareness about [conversion practices](#), the harms they cause and the human rights they violate. At hearings before the European Parliament, and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where I recently spoke about these practices, I repeatedly saw politicians who were shocked to learn that these things are still happening here, in Europe.

Finally, for this point, allies need to **show up**, and in a visible way. During [Europride 2022](#), I was in Belgrade, [calling](#) on the authorities to allow the ill-fated pride march to go ahead. This year, I participated in the [opening](#) of Tbilisi Pride week. Throughout the years, and in light of serious threats, I have repeatedly [urged](#) the authorities to ensure that organisers and participants are protected at Tbilisi Pride events. Regrettably, the week ended with a shameful attack. The continued determination of activists has only strengthened my own commitment to stand by your side.

Secondly, institutions must proactively defend LGBTI rights and activists.

Unfortunately, this has become an increasingly necessary part of my role during these past years. In the first place, it is the responsibility of those who work to ensure respect for human rights to **counter harmful, powerful anti-LGBTI narratives**. I have called out the [political manipulation](#) of LGBTI-phobia – instances where these minorities have been used as scapegoats by ultra-conservative and nationalist politicians for their own gain. I have also pointed out the toxic discourse around transgender (trans) people during my [visit to the UK](#), and will elaborate on this in an upcoming publication on trans people’s human rights. As Commissioner, it is essential that I make it clear: those who peddle anti-LGBTI arguments do *not* do so in the name of human rights.

Related to this, I believe that an important part of my role is “**defending**” the **defenders** – those working in increasingly hostile climates face harassment and intimidation, physical attacks and sometimes strategic litigation, aimed at silencing them. I have, and will continue to, condemn these loudly and publicly, while calling for effective investigations to be conducted, and perpetrators to be sanctioned.

Crucially, I have, and will continue to **use all the tools** at my disposal, in order to carry out this work. This includes speaking and writing to parliamentarians and ministries in your countries, when [problematic laws](#) are suggested – or indeed, when [good laws](#) are proposed, which might benefit from backing or support. I have also increasingly used my power to intervene before the European Court of Human Rights, notably in order to push for [equal recognition](#) of same-sex partnerships.

I would like to reflect on one further point. As Commissioner for Human Rights, it is clear to me that the fight for human rights, and the efforts of the LGBTI movement, are intrinsically linked. LGBTI rights are not a special set of rights – they are basic human rights: to live free from violence and discrimination, to have equal opportunities and decent, dignified conditions, access to healthcare, a family life, and to have one’s autonomy and identity respected.

At the same time, threats to LGBTI people’s rights are a [threat to all](#) who value human rights, democracy and the rule of law. We have seen too many times that attacks do not happen in isolation. Many hard-won rights are also threatened by harmful ideologies which appeal to so-called “traditional values” and “natural order”. In those places where we see the highest levels of intolerance against LGBTI people today, we also find gross violations of minority rights, the roll-back of women’s equality and freedoms, the suppression of freedom of expression and assembly, the destruction of democratic institutions and independent judicial systems.

This affects us all, and highlights the importance of nurturing support and alliances across the broader human rights movement, to defend the rights of all.

Finally, I would like to close by thanking all those who have shared their voices, their knowledge, and their support with me and my Office during these years. The **trust** that you have shown is not something that should ever be taken lightly, or for granted. It is something that must be actively and continuously earned.

I hope that we will all rise, together, to face the challenges both of today – and tomorrow.

Thank you.

Background information

Information on the plenary and panel (entitled “The practice of solidarity: Reflections on unity, trust and true connections”)

Plenary speeches by:

- Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (she/her)
- Susanne Knoefel, Head of Unit, Unit Non-Discrimination: LGBTIQ, Age, Horizontal Matters, European Commission (she/her)

After your interventions, there will be a discussion with panellists entitled: The practice of solidarity: Reflections on unity, trust and true connection, with the following questions: *How does solidarity manifest itself? What can we learn from solidarity successes and failures? What does trust-building look like and what makes it hard to show up for others? The panel brings together speakers with perspectives and experiences from across the region to have a real conversation about the hard and beautiful work of nurturing solidarity and cohesion in the movement and beyond.*

The theme of this year’s Conference is “Rising to the moment”, which aims to focus on the resilience of the movement, as well as solidarity and cohesion within it. It is expected that approximately 400 activists, civil society representatives and other stakeholders will participate.

The last time you addressed the ILGA-Europe annual conference was in 2019, also through a [keynote speech](#).