

VISIBLE: PRIDE AROUND THE WORLD

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OUTRIGHT
INTERNATIONAL

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Cover photo: People march with their rainbow colors from the parliament building in Budapest downtown during the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Pride Parade in the Hungarian capital. Photo by Attila Kisbenedek/AFP via Getty Images

About Outright International

Outright International works together for better LGBTIQ lives.

Outright is dedicated to working with partners around the globe to strengthen the capacity of the LGBTIQ human rights movement, document and amplify human rights violations against LGBTIQ people, and advocate for inclusion and equality.

Founded in 1990, with staff in over a dozen countries, Outright works with the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies and civil society partners. Outright holds consultative status at the United Nations where it serves as the secretariat of the UN LGBTI Core Group.

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Summary

Pride was born as an act of resistance. A concept unifying lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) communities around the world, Pride has evolved from its roots in New York City's 1969 Stonewall uprising and has taken on a shifting constellation of meanings in different global contexts. Yet everywhere that Pride takes place, repression remains a fact of life. Even where visibility is celebrated and equality has been achieved under the law, heterosexuality is a presumed norm, and restrictive gender binaries persist. Pride – whether it looks more like a protest or a celebration – serves as a reminder to the public, and to queer communities themselves, that queer people exist and will not be silenced.¹

Outright International has identified more than 100 countries in which Pride and other events aimed at LGBTIQ visibility take place. These events may be centered around building public awareness of LGBTIQ people's existence, articulating specific advocacy demands, resisting oppressive policies or systems, strengthening community and connectedness among LGBTIQ people, and celebrating hard-won freedoms.

Pride can be dangerous, and activists must make strategic calculations as to the value of visibility. Some communities have adapted the concept of "Pride" to define events centered on LGBTIQ community building, with visibility as a goal only among LGBTIQ people and not engaging the wider public. Pride in this sense can include educational events, social events, and provision of services for LGBTIQ people. In other contexts, LGBTIQ people have preferred to be visible in solidarity with other movements, bringing queer visibility to protests against police brutality, corruption, or gender inequality.

In 2021, LGBTIQ groups considering Pride commemorations were also contending with the COVID-19 pandemic, which offered unexpected opportunities. Once online events became a fact of life, activists around the world organized virtual Pride activities for the first time. Many of these events were open to the public, allowing LGBTIQ people to share their messages without being exposed to the immediate threat of physical violence, and, in some cases, without exposing their identities at all.

While public displays such as Pride and other visibility events are not the ultimate goal or even a key priority for every movement, they can serve as a useful barometer of LGBTIQ movements' capability to organize and voice their demands in various parts of the world. Where visibility is illegal or impossible, hostile governments and politicians monopolize the metaphorical public square with a degrading narrative and deprive LGBTIQ advocates and allies of space to present a counter-narrative. Governments that have passed laws prohibiting LGBTIQ advocacy or so-called LGBTIQ propaganda typically advance false narratives around "protecting children"



¹ Malawi's first Pride march took place in Lilongwe on 28 June 2021. Photo courtesy of Nyasa Rainbow Alliance

or public morals, but the intent of these laws is more pernicious: to prevent the public from hearing LGBTIQ people's stories and potentially experiencing empathy. Public understanding and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity would deprive politicians of a convenient scapegoat to shore up political power and distract attention from poor governance.

LGBTIQ people's rights and lives should not be up for debate in the first place, but to the extent that LGBTIQ people still must win over hearts and minds, an equal playing field is needed. Prohibiting Pride and other visibility events, or obstructing them by failing to provide state protection, shuts down the conversation before it even has the chance to begin. In contrast, a positive impact of allowing Pride to take place is that allies, as well as LGBTIQ people, flock to the streets or take to social media to voice support for LGBTIQ equality. Allies' visible support is one pathway to garnering new allies.

In 2021, Outright published its first *Pride Around the World* report, which sought to provide a global snapshot of what Pride looks like and means in different countries.² We defined "Pride" as any public-facing, open, and visible event with the purpose of affirming the existence of LGBTIQ people, demanding recognition and protection of our rights, and celebrating progress to date.

Like our 2021 report, this report focuses primarily on events that activists identified as "Pride," but also includes other events aimed at advancing public visibility of LGBTIQ people, queer cultures, and human rights issues affecting LGBTIQ communities. It centers around seven country case studies – the Bahamas, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Ghana, Malawi, and Rwanda – where Pride events were new or notable in 2021, or, in the case of Ghana, where heightened repression made Pride

impossible to celebrate. The case studies use Pride as a steppingstone to examine broader legal, political, and social dynamics in the seven countries.

In this report, Outright also tracks the proliferation of visibility events around the world, providing data on countries in which Pride events were held in 2021—at least 107 countries, a notable increase over previously tracked data, despite obstacles posed by COVID-19. The report also provides data on countries in which Pride is celebrated outside capital cities, an important step for many movements. A multiplicity of Pride locations reinforces that LGBTIQ people are everywhere, and dispels the myth that queerness is restricted to cosmopolitan, urban elites.

We seek to interrogate the purpose, meaning, and impact of Pride and to inspire activists by sharing strategies and approaches from diverse contexts. Finally, we celebrate not only LGBTIQ visibility for visibility's sake, but also, queer resilience and queer resistance. As our communities around the world have always known, Pride is a protest. There remains work to be done.

A participant distributes flags during a rally in support of those who were injured during the 5 July protests, when a pride march was disrupted by members of violent groups before it could begin, in Tbilisi, Georgia on 6 July 2021. Photo by Irakli Gedenidze/Reuters



Methodology

This report is Outright International's second in a series of annual reports, *Pride Around the World*. The first report, published in 2021, highlighted new and notable Prides, presenting case studies on Pride events in 10 countries and several global Pride events. It also tabulated the number of countries that had convened pride marches and other events aimed at promoting LGBTIQ visibility in recent years, totaling 102 countries.

The 2022 report is based on in-depth individual interviews, an online survey, and a literature review of news reports, social media posts, and reports by non-

governmental organizations. Between February and June 2022, Outright conducted interviews with 36 LGBTIQ activists about Pride events in their countries or regions. Nineteen of those activists were from Ghana, and were interviewed for this report as well as a Ghana-specific study that Outright will publish separately. Our inquiry in Ghana focused on a recently proposed anti-LGBTIQ law and a related uptick in anti-LGBTIQ violence, creating an environment in which public Pride and visibility events cannot currently take place.

The remaining interviews were conducted remotely via phone or video link and were primarily with activists from the six countries featured in our case studies: the Bahamas, Georgia, Ghana, Hungary, Lithuania, Malawi, and Rwanda. Outright also spoke with or solicited information via email from activists in Bangladesh, Namibia, and Nigeria about visibility events that are mentioned in this report. Interviews were semi-structured and aimed at eliciting information about the history and meaning of visibility events, the role such events play in local and national LGBTIQ movements, the legal, political, and social environment and how it impacts visibility events, and what was new or notable about Pride and other visibility events in 2021.



A person waves a rainbow flag during a concert organized in solidarity with Lebanese indie band Mashrou' Leila in Lebanon's capital Beirut on 9 August 2019 after the Byblos International Festival Committee canceled the band's performance due to security threats. The lead singer is openly gay. Photo by Anwar Amro/AFP via Getty Images

Outright also distributed an online questionnaire to our networks, requesting information on whether public Pride or other LGBTIQ visibility events took place in 2021 in person or online. We also asked whether Pride events took place in locations outside capital cities. LGBTIQ visibility in some countries has been primarily limited to one or several major cities, and Outright sees the proliferation of Pride events outside capital cities as playing an important role in demonstrating that queer people are everywhere. Sixty-seven activists in 45 countries responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed in English, French, and Spanish and allowed for responses in any language. Responses were registered in all three languages as well as in Portuguese. A separate questionnaire, related to other Outright research on LGBTIQ civil society space, also elicited information about whether activists were able to hold Pride in 23 other countries, and what factors contributed to an inability to hold Pride events.

There were several limitations to this research. Because we only interviewed a handful of activists in most countries, their perspectives on Pride are not necessarily representative of LGBTIQ communities as a whole. The sample of seven countries featured in our case studies is not inclusive of all regions of the world. Our online survey generated some responses that were difficult to understand, particularly regarding whether certain events were online or in person and whether they were restricted or open to the public. We were unable to follow up with all respondents to request clarification. For this reason, our data on Pride locations may be incomplete, or may include events that were not open to the public.

Overview: Pride in Context

In March 2022, two weeks into Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Russian’s Orthodox Church leader Bishop Kirill named “gay pride parades” as the litmus test defining the opposing sides in a war that he said would determine “which side of God humanity will be on.”³ It was not the first disparaging remark about Pride in Ukraine emanating from Russian leadership; in 2019, Russia asserted during a United Nations (UN) meeting that Ukraine needed “real democratization, and not just colorful gay parades.”⁴

Across the Atlantic, US lawmaker Marjorie Taylor Greene tweeted in June 2022:

An entire #PrideMonth and millions in spending through corporations & our government on LGBTQ sexual identity needs to end.

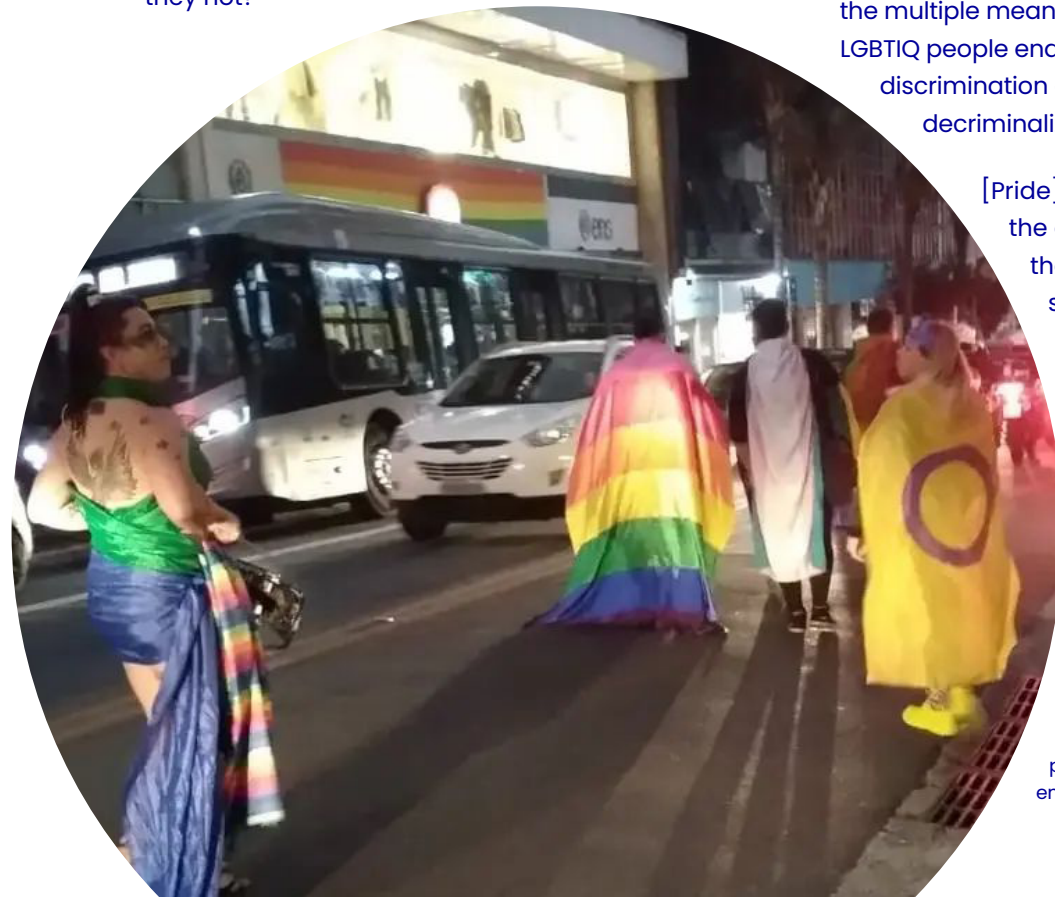
The movements [sic] goals were achieved, were they not?⁵

Kirill and Greene’s comments on Pride place both on one side of what South African writer Mark Gevisser describes as a global “pink line”⁶ dividing those that embrace sexual and gender diversity and those who reject it. On the other side of this fault line are the activists in more than 100 countries that hold Pride marches and other events aimed at amplifying LGBTIQ visibility and demanding inclusion and respect for rights. From Albania to Vietnam, from Angola to Venezuela, LGBTIQ people understand that Pride is an opportunity to celebrate movement goals that have been achieved while also striving toward those that remain out of reach. Pride is fundamentally democratic in its advancement of marginalized people’s civic participation.

Outright’s research on Pride events that took place in 2021 allowed activists to share their understandings of Pride in all its complexity. An activist in Honduras summarized the multiple meanings of Pride in a country in which LGBTIQ people endure extraordinary levels of violence and discrimination even though same-sex relations were decriminalized decades ago:

[Pride] makes it possible to make visible the diversity of our population and, at the same time, make it clear that the situation for LGTBI+ in Honduras is different due to the constant violations (a mixture of pride and human rights advocacy).⁷

Participación intersex visible en una Marcha del orgullo en Pelotas Brasil, el 2021. Foto cortesía de ABRAI (<https://abrai.org.br/sammie-ativista-intersexo-participa-da-marcha-pela-diversidade-em-pelotas-rs/>)



An activist in Namibia, which retains a British colonial era law banning same-sex relations, stated:

To me Pride means changing hearts and mindsets; it means freedom and liberation; it's a celebration of myself irrespective of the adversities I face. Pride for me means being able to be with my fellow LGBT people (and just be us). It is being able to be myself and be who I am.⁸

Activists who may face less adversity, such as those living in jurisdictions characterized by legal equality and protections, also experience a sense of liberation through Pride. A respondent from Canada said of Pride there, "It really means a lot to me, to celebrate the joy of my life and being free."⁹

This overview explores the multiple meanings of LGBTIQ visibility and the ways in which queer communities celebrated Pride around the world in 2021.

Pride as Awareness

A classic objective of Pride is to build public awareness of LGBTIQ people's existence. At New York City's first Gay Liberation March in 1970, marking the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, an organizer told the *New York Times*:

We have to come out into the open and stop being ashamed, or else people will go on treating us as freaks. This march... is an affirmation and declaration of our new pride.¹⁰

This affirmation retained particular significance in 2021 in places where many members of the public believe that they do not know any LGBTIQ people. An activist from Bangladesh who co-organized the first online Dhaka Pride in 2021 commented, "Many people joined this Pride [who were] unaware of the LGBTIQ community. From our Pride they raised

An intersex activist holds up the yellow and purple intersex flag together with LGBTQ activists at a 2021 Pride march in Pelotas, Brazil. Photo courtesy of ABRAI (<https://abrai.org.br/sammie-ativista-intersexo-participa-da-marcha-pela-diversidade-em-pelotas-rs/>)

[their] awareness about the LGBTIQ community."¹¹ A respondent in Ecuador told Outright that the importance of Pride events for them was to "share a human face and normalize the subject" of LGBTIQ identity.¹²

Pride can also build awareness of specific groups within the LGBTIQ rainbow. For an intersex respondent from Brazil, the diversity march in Pelotas, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was significant because substantial participation from intersex people created new visibility for intersex human rights demands.¹³ Similarly, a Mexican activist highlighted the importance of intersex participation in a video initiative related to Mexico City's Pride march in 2021.¹⁴

"We are everywhere" was the slogan of the first Pride march in the town of Kaunas, Lithuania, in 2021, and the march sought to demonstrate precisely that: that LGBTIQ people live in small towns and cities, and are not just urban elites.¹⁵ Five thousand miles away, for a Black transgender man who participated in Windhoek Pride in Namibia, visibility similarly helped to counter messages that LGBTIQ identities are "un-African":

In the past they used to say LGBTIQ issues are European. Now we don't hear that argument as much because we are seen, through Pride.¹⁶



The Namibian activist added that Pride had brought visibility and understanding regarding trans identities as well as Black LGBTIQ identities. Speaking of a 2021 court ruling awarding damages to a trans woman who had been assaulted by police, he said, “There were times where the court was misgendering, but it was not as bad as you would expect it to be – you can see that they now know us.”¹⁷

Pride as Advocacy

Pride also speaks to governments and other decision-makers. It is an opportunity to present unified demands for legal and policy change.

Early Pride marches in the US called for the repeal of sodomy laws and an end to anti-LGBTQ discrimination. These demands echo today throughout the nearly 70 countries that criminalize forms of consensual same-sex relations between adults. Repression in some criminalizing countries is pervasive enough, carrying significant risks of arrest or violence, that LGBTQ visibility is almost unimaginable. But in other criminalizing countries, such as St. Lucia, Uganda, and Singapore, queer activists have come out to the streets to demand decriminalization. In 2021, Namibia’s Windhoek Pride

celebration provided activists with an occasion to meet with the Law Reform Commission at the Ministry of Justice to demand the repeal of the colonial-era law criminalizing “unnatural offenses.”¹⁸ In Malawi, a group of LGBTIQ-led organizations and allies petitioned the government to decriminalize same-sex conduct, abandon a proposed referendum on the rights of LGBTIQ people, and prohibit discrimination, among other demands.¹⁹

In Lithuania, participants in the first Pride march in the town of Kaunas took the opportunity to present the speaker of Parliament with demands including the right to legal gender recognition, equal access to health and education, social safety, and non-discrimination protections.²⁰ In Honduras, activists called for legal gender recognition and marriage equality.²¹ A Honduran activist commented, “Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic restricted the movement of people, we managed to meet to demand our rights.”²²



Above: Members of the Nyasa Rainbow Alliance march in Pride in Malawi. Video still courtesy of Nyasa Rainbow Alliance

Left: At Namibia’s Windhoek Pride 2021, activists advocated for the repeal of a colonial-era law prohibiting same-sex relations. Photo by Carl Modler courtesy of Out & Proud Namibia

Pride as Alliance Building

In some contexts, queer people have preferred to be visible as a way of building bridges to other movements. In countries including Georgia, Malaysia, and Lebanon, trans and queer people have played central or visible roles in International Women’s Day marches, building common cause with broader feminist movements.²³ Queer people were also visible in Lebanon’s 2019 anti-corruption protests, aligning themselves with the public in a resounding demand for accountability.²⁴ In Nigeria, queer people shared their stories of police violence and took to the streets as part of the 2020 #EndSARS movement, a series of mass actions against police brutality.²⁵

In Myanmar, LGBTIQ people demonstrated against the February 2021 coup as a visible element of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). One activist told Outright:

We usually do LGBTQ Pride parades from February 15 to 28. This time, we are doing protest marches and demonstrations. On 19 February, 1,500 LGBTQ people marched about seven kilometers to Sule, the heart of downtown Yangon. We’ll keep doing it weekly to show the international community that LGBTQ are part of CDM.”

Myanmar society usually [doesn’t] accept LGBT people. They say LGBT are not good for the nation. But now people are surprised to see LGBT people on the streets, participating in the CDM. LGBT are getting positive feedback not only in Yangon but also across the country.²⁶

Visibility within the context of broader social movements can be an effective alternative to, or can complement, Pride marches and other forms of more obviously queer-focused visibility. Mainstreaming queer voices within such social movements accomplishes at least two goals: it publicly celebrates LGBTIQ existence

Iloilo Pride, in collaboration with the Gabriela Panay gender justice organization, set up a community food pantry and book giveaway in April 2021. Photo courtesy of Iloilo Pride Team. Facebook photo

while also aligning LGBTIQ people’s social change agendas with larger portions of the public, demonstrating the intersectional nature of many movement demands.

Pride as Community Building

Pride events provided a crucial sense of community at a time marked by isolation in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was especially true for young people just beginning to fully understand their sexual orientation or gender identity, and it was true even for events held online. One participant in online Pride events in Nigeria told Outright, “I finally felt a sense of belonging, which was something I hadn’t felt in a long time.”²⁷

Rwandan activists told Outright that Pride events in Kigali, held largely under the radar, were valuable opportunities for LGBTIQ people to get together and enjoy one another’s company. In the Philippines, a respondent said of Iloilo City Pride, “We want to show the queer kids that they have a safe space with us.”²⁸ For a Pride participant in Venezuela, a Pride march was an opportunity to “raise the spirits of young people” from LGBTIQ communities.²⁹



Pride as Resistance

In places where some feel Pride has been co-opted by governments or corporate sponsors, some organizers are trying to reconnect with Pride's roots of resistance. The Reclaim Pride Coalition in New York City held its first Queer Liberation March in 2019. The Queer Liberation March explicitly distanced itself from the traditional NYC Pride event and from World Pride, which rotates to a different city each year and was held in New York in 2019. Both events were heavy on corporate sponsorship and branding. Reclaim Pride stated that it was resisting "the exploitation of our communities for profit and against corporate and state pinkwashing, as displayed in Pride celebrations worldwide, including the NYC Pride Parade."³⁰ The coalition also rejected formal police and military participation in the Queer Liberation March. Reclaim Pride wrote:

We see our own struggles tied to the liberation of other oppressed peoples across the world... People's rights and liberties are being stripped at this very moment in the US and abroad, and we must continue to fight back.³¹

Reclaim Pride's positioning regarding police participation resonated more deeply with NYC Pride organizers after the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 spurred national protests. In 2021, NYC Pride organizers banned uniformed police, including a gay police association, from marching in the city's main Pride march in 2021.³² "We as an organization started as a response to police brutality," one NYC Pride organizer, André Thomas, told the *New York Times*. Organizers acknowledged that police brutality against queer people was not a historical artifact: police in the US continue to subject many LGBTIQ people, and particularly people of color and trans people, to harassment and violence.

Where governments are openly hostile toward LGBTIQ people, the resistance woven into Pride is a given. Such is the case in countries like Hungary, where record numbers came out to march in 2021 after an anti-LGBTQ "propaganda" law came into effect. In the United Kingdom, despite rhetorical commitments to LGBTIQ equality, authorities have increasingly turned their backs on trans people by failing to amend a Gender Recognition Act to allow for trans people's genders to be recognized based on self-determination.³³ In this context of stalled progress, Trans Pride London in 2021 put forward clearer policy demands than the festive and less political "Pride in London" event.³⁴

Activists in both Hungary and Lithuania described decentering corporate visibility during Pride as a form of insistence on Pride's authentic groups within oppressed communities. Budapest Pride restricts the number of corporate floats and provides a civil society space for celebration after the march, off-limits to corporate sponsors.³⁵ A Kaunas Pride organizer described the event as a protest against "rainbow capitalism."³⁶



Participants in New York's 2019 Queer Liberation March staged a die-in to commemorate HIV-positive asylum seekers who died while held at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers. Photo by Leandro Justen

Pride Online

For some activists, the shift to online organizing and activism triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic provided new opportunities to reach the public and their own communities while also minimizing risks. Online Pride events also allowed activists to reach across borders, share stories and struggles, and be heard by international audiences.



Activists Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy were murdered in Bangladesh in 2016. Facebook photos.

In Bangladesh, organizers in 2021 also pivoted to virtual events, which they saw as an opportunity to re-engage rather than as a limitation.³⁷ Bangladesh's first online Pride, hosted on 4 June 2021 by EQUAL (the Bangladesh Queer Liberation Movement) and open to the general public, allowed activists to build community and raise awareness while sidestepping the risks associated with street marches: an important consideration as the community continues to deal with trauma from the murder of activists Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy in 2016. Mannan and Tonoy had organized an event called the Rainbow Rally, a queer contingent that participated visibly in Bengali New Year celebrations in 2014 and 2015. In 2016, the police ordered the group not to rally, citing threats from religious extremists. Four people were arrested for gathering to participate in the 15 April rally anyway, and Mannan and Tonoy checked in on them at the police station. Ten days later, they were murdered.³⁸ Scarred by the events of 2016, activists in Bangladesh had been reluctant to hold public Pride events in the years following the double murder; however, in the online space offered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many activists and LGBTIQ individuals felt free to express themselves in an online event that reportedly received over 20,000 views online.³⁹

Pride Afrique, the first Pan-African Pride event, was born in 2020 as activists across the continent struggled to contend with the isolation wrought by the pandemic.⁴⁰ In 2021, the volunteer-driven program took the form of a 90-minute live video broadcast featuring the voices of activists of African origin living in South Africa, Nigeria, Brazil, Italy, Ghana, France, Cameroon, and Benin.⁴¹ Broadcast on Pride Afrique's website, YouTube, and Facebook, the program reached over a million viewers and led to over 200,000 engagements such as visiting partners' websites.⁴² Cheikh Traore, a seasoned LGBTIQ activist based in Nigeria, wrote to Outright about the experience of sharing his personal story during the broadcast:

It was very empowering, and I found new courage to speak out. I wanted to share how feelings of shame never really disappear, despite my own constant efforts to develop myself and rise above societal prejudice and constant micro-aggressions and negativity about my Africanness and my queerness. I also explore how to get rid of shame by recognizing my own uniqueness and what I bring to this world, while I am still alive.⁴³

Pride Out of Reach

Anti-LGBTIQ violence, discrimination, and stigma are at high enough levels that it is impossible or extremely dangerous to hold Pride events in some countries. Activists responding to an Outright survey described the factors that contributed to decisions not to hold public-facing Pride and visibility events and how their movements adapted to the circumstances to commemorate Pride.

For instance, an activist in the Republic of the Congo told Outright that organizations there have localized Pride celebrations by "de-Westernizing Pride," "prioritizing safety over visibility," organizing "private events open to a public that we control," and celebrating Pride in May alongside the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), "not in June as in the West."⁴⁴ The activist told Outright that they hoped there would be opportunities to open some private events to the public in the future.⁴⁵

In Côte d'Ivoire, a respondent explained:

Local communities are hesitant and community mobilization is slow because organizations are not recognized as LGBTIQ but rather as HIV groups, so doing Pride means exposing yourself to state sanctions and delisting/deregistration.⁴⁶

In Indonesia, one activist stated that their organization has received threats from fundamentalist groups which prevents them from holding public events to celebrate Pride. Instead, organizations hold indoor celebrations during IDAHOBIT, the Transgender Day of Remembrance, the International Trans Day of Visibility, and Pride through discussions, online seminars and other safe activities, "not marching on the streets."⁴⁷

In Nicaragua, before 2018, activists held vibrant Pride parades. However, in December 2018, the government banned all public demonstrations, silencing LGBTIQ communities as well as other activists that had sought to use the power of the streets to demand change.⁴⁸



Activists gather in Indonesia for Pride. Photo by @pelangi nusantara

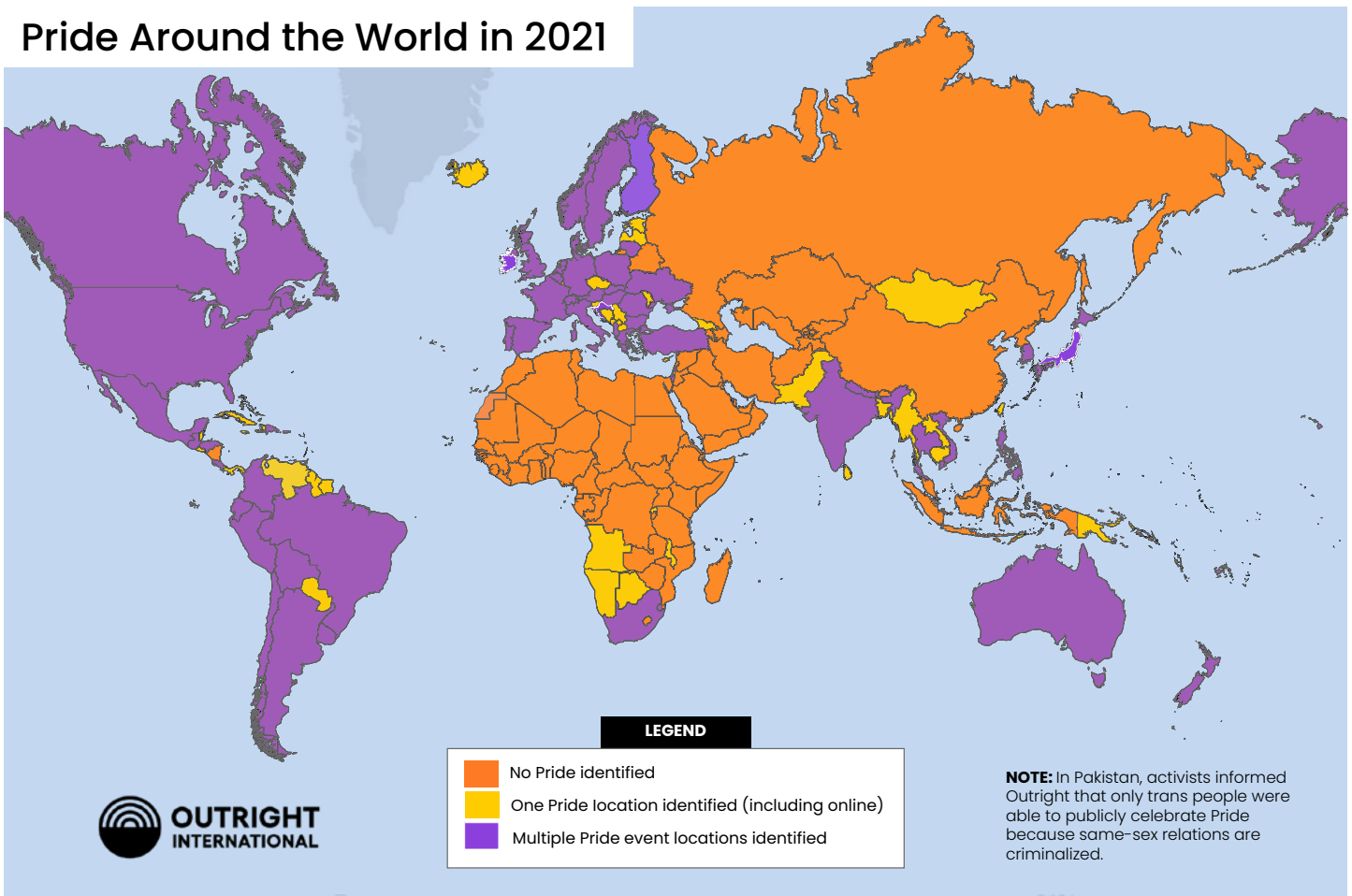
Pride by the Numbers

Activists in at least 107 countries around the world held public-facing Pride or other visibility events in 2021, either in person or online.⁴⁹ The vast reach of Pride, despite momentous organizing and economic challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, is testament to the value of visibility among LGBTIQ movements around the world and these movements' resilience in times of crisis.

Outright also found that in at least 50 countries, Pride events were celebrated in 2021 outside the capital city. This number is particularly notable given that COVID-19

restrictions militated against ease in organizing these in-person events. The expansion of Pride beyond capital cities is of enormous significance. Activists in Kaunas, Lithuania, pointed out that as long as Pride was only celebrated in the capital, Vilnius, much of the Lithuanian public could dismiss it as an affair of urban elites. When Pride reaches smaller towns and cities, it truly sends the message that "We are everywhere." Scholarly work supports Outright's contention that supporting the expansion of Pride events outside capital cities is crucial for movement-building.⁵⁰

Pride Around the World in 2021



The organization InterPride, which was founded in 1982 and is the world's largest organization for organizers of Pride events, has also tracked important data on Pride events around the world. InterPride promotes Pride on an international level and encourages diverse communities to hold and attend Pride Events. InterPride increases networking, communication and education among Pride organizations and collaborates with other LGBTIQ and human rights organizations. It also raises awareness and educates people about the existing difficulties for LGBTIQ people around the world through our member Pride events.

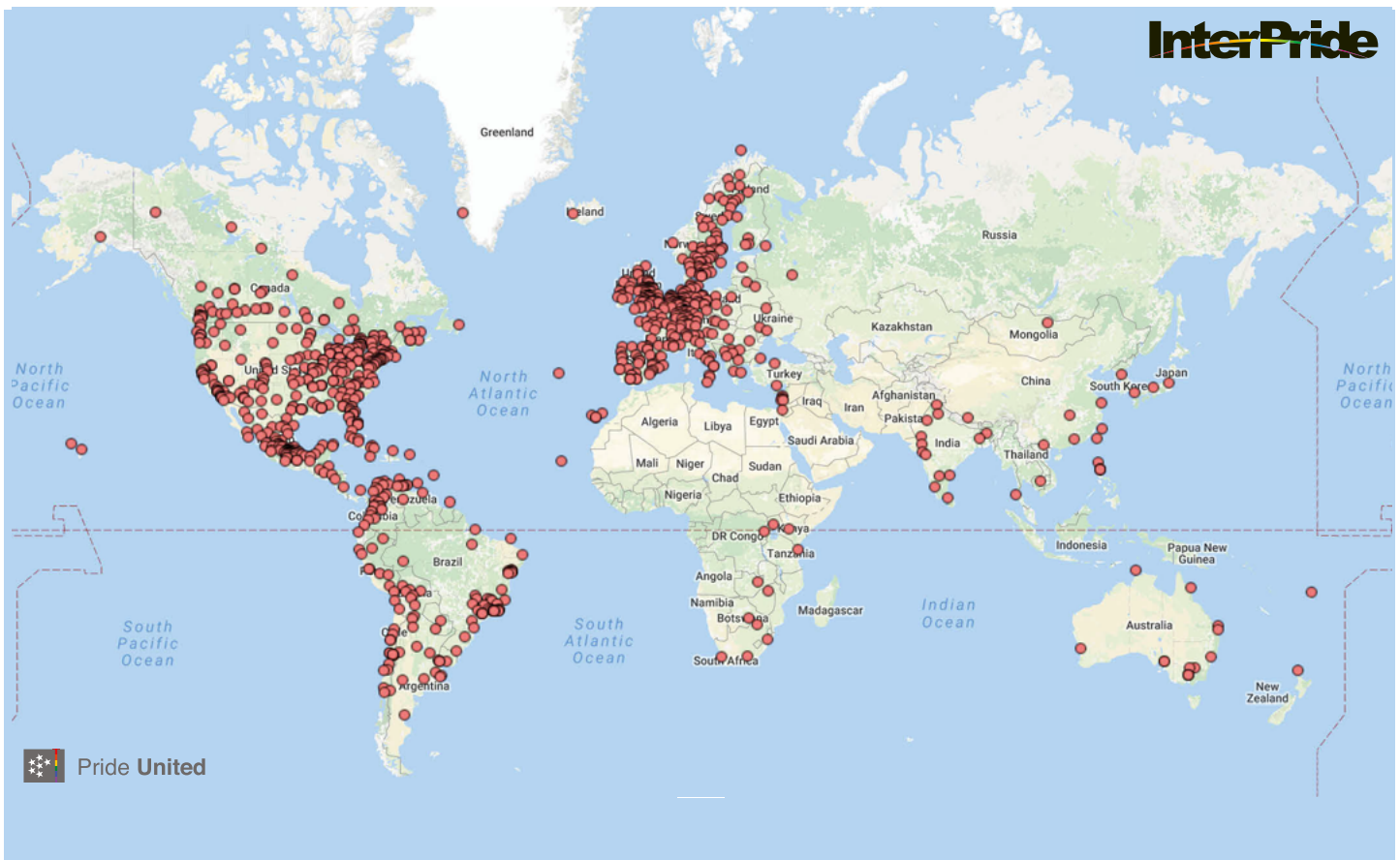
In 2012 and 2016, InterPride published the first and second editions of its PrideRadar. The PrideRadar is a document whose intent is to collect and disseminate information about all Pride events (or in some cases, the lack thereof) around the world. The PrideRadar was developed based on a survey of Pride organizations, internet research, and outreach to other organizations.

InterPride's findings also demonstrate the proliferation of Pride events and, particularly in Europe and South

“Each event, wherever it is held, is a profound political statement. Our events broadcast to the world that: We are here, we are Queer, and we will no longer continue to be invisible and accept second-class citizenship. The determination of the global LGBTIQ population to not simply go away or be legislated out of existence is growing.”

– InterPride

America, their expansion beyond major urban centers. InterPride catalogued 950 unique Pride events around the world in 2016, compared to 750 in 2012.⁵¹ InterPride's research findings also include data on the number of participants at Pride events, the types of events held, the level of participation of the various identities within the LGBTIQ rainbow, the level of participation of straight allies, political parties, corporations and others, and organizers' opinions on the main objectives of Pride events.



InterPride, 2016 PrideRadar map. Used with permission.

Case Studies

The Bahamas: “The Most Powerful Weapon”

Legal and Social Background

The Bahamas, a former British colony, was the first country in the Anglophone Caribbean to decriminalize consensual same-sex conduct, in 1991.⁵² However, a discriminatory provision in the Sexual Offenses Act sets the age of consent at 18 for same-sex sexual acts, and at 16 for different-sex sexual acts.⁵³ No law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵⁴ According to the Matrimonial Act, marriages are considered void under the law if the parties are “not respectively male and female.”⁵⁵ A proposed referendum in 2016 regarding a constitutional amendment that would have expanded citizenship rights for children born of mixed-nationality couples led to a moral panic sparked by claims that the amendment would also institutionalize marriage equality.⁵⁶

While activists interviewed by Outright said that social attitudes had generally improved in recent years, backlash against LGBTIQ equality remains a fact of life in the Bahamas, at times inflamed by hostile rhetoric from politicians and faith leaders. One MP suggested transgender people be exiled to “their own island” during the heated referendum debate in 2016. When the US Embassy hoisted the Pride flag in June 2021, the Bahamas Christian Council decried the gesture as “overreaching and insensitive,” asserting that heterosexuality was the Bahamian way of life: “The Bahamas believes in the traditional family structure of one man and one woman.”⁵⁷

Some young LGBTIQ people experience family rejection and homelessness. McTair Farrington, a 21-year-old non-binary activist, raised concerns that LGBTIQ children coming of age in the Bahamas lack the information needed to understand their identities and may experience bullying at school as well as pressure to change their identities at home. “My gay niece, she needs to go to aversion therapy every Sunday at church, and she has to put up with it because she doesn’t want to be homeless,” Farrington said, referring to debunked practices also known as “conversion therapy.”⁵⁸

Despite this, the Bahamas also has a long history of celebrating LGBTIQ Pride, dating back to a 2001 event organized by a group called the Rainbow Alliance.⁵⁹



Alexis D'Marco, an LGBTIQ activist and executive director of UC-TRANS. Facebook photo.

Alexus D'Marco, an LGBTIQ activist and executive director of the United Caribbean Trans Coalition (UC-TRANS), recalled the early Pride events:

I was about 20 or 21 at my first one. It was more like 'Are we really doing this?' It was very difficult being LGBTI back in the 90s, but with the little bit of space that they [the Pride organizers] created, I thought, look at what we can do!⁶⁰

D'Marco said the Rainbow Alliance held several small Prides. Around 2014, another group, SASH Bahamas, which focused on combating HIV among men who have sex with men, sought to organize Pride events on a larger scale. D'Marco recalled, "The country was not prepared and had no understanding of Pride. There was backlash by Christian Council and the public, so they canceled Pride."⁶¹

The Rebirth of Pride

In 2020, D'Marco, Farrington, and several other LGBTIQ activists decided it was time to try again, so they established an entity that they called the Pride Board. Although they anticipated some backlash, D'Marco and her colleagues within the Pride Board were undeterred:

I saw the need to create space, and creating space meant visibility for LGBTI Bahamians. LGBTI Bahamians were at this point open, out, and proud, even if it was through the social media platforms. Creating Pride for me at that time was creating space through visibility for members of the LGBTI community in the Bahamas. Many have achieved success in different areas. They participate in pageants, art activities around the world, so I thought, why can't we have this here?

We had opposition from the Christian Council, but I thought, they are always opposing, that's their job.⁶²

In fact, D'Marco said she tried to engage with the Christian Council, though to little effect:

The Christian Council, they have their voice to say what they want to say, but it won't stop anyone from having their events. I speak to them, I tell

them we want dialogue and conversation. We told them we are having Pride because of the injustices we face. They think it's just about marching in the streets – and it's ok if I march in the streets! You're not going to stop me! – but we wanted to explain that we are trying to do Pride to sensitive them about the issues we face. [...]

They just protest because of the Preamble of the Constitution that says we are a Christian nation. But we are not a theocracy, we are a democracy.⁶³

The activists hoped to hold in-person Pride events in 2020, including public lectures and discussions, but they were prevented from doing so because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This may have been a blessing in disguise, D'Marco said. "We had to open the space virtually, which got even more participation." Around 800 people registered to attend online altogether – a remarkable turnout in a nation of 400,000 people – over three days of virtual events. The sessions included education, sensitization about LGBTIQ topics, and entertainment, including drag performances.⁶⁴

McTair Farrington told Outright:

Pride in the Bahamas is about education. Like Nelson Mandela said, the most powerful weapon is education. The country is still in a



denial phase – it’s like it’s not the 21st century, we’re stuck a little bit backwards.

We need to educate people outside the [LGBTIQ] community and inside the community. Lots of young people are coming out but they don’t have the tools to have safer sex, they don’t have the information, they don’t have support. You have children who grow up who might be trans, but they suppress everything because society might not like you.

We have safe sex sessions, education sessions, movies, LGBTQ church pastors, discussion on police brutality versus LGBTQ community. People from the police force came on and they spoke to us – we need to understand where they’re coming from and they need to understand where we’re coming from.⁶⁵

Pride was online again in October 2021, this time with more visible allyship from members of the diplomatic community, and “even more resounding applause from persons joining online,” D’Marco said.⁶⁶ About 300 people attended, Farrington said.

A key aspect of Bahamas Pride, said D’Marco, is that it has been trans-led. While some Pride events around the world have been dominated by cisgender gay men, sometimes leading queer women and trans participants to feel excluded and unheard, trans people were centered in Bahamian Pride with immediate impact:

We were the leaders in the rebirth, we were the ones making sure logistics were getting taken care of, talking to the government, the university. Trans women took the lead. It showed that trans citizens do exist and it increased their space of access to services, to health care, because doctors would say things like ‘I saw you in a video!’⁶⁷

D’Marco said the outlook for LGBTIQ equality looked brighter under a new government elected in September 2021:

I do see a vast improvement in the way LGBTI citizens are treated now in the country. There has been censoring from the government of people spouting vitriol against LGBTI community. I see that happening through Pride. The current government was the opposition when we did Pride, and they have said they’re in support of Pride.⁶⁸

D’Marco sees Bahamas Pride as having the potential to have ripple effects in other Caribbean countries:

We’re the first to decriminalize in the region and we have signed up to some conventions. We’re moving from improving things on paper to actual action. I’m holding their feet to the fire regarding constitutional rights.... As the first to decriminalize in the region, we have an obligation to other countries to show them the way, and we’re going to do this through visibility.

We want to bring in people from other countries in the Caribbean in the future to talk about their Prides. One of my visions is to host World Pride – because now is the time.⁶⁹

Georgia: “They Were Trying to Destroy Us”

Legal and Social Background

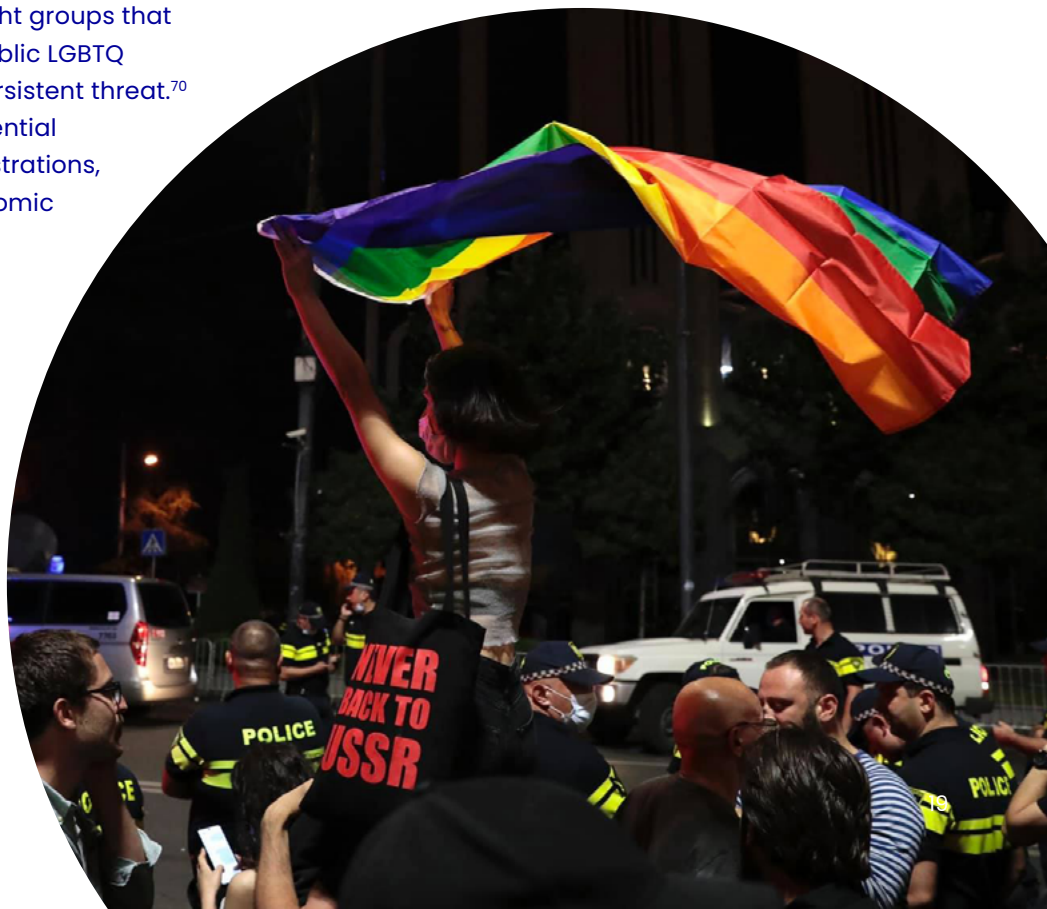
Georgia, a country of about four million people in the Caucasus region, has sought to build a nation based on democratic principles since its independence in 1991. Those principles, however, have not always extended to respect for the rights of LGBTQ people. Attempts at public demonstrations in support of LGBTQ human rights have often been thwarted by violence and disruption.

The strong anti-LGBTQ climate in Georgia can be attributed, in part, to the powerful influence of the conservative Georgian Orthodox Church; a clear lack of political will by the Georgian government to protect the rights of LGBTQ citizens, with authorities at times using LGBTQ people as a scapegoat to sow social divisions; and a proliferation of ultra-right groups that have violently disrupted attempts at public LGBTQ rights demonstrations and remain a persistent threat.⁷⁰ Concerns about the safety and the potential political manipulation of public demonstrations, combined with current social and economic conditions that impede equal access to employment, housing, and education for LGBTQ citizens, have led to divisions within the queer movement regarding the most effective strategies for achieving true, long-term progress.

Same-sex relations were criminalized under the Soviet Union, and the law was not annulled in

Georgia until 2000. In 2014, LGBTQ people in Georgia were buoyed by the passage of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that included the prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁷¹ This law was part of the country’s effort to meet European Union requirements for visa-free travel. It also marked an important milestone in pushing back against the Georgian Orthodox Church’s powerful influence.⁷²

Still, resistance to the social acceptance of LGBTQ people continued. Eighty-eight percent of respondents to a 2013 survey said they believed that homosexuality “can never be justified” and 37 percent believed that protection of LGBTQ people’s rights was “not important at all.”⁷³



Manifestantes frente al Parlamento de Georgia, 6 de julio de 2021. Fotografía de Guram Muradov @CivilGe

Identoba, a Georgian gender equality and LGBT rights organization, stated in a 2013 shadow report to the UN Human Rights Committee that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people face discrimination, public violence, a “culture of legal impunity,” and “live in a constant state of insecurity and fear.”⁷⁴ In 2018, the ruling political coalition Georgian Dream pushed through a constitutional amendment that changed the previous gender-neutral language on marriage to phrasing that specifically defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman.⁷⁵

Early Public Protests in Support of LGBTIQ Human Rights

Even before Georgian activists held any LGBTQ visibility events, the Georgian Orthodox Church appeared to be orchestrating against such commemorations. David Kakhaberi, who leads the organization Equality Movement Georgia, recalled that in 2010, the Church announced that a “gay parade” was being planned in Batumi and that LGBTQ activists from Ukraine and Turkey were planning to come.⁷⁶ Georgia’s small community of “out” activists knew nothing of this event. In fact, no march had ever been planned. It appeared to be a ruse to whip up social opposition to LGBTQ acceptance.

According to Kakhaberi, “When I look back on the story of Pride, now I see that it [the 2010 announcement] was kind of a declaration from the church that now we need some new enemies and that LGBT people were replacing religious minorities as a target.”⁷⁷ Before then, and even before the Rose Revolution in 2003, the Church did not seem to take issue with the existence of LGBT people in Georgia.⁷⁸ From 2010, however, the Georgian Orthodox church initiated a “huge anti-LGBT campaign that continues even until now.”⁷⁹

Georgia’s first public demonstration in support of LGBTQ human rights took place in Tbilisi on 17 May 2012 to mark what is now known as the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT). At that time, about 60 counter-protesters comprising priests and far-right groups blocked the LGBTIQ marchers, threatening and assaulting them, while the police did nothing to intervene.⁸⁰ Undeterred, Georgian activists planned another demonstration and flash mob on Freedom Square in support of IDAHOBIT in 2013, and they were attacked again, this time much more seriously. According to Kakhaberi, it was a “huge disaster that still defines the strategy we are working with, even today.”

Led by Orthodox religious leaders, thousands of people violently descended on the IDAHOBIT marchers, culminating in the attack on a minibus meant to evacuate the activists, who were mostly queer women. Religious fundamentalists and ultra-right protesters threw eggs and rocks at the activists, dragging them out of the minibus and smashing the vehicle’s windows.⁸¹ Again, the police did not prevent or control the violence, despite having promised the LGBTIQ protesters ahead of time that they could demonstrate safely.⁸²

As Kakhaberi describes it, “There were thousands of people chasing a small group of activists and supporters of the cause.” According to Mariam Kvaratskhelia,

Personas marchan para conmemorar el Día de la Pureza Familiar, establecido por la iglesia ortodoxa georgiana frente al Día Internacional contra la Homofobia y la Transfobia en Tiflis, Georgia, 17 de mayo de 2017. Foto de David Mdzinarishvili/Reuters



the current co-chair of Tbilisi Pride, “It was a very, very difficult day in LGBT history in Georgia: really tragic and traumatic.”⁸³

Ultimately, about 30 people were injured. A subsequent poll that year indicated that 79 percent of Georgians did not approve of the IDAHOBIT demonstration, and 52 percent approved of the counter-protests organized to disrupt it.⁸⁴

After each of the events of 2012 and 2013, Georgian activists submitted complaints to the European Court of Human Rights, which concurred in both cases that the state had violated their rights to freedom of assembly and expression, and that ill-treatment on discriminatory grounds had occurred.⁸⁵ Yet, the Georgian movement had been traumatized, even if the events had inspired more people to come out and join the fight for rights.⁸⁶

In 2014, realizing that LGBTIQ activists intended to rally annually on 17 of May in support of the IDAHOBIT, the Georgian Orthodox Church declared a new annual holiday – on 17 May – to honor the traditional Georgian family. This meant that Georgian and Tbilisi city authorities could deny permits to LGBTIQ activists to march along the main thoroughfare in Tbilisi – Rustaveli Avenue – because it was already booked for Family Purity Day.

At the same time, these events also led some activists to believe that public demonstrations were not only ill-advised due to the risks involved, but also not effective in addressing what they saw as more critical economic and social issues facing Georgians across the board and negatively impacting LGBTIQ people, including high unemployment and inadequate access to health care and social services.⁸⁷

Over the next three years, a few public pro-LGBTQ rights demonstrations took place in Georgia. For IDAHOBIT 2014, activists organized several gatherings around Tbilisi, as well as a display of shoes which represented those who were unable to march safely or live openly.⁸⁸ In 2015, 15 activists held a symbolic event on Vachnadze Street

on 17 May to reclaim the space where the 2013 attack had occurred.⁸⁹ Two other small demonstrations took place: one outside the Ministry of Justice, and another at the Tbilisi office of the United Nations in Mrgvali Bagi.⁹⁰ In 2016, the notorious anti-LGBTQ group the World Congress of Families convened their annual meeting in a Tbilisi hotel, and a few activists staged protests in front of the hotel door.

In 2017 and 2018, activists again attempted to organize rallies for IDAHOBIT, but conflicts about permits and the lack of police commitment to protect the activists created tension and anxiety among the activists. In 2017, a rally went forward, but attendees had to gather in secret locations in the Tbilisi suburbs, from which the police transported them to the rally site in front of a government building. In less than an hour, the police insisted on taking them back due to fears that they might be attacked.⁹¹

In 2018, the planned march for IDAHOBIT, at which 3,000 people were expected, was canceled when news spread that “something terrible was going to happen: there will be blood.”⁹² Activist Mariam Kvaratshkelia told Outright that the rumor of violence was likely started by the Georgian Secret Service to induce the activists to cancel the event themselves.

Kvaratshkelia said, “It was the first year of this trick. We didn’t know – it was a new thing... Unfortunately, we believed them, and we had to cancel.”⁹³

Following the cancellation, activists from the Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) and Equality Movement proceeded to hold what they called “guerilla rallies” as an alternative form of protest against government manipulation. At locations including the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Justice, Education, and Health and the Government Chancellery Building, activists emitted smoke symbolizing the colors of the rainbow flag. These “guerilla” actions demanded the end of LGBTQ exclusion and called on the government to condemn and investigate hate crimes, permit legal gender recognition, adopt international standards of health care for trans and intersex people, and ensure safe access to education for queer youth. The fascist group “Georgian National Unity” convened an anti-LGBTQ protest on the same day, while the Orthodox

Church's March for Family Purity took over part of Rustaveli Avenue.⁹⁴

Progress, Backlash, and Diverging Strategies

The trauma, stress, and pressure to organize public rallies for IDAHOBIT led to a reckoning within the Georgian LGBTQ movement. Some groups came to believe that embedding visibility within their ongoing work on community empowerment, advocacy, and service delivery would be safer and more effective than prioritizing visibility on a specific day or week during the year.

For example, Beka Gabadadze, who works with Temida, an organization for transgender and gender-diverse people, recalled feeling frustrated after the 2017 action. He said it seemed as though the events themselves, including the process of negotiating with authorities to be allowed to rally publicly, had become the main goal rather than part of a bigger strategy. Gabadadze said, "After this day, I stopped being part of organizing these events. A lot of activists experienced a lot of trauma, and many left the country."⁹⁵

David Kakhaberi said:

I worked for many different organizations over the years, and it was always about the 17th of May. It was a kind of vicious circle: we lived before the 17th of May and after the 17th of May, and it was always about mental health issues and traumas, and we couldn't do anything else. Some of us thought we needed new strategies, and some said we must do public events — we can never refuse.⁹⁶

Natalia Mchedlishvili of WISG noted that they decided to choose alternative strategies of visibility: "We don't give up on this right, but we advocate for other rights, too, and we do not build our strategy only on visibility or manifestation [protest]."⁹⁷

Those activists who no longer supported public action on 17 May (and later, for Pride) also had come to believe that public actions, in fact, were being co-opted and manipulated by the Georgian government to "check the box" on allowing freedom of assembly: an important indicator of democratization for international donors, partners, and other European bodies. These activists cite the 2017 experience as an example of how the perception of success in holding a violence-free rally clashed with reality.

According to Nino Kharchilava of WISG, about the 2017 event:

There was limited time and space where [LGBTIQ] community members could go, and it was always community members who were taken from the space, while the streets — the public spaces — were left to the fundamentalists and far-right group... It was the practice all the

People surround a woman injured during an anti-LGBTQ protest against the premiere screening of the gay-themed movie "And Then We Danced" in Tbilisi, Georgia 8 November 2019. Photo by Irakli Gedenidze/Reuters



time. Then our government would say that there was a peaceful demonstration.⁹⁸

WISG members came to believe that the community was essentially being used to create social conflict, especially before elections, when political parties tried to manipulate and exaggerate these conflicts to their benefit. Kakhaberi made a similar point: “When the government doesn’t like a protest, they mobilize far-right activist groups who come out in the street and create this illusion that there is a conflict between two sides of society.”⁹⁹

“When the government doesn’t like a protest, they mobilize far-right activist groups who come out in the street and create this illusion that there is a conflict between two sides of society.”

– David Kakhaberi, activist

Indeed, Georgia’s queer communities are not monolithic, and LGBTQ Georgians share many of the same social, political, and economic concerns that many other Georgian citizens have. For this reason, some activists strongly advocate intersectional approaches that align advocacy for LGBTQ people’s human rights with fights for workers’ rights, disability rights, gender equality, access to comprehensive sexuality education, and other movements.¹⁰⁰ Kharchilava of WISG said:

These issues are tense and affect everyone. That is why bringing up queer issues as something exclusive creates the impression that this is something different...What we try to do is build bridges among different social groups and initiatives.¹⁰¹

Others noted the costs of public demonstrations for LGBTQ people who were inadvertently outed by participating, as they might suffer family rejection, be fired from jobs, or be bullied in school.¹⁰² Gabadadze expressed concern that transgender and gender-nonconforming people likely faced disproportionate

levels of danger compared to others in the queer community when IDAHOBIT or Pride events were held. He said that those engaged in sex work and are on the streets at night experienced higher-than-usual levels of violence in the immediate weeks before and after planned public events.¹⁰³ Gabadadze’s organization, Temida, began joining Georgia’s International Women’s Day marches on 8 March, finding that trans women were more easily accepted by members of the public in that context.¹⁰⁴ In addition, for many trans activists, the most important days for visibility and solidarity (largely virtual) are 31 March, Trans Visibility Day, and 20 November, Trans Day of Remembrance, which, thus far, have not been disrupted.¹⁰⁵

Some LGBTQ activists who advocated for having public events voiced that it is vital to continue being visible, recognizing that, although every effort must be made to mitigate risk, some risk may always be present.¹⁰⁶ Kvaratskhelia noted the importance of pushing back on the notion that, “we can exist, but we cannot come outside; we are allowed to organize in private spaces but not in the streets.” By retreating from public spaces, she said, the movement allowed opponents to dictate the discourse.¹⁰⁷

As the debate continues about visibility politics, LGBTQ people in Tbilisi have supported the steady growth of queer techno club nights as a form of mobilization, education, and solidarity, especially for young people just coming out. So-called Horoom Nights, attended by up to 2,000 people each month, along with Kiki Nights, attended by up to 3,000 people, “have done amazing work to change youth attitudes about sexuality and gender norms.”¹⁰⁸

The Emergence of Pride

In early 2019, Mariam Kvaratskhelia and six other LGBTQ activists who felt that visibility activism remained critical founded the member-based Tbilisi Pride organization, now composed of 51 people, including LGBTQ people and allies. Tbilisi Pride has positioned itself as a comprehensive LGBTIQ advocacy organization that leads a variety of political and social campaigns and initiatives to press for the recognition of LGBTIQ people’s human rights and to educate Georgian society.¹⁰⁹

In June 2019 (because the Church had claimed 17 May as Family Purity Day), Tbilisi Pride organized the first-ever “Pride Week” in Georgia, comprising a theater performance, a conference entitled “Equality in Public Space,” and a “March of Dignity.” Ultimately, again, the march had to be canceled as Georgia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs refused to provide protection for the nearly 1,000 people registered to attend.¹¹⁰ Apparently, the route of the march had been leaked online, causing safety concerns.¹¹¹ According to Mariam Kvaratskeli:

There was a huge mobilization of far-right groups, who started to gather on the first day of Pride week. They were gathering in the main parks every day and forming illegal groups to patrol the city. They made direct threats, saying that if they caught any gay people in public spaces, they would tie their hands with belts. According to the law, this is not allowed, but the police did nothing... And the Pride organizers, including me, got death threats – terrible death threats on our phones. They also threatened our offices, and we had to evacuate. The police would not give us any protection guarantees, saying that ‘we don’t have enough resources.’ After three years, we still have no results from the investigation.¹¹²

In protest, about 30 Tbilisi Pride members staged a rally in front of the Ministry of Internal Affairs on 8 July.¹¹³ The rally lasted just 30 minutes due to threats that they may be attacked. But Tbilisi Pride activists nonetheless felt that it was important to persist with a public demonstration of support for LGBTIQ human rights.¹¹⁴

Tbilisi Pride initiated a project in February 2020 entitled “Empowering Civil Society and Queer Activists for Preventing and Countering the Far-Right Movements.” With support from ILGA Europe, the organization published a comprehensive report and undertook media campaigns and other interventions to raise awareness about the dangers of far-right narratives.¹¹⁵ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no public demonstrations or events took place that year. Instead, organizers convened an online demonstration and conference. Yet, starting on IDAHOBIT – 17 May 2020 – the Tbilisi Pride office was attacked and vandalized again numerous times. In October, activists from Tbilisi Pride met formally with the Georgian Public Defender’s Office to discuss the

increase in attacks and what to do to hold perpetrators accountable.

2021 Attack on Tbilisi Pride

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the stress faced by LGBTIQ activists and communities and demonstrated how dangerous it remained for many Georgians to come out.¹¹⁶ Still, in 2021, as the pandemic eased, the Tbilisi Pride team once again planned to hold a series of political and cultural events in early July to commemorate Pride Week. Mindful of past disruptions, organizers sought out national and international partners to join them in solidarity to demand fundamental rights for LGBTQ people. Before Pride Week, organizers undertook a media and advocacy campaign to help the nation better understand the realities and needs of LGBTQ people in the country. Further, the UN system in Georgia, along with the Delegation of the European Union, the Head of the EU Monitoring Mission, and 16 Embassies in Georgia, issued a joint statement in support of human rights and equality. Specifically, they urged the Georgian authorities “to secure the right to peaceful assembly to all people in Georgia without exception, and to enable these events to take place without participants having to fear becoming victims of hatred and violence.”¹¹⁷

Pride Week itself included the screening of a documentary film about the 2019 Pride march. Anti-LGBTQ protestors verbally harassed and pelted some attendees with eggs as they entered the theater; nonetheless, the screening proceeded. In addition to the film, Pride Week also included a Pride Festival, attended by about 2,000 people on private festival grounds. The festival was hugely successful, boosting the morale of the community.¹¹⁸

The final event was the March of Dignity, to be held on 5 July, but there were ominous signs: the Orthodox Church asked people to participate in a public prayer against Pride events, while Georgia’s Prime Minister, Iraki Garibashvili, said that the March of Dignity was “unacceptable for a large segment of Georgian society.”¹¹⁹ Then, on the morning of the march, ultra-right groups attacked the Tbilisi Pride office, scaling the walls of the building, destroying equipment, and shredding a large pride flag on display over a balcony. Explosives

were thrown into Tbilisi's Human Rights House, another organizer of Tbilisi Pride. As Kakhaberi noted:

These people – they came out in the street, they organized an alternative protest, but this time they really went too far. LGBTQ activists managed to be safe because the United Nations Development Program [UNDP] and other big international organizations were accompanying and supporting activists, but media representatives and journalists were attacked for the first time.¹²⁰

Some organizers, however, were chased from one location to another. Kvaratskhelia said, "We were hunted. They were trying to destroy us."¹²¹

As the situation quickly worsened, the Pride organizers canceled the march, saying, "We cannot come out to the streets full of oppressors supported by the Government, patriarchy, and pro-Russian forces, and risk the lives of people."¹²² Street violence nevertheless worsened, with anti-LGBTIQ protesters – Orthodox priests among them – engaging in violence, including attacking journalists. A photo of a priest beating and dragging a journalist, Rati Tsvevara, went viral.¹²³ All told, at least 15 journalists were injured. One of them, Lekso Lashkarava from TV Pirveli, died one week later.¹²⁴

According to Kakhaberi, "No one could have imagined that this could happen in the center of Tbilisi...This showed the attitude of our government towards this [LGBTQ rights] issue...."¹²⁵ Kvaratskhelia concurred: "Of course, we expected that it would be difficult to organize a march...but we did not really expect that the Georgian state's police would allow such a scale of violence."¹²⁶

The next day, 7,000 people attended a rally in front of the parliament, unfurling rainbow

flags to denounce the violence and express solidarity with those injured and with LGBTQ people.¹²⁷

In October 2021, in response to the 5 July violence, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe issued a written declaration calling on the Georgian authorities to "protect LGBTIQ people from violence and discrimination." The declaration further stated:

LGBTIQ people in Georgia continue to face bias, stigma, discrimination in political, social and economic life, as well as experience violent hate incidents and crimes and hate speech... The authorities' response [to 5 July events] demonstrates a resounding State failure to ensure the protection of human rights and constitutes a violation of the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights. We remind Georgian authorities about their duty and responsibility to protect the Constitutional rights and freedoms and human rights of all citizens and call on Georgian authorities to bring to justice those who commit violence against others peacefully exercising their rights.¹²⁸



Mourners carry the coffin of journalist Alexander Lashkarava during his funeral in Tbilisi, Georgia 13 July 2021. Lashkarava was found dead at his home several days after he was beaten during attacks on LGBT+ activists in Tbilisi. Photo by Irakli Gedenidze /Reuters

In April 2022, Tbilisi Pride filed a case at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in support of the case, regarding the violence that took place at the July 2021 Pride event.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, the Georgian Government recently compensated those injured during the May 2013 IDAHOBIT event, as ordered by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.¹³⁰

The Future Outlook

The treatment of LGBTQ people in the coming years will be very important to Georgia as it pursues membership into the European Union. Nine questions on the EU application ask about the Georgian government's position on protection of LGBTIQ human rights, including rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Eka Tsereteli of WISG said:

The window for democracy in Europe is narrowing, as it is in Georgia. So, we do not have much time. We must use all opportunities to somehow overcome this situation.

Meanwhile, Tbilisi Pride is planning to undertake another Pride week in July 2022 that will include theatrical performances and a festival that they expect at least 4,000 people to attend. They also plan to organize another regional conference. No march was planned at the time of writing.¹³¹

Ultra-right threats persist, especially from a relatively new group called Alt-Info that has formed its own political party, Conservative Georgia, and has acquired a license for its own television station.¹³² It has also opened 88 party offices throughout Georgia, including in small rural villages and towns.¹³³ Evidence that it is financed by Russia, along with the party's open support for Russia's war against Ukraine, have led to protests against its presence in various regions.¹³⁴

Polling suggests that attitudes towards queer people, especially among young Georgians, are gradually improving, with 38 percent of respondents 18 to 35 saying in 2019 that it was important to protect the rights of queer people, compared to 26 percent in 2015.¹³⁵ In February 2022, the Council of Europe published the results of a study indicating that 47 percent of respondents in Georgia believe that the rights of LGBTIQ people should be protected.¹³⁶

Although many LGBTIQ activists have left Georgia, those who remain and those entering activism are determined to press for change using a variety of strategies. Gabadadze pointed to the need to strengthen media engagement so that LGBTIQ people are addressed beyond the reporting on IDAHOBIT or Pride Week.¹³⁷

According to Kakhaberi:

The future challenge for us is mobilizing the community and empowering it... In Georgia, LGBTIQ activism is still really young – it really only started in 2006. We still have a lot to learn, to achieve, to develop. Right now, we don't have a homogenous point of view or idea about our struggle. We have different strategies –and that is a good thing because if one strategy doesn't work, then maybe another will be successful.¹³⁸

Ghana: Pride Deferred

Legal and Social Context

The socio-political and legal environment in Ghana has been marked by homophobia since the enactment of the Criminal Offences Act of 1960. Over the years, this atmosphere has become increasingly hostile against persons of non-conforming sexual orientations and gender identities or expressions. Fundamentalists' efforts to clamp down on human rights have led to targeted attacks against LGBTIQ persons, activists, and organizations in Ghana.

Human Rights Watch reported in 2018 that queer Ghanaians "suffer widespread discrimination and abuse both in public and in family settings."¹³⁹ The political atmosphere took a turn for the worse in 2019, after the World Congress of Families, a right-wing anti-LGBTQ group based in the US, held its regional conference there.¹⁴⁰ It worsened further in 2021, when Parliament introduced the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill. This Bill criminalizes LGBTIQ identities and organizations, and, if passed, would provide government support to conversion practices aimed at changing people's sexual orientation or gender identity.

In light of this, LGBTIQ organizations in Ghana cannot organize public Pride events as they would prefer. The activists we spoke to cited additional reasons why Pride events are either private or re-adapted. One activist who heads a large LGBTIQ organization told Outright, "We've not done the open and public ones because of the security issues and the risks it will bring."¹⁴¹ Another veteran activist agreed, citing the challenges to such events to be the widespread stigma against sexual and gender diversity, discrimination, and security reasons. This activist reported that they would not be able to get permission from the police to host an event known to be an LGBTIQ event.¹⁴²



Chale Wote Street Arts Festival 2013. Photo by Kwabena Akuamoah-Boateng from Accra, Ghana

These fears are not misplaced.

In 2021, the United States Embassy in Ghana held a closed-door event for Pride and hoisted the Pride flag.¹⁴³ The Ghanaian media took it to mean that the embassy was “defying” Ghana. Bloggers reported it as the US Ambassador “motivating” LGBTIQ activists to “continue their rights advocacy with the full assurance of US support.”¹⁴⁴ One activist reported to Outright that there were talks of summoning the US Ambassador to Parliament to be questioned.¹⁴⁵

Earlier Progress Toward Pride

In previous years, various organizations would hold Pride month activities during June. They would also mark Lesbian Visibility Day and Week in April, and IDAHOBIT in May.¹⁴⁶ However, they always prioritized safety and security for LGBTIQ persons. In one community near Accra, the capital city, these events were slightly more public facing because people considered it a safe environment. There, activists hosted games and festival-like activities to mark Pride.¹⁴⁷

But activists also have found ways of incorporating Pride events or days of celebrating LGBTIQ rights into local festivals. Around the Central Region, activists adopted the Afahye festival, an annual cultural festival celebrated by the people of Ghana’s Oguaa Cape Coast area, to discreetly celebrate and recognize diversity among LGBTIQ-friendly spaces.¹⁴⁸

Some organizations and activists adopted a similar method during the Chale Wote Street Art Festival in the Greater Accra Region in 2018, but at this festival, participants were more visible in their queerness.¹⁴⁹ Rebecca F., an LBQ activist, told Outright, “We have carried out a ‘Pride’ event where we went to the streets at the Chale Wote festival. We painted our faces. We embraced ourselves in 2018.”¹⁵⁰

Not only was this art festival used to celebrate diversity and self-acceptance, but LGBTIQ activists used it as a medium to educate people and reach other sexual minorities. “We book a stand [at the festival]. We had t-shirts with various logos and people representing the different letters of the LGBTQIA+ term. We promoted education and also did testing and training on HIV issues.”¹⁵¹

Chale Wote was a liminal space that provided a degree of freedom, but it did not necessarily serve as a barometer of social acceptance. A Ghanaian journalist wrote in 2018:

...[O]utside the confines of this festival, the mob stopping to pose with rainbow-vertical-ponytail-man could be the same ones turning on him the next Monday if he walked on the streets dressed like that.¹⁵²



Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, 40, a trans woman who is an artist and LGBT+ activist, holds up a gown at her home and studio in Oduom, Ashanti Region-Ghana. 22 December 2021. “To say I’m afraid is an understatement, but I am what I am,” said Fiatsi “It feels like waiting to be slaughtered.” Photo by Francis Kokoroko/Reuters

Another organization has used Pride month as an opportunity to hold dialogues on LGBTIQ issues. One of the organizers told Outright:

For two years, we use our social media where we have some control, to have a series of dialogues with community members, activists, advocates, and allies across fields. We started in 2020, where we used the 30 days in June to have back-to-back conversations with academics, lawyers, and activists on various topics every day, via Instagram live. We repeated that last year, and we're looking to doing that this year.¹⁵³

Organizations try to keep these events out of the press radar at the time they are taking place to prevent attacks on gender and sexual minorities.¹⁵⁴ Kplorm M., an Accra-based activist, told Outright that while some members of the public might be receptive to these events, press attention would likely backfire:

But, immediately it gets to the press, persons from other communities and backgrounds will make it look like a weird, horrible event... Then people will make sensational comments.¹⁵⁵

Not Time for Pride?

The notion of celebrating Pride is also controversial for some activists because they view homophobia as institutionalized in Ghana. Many LGBTIQ persons face human rights violations and other forms of social and economic exclusion, including homelessness. Kplorm M., an activist in Accra, told Outright that the severity of violations makes celebrating Pride seem out of place. "So, until the systems are a bit [inclusive] and people are getting access to some of these things, you don't just [celebrate] Pride."

Still, activists remain creative and adaptive. As this report went to press in June 2022, activists had just successfully pulled off the #WeAreAllGhana campaign, mounting billboards in three cities with messages promoting acceptance of LGBTIQ people. The billboards, with messages such as "When all Ghanaians are treated equal no matter where they are or who they love that's true freedom," remained in place for over two weeks before being torn down.¹⁵⁶

Celebrating LGBTIQ rights and movement building can take many forms. Even in countries like Ghana, where the laws are repressive against gender and sexual diversity, LGBTIQ persons take steps to recognize the progress made, foster community, and build acceptance.

Billboard stating, "Live and Let Live, Love and Let Love" under the campaign #WeAreAllGhana. Photo courtesy of LGBT+ Rights Ghana 2022



Hungary: “We’ve Always Been Political”

Hungary decriminalized homosexuality in 1961. The period from 1990 until 2010, when Viktor Orbán came into power the second time, saw some progress on a range of LGBTIQ issues, including the passage of the registered same-sex partnership law in 2009 and other protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. With the ascendancy of the Orbán government, in which Orbán’s conservative party, Fidesz (the Hungarian Civic Party), currently holds a super-majority, the country has endured a significant regression in protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity, justified in the name of preserving so-called traditional values and binary gender biological determinism. Orbán’s landslide victory in the April 2022 election assures that the political direction of the country is unlikely to change in the coming years.

History of Pride in Hungary

The first Budapest Pride that included a public march was celebrated in July 1997 with about 300,000 people in attendance.¹⁵⁷ It was part of a week-long set of events, including film screenings, discussions, concerts, parties, and other attractions. For the subsequent 10 years, the event, eventually called the Budapest Pride Film and Cultural Festival, became the largest LGBTIQ-related annual celebration and protest in the country.

The number of attendees remained small in the early years. Pride celebrations faced only minor protests. Viktória Radványi of Budapest Pride told Outright, “For many years there was no counter protestors, maybe just 1 to 2 people with a sign saying, ‘Gays go home.’ But there was not much security around Pride because no one wanted to hurt us.”¹⁵⁸

That changed in 2007. Radványi explained, “We had a social democratic government, and there were protests against a scandal, the far right got a lot of momentum, and then the economic crisis empowered the far right everywhere, and then they started attacking the Pride march.”¹⁵⁹

Several hundred counter-protesters chanted obscenities and threw eggs, bottles, and Molotov cocktails at the approximately 2,000 marchers along the parade route. Although police forces were present, they did not act to protect the marchers, exhibited discriminatory

People hold up a banner at Budapest Pride, 11 July 2015. Photo by Attila Kisbenedek/AFP via Getty Images



behavior towards the marchers, and failed to protect marchers attending a Pride after-party later that evening.¹⁶⁰ More than a dozen Pride marchers and party attendees were reportedly injured. At the time, Amnesty International noted that:

The authorities' failure to protect the participants of the Pride march violates their right to equal protection of the law guaranteed by Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Hungary is a state party. Amnesty International is urging the Hungarian authorities to tackle discriminatory attitudes within the police force in order to ensure that freedom of expression (Article 19 ICCPR) and peaceful demonstration (Article 21 ICCPR and Article 11 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms) is guaranteed.¹⁶¹

In 2008, counter-protesters returned, largely mobilized by the far-right Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), and again threw eggs and rocks at the marchers, as well as Molotov cocktails at popular LGBTIQ-friendly nightclubs. Some of the marchers were trapped along the parade route; police evacuated them to a nearby subway station. Despite the serious disruptions, organizers noted that more non-LGBTIQ people and organizations participated in the march than ever before, signaling growing societal support for LGBTIQ human rights.¹⁶²

The following year, in 2009, the festival was officially renamed Budapest Pride, and more than 2,500 police encircled the marchers to protect them. In April 2011, Pride organizers faced another setback as the Budapest Police refused to issue a permit to expand the route for the Pride march. The Budapest Metropolitan Court overturned the Police's decision, and the march was allowed to take place. In 2012, the Budapest police again refused to issue a permit for the march. Representing the march's organizers,

the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ) succeeded in getting the Budapest Metropolitan Court to overturn the ban. The Budapest Police appealed, but the Court upheld the decision in 2014, ruling that a ban was discriminatory and a form of harassment since it fostered hostility towards LGBTIQ people.¹⁶³ The march was allowed to proceed and was attended by 3,000 people, the biggest march thus far.

Starting in 2013, and for the next four years, police did not attempt to block the parade; instead, they created protection in the form of a "hermetic lockdown," using gates to block entrances to the march to keep out those who had not joined the march from the beginning. "It wasn't what we wanted," said Radványi, "but people had been getting beat up."¹⁶⁴ Organizers wanted a march that was accessible to the public and wanted police to protect them along the length of the march, not to be sealed off from the public.

Pride organizers eventually came to realize that the hermetic lockdown was not a straightforward security measure. Radványi recalled:

I joined Pride in 2016. At the time the viewpoint of organizers was that this hermetic lockdown was unnecessary. It segregates the march from the city and defies the whole purpose of visibility.

People take part at the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Pride Parade in Budapest, Hungary on 8 July 2017. Photo by Ferenc Isza/AFP via Getty Images



We started trying to convince the police that it was unnecessary and that it doesn't provide true protection. But the police told us they were given political instructions to do this, to try to segregate the march from citizens.

By 2017, more than 22,000 people, including representatives from 36 embassies, attended the annual march.¹⁶⁵ That year, in an act of civil disobedience, organizers informed police that they would not use the fenced-in route, and insisted on an alternative route. Radványi said, "So the police didn't have time to move the fences and had to do what we wanted – to protect the march with live force. And it happened because they were forced to do it." In 2018, activists again demand the right to march with police protection, but without being fenced in:

Our argument was freedom of movement, freedom of expression. The law says every person has the right to freedom of assembly, and if that right has to be restricted it has to be minimized as much as possible. So we convinced the police, don't put the Pride march behind fences, but put fences around the far-right radicals. It's much more logical to put fences around the small groups than the big ones.¹⁶⁶

The activists prevailed, and Budapest Pride went forward without fences. Police maintained a presence a block away from the March. Radványi described the policing at Pride as not necessarily antagonistic, but not helpful. "The case is that we do most of the security," she said of the organizing team. "We have about 250 volunteers just for safety, and 50 to 60 legal observers with cameras so that later we can press charges if something fits the books."¹⁶⁷

Beginning in 2018, Budapest Pride organizers faced a new challenge with the passage of a new law on assembly that "provided an opportunity for the police to impose undue restrictions to the right to peaceful assembly."¹⁶⁸

The change in climate for queer people in Hungary can be directly linked to Viktor Orbán's election as prime minister in 2010.

Erosion of Rights

The climate in Hungary since Viktor Orbán re-assumed leadership in 2010 has grown increasingly hostile for LGBTIQ people. As an indicator of the continued degradation of rights, ILGA Europe's Rainbow Europe Country Index, which gauges how well countries protect LGBTIQ human rights, ranked Hungary ninth in 2012.¹⁶⁹ Ten years later, Hungary's position has slipped to 28th.¹⁷⁰

The change in climate for queer people in Hungary can be directly linked to Viktor Orbán's election as prime minister in 2010. The leader of the conservative Fidesz Party since 1993, and the country's prime minister from 1998 to 2002, Orbán led the development of Hungary's new constitution (the Fundamental Law) and a set of new "cardinal laws," which were adopted in January 2012. The new legal framework essentially did away with important checks on centralized power. Among the new provisions and amendments are articles that, for example, curb the autonomy and freedom of the judiciary system, religious institutions, universities, and journalists; infringe on the rights of women and people with disabilities; and curb

LGBTQ activists deploy a 30-meter-long rainbow flag prior to a press conference by Budapest Pride and European Pride Organizers Association (EPOA). Organizers announced that this year's Budapest Pride Parade will be held in the capital on 23 June. Photo by Attila Kisbenedek/AFP via Getty Images



LGBTIQ human rights.¹⁷¹ Specifically, the new constitution defines marriage as solely between a man and a woman and defines “the family” through marriage and parent-child relationships.¹⁷² Further, sexual orientation and gender identity are not explicitly included among the list of protected characteristics.

In July 2013, Hungary adopted a new criminal code that added sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as disability, to the list of characteristics protected under a law against hate-motivated assaults. According to Amnesty International, “NGOs welcomed the change, but expressed concerns over how the new provisions would be implemented without effective guidelines for police and prosecution services on the investigation of such crimes.”¹⁷³

Indeed, since the adoption of the new constitution and its related laws and amendments, the government has waged a sustained campaign to deny protections for LGBTQ Hungarians.¹⁷⁴ In 2020, as COVID-19 swept across Europe, the Orbán government abolished the Equal Treatment Authority, whose mandate was to investigate cases of discrimination.¹⁷⁵ The Orbán government also banned legal gender recognition, declaring that “birth sex” cannot be changed on in the birth registry or on other identification documents, thus ending the ability for transgender people to legally change their gender markers.¹⁷⁶

Hungary’s 2021 Pride: Resistance Rebooted

In June 2021, Hungary passed a law that bans the “display and promotion of homosexuality” among children under 18.¹⁷⁷ The law is one manifestation of an increasingly globalized anti-gender movement that attempts to restrict the rights of women and LGBTIQ people around the world, on the grounds that one’s sex assigned at birth corresponds to a rigid, binary set of gender norms and that governments should limit any perceived deviation from these norms.¹⁷⁸

Hungarian activists responded by scaling up. Budapest Pride sponsored 82 events in 2021 and mobilized LGBTIQ people and thousands of allies for Budapest’s largest

Pride march ever.¹⁷⁹ Viktória Radványi estimated there were 35,000 participants, an increase she directly attributed to the “Russia-style propaganda law” that had passed just two weeks before. Many of the participants, she said, were allies:

What we experienced was that at this pride we had much more allies than before. It wasn’t really the community that came out in larger numbers. They were afraid the police wouldn’t protect them. So a lot of allies came out seeing Pride as a general anti-Orbán protest. They are allies who often don’t come to Pride because they go to a music festival instead, or go away for a weekend – and these were the people who came out, because normally it’s not at the top of their list of priorities because it doesn’t affect them personally, but in 2021 it was a priority.

In September 2021, the city of Pécs also held a Pride parade, the first time a Pride march in Hungary took place outside of Budapest.¹⁸⁰

Participants in the 2021 Pride events in Hungary understood that marching had become a political necessity. They saw the attacks on “promotion of homosexuality” as attacks on democracy and saw the need to make a statement that they would not remain silent as democratic rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and association, were eaten away.



But Pride in Hungary has always had a political edge; not in a partisan sense, but in its embrace of a politics of sustainability and community, absent in the corporate-intensive Pride events in much of Western Europe. Radványi said:

A lot of Prides in the region define themselves against the traditional American and Western European Prides. The criticism of capitalism is more present and visible at our Pride. And we were in the position to make these rules because we're not dependent on corporate money, because we don't get corporate money. [...]

I think what has been special about Budapest pride is that we've always been on the more political side. A lot of western Europeans come because it's very different. We don't really have corporate sponsorships because they're afraid of the Hungarian government and don't want to support us, so we don't really have many brands – maybe just a group of 30 coworkers who wear the same shirts... We have environmental rules. People are not allowed to bring helium balloons that they let go; we encourage people to use reusable materials for their floats, like fabrics, so that they can use it the next year and not just throw it away. We have a lot of small and grassroots groups to attend and we encourage them to use this as a form of visibility to get more people.¹⁸¹



Doubling Down: Hungary's Anti-LGBTQ Referendum and Election

In July 2021, the European Parliament voted to initiate legal action against Hungary, citing the new “propaganda” law as “another intentional and premeditated example of the gradual dismantling of fundamental rights in Hungary.”¹⁸²

Hungary remained defiant. In April 2022, Fidesz submitted the rights of LGBTQ people to a referendum. The referendum sought to sow moral panic regarding children's alleged vulnerability to LGBTQ-related content: it asked whether voters supported the “teaching of sexual orientation” in schools without parental consent; the “promotion of sex reassignment therapy” for children; the exposure of children to “sexually explicit media content;” and showing “media content on gender-changing procedures” to minors.¹⁸³ Human rights organizations mounted a massive campaign calling on voters to spoil their ballots. 1.6 million people did so, successfully nullifying the referendum.¹⁸⁴

Still, the landslide victory for Fidesz in the same election contributed to a climate of despair. Radványi said LGBTQ activists were even considering emigrating in larger numbers than in the past:

People burn out after a short period of time. They feel their efforts are in vain. They usually leave for the private sector and don't come back to the NGO sector. Now, a lot of LGBTQ people are talking about going to Germany, Austria, the Netherlands.¹⁸⁵

Radványi also sees Pride as a likely target following Orbán's reelection, given that Fidesz “already took away adoption and legal gender recognition.” LGBTQ Hungarians had once enjoyed a broader array of rights, but now, she said, “What's left is registered partnerships, and the Pride march – freedom of assembly without any restrictions.” As Budapest Pride prepared for its 2022 march, Radványi was aware of the risks:

The Pride is really bugging Fidesz and really bugging their voter base. Freedom of assembly is at stake right now.¹⁸⁶

A participant holds a sign reading “love human rights” during the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Pride Parade in Budapest on 24 July 2021. Photo by Ferenc Isza/AFP via Getty Images

Lithuania: “We Are Everywhere”

Legal and Social Context

Lithuania, a small Baltic country with a population of three million, decriminalized same-sex relations in 1993, shortly after the Soviet Union dissolved. As a condition of joining the European Union in 2004, the country enacted various protections against discrimination, including based on sexual orientation (but not gender identity). The state does not legally recognize same-sex marriages or partnerships. ILGA Europe’s most recent Rainbow Europe Index ranks Lithuania at 35 out of 49 countries.¹⁸⁷

In 2002, Lithuania adopted a Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information that restricted “public information having a detrimental effect on the mental health, physical, intellectual or moral development of minors.” In 2009, parliament adopted amendments to the law that would specifically censor content “whereby homosexual, bisexual or polygamous relations are promoted” and “whereby family relations are distorted, its values are scorned.”¹⁸⁸ The president vetoed the amendments, but parliament overruled the veto. By this time, a newly elected president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, had taken office and the law returned to her desk for approval. She too, vetoed the amendment, but went on to approve a revised provision that no longer explicitly referred to same-sex relationships, but instead censored material that “expresses contempt for family values, [and] encourages the concept of entry into a marriage and creation of a family other than stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania and the Civil Code of

the Republic of Lithuania.”¹⁸⁹ The President insisted that the amendment did not discriminate against LGBT people, although unsurprisingly, it proved to be deployed in a discriminatory manner to restrict media coverage of a 2013 Pride event, discussed below.

Political History of Prides in Lithuania

Baltic Pride

Baltic Pride, conceived as a regional event, seeks to increase LGBTQ visibility, dismantle the arguments against allowing LGBTQ people to exercise equal rights, and demonstrate how progress is being made over time. Each Baltic Pride is organized



Lithuania Pride in Vilnius. Photo courtesy of LGL

around a particular theme. Funding for Baltic Pride comes from embassies and other public and private donors who support LGBTQ civil society organizations. In 2019, for the first time, businesses and corporations provided support.

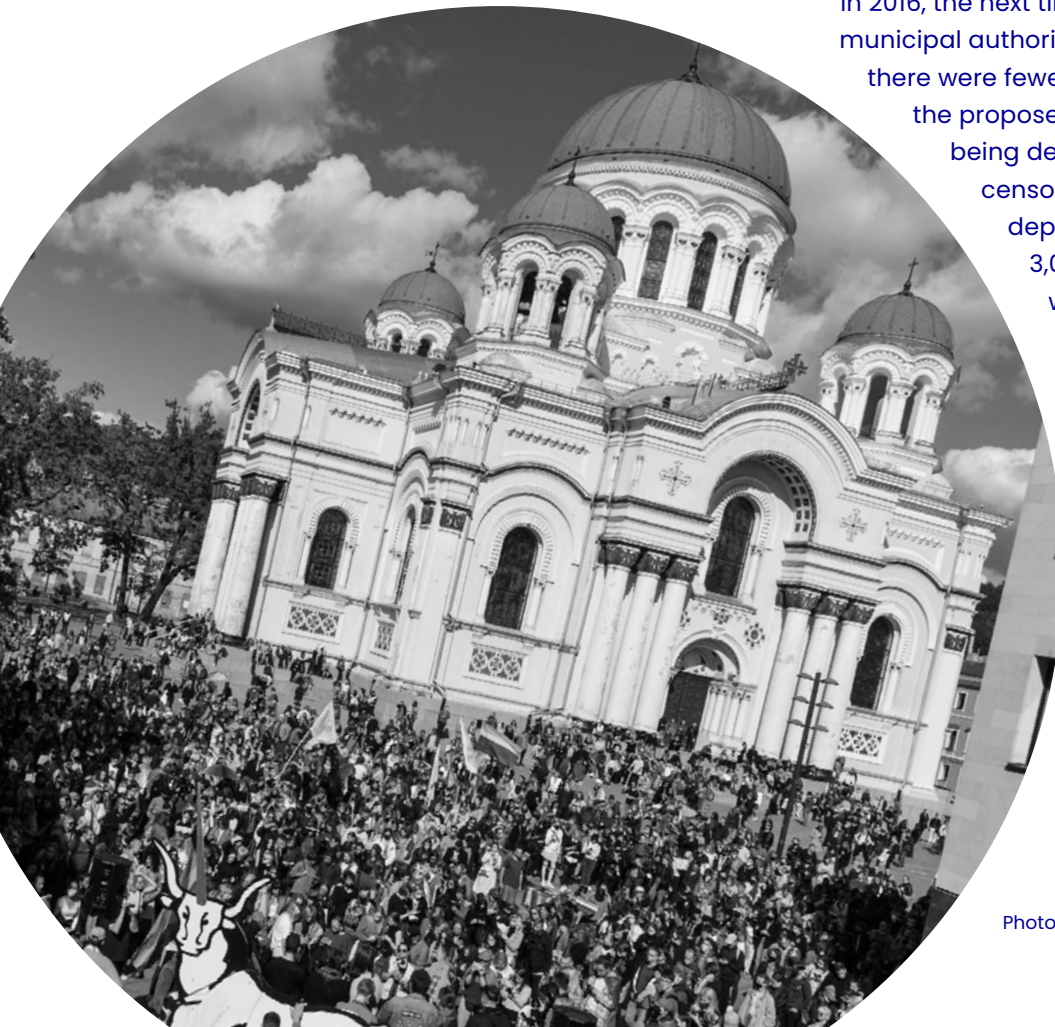
The first Baltic Pride took place in Riga, Latvia, in 2009, thus initiating a regular rotation of Pride hosting among each of the three Baltic state capitals of Tallinn (Estonia), Riga (Latvia), and Vilnius (Lithuania). In 2010, Baltic Pride was held in Vilnius, marking Lithuania's first Pride celebration ever. LGL, the primary LGBTQ association in the country, organized the week-long series of events with other Baltic national LGBTIQ organizations.¹⁹⁰

Pride in Lithuania initially faced opposition. After activists secured permission for the march from municipal authorities, the Vilnius Regional Administrative Court, at the request of the Attorney General, banned the event, claiming that security for the marchers could not be assured.¹⁹¹ This triggered criticism from the president of Lithuania as well as from national, regional, and global human rights organizations. One week later, Lithuania's highest court overturned the ruling, and the march was allowed to proceed.¹⁹²

About 500 people marched, while 600 police surrounded the marchers, sometimes using tear gas to protect against more than 1,000 anti-gay protesters.¹⁹³

Three years later, when Baltic Pride planned to return to Lithuania in 2013, city officials in Vilnius refused to approve the route, again citing concerns that the city could not keep Pride marchers safe and offering instead to allow the march to take place in the city's outskirts. LGL engaged in an intensive legal battle in the weeks leading up to Pride, finally gaining permission to march along Gedimino Avenue in central Vilnius. About 800 people participated in this "March for Equality."¹⁹⁴ Compared to 2010, there were fewer counter-protesters, although 28 people were detained for throwing eggs at the marchers and for other disruptive behavior.¹⁹⁵ Citing the 2010 Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detriment Effect of Public Information, the national television station refused to air promotional videos for Baltic Pride before 11 p.m. and insisted they be labeled "adult content." Organizers appealed the decision, but the Inspector of Journalist Ethics upheld the national broadcaster's position.¹⁹⁶

Subsequent Baltic Prides in Vilnius were less contested. In 2016, the next time Baltic Pride was held in Vilnius, municipal authorities did not obstruct the events and there were fewer protesters. The theme focused on the proposed anti-gay propaganda amendment being debated at the time due to the censorship of a book of fairy tales that depicted same-sex relationships.¹⁹⁷ About 3,000 people participated in the march, which was preceded by the Vilnius LGBT Festival Kreivės, a week-long series of film screenings, discussions, literary readings, theatrical performances, and art exhibits.¹⁹⁸ The next Baltic Pride in Lithuania, in 2019, focused on the proposed, yet ultimately failed, civil partnership law and was attended by a record 10,000 people, including representatives from political parties and corporations. A few people protested, but they were far outnumbered.¹⁹⁹



Baltic Pride is again scheduled to occur in Vilnius in early June 2022, with the theme focusing on democracy and support for Ukraine. Funding is coming from institutional donors and the private sector, and, for the first time, the municipality of Vilnius will be a formal partner. This increase in support for Baltic Pride 2022 is likely in response, in part, to the May 2021 “Great Family Defense March,” in which 10,000 people protested against a range of issues including the pending civil partnerships bill, the destruction of “traditional family values,” COVID-19 restrictions, and the Istanbul Convention, Vilnius authorities denied a proposed second march for September 2021, organized by the Lithuanian Family Movement (LŠS).²⁰⁰ In July and August 2021, protests against COVID-19 restrictions and immigration and in support of “traditional family values” nevertheless took place, devolving into riots in front of parliament.²⁰¹ An investigative report found that some of the nearly 5,000 protesters included LŠS supporters.²⁰² President Gitanas Nausėda suggested that some had financial backing from Russia and Belarus.²⁰³

Vilnius and Kaunas Prides

Baltic Pride has some critics from within LGBTIQ movements in Lithuania. Because local community involvement is limited in organizing the regional event, and because it is always held in a capital city, some perceived Baltic Pride as “elitist.” This critique fueled the organizing of more grassroots Pride celebrations in Vilnius and Kaunas in recent years. According to Tomas Vytautas Raskevičius, an activist, a Member of Parliament, and Chair of the Parliament’s

Human Rights Committee:

In a small country like Lithuania...everything happening in the capital city is perceived by the rest of the country as elitist. Community Pride initiatives, such as in Vilnius in 2020 and in Kaunas in 2021, happen because people don’t feel represented by institutional Prides, which are seen as a depoliticized celebration.²⁰⁴

Neither Vilnius Pride nor Kaunas Pride were affiliated with the main organizers of Baltic Pride. In 2020, the grassroots event in Vilnius was organized by individuals and sought to protest “against injustice both locally and globally.”²⁰⁵ About 1,000 people participated, a smaller number likely due to COVID-19 prevention requirements. The march was decidedly political, with organizers voicing three demands: legal gender recognition for transgender people; the right to marriage, civil partnerships, and adoption for same-sex couples; and repeal of provisions of the Law on the Protection of Minors that promote censorship.²⁰⁶

The following year, grassroots activists organized Pride events in Kaunas, Lithuania’s second-largest city, using only crowdfunding as their source of support with no formal links to any organization. This was a political statement to signal that Kaunas Pride was not an elitist event.²⁰⁷ Kaunas Pride comprised a queer festival, Kreivės, featuring film screenings and workshops, as well as a march. In addition, Kaunas Artists’ House and



Feministarium collaborated on a project called “Black Rose. Black Carnation. Baltic Queer Art and Politics Network.” The goal was to examine Baltic queerness, through discussion among artists, activists, and scholars from the region, and to launch a sustained regional network to “build intellectual and cultural bridges.”²⁰⁸

Regarding the Pride March, organizers faced opposition almost immediately from municipal authorities, who refused to grant permission to march through the center of the city, claiming concerns about safety and ongoing construction work. After activists proposed three alternative routes that were rejected, it became clear that the city was intentionally obstructing the right to march. The organizers, through a labor union, sued the city and won. The city unsuccessfully appealed, and the final go-ahead was given just the day before the march.²⁰⁹

Because of the city’s claims that the march could be unsafe, some people were afraid to participate. Organizers responded with encouragement, emphasizing that participant numbers were going to be their strength and the march was an important way to speak up against a political and social environment in which LGBTIQ people in Kaunas were unsafe every day. As part of their communication effort, they shared the message “We know how to suffer, but also how to take care of each other.”²¹⁰ Before this event, LGBTIQ activists faced similar obstructionism regarding a planned debate on LGBTIQ rights as part of a youth festival organized under Kaunas European Capital of Culture event. The debate was first canceled but then was allowed to go forward after pressure from activists.²¹¹

After active negotiations between organizers and the police, the march had significant police protection, with officers coming from other Lithuanian cities as well. The heavy police presence was also likely due to the violent riots that had taken place in Vilnius in the preceding months. According to Viktorija Kolbesnikova, one of Kaunas Pride’s lead organizers, they also trained volunteers to ensure security at the Pride march, including sharing a list of safety recommendations with participants.²¹²

About 2,000 people participated, and organizers prepared a list of 14 demands for the speaker of

KAUNAS PRIDE MANIFESTO

KAUNAS PRIDE – WE ARE EVERYWHERE

WE ARE EVERYWHERE and we don’t want to hide.

WE ARE EVERYWHERE and we want to live our lives freely without harassment in the store, at work, at family gatherings, without violence on the street or at school.

WE ARE EVERYWHERE and we will no longer allow the decisions to be made for us under the guise of traditional values.

WE ARE EVERYWHERE and we demand legal and social guarantees for all, regardless of marital status, gender identity or sexuality.

WE ARE EVERYWHERE and we will no longer tolerate hate, disguised as freedom of speech.

WE ARE EVERYWHERE, therefore KAUNAS PRIDE.

Lithuania’s parliament, well beyond demands for civil partnership, which, according to Kolbesnikova, is “too often seen as the most important step to emancipation.”²¹³ These demands included rights to legal gender recognition, equal access to health and education, social safety, and non-discrimination protections, among others. The manifesto of the march was, “We are everywhere,” to emphasize that LGBTIQ people exist in “different cities and in peripheries, where the struggles are different, and their safety is more at risk.”²¹⁴ “We are everywhere” was also intended to broaden the understanding of the lived realities of LGBTIQ people in Lithuania in terms of socio-economic status, educational attainment, and employment diversity. Further, the message sought to directly challenge a common misperception in smaller cities and towns in Lithuania that LGBTQ people are elites from the capital city.²¹⁵

The march faced vocal opposition. A group opposing the march distributed posters throughout the city condemning it and describing it as a “globalist infection.”²¹⁶ Counter-protesters threw eggs and shouted obscenities and insults, as well as statements such as “We stand for traditional values.”²¹⁷ Still, according to Kolbesnikova, “Civil society assessed the police’s work as generally good – they arrested 22 people and launched pre-trial investigations in five cases.”²¹⁸

Organizers did not expect that policy makers would accept their demands. Yet, they managed to be heard and to broaden the understanding of issues affecting LGBTQ people within society. The march provoked a hostile response from President Nausėda, who vowed to work against same-sex marriage, same-sex couple adoption, and teaching LGBTQ history in schools.²¹⁹ According to Kolbesnikova, the debate that Kaunas Pride ignited is still lively, which she sees as a great success.²²⁰

Kolbesnikova noted that above all, Kaunas Pride was a form of protest, rather than a celebration or parade. “We don’t have enough to celebrate,” she said. Eglė Kuktoraitė commented, “Among other things, Kaunas Pride protested against rainbow capitalism.”²²¹ Said Tomas Vytautas

Raskevičius, “It was needed and changed the dominant narrative of compromise from the past.”²²² Regardless of their differing political stands and strategies, all activists interviewed agreed that it was important to have Pride protests in different regions using diverse approaches.

At this writing, a new civil union bill passed the first vote in Lithuania’s parliament, and Baltic Pride 2022 is underway in Vilnius.²²³ According to Vladimir Simonko, “Vilnius has made rapid progress in recent years. We have to acknowledge that the quality of social life for LGBT+ people, the provision of equal opportunities is growing, and that there is a welcoming atmosphere for LGBT+ people in the Lithuanian capital.”²²⁴ Still, for many, Pride is more of a protest than a celebration in Lithuania, as many legal reforms are needed to achieve true equality for LGBTIQ people throughout the country.



Photo by Ziuperii Photography

Malawi: “All the Energies into One Voice”

Legal and Social Context

Malawi’s penal code prohibits “carnal knowledge against the order of nature.” This offense, aimed at punishing sex between men, dates to British colonial rule. It carries a sentence of up to 14 years in prison along with “corporal punishment.” In 2011, in a perverse gesture toward equality, Malawi’s parliament amended the penal code to add an offense of “gross indecency” between women, an act not contemplated by Malawi’s former Victorian colonial masters that now carries a sentence of five years in prison.²²⁵

The law has, on occasion, been enforced, most notoriously in a 2010 when two people perceived as gay men at the time (one later came out publicly as a trans woman) received the maximum sentence from a judge who accused them of “corrupting the mind of a whole nation” for performing a traditional marriage ceremony.²²⁶ The President ultimately pardoned the couple due to international pressure, including from then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon.²²⁷

In November 2012, Malawi’s justice ministry issued a moratorium on the laws prohibiting consensual same-sex relations pending a parliamentary decision on whether to maintain the laws, although the moratorium’s legal status has been challenged in court.²²⁸ In December 2021, the Senior Resident Magistrate Court in Mangochi sentenced

a transgender woman to eight years in prison for unnatural offenses and “false pretenses.” The ruling demonstrated clear homophobic and transphobic bias, with the judge describing the woman as among the “worst offenders...yet to be born.”²²⁹

Malawian and international human rights organizations have documented frequent instances of physical violence, sexual violence, discrimination, and harassment of LGBT people.²³⁰ Juma Mido Wasili, one of the organizers of Malawi’s inaugural Pride in 2021 said, “Every day we receive reports of people being abused and leaders making homophobic utterances. The scale of violence is quite high.”²³¹

Malawi’s Inaugural Pride

In 2021, Malawian activists with the organization Nyasa Rainbow Alliance organized the country’s first public Pride march. About 50 people participated.²³²

Chrispine Sibande, a lawyer with human rights organization the Center for the Development of People (CEDEP), emphasized the importance of visibility in Malawi:

In previous years, it was impossible to even discuss LGBTIQ+ issues in Malawi. Over the years, there has been progress internationally and in the region. In Malawi, we were still at the stage where people were asking do these people even exist? We wanted to show that we exist!²³³



All photos courtesy of Nyasa Rainbow Alliance

Organizer Juma Mido Wasili emphasized the multiple objectives of the march:

The objective was to increase visibility. We wanted to join the rest of the world. Community members in Malawi wanted to increase visibility, but they also wanted to make certain demands to the government. In particular, the recommendations relating to the protection of LGBTIQ+ persons which were made by States in Malawi’s 3rd Universal Periodic Review were not implemented by the government of Malawi. Accordingly, we used Pride to address this issue. We wrote a petition to the government demanding that these recommendations be implemented.²³⁴

The demands included the full decriminalization of consensual same-sex relations, and the cancellation of a proposed public referendum on decriminalization, an approach that would subject the fundamental human rights of a minority to the prejudices of the majority, in violation of international human rights law.²³⁵ The petition also called on the government to investigate police violence against sexual and gender minorities and sex workers, explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and protect the right to freedom of expression, among other demands.²³⁶ Activists based the petition in part on recommendations that other states made to Malawi during its Universal Periodic Review in Geneva, drawing a connecting line between UN advocacy and street protests.²³⁷

Wasili said the Pride march also aimed to address anti-LGBTIQ violence in Malawi and to “shine a spotlight on it both nationally and internationally.”²³⁸ He added:

We invited key allies and organizations forming the consortium of LGBTIQ+ activists in Malawi to participate in the Pride event. So, Pride was important as it brought everyone together. Even organizations not working on LGBTIQ+ issues were included and participated.

For Wasili, the current president’s evangelical background and apparent homophobia were likely barriers to rapid progress. However, he said,

Be that as it may, the Pride event was a unifying moment for us because this is where we have seen that there is global attention on LGBTIQ+ issues in Malawi. We used this platform to bring together all the energies into one voice.²³⁹

Allies present at the march included the executive director of the Malawi Human Rights Commission, a quasi-governmental body.²⁴⁰

As of April 2022, the Malawian government had not responded to the petition submitted by activists.²⁴¹ However, asked about any positive outcomes of the event, Wasili said:

The only positive outcome is visibility! This narrative that there are no LGBTIQ+ persons in Malawi is still continuing – so this was a moment



to show everyone that we are here, we exist, and we are not going anywhere. We are not aliens – we are here, and we exist!

In terms of visibility, the Pride event was reported online and in print media. We were happy to see some positive reporting and the correct use of terminology – some of the media we trained reported positively on the Pride event, and we were happy to see this. [...]

From what was on social media and from stories from the victims, there was [also] a lot of negativity. But some of them were trying to understand that LGBTIQ+ people do exist.²⁴²

Chrispine Sibande added:

This was unthinkable 15 years ago – the strength of advocacy in the last 10 years culminated in this Pride event. In fact, a Pride march is still not possible in other African countries – it is a very big victory!²⁴³

He added that some LGBTIQ activists had anticipated violence and arrests in response to the march, and the absence of such affronts was, to some participants, remarkable:

People were very worried whether to have this Pride march or not. They thought they could have stones thrown at them and people will be disgusted or they will counter with another march against Pride... Now when we demonstrated – waving the flag and the flyers – there were no arrests. Nobody issued a statement or

demonstrated against this – this is very big positive news – it was unthinkable!²⁴⁴

But the march did trigger backlash, Wasili said. Although participants wore masks – “not because of COVID-19 but for fear of revealing their identities” – many were identified.²⁴⁵

The backlash was unprecedented! The scale and speed was terrifying – you can’t imagine. People received threats on why they came to Pride... We have had reports of members being dismissed from school and from work. We have also received reports of physical attacks. We have documented these cases and are providing support.²⁴⁶

Wasili said activists were undeterred by the backlash and planned a larger march for 2022, engaging more allies, including the National Diversity Forum. “We think this is only the beginning,” he said.²⁴⁷

“The government is surprised,” assessed Sibande. “It is asking itself, what are these people up to? What will they demand next?”



Rwanda: “We Just Have to Take Things Slowly, Slowly”

Legal and Social Context

Rwanda is the only member of the five-nation East African Community that does not criminalize consensual same-sex relations. While Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda all inherited British colonial laws prohibiting “carnal knowledge against the order of nature,” Rwanda and Burundi were colonized by Belgium, which had never criminalized homosexual conduct in its history as a nation-state and did not attempt to enforce any such laws in its colonies.

In the early twenty-first century, several African governments responded to increased queer visibility through new criminal laws, including both new and expanded prohibitions on same-sex relations. Tanzania, Botswana, Gambia, Zambia, and Malawi all expanded their “unnatural offenses” laws by

explicitly criminalizing sex between women, while the new nation of South Sudan, amid the myriad problems facing it at its birth in 2006 following a decades-long civil war, chose to criminalize “cross-dressing.”²⁴⁸ In 2008, during its first reform of its pre-independence Criminal Code, Burundi’s National Assembly introduced a provision that would criminalize same-sex relations for the first time in the country’s history. Following significant political debate, then-President Pierre Nkurunziza signed the penal code into law in April 2009, seizing upon the issue as an opportunity to smear his political opponents who opposed the law as “pro-Western.”²⁴⁹ He aimed to consolidate power, rendering LGBT Burundians effectively criminal in the process.²⁵⁰

Rwanda took a different path. When Rwandan MPs floated the idea of a similar amendment in the wake of the passage of Burundi’s penal code provision criminalizing same-sex relations, President Paul Kagame dismissed the idea. Kagame suggested in his comments in response to the proposed bill that Rwanda, a country that had emerged from genocide and was invested in “harmony,” had no interest in changing its laws to persecute a portion of the population based on identity.²⁵¹ In the international sphere, Rwanda has supported resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council on ending violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.²⁵²



A non-discrimination provision in the constitution prohibits and punishes “discrimination of any kind or its propaganda based on, inter alia, ethnic origin, family or ancestry, clan, skin color or race, sex, region, economic categories, religion or faith, opinion, fortune, culture differences, language, economic status, physical or mental disability or any other form of discrimination.”²⁵³ The provision does not explicitly mention sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics, although in theory these characteristics could be understood to be included among other forms of discrimination.²⁵⁴ Ironically, the constitution’s following article limits recognized marriages to those between “a man and a woman.”²⁵⁵

Despite Rwanda’s public positions on protection of LGBTQ people, LGBTQ organizations report that discrimination, particularly in employment, is common and that the fear of discrimination in accessing employment, health care, education, and housing prevents LGBTQ people from living openly.²⁵⁶

In 2020, media reports emerged indicating that trans people were routinely detained and placed in a “transit center,” a type of detention center that functions primarily to warehouse those picked up in operations to “clean the streets.”²⁵⁷

Such centers operate

Despite Rwanda’s public positions on protection of LGBTQ people, LGBTQ organizations report that discrimination, particularly in employment, is common and that the fear of discrimination in accessing employment, health care, education, and housing prevents LGBTQ people from living openly.

largely outside the rule of law.²⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interviewed gay and transgender people who had been held in Gikondo Transit Center who said they had been “harassed, insulted, and beaten by security officials during their arrest and detention” and that transgender women were held in male facilities.²⁵⁹

Few activists are publicly “out” as LGBTIQ in Rwanda. In 2019, Albert Nabonibo, a well-known gospel singer, came out as gay.²⁶⁰ Nabonibo’s courage took a toll, as he told Outright:

I was chased from my job as finance officer, by forcing me to resign after few days of my coming out as gay in media. I have [been evicted from] my rented apartment so many times, four times. After my landlords knew that [I] am gay they requested me to leave their house with no reason, I could pay my rents well, I had no credit to any landlord but they observe you for some months and know that you are gay, wake up in the morning and say Albert we need our house now, look for another [rental]...

Rwandans sit in the Gikondo transit center in Kigali on 24 September 2015. Rwanda’s government was accused on 24 September by rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW) of rounding up “undesirables” including beggars and prostitutes and holding them in the grim centre to promote the capital’s clean image. Kigali however dismissed the report, with authorities saying the centre was supporting alcoholics and drug users. Photo by Stephanie Aglietti/AFP via Getty Images



I was rejected by some family members, friends and colleagues and openly some of them said they cannot walk with me in public since I am a known gay, they do not want to face problems, or the society could guess them as gay too. My friends isolated me too much.²⁶¹

Asterie Iribagiza, an activist working with a lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women’s organization, described the impact on other activists in a community that had long worked largely underground:

I know it was very challenging for [Nabonibo], but it was exciting for me, because I didn’t know he was going to come out. They’re paving a way for us, in a way. It created space. You can’t talk about activism and do everything behind closed doors. You have to be as aggressive as possible, but that’s for the people who are able to do that. You have to get in spaces, be bold enough, come out so that others can think ‘Oh my god, if he came out, I can come out as well.’ Nobody is forcing anyone to come out who is not ready to, but for activists who did come out, it created a challenge, like why I am not being loud enough?²⁶²

Framing Pride as Inclusion

Rwanda’s first Pride celebration was held on 17 September 2021. The event was not publicly pitched as Pride, activist Albert Nabonibo said, but rather as an “inclusion” event.²⁶³ Although both participants and local government officials understood the event to be promoting the visibility and inclusion of LGBTIQ Rwandans.²⁶⁴ The cautious, non-confrontational approach to Pride is typical of much activism in Rwanda, where strident political demands or vocal dissent can have severe consequences.²⁶⁵

Nabonibo, a facilitator with Isange Rwanda, an LGBTI coalition that includes 24 organizations in Kigali and in rural areas along with informal groups and individuals,

elaborated on the context in which Isange organized Pride. Few people “have come out officially” in Rwanda, he said, although some speak to the media on LGBTI issues. Activists have tried to register LGBTI organizations without success: “You get rejected silently.”²⁶⁶ He described the Rwandan government as having a mixed record when it comes to LGBTI rights, recognizing “men who have sex with men (MSM)” in the context of the HIV response, but not engaging with LGBTI identities.

The government is not against LGBTI, but they are not supporting. LGBTI is not written anywhere in government papers. The health ministry uses the word ‘key populations,’ but not LGBTI. It uses the ‘MSM’ term to support [access to] condoms and lubricant.

They don’t talk about LGBTI openly. That’s the problem. We want to talk about LGBTI [and not just MSM]. We have our needs.²⁶⁷

As for members of the public, Nabonibo described them as more hostile than the government:

The society is totally against LGBTI. Some people say LGBTI does not exist, others say LGBTI people have mental problems. So we do advocacy with the public... Pride was to raise awareness, to show that LGBTI exists in Rwanda.²⁶⁸



Albert Nabonibo, a well-known gospel singer, came out as gay in 2019. Facebook photo

Astherie Iribagiza shared a similar perspective on government and public attitudes. When she was involved in organizing an IDAHOBIT event exhibiting crafts made by LGBTI people, she said, organizers decided not to open the event to the public.

Because of safety and security, it was just for the LGBTI community. We were cautious about who was coming in, who was going out.

The caution is more about the society. We do know that Rwanda does not criminalize same-sex relations and they don't have a particular stand that they are for or against the community. The reason we haven't started doing public events is because of the feedback we're going to get from the community, because it's such a homophobic country. It's not the government that has a problem, it's the people in the institutions who are homophobic.²⁶⁹

For the 2021 Pride event, Nabonibo believed it was important to show that LGBTIQ people exist in Rwanda, both to educate the public and to bolster the confidence and connectedness of LGBTIQ people themselves. Isange had previously held an event for IDAHOBIT but had not held other large events. For Rwanda's first Pride, Isange received financial support from AllOut, a global LGBTIQ campaigning organization that also provides funding for some grassroots initiatives.

In organizing Pride, Nabonibo said it was important in the Rwandan context to work through local government leaders at the village and sector level. Isange organizes some training events for local leaders and invites them to activities. He explained, "Our members are living day-to-day with these local leaders, so we can't jump to the government without going through these local leaders. [National] government officials do not want to come to events."²⁷⁰

Through its partner organization Amahoro Human Respect, Isange applied for a permit from local sector leaders to use a football (soccer) pitch for the Pride events, which would include a football match as well as speeches from local government, women, and youth leaders, followed by a lunch banquet for LGBTIQ participants. The theme of the event was, broadly, social inclusion.

Nabonibo explained:

The idea of this Pride was to gather the movement. We gathered about 250 to 300 people. We wanted them to know each other, enjoy themselves. But to cope with the government program, we also had to give messages about youth, about drug users. It's a strategy we're always using – for example if we want to train LGBTI members, we say we are training youth on different skills. We have to work indirectly. If you work openly, you are in trouble. If you copy the government programs, then you can have space to work. We said we are working with youth, women, girls, on inclusion – we had T-shirts that read "Inclusion" – and that we needed the football ground.

We started the Pride with football, because the government is supporting football. We invited youth and friendly media, and they played against LGBTI youth.²⁷¹

For the 2021 Pride event, Nabonibo believed it was important to show that LGBTIQ people exist in Rwanda, both to educate the public and to bolster the confidence and connectedness of LGBTIQ people themselves.

The speeches did not mention LGBTI Pride, Nabonibo said; this could have been seen as too confrontational and could have led local officials to stop the event. Instead, speeches addressed issues of equality and inclusion without specific reference to LGBTI people; they also addressed issues related to health, COVID-19, and the role of sport in society. After the event at the football pitch, about 300 people gathered at a hotel for a celebratory lunch.

Nabonibo concluded:

The Pride was perfect. We don't want to walk and go on the road with banners. The way we did it was perfect, maybe slowly slowly we can go to the road and have a walk, but it's not for now – we're trying not to make any problems.²⁷²

Iribagiza noted, however, that few LBQ women participated in the Pride event and that many LGBTI events in Rwanda tended to primarily attract gay men, along with some trans people. She founded an LBQ women's group in part to create space for alternative events that would prioritize queer women's needs.

We saw the gap with regard to any particular activity happening. You wouldn't find a lot of lesbian, bisexual and queer women in those spaces. Not a lot of women are comfortable enough to be in those spaces.

"I am hopeful and positive that this year and in the years to come, we will be visible."

– *Astherie Iribagiza*

If they know you as LGBTI, there are missed chances, there are missed opportunities, some people don't want to work with you.

As an activist, you might want to speak on TV, but no one will invite you. You might want to speak at a government meeting, but no one will invite you. So we just have to take things slowly, slowly, and eventually there will be change.²⁷⁴

Iribagiza added that even if the media were to invite LGBTI activists for interviews, few people are ready for that level of public attention to their sexuality or gender identity in Rwanda's conservative context. She contrasted Rwanda to Uganda, where several individual LGBTI activists have long had such a strong media presence that they have virtually become household names, whereas in Rwanda, "We have activists who have been in the community for years and years, but we are not aggressive enough."²⁷⁵ However, Iribagiza said she saw slow but steady improvement:

I am confident when it comes to attitudes changing. We have a lot of people opening up their minds. The past years it was very conservative, not a lot of activists would come out and have conversations because of their safety and security. Now, there are different activists who are bold enough to create a Twitter space, for example, and have a conversation. That wasn't happening three years ago. I am hopeful and positive that this year and in the years to come, we will be visible.²⁷⁶

The Path to Visibility

Rwanda Pride adopted an ambiguous posture regarding public visibility. Nabonibo provided interviews to an international media in advance of Pride, and AllOut conducted a public fundraiser for the event. In this sense, Nabonibo said, the event was different than others that had been held in complete privacy. However, organizers did not seek coverage of the event by Rwandan media until later, after the event had safely taken place.²⁷³

Nabonibo said that the closed environment in Rwanda meant that activists needed to work in subtle ways. LGBTI organizations do not enjoy full freedom of association, and local officials have been known to shut down meetings. In addition, being too public about one's sexual orientation or gender identity can close doors:

Acknowledgments

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Activistas celebran en Tiflis una concentración en apoyo de los derechos de las personas LGBTIQ y contra la violencia religiosa. Fotografía de David Mdzinarishvili/Reuters.

Endnotes

- 1** This report uses the acronym LGBTIQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer – in most general discussions of Pride events and visibility. In some contexts, intersex people, who may be of any sexual orientation or gender identity, experience forms of oppression and marginalization closely related to those experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, and sometimes they organize as part of the same movements. In other contexts, intersex people might experience different forms of oppression. For instance, laws that target people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity might not directly impact them, and movements might operate in silos. For this reason, when it is more accurate and appropriate, we refer to LGBTIQ people or movements, resisting a “cosmetic” inclusion of intersex people when discussing issues that may not pertain to them. In the case studies, we adopt language used by activists interviewed, some of whom referred to, for instance, “LGBTI” visibility. Throughout this report, OutRight also uses “queer” as shorthand intended to be inclusive of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people as well as those who identify with other diverse sexual or gender identities.
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- 8** OutRight interview with Teddy, Cape Town, 27 May 2022.
- 9** Pride in Your Country survey, respondent EN-25.
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- 12** Pride in Your Country survey, respondent SP-7.
- 13** Pride in Your Country survey, respondent SP-8.
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