

## **25 years after fall of Berlin Wall, more queer work needed**

Published at dailyxtra.com on Nov. 1, 2014

*Activists say some LGBT people still face racism and violence*

Twenty-five years after its reunification, Germany has come a long way but still has a long way to go to address social and political problems still plaguing the LGBT community, some activists say.

Though Germany, under pressure from the EU, passed the General Equal Treatment law in 2006 to prevent discrimination in the workplace, the law exempted the Catholic Church, the second largest employer in the country.

Meanwhile, same-sex marriage remains illegal, as does some forms of adoption by same-sex families, and gay men are still banned from donating blood.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), in power along with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), is in no hurry to legalize gay marriage, but that hasn't detracted from its popularity.

"The fact that the Christian Democrats are against gay marriage is not reason enough for a lot of people in Germany not to vote for them," says Markus Ulrich of the Lesbian and Gay Federation in Germany. "Even gay people vote for them. There are openly gay people in the party."

Lela Lähnemann, of the Office for LGBTI Issues for the Berlin region, says there are four main areas her department is currently focusing on: equal rights and self-determination for trans and intersex people; international relations; extending rehabilitation to men not just persecuted during WW2 but in its aftermath from 1945 to 1969 under paragraph 175; and anti-violence work. Many cases of violence and discrimination in the region are still not reported, she says. "There's still a very big, dark field."

But, thanks to the work of LGBT groups and increases in government funding, progress is being made in all of these areas, she says. "Fortunately over the years the amount of money we can give to these organizations grew a lot so we have quite a good infrastructure."

In 2001, same-sex couples gained the right to register legally for almost the same benefits of opposite-sex couples, and in 2003 they got the right to adopt each other's children.

But, while these gains are significant, some think they are not enough.

"To say that Germany is doing great in terms of homophobia and transphobia, you can't say that," says Jennifer Petzen, executive director of the Lesbian Counseling Centre in Berlin.

"There's a tendency for these organizations to become incorporated into a neoliberal system," she explains. "If you look at where all this money is going, and who's getting it, I have a feeling that really disadvantaged and marginalized people are being left through the cracks. It's exactly who these programs should be helping. A gay white middle class man already has a lot of structural advantages and the trans sex worker who might be Roma from Bulgaria... there is absolutely nobody fighting for her."

Petzen doesn't think the services offered to queer people in Berlin go far enough. "When you have people who are dying from HIV, and they're going to get deported, there's a big problem."

Racism around citizenship is a major problem for some LGBT people, she adds. "Being able to register your partnership, okay great," she says. "But a queer person of colour has a completely different set of issues to deal with, and that's not thought about by these big lobby organizations that bring about these big changes."

“So they might bring about gay partnership, but if you can’t even get citizenship then it’s not an issue. And that’s a big segment of the population here.

“What if you’re a queer person and you can’t get citizenship here because your parents didn’t get you a passport? Maybe it was too expensive at the time and they kept putting it off, and now you’re a gay Turkish man and you are suddenly faced with the fact that you have to go to military service in Turkey, as a gay man, and you don’t even speak the language because you’ve grown up here,” she asks.

“Germany is modern and emancipated and all of that, but trans- and homophobia is still really anchored,” she says.

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### **Ukrainian activists say tension rising since Russian conflict**

Published at dailyxtra.com on July 12, 2014

*After supporting new regime, many feel betrayed by lack of support*

“Gays and lesbians? Here in Kiev?” The barista, who has until that moment been begrudgingly indulgent of my lack of Ukrainian and stupid questions, now looks down at me and frowns. “You’re joking.”

I have just told him that I am a writer from Canada and am here to cover Kiev (increasing spelled Kyiv) Pride: a week of workshops, talks and activities meant to knit together the country’s LGBT network. It will raise public awareness and train queer and trans activists in creating effective banners and interacting with media.

He doesn’t believe me and really, he has no reason to.

In Ukraine, being gay has always meant either a life of danger and discrimination or a life of hiding your sexual identity from all but those closest to you. The LGBT movement is slowly gaining visibility in both public and official spheres, and so far it’s been a double-edged sword.

Ukrainian LGBT activist Taras Karasiichuk knows the consequences of this new visibility well. As a prominent spokesperson for the movement, he was attacked twice in 2012 — once severely — and the stark image of his broken face swept the internet, bringing the world’s attention to the plight of LGBT Ukrainians.

“The only chance for gay people [in Ukraine] to feel safe is to be closed. Otherwise it means you can face violence or discrimination in the workplace, in the street, in family, everywhere,” Karasiichuk says. “Because the LGBT community has become more visible, sometimes it could seem that the situation now is worse; the level of homophobia increased because of the risen level of visibility. My personal experience is that 10 years ago, it was safer. But I think it’s [necessary]. We need to go through this period.”

Since the escalated aggression between Ukraine and Russia, tension has increased for some openly gay people. Recently in Kiev, a friend of Karasiichuk’s was forced to ask for refugee status in the United States because threats from neighbours caused him to fear for his life.

Clashes don’t occur only at the street level. Nazarii Boiarskyi, co-chair of the National Coalition for Battling Discrimination in Ukraine, describes a tangled web of varying degrees of bureaucratic policies and discrimination with few real allies on the inside.

“Every government body has its own special politics,” he says. “In general, Ukrainians and LGBT Ukrainians do not believe in the possibility of defending their rights in the legislative field [in Ukraine]. There are many reasons for that — they begin in bureaucracy and end in corruption.”

“We must just live, just do our business, because nobody will do it for us,” Boiarskyi says. “We need to become

more reasonable. We need our voice to be more loud, then society can see that we are not like trans divas in the clubs. We are politically active people.”

There is a lot of work to be done at the legal level and in the courts, he says. The LGBT movement in Ukraine cannot be discussed without addressing the issue of anti-discrimination legislation, or rather the lack of any, for gay and trans people.

As is the case with many LGBT activists in Ukraine, Boiarskyi works with multiple advocacy organizations: he is also co-chair of the Human Rights Defenders Organization in Ukraine and was co-chair of KyivPride 2014.

Planning for Kiev Pride this year began hopefully but ended in disappointment when police refused to provide security for the Pride march, which would have left participants vulnerable to violent opponents. Rather than risk the safety of participants, organizers called off the march, though a few dozen people later held a flashmob instead.

Predictably, organizers received numerous threats of violence from various parties. Just days before the march was scheduled to take place, police began to indicate that they wouldn't have — or weren't willing to provide, depending on whom you talked to — the security forces needed to keep such a controversial public event safe for the participants.

They dealt the final blow the day before the march, stating the event was now illegal since organizers hadn't given sufficient notice to authorities.

Olena Shevchenko, responsible for the march and its security, flatly denies this claim. “That's completely not true; we submitted notification two days [prior],” she says.

The mayor of Kiev released an official statement on the matter, writing “now is not the time for celebration.”

Following the cancellation of the march, many activists feel betrayed. The LGBT community took a leading role in providing health and food services during Euromaidan, the wave of protests and civil unrest in Ukraine in 2013, and their present social status is closely intertwined with Ukraine's struggle against Russian oppression. Many gay activists are now holding their breath to see what their new president will do.

“Of course LGBT people are involved. The LGBT movement couldn't be outside of the process,” Karasiichuk says.

Olena Semenuk, another community leader, echoes that sentiment. “We are involved, we are involved and we also want the country, we want the state, we want the whole of Ukraine to be involved in our problems also,” she says.

On the day the Pride march was supposed to take place, a small group of activists gathered in a central location of Kiev for a small gesture of solidarity. But the sting of the formal rejection, and what it says of the larger social and political atmosphere in Ukraine, will remain.

“It's not just about LGBT,” Shevchenko says. “We see how it's growing, this hatred towards social groups: many now think all those who [fled] Eastern Ukraine are bad people. This is xenophobia and the roots are the same, and the state should understand that this is a huge problem and should start to do something.”

The situation is grim, proven by the tears shed by some LGBT youth after the cancellation of their Pride march. But for Karasiichuk, the fight must go on.

“Ten years ago we didn't have a fight, but we didn't have hope. Right now we have hope, but we need to fight.” He, like the others, thinks positively but realistically and is wary of Russia's potential influence. “We are quite brave, we are quite strong, but we couldn't work against a monster-like government to be honest.”

The ultimate goal for KyivPride organizers is to be able to hold the event with open doors — a week with no

special registration and free public participation. Maybe in a few, or many, years they will get there. But holding the event, no matter how unwelcome, is vital, according to Shevchenko: cancelling KyivPride 2014 altogether was never an option.

“If you show them your fear once, they will remember it forever,” she says. “I think we all feel like it’s a huge fight, and it’s just the start.”