

Non-discrimination in practice - Covering aspects of discrimination, freedom of assembly and expression, situation of media and internet for all minorities

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen

As an LGBTI activist and a person who works for civil society in Albania, I find this conference a great opportunity, to explore some of our common achievements and challenges. I want to thank the European Union for their continuous effort in providing specific assistance to the protection and advancement of LGBTI people's rights. This is needed and the reason why are many!

We have gone a long way from making the LGBTI topic from a taboo issue to a mainstream human rights issue. Even though from our perspective it has been clear from day one, that we are talking about human rights and human dignity, historic homophobia and transphobia in our societies demand of us not just to come out and speak, but to work with the entire social construct so that we can make sure that all spaces, are safe for LGBTI people.

We strongly believe that all actors and stakeholders need to come together for anti-discrimination to work in practice. Anti-discrimination is clear in its objectives but is still difficult to work in our everyday life. First of all we need to understand that these laws are not just the responsibility of the Ombudsman, Commissioner, some activists or a small number of people complaining because they have no other resort or solution. Non-discrimination is a responsibility of all institutions, of all people who hold a position of power and for it to work in needs to be viewed as a law that needs proactive measures and not just punishment. Obviously we should not aim for people to get harassed, discriminated, hurt or worse getting killed for anti-discrimination to work in practice.

I believe that it is time for people in Albania and for people in the Balkans to question the privileges that come from belonging to a so-to-speak majority, to ask who is being excluded or silenced when a decision is being made, or an action taken. LGBT people are not silenced in Albania, but they do practice self-censorship because they are afraid, WE ARE AFRAID, because for one LGBT person to come out, to speak openly in their communities, they need to have the confidence that their feelings will not be ridiculed, their orientation and identity will not be misunderstood, that they will not be excluded, ostracised, violated, hurt or victimised just for who they are and for how they express who they are. In order for them not to feel ashamed they need to see that teachers are not afraid to speak of homosexuality, that employers and colleagues respect diversity and fight discrimination, that the media reports ethically and with respect for human dignity when they speak of LGBT people, of prides, and homosexual couples, that parents will not be shocked, ashamed and humiliated in front of their relatives, that they will not think that their sons and daughters are of a lesser value just because they are homosexual, bisexual, transgender, intersex. Before asking and wondering why we need prides and marches, we need to ask why LGBTI people are so invisible in families, schools, offices, sport teams, military or even Parliament. Again it is the fear of stigma, exclusion and victimisation. Whether this is real or perceived, the issue is quite simple: Pride marches are not taking place in the Western Balkans for people to party, drink and meet other people, (not that there is anything wrong with that) but because they are speaking, demonstrating and marching to let go of that fear, of that shame that we have grown up with and accustomed to

For those politicians and Parliamentarians who have marched with us in prides, I believe the concept is quite clear. LGBTI people do not need protection for the sake of protecting them, but because it

will take a lot of time and effort for everyone to understand that human rights are for all, that we need to have in place good laws, good policies good research and evidence for everyone to understand that LGBTI rights are non-negotiable, and as important as all other rights.

When it comes to the media I think it is a bitter-sweet story. It is sweet because we have a very active media, which promotes debates, open discussions, which overall does not censor the LGBTI topic. But it is a bitter story too because the issue of ethical reporting still needs to be addressed. The media themselves, and the NGO's working in this field need to be more proactive to make sure that there is fairness, justice, ethics and truth in the way LGBT rights and issues are reported.

As LGBT activists we are aware that we cannot wait for society to be fair and just, so that we can enjoy all rights fully just like anybody else. But there is also another awareness, that of the need for education, information, strengthening capacities of institutions and empowering the community.

On a last note, we are currently as an organization working with six municipalities all across Albania who have given their full support in understanding the issue, addressing it and designing action plans which will hopefully make local institutions more friendly towards LGBTI people. We are working to involve in this process all stakeholders at the community level, local Police, media, NGO's, health services and LGBTI people.

To conclude I think that LGBT people in Albania and across the Balkans and Turkey have demonstrated that they are not victims, they are not shy or ashamed of who they are and what they are advocating for. Personally I am very happy that all our efforts have received the response and understanding of many national and international institutions, of friends in government, parliament, media and civil society who have understood this plight and have joined us in a path of no-hate, no-shame and no-discrimination.

Thank you!