

Opening Statement 22nd ILGA Europe Conference

‘From Words to Action’

Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

24 Oct 2018

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Dear all,

Let me first welcome you all here in Brussels. The capital of Belgium and the beating heart of Europe.

For Belgium, it is an honour to host this year’s ILGA Europe conference. As many of you know, Belgium historically has always been one of the leading voices on LGBTI+ equality. Because Belgian citizens strongly believe that we are equal under the law, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference or any other characteristics.

That’s why we are really proud to be ranked among the top-five countries in the Rainbow Index. It should be our ambition to do even better and to move up to the first place.

We got there by consistently promoting equal rights for the LGBTI+ community. To paraphrase this conference theme: by moving “from words to action.”

We did so already a long time ago, at the end of the eighteenth century, in 1795, by legalizing same sex sexual activities with an equal age of consent in the Napoleonic Code.

Fifteen years ago, we took another important step. We were the second country in the world to legally accept same sex marriages. Since then a lot of countries and governments have realized that love has no gender, including a record number of European states. Each time a new country joins the growing group of countries that embrace same sex marriages, it is a tremendous step forward, that means so much to so many people.

After legally opening up the marriage for same sex couples, Belgium also legalized same sex adoption, gave lesbian couples equal access to IVF and enacted discrimination protections based on sexual orientation.

And during the last years, we have made important steps forward for transgender people.

This strong and sustained commitment to LGBTI+ rights is not something that did happen by accident. We Belgians did not have a collective mental breakdown, as conservative voices would think.

On the contrary. Our commitment to LGBTI+ rights is rooted in a fierce belief in the values of liberal democracy. In freedom and equality. In the conviction that every individual, every person holds the same rights, regardless colour of skin, with whom you share your love with, or how you live your sexual identity.

But it is not all peaches and cream. When I look around in Europe, and beyond, I see some disturbing trends. In some places we're no longer making progress.

We seem to be going back in time. The idea of illiberal democracies seems to be gaining ground. Populist politicians preach intolerance and win elections, from Brazil to Hungary.

In Europe, there still is a yawning gap between the human rights promises of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the reality for LGBTI+ communities.

LGBTI+ persons are still too frequently victims of discrimination and physical violence. You continue to suffer from widespread discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes.

While seven out of ten European citizens agree that LGBTI+ people should have equal rights, the European Fundamental Rights Agency indicates that almost half (47%) of LGBTI+ people reports to be discriminated or harassed. That's one in two. Half of this hall. If it's not yourself, it's the person next to you. This is simply not acceptable.

The European Union is not only a political and economic union. It is also a union of values.

When nearly seventy years ago, the Council of Europe was founded – the first great effort to bring European countries together – its primary focus was on values, human rights and democracy. Equality, the rule of law, respect for human rights, they are part of our European DNA.

And that's why it is simply not acceptable that peaceful prides in Europe, as celebrations of love for all, require extensive police protection because homophobia is getting institutionalized and violence is being tolerated.

We can and we will not allow that our European liberal societies are being undermined, that basic democratic principles of equality and freedom are repeatedly being disregarded, and that our capacity to speak with one voice is weakened.

Belgium takes this very seriously. Because when you remain neutral in situations of injustice, you choose the side of the oppressor. That's why, together with likeminded countries, Belgium does not remain passive and has chosen to act.

Through the Equal Rights Coalition, for example, which we have co-founded with over 40 other countries across the world, we promote equal rights and fight discriminatory policies via all the channels we have.

Whenever necessary, the Equal Rights Coalition teams up with local and international partners to bolster our commitment and to build platforms to promote inclusive policies and advance important issues, such as the ending of forced anal exams or to voice concerns about specific local situations of the LGBTI community, for instance in Chechnya.

Last year, Brussels hosted the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia Forum, signalling our commitment to advancing gay rights and fighting discrimination. If you walk around in Brussels, you'll still see the pedestrian crossings painted in rainbow colours are still there. You'll find the most famous crossing between the European Commission and the Council building, just a short walk from here. These rainbow crossings remind us all of the importance of our commitment for equal rights.

Belgium is also a strong and staunch supporter of the Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Together with likeminded partners, Belgium was instrumental in setting up the mandate of the Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

The work of the Independent Expert is important for everyone fighting discrimination. So I am happy that Mr. Victor Madrigal-Borloz will join us during this conference. Belgium calls upon all states to grant the Independent Expert all necessary access and to make use of his expertise to make equal rights a reality for all.

Finally, as Minister of Development Cooperation, it's also my duty to promote equal rights and combat discrimination in developing countries.

That's why I launched on this symbolic day a call for proposals to support LGBTI+ rights in countries in Central and Western Africa.

The call will support organizations that are working on the root causes of violence and oppression against LGBTI+ people, and on the protection and promotion of LGBTI +rights.

With this call for proposals, we want to support the extraordinary courage of LGBTI+ advocates who – often at risk of their own personal safety and well-being – find the strength to fight for something that is much bigger than themselves.

Dear friends,

History does not always move in a straight line. We have to stay vigilant and we should never take our rights for granted.

But I am a stubborn optimist. I see young people speaking out with the courage of their convictions. I feel so many energy – also in this room – to stand up for equality for all. To let love win.

Know that you can always count on Belgium to join you in this fight!

I wish you an inspiring and creative conference, stimulating and energizing conversations, so that together we can move from words to action.

Thank you.