



REPORT

Regional Conference on Political Participation of LGBTI+ People in the Western Balkans and Turkey

14-15 December 2021, [MAK Albania Hotel](#), Illyria II Room, Tirana, Albania,

Background



ERA - LGBTI Equal Rights Association for the Western Balkans and Turkey, is a regional network of 74 LGBTI+ organisations working for the advancement and protection of the rights of LGBTI people in the region. Among other responsibilities, the ERA network monitors political processes in the region and updates members on relevant developments, initiates solidarity campaigns and

actions, conducts research on political participation and provides capacity development tools and resources on the political participation of LGBTI+ people.

Since its establishment in 2015, and in close cooperation with its member organisations, ERA has advocated regionally and internationally for the political participation, representation and engagement of LGBTI+ people. To date, significant efforts have been made to push for and maintain a positive momentum among governments, parliamentarians, human rights organisations and other stakeholders in the region. As a part of these efforts, and in cooperation with its Macedonian member organisations and the LGBTI inter-party working group of the Parliament of North Macedonia, ERA organized its first [regional inter-parliamentary conference](#) in December 2019. Meanwhile, since 2016, we have organized several working meetings of the Regional LGBTI Intergovernmental Platform as a space for governments and NGOs of the region to build further understanding and dialogue. These previous events showed the importance of regional cooperation and engagement among politicians, parliamentarians and LGBTI+ community leaders. Conference participants recognized the importance of such regional meetings as a tool to strengthen dialogue and solidarity between the parties involved.

With this in mind, and within the framework of its strategic goals, ERA, in cooperation with HBT-Socialdemocrats in Sweden and Open Mind Spectrum Albania (OMSA) and the support of Olof Palme International Centre, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, LSVD Germany, the European Commission, and the Council of Europe hosted its second regional conference on the political participation of LGBTI+ people in the Western Balkans and Turkey, in Tirana, Albania.

The situation:

There are several existing barriers to the political participation of LGBTI+ people in the region. With extremely rare occasions there are no out LGBTI politicians. Regular studies across the region show that the majority of political parties do not have LGBTI rights in their Party statutes or governing programs. Across the region, hate speech against LGBTI people is very prevalent among politicians and other public figures.

Despite this, LGBTI people have found support and allies among many political parties and politicians, whose efforts in defending this community have made a huge difference. Their efforts - and those of many governments and mandates across the entire Western Balkans region - have led to positive legislation in the area of non-discrimination, protection from hate speech and hate crimes, family rights and those relating to gender identity and gender expression. North Macedonia has recently become a leading global example of parliamentary engagement by establishing an inter-party working group that meets regularly and builds consensus on important legal and policy reforms.

The road to LGBTI equality however is still very long and no country can say they have fulfilled all demands and expectations of the community. In fact, recent global developments and trends, including Europe itself, show a backlash against LGBTI rights, and an increased polarization on almost every single topic, which has made the LGBTI movement and communities even more vulnerable and concerned about their future.

Given these obstacles and the overall context, **our conference objectives were:**

- To update stakeholders on the state of political participation of LGBTI+ people in the region since 2019
- To discuss the current situation and strategies aiming to obtain legal gender recognition in the countries of our region
- To discuss the current situation and strategies aiming to obtain legal recognition of same-sex families in our region.

Below is a summary of the main panels of the conference.

REGIONAL CONFERENCE

Panel 1: Political participation of LGBTI+ people in the Western Balkans and Turkey

Political participation and representation of LGBTI+ people in the Western Balkans remains still the “next frontier”. Out LGBT+ politicians are only but a handful, despite the very rare exceptions when they are in high positions of power. Predominantly, there are no out LGBTI+ politicians, LGBTI+ issues are not included in party statutes and governing programs, protection and advancement of LGBTI+ rights has reached governments, parliaments, but LGBTI+ people have yet to become a visible part of these structures. Our panel of guests from across the region explored this topic in more detail. Why are most political parties still homo/bi/transphobic? Where are we exactly stuck and what is the way forward?

This panel was joined by Damir Arnaut, Member of Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Natalija Simović from Ne Davimo Beograd in Serbia, Dajana Bakić, Vice President of Rainbow Rose and Arber Kodra, Executive Director of Open Mind Spectrum Albania (OMSA).

Highlights:



Serbia: On the surface we have openly lesbian politician, but that has not changed the situation and political rights of LGBT+I persons. One example is that law on same-sex partnership is still pending and is still in procedure due to public backlash. There is still strong backlash around this issue, regardless of the fact that we have a quite many active organisations, promoting LGBTI issues. Regardless of the fact that we have pride marches, with less and less backlash, the

struggle is real and we have not yet reached a threshold.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina discrimination is present in all levels. Damir Arnaut was one of the first persons in political scene of the country that called for allowing the first queer fest in 2008, which was an attempt by the LGBTI to hold a public event, which was met with violence. In that sense some things have changed. Some changes have been monumental. In 2015, the state parliament organized its first thematic session on LGBTI rights. Significant changes were made. In 2019 we had first pride in Sarajevo, which now seems will be an annual event, like. Only 11 years have passed from a violent attack, to the Pride March in Sarajevo. Progress has been fast and slow at the same time. As far as visibility of LGBTI people in BiH, progress has been minimal. Less than a week ago, a politician from Banja Luka was outed publicly by his political opponents. His party however, even though conservative, stood behind him and there was a positive step of support. Human rights organisations across BiH were supportive too. I am glad that in my own political party Naša Stranka, social-liberal, that they are quite individuals who are openly LGBTI and accepted among us. But that indeed is not the norm in BiH. Naša Stranka is the only party with a stated openness. Others don't come near this party's attitude on this and other issues.

Dajana Bakić, Representative of Rainbow Rose network of Socialist and Social Democratic Parties from Europe (including Western Balkans), noted that in the WB there have been some improvements. She is the only person from the Western Balkans in Rainbow Rose who is out as LGBTI person. This says a lot about our region and the work that we need to do. We use our political power to organize actions or sanctions within the party to make our progressive voices heard but also to challenge the situation and to change it by proposing policies and different kind of actions. It is good to have people from our party who are in governing bodies, of European Parliament and that are in power in their countries, who have power to make change. We as a network, most of our parties have their own national LGBTI networks, and it is easy to organize to hear their needs but also to create answers to it and political actions. We are following the situation, to see if it reflects our own region here. Here we have challenges in having unified positions and actions. We saw that in Croatia in 2013 with the referendum, or when they voted for same-sex partnership law.

“When it comes to political participation of LGBTI people in the Western Balkans but also in general, our political parties are male dominated, patriarchal, with strong hierarchy when it comes to decision making processes and it is still always about the vote. We are still complacent to the norms.”

Dajana Bakić, Rainbow Rose

So making LGBTI issues visible is always hard and challenging and questioning if it going to bring us votes. So even if you are a progressive party, you always live in an environment that is traditional. Studies in our region show that political leaders do not lose votes if they support LGBTI rights. There is not enough knowledge in parties when it comes to LGBTI issues, and political parties are not considered as friendly for LGBTI people. The membership is quite homophobic, because there is no basic knowledge about LGBTI issues, because there is general invisibility of LGBTI people. It takes courage and knowledge to be out and dealing with LGBTI issues is not considered a priority, because there is no knowledge that LGBTI rights are human rights.

“We have an invisible community, and it is clear why the community is not out from fear of not feeling safe but also in the LGBTI community there is the opinion that the political scene is a toxic and aggressive space so nobody in their right frame of mind joins politics and at the same time and abide to their values.”

Dajana Bakić

Question for Ne Davimo Beograd: You are a grassroots movement, how has it been it for you to include LGBTI people, have they been active, and how has it affected the groups?

Natalija Simović: We are a grassroots movement; we are not just allies. LGBTI people are organic part of our movement from the very beginning, so they reflect our structures in our bodies, membership and electoral system. What I believe is important to say is that LGBTI people participate in different topics. So it is important to have LGBTI credibility and competence outside of LGBTI issues, for example territorial issues. Apart from LGBTI issues, as one our main values, is the right to living in a city for everyone. We do this with people who carry this weight and live with those realities, for instance we have people with disability whose views and perspectives are included in the program.

When it comes to LGBTI we have always been in support of full marriage and to promote parenthood among same-sex couples in terms of adoption and other rights. We work to bring these issues to the

national level as they are a national matter and go to national parliament. Throughout our activities we have been involved in activities of the LGBTI community, like pride marches. In the next months the LGBTI community will organize a fundraiser party for the upcoming elections.

“Our representation is organized in such a way that 10% of LGBTI people participate in all structures of the party. We have a proportional list which includes men, women and non-binary. We want to own up to our values. One of our aspirations is not only to create a world where LGBTI people will live freely but also to have intentional processes that will include people from all walks of life.”

Natalija Simović, Ne Davimo Beograd

We do this by cooperating with similar political movements in Europe. We have this methodology for feminisation of politics, the ethics of care. We try to rethink and structure ourselves, to include everyone, to have proximity to community and have essential pathways for participation.

Question: How does the public react to your involvement of LGBTI community, internally but also externally and how do we working with the public on this?

Natalija Simović: In the beginning it was more intuitive, so it was kind of organic. One of the things that's really important to stress is that we need to have strategic communication when we talk internally and externally. Of course we had all kinds of misunderstandings and struggles in understanding why we need to support LGBTI issues. We have overcome them with careful and deliberate messaging to deconstruct those narratives, promoting diversity and have affirmative messaging. When we were discussing family and concept of family, we said family is a place where we are taught love, and care for others, so for us this is where it all starts. We have not only LGBTI families but also single parents, chosen families so you promote all these, and it boils down to family.

Secondly, something that happened organically, we fight alongside each other on issues that are common to us. In protests people familiarise with comrades in struggle, so when you work on a goal, eventually tensions fade away when we realize we are in this together. It should be done with persistence and courage that over time you will lose some supporters, but you know that it is on the right side of history. If you are really persistent about it.

When we made public endorsements on LGBTI community, we got backlash and violent comments. Public lynching is always banned and prosecuted and we file reports on people who make hate speech. For people who were reached first by the right-wing narratives, we try to moderate the discussion and we know that less and less people are unfollowing us over time, with less negative comments. We really need to work together on these issues. What was important was not to further polarise with your messaging, which I think is really crucial and to win over the moveable middle, because people essentially want to understand better.

Question for MP. Damir Arnaut: On the political debate in Parliament. How is the discussion when it comes to issues of the community? Where do you see the chance for this matter?

We have a very complex system. The state body where I serve is limited. Most social issues are on entity levels and cantonal levels. By following the work of my colleagues in other bodies, our party is extremely active and all other issues. As far as the state level is concerned, the special session on LGBTI

rights was called by a conservative party rep, and it received huge publicity. I don't have opportunity to work more on these matters, but to the extent that they are dealt on entity level, many of our party members are very active. Again, there are parties that are advocating on this topic, but the overall scene is still lacking some sort of momentum or critical force that would make this a success.

Question for Dajana Bakić, Rainbow Rose: In your view how can we include LGBTI people in political parties and movements?

When it comes to CSOs we need to provide tools to LGBTI people on how to be involved and active in politics, not just political parties, but how to be involved in decision making. We need to provide education on how to be active, how to address your issues etc. When it comes to responsibility of political parties: it is important that they discuss LGBTI issues and take stance on LGBTI rights and be vocal about it in public. It is important that the public sees that you care about human rights of LGBTI people and that you are taking action internally to organize yourself. To make space available for LGBTI people internally, to take public stance on LGBTI issues, to address attacks, hate speech and discrimination. Political parties need to be more responsible but also accountable for everything that is going on, because they have the power to make change in Parliaments and governments. Parties need to adopt different kinds of internal procedures and policies and organise different actions and initiatives to make safe space so that LGBTI people can become involved. Give power to LGBTI people in decision making processes, include their perspectives and give them position of power and responsibility. Being in a Party's board or presidency, is a step towards encouraging visibility also. It is important for parties to have a clear stance and how support for LGBTI people, create a safe environment for them and give them a chance to be involved in decision making processes.

Open Mind Spectrum Albania (OMSA), has conducted a survey in Albania on position of political parties on LGBTI rights and their participation. In 2017 they conducted a study, which aimed to identify opportunities to increase political participation of LGBTI people in Albania. It was a challenge first to find someone who would do this research. Parties in Albania with large electorate are neutral on LGBTI rights, but not openly supportive, which makes it unclear if they are for or against. Small parties on the other hand have opened positions against the LGBTI community. We identified the importance of trainings and raising awareness with political parties and the communities where they live. Key political parties need to make their positions public, to have more dialogue among parties and to have higher level of engagement of issues that affect the LGBTI community. For institutions to monitor hate speech from politicians.

Main conclusions:

- Political parties should make their positions clear on LGBTI rights and provide space for LGBTI people in decision making bodies and positions of responsibility;
- Political parties need to acquire more education and sensitisation on the needs and issues of LGBTI citizens;
- The political culture in the region is toxic and aggressive, which tends to make LGBTI people stay "out of it"
- New grass roots movements, like Ne Davimo Beograd in Serbia, show that inclusion of LGBTI people is possible. Their experience shows also that preparation is needed for the backlash and how to speak to the moveable middle but also sanction those who discriminate.
- The recent case of the outing of a gay politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by the support of his party and the general public, shows that there is progress and hope for the LGBTI community to be embraced by their political parties.

Panel 2: [Achieving Legal Gender Recognition in the Western Balkans and Turkey](#)



Trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people face the greatest barriers in terms of political participation, inclusion and visibility across the entire Western Balkans and Turkey region. However, a stronger and more visible trans community is emerging everyday. Their demands for the political parties across the region are clear: legal recognition, protection from discrimination and violence, access to employment, housing and other services and more. Most political parties, however,

have no clear vision, agenda or position on trans specific issues. How can we change this? The panel will further look into these questions and more.

This panel was joined by Sultan Kayhan, Member of Parliament and HBT-S Board Member, Sweden, Luana Myrtollari, Coordinator, “Ylberofilia”, Albania, Matija Stefanovic Da Se Zna, Serbia and Predrag Jovanovski, TransFormA, North Macedonia. The panel was moderated by Biljana Ginova from ERA.

Summary:

Trans, non-binary and intersex people are the least included in societies and laws and policies continue to be regulatory and imposing on the bodies and freedoms of these communities. For example, trans people often need to go through long and violent procedures to change their gender legally. Even though international standards have changed, in our region there is still compulsory sterilisation, hormonal treatment and other types of interventions. In the last years we have noticed a strong and visible trans movement which is established and take space in political life. We see individuals who are taking the space, creating their platforms and we see them making clear demands. First time that we have in the region a community clearly vocal. During the pandemic trans people stood for each other, organizing food, shelter, peer support and everything that the states failed to do. We saw a solidarity which is important for us to achieve our rights. ERA has established a TNBI caucus, as a space for self-empowerment and support. Everybody in our region who shares this identities, to join us in the caucus.

Predrag Jovanovski, from TransFormA in North Macedonia: Our focus now is Legal Gender Recognition, because we still lack it. We also don't have laws that oppose LGR, so we have a vacuum, where people who should approve LGR do not know what to do. We need LGR so we do not depend on the will of the people who should approve recognition in our documents. Without it there are a lot of challenges that we as a community face: There is a challenge everywhere that requires documents of self-identification. For example, for work, renting an apartment, for college, school, using a bank etc. Trans community faces many other challenges: a trans woman was renting a flat, when the landlord found out she was trans, he asked her to leave the flat. We as a community do not have the stability and safety to rent a flat. It does not matter if you have money or not, you still risk being homeless and you don't have a roof over your head. Another example was that of a trans man who was trying to take his money from his bank, and the staff there refused to give him service as they did not believe him. They continued to ask him personal questions. This was in a bank full of people where he had to explain his situation in front of strangers. At the end he still did not receive the service that he needed, because the security personnel there did not believe him. There are many other examples like this which show that every trans person here in North Macedonia faces challenges, as we have no laws that protect us from discrimination.

On the importance of a law based on self-determination and the status of the draft law: The adoption is still pending, with challenges from politicians and the parliament. It is an endless cycle and at one point we should receive this important change. On the other hand, we don't have understanding why this law is so important for us and the country. Why self-determination is important for us. Because we do not have the law now and if we have the law then it should be accessible to everyone. Without self-determination it will not be accessible to every trans person, because not all trans people want to go through surgeries and interventions. If we want the law to work, then it must be with self-determination. First not everyone wants to transition medically and secondly there are people who want to transition but can't do for health reasons. So it would be contradictory for us to ask for a law that is without self-determination. It will not be good for the trans community.



Luana Myrtollari from Ylberofilia in Albania:

This is a new trans group and the first trans led in the country. Ylberofilia intends to promote love and acceptance, as people should not be afraid of the community. We have chosen love and art as a form of protest, as the highest form of expression, for people to accept us. We also want to be formal and serious and want to move forward with our ideas and work and the change that we can bring for the trans community in the country. The whole group is a strong voice for the trans

community but also non-binary as well as for anyone else who feels invisible and unsupported.

When it comes to expectations from political establishment, the government should play a very important role. Yes, organisations work for the rights of this community, but I think that our work is an added value and the main role is for the government to play. Recently we have had progress in terms of trans people being able to rent apartments. However as trans people are excluded from social, political and economic life we want a rent bonus for the whole community, especially for those who are sex workers as they have a very hard time to ensure income. There is lack support from the family and it would be really helpful.

Education is another issue. Many trans people have a hard time enrolling and continuing university. The government should provide some bonus for the university fees, so that they can enter to university. Professional education is also important. Sex work should not be the only solutions. By vocational training we can encourage them to be entrepreneurs, so finding ways to encourage self-employment. Also during vocational trainings, they should be provided with safe spaces.

Legal gender recognition is one of the most important changes we need to have, as people face big challenges in front of institutions, in the border, in schools, in banks, when we pay bills etc. It is very uncomfortable and often very dangerous.

Last part for now, for LGBTI organisations to be together, to be as a family. Since most LGBTI people are kicked out of home we should have more solidarity.

Matija Stefanovic, from organisations Da Se Zna and Talas, Serbia: Talas is a new TNB organisation which works specifically with these communities. Some of my videos on TikTok did kind of blow up and I decided to document my process of medical transition. When I was in the closet I found a huge support and realised my identity as a trans man and it just clicked in my mind that this is me in three years. I could read books on transition and gender theory, but sharing your personal experience meant a lot to me and it was easier to identify with this person I saw online and their journey. I subscribed to a lot of people abroad but no one in Serbia, which is different than for example in the UK. I feel that a

lot of people would rather watch a TikTok on transition rather than read a manual. What happened was that through my outreach I was invited to several TV channels to speak about my transition. It is very useful to have more trans people in the media space. When I am online I reach those who search for it, but in national television I reached people who do not necessarily search for trans content. So I see it also as political activism as people don't know much about us. Many people asked many questions, which showed how uninformed people are. Since there is so much ignorance there is a big challenge with transphobia and we also have TERFS, it feels empowering to get feedback from people who are transitioning because of what I did. Other people in the region are also now sharing in social media their experiences. In Serbia there is some form of gender recognition, however we have some requirements, like to be on hormones, get a diagnosis from a psychiatrist, as well as get sterilised. It is better than not to have LGR at all. A few years ago we had to have surgery in order to change documents. Now the situation is better, but it is still against basic human rights of trans people. Being transgender is not anymore classified as a mental disorder, and we should not be forced to get a diagnosis. The only thing we should be happy with is a complete self-identification system. The current situation creates big challenges for the community. When people go through hormones and their appearance changes, they face awkward situations. So it goes from minor challenges, like showing your Covid-19 certificate. Why do I need to explain my identity and come out to random people? Not to mention extremely uncomfortable situations in airport where they need to see all my other documents, ask me to sign my name, it is scary and uncomfortable. I never have been in a situation of danger, and it does happen to many others, the situation is better but far from perfect. The health system for trans people is monopolised. When they work with Serbian patients who transition using health insurance, they do not care if they treat you well or not, which is inhumane. It is also centralised to Belgrade so it is not accessible to people everywhere.

Sultan Kayhan, Member of Parliament and HBT-S Board Member, Sweden: The social democrats in the country are the largest party and we are also in power. By having our section in Sweden's largest party we can advocate directly for legal and policy changes. Our last PM promised that a new legislation regarding gender recognition will come into effect. The proposal came through a few years ago and having a seat at the executive level is a way to have direct impact. Most changes for trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people were done with the consensus of the political spectrum, even with conservative parties. In such issues we actually agree and cooperate. The new proposed draft law is still work-in-progress and we will reply to it in February 2022, I think there is a good chance it will be a much better law because we will be in power still and we can push for views that we think are important. This will come in force next years. This is going that a bit slower, but in Sweden there is history of taking a long time for laws to last longer and to be stable. This is long overdue, and we expect this to pass into parliament, with self-determination being one and the surgeries being another. We need to involve all interested groups in the discussion before changing or introducing legislation.

Saranda Bogujevci, Deputy Speaker of Kosovo Parliament: I am aware of the challenges we have in the region. As an MP since 2017 I have seen myself the discussions that we have had and how issues have evolved over time, and the change we see also in politicians. Organisations have often been left alone on these issues. I am also a member of Committee on Human Rights and Gender Equality and one thing that I realised over the years, there is little understanding in terms of this specific community. We need to focus on the human rights of everyone, as it is not about our individual judgment. We need to have more direct conversation. With some of the MPs, as open minded as they are, they have a little understanding of it. I have many friends from the community. It did teach me a lot, and through these opportunities I can push things at a different level. In Kosovo we have many politicians join the parade over the last few years, and unfortunately with a lot of them was with coming for the image rather than understanding or supporting the cause. We need to change that. My advice for the community is to find MPs who are open, to have that conversation and then to go into the difficulties they face. When we look at the legal framework, Kosovo is in a very good position, but in terms of implementation we are behind. Recently we are working on domestic violence and we

have the Istanbul Convention now as part of our Constitution and we have also LGBTI component. We need to be specific to make sure that the law protects these communities.

Another issue that I have become aware recently in terms of gender equality, but also LGBTI community, is the lack of data. Throughout this research in terms of legislation there was very little information whether through our institutions or organisations, as to what has been provided to these communities. There are no specifics in terms of challenges that trans people face in terms of accessing services, health, documentation. There is very little data, which we need to be able to put legislation forward or creating equal opportunities in many aspects. For example, our institutions were not aware at all in terms of what is needed for trans citizens. This is something we need to work on, together with civil society organisations and state institutions. I was speaking with NDI to come make a workshop for the LGBTI community and to extend that knowledge for the MPs. When I first joined the Pride in 2017, I remember the public comments on family values, which we need to educate people about. And they asked me would I go out if a woman protested for the right to wear headscarf's? We are here to support and protect people equally.

Panel 3: Joining forces for family rights: the political fight, strategies ahead and current good practices



Recognition of same-sex families constitutes amongst the hottest and most contested political debates across the Western Balkans and Turkey region as well as the rest of the world. Parties remain ideologically divided between those in favour of the provision of a liberal and inclusive notion of family and those who remain strongly opposed to it. Political parties are building their entire election campaigns on the issue, and are always aware of the strong public reaction (whether in favour or against). How have political parties across the region dealt

with this topic? What are some lessons learned and how can we make this less of a political issue and more of a human rights one?

The panel was joined by Boris Milićević Acting Assistant Minister, Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, Serbia, Tinka Kurti, Member of Parliament, Kosovo, Marta Šćepanović, Member of Parliament, Montenegro and Arber Nuhiu, Executive Director, CSGD, Kosovo. The panel was moderated by Dragana Todorovic from ERA.

The panel highlighted the many challenges that same-sex families encounter in the Western Balkans region and focused on specific examples from Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. The panel was a great opportunity to strengthen dialogue on the matter of family rights in our region and to exchange experiences and perspectives. Participants agreed that both policy and legislative environment needs to be improved in respect of family rights for LGBTI persons.

In Kosovo, Arber Nuhiu from CSGD explained the challenges that the movement is facing in the framework of the draft family code which is in process of finalization and is expected to be voted in Parliament soon. Differently from the Constitution of Kosovo which stipulates that marriage is a union between two persons, and leaves the option of same-sex marriage open to same-sex couples, the draft family code (supported by the EU) intends to define marriage as a union between a man and a

woman and stipulates that a special law should regulate other unions. This is considered as unacceptable (and unconstitutional) by the LGBTI community in Kosovo who are demanding for the family code not to discriminate on basis of sexual orientation. Tinka Kurti, MP from Kosovo explained that while she supports same-sex couples, this debate still has not taken place in her party or in the Parliament of Kosovo and that it will still be a challenge to amend the family code in a way that is inclusive. The ruling party in Kosovo, does not have an official position on LGBTI rights, and so far there are only supportive individual MPs but not as a whole. The LGBTI movement in Kosovo has made it clear that if this unconstitutional code is adopted the community will file an official complaint with the Constitutional Court.

Marta Scepanovic from Montenegro shared her experience of making the same-sex unions law a reality in Montenegro and the challenges that were encountered up to that point. She explained that the most important element in achieving such important legal change is the political will of the ruling majority to go the end of this issue. She also explained in detail the challenges that they are now facing with the passing of by-laws and procedures, which are necessary to be approved for the law to be fully functional and for citizens to benefit from it. There are numerous other laws that need to be changed so that the law on same-sex partnerships can be fully implemented, but the current ruling coalition remains unwilling to do so, even though these amendments are ready and have been prepared by the LGBTI movement. Parties that are in favor of adopting the amendments are now in opposition and cannot do much, unfortunately.

In Serbia, a draft law on same-sex unions has been prepared by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, and is expected to be adopted likely after the general elections of 2022. There is, however, a political will, and the Ministry has worked a lot on changing the narrative about this topic. Boris Milicevic, who is an out gay politician explained his own journey of activism and then politics and the difficulties that exist in Serbia to be politically active as an LGBTI person or to pass important legislation like same-sex unions. More support and pressure from the LGBTI movement is needed, especially voices coming from rainbow families themselves.

All participants agreed that political parties have a crucial role to play on this matter, that a strong collaboration between political parties, state institutions and civil society is needed and that regional cooperation is needed and welcome, and that countries can learn from each other.

END

This Conference was organized by ERA, Open Mind Spectrum Albania (OMSA) and HBT-Social-democrats of Sweden, with the support of Olof Palme International Center, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, LSVD Germany, the European Commission, and the Council of Europe is hosting a regional conference on the political participation of LGBTI+ people in the Western Balkans and Turkey.

