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**The Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Situation of LGBT+ People in the Eastern Partnership Countries and Russia**

*A written submission by the Eastern European Coalition for LGBT+ Equality[[1]](#footnote-1)*

*to inform the report of the Independent Expert on SOGI to be presented at the General Assembly in October 2020*

This report aims at answering questions posed by the Independent Expert, in the recent call for submissions[[2]](#footnote-2), based on the information and analysis presented by the 5 member organizations of the *Eastern European Coalition for LGBT+ Equality* from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.

While we acknowledge our limitations and do not attempt to speak on behalf of all the LGBT+ people living in our respective countries, our position as community-based, service provider organizations with active involvement in national and international advocacy, allows us to see and analyze general trends, illustrating them with the cases we encounter in our daily work.

1. **Lack of Governments’ assessment of the situation of LGBT+ people vis-à-vis the pandemic and other political challenges[[3]](#footnote-3)**

Since March 2020, different social distancing measures have been introduced in the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic[[4]](#footnote-4). In most cases state of emergency was enacted, accompanied by curfew and strict limitations on movement, public assemblies and functioning of various ’’non-essential’’ private and public institutions. Some of the restrictions have already been lifted in countries like Georgia, Ukraine, and even Russia[[5]](#footnote-5), however the current epidemiological situation suggests, that the pace at which the countries start to re-open will continue to be uneven and not easily predictable[[6]](#footnote-6).

Between March and April, the governments began to roll out short-term humanitarian assistance and stimulus programs for the branches and individuals affected by pandemic, **however none of the authorities in the 5 countries represented in this report have included an assessment of the situation of LGBT+ people in their analysis of the socio-economic and human rights effects of the current public health and economic crisis**. The activists report that there have **not been any consultations with civil society organizations and the authorities have not requested any information from community based CSO’s**, depriving them of the opportunity to participate in the design of the crisis relief programs.

It is interesting, that only **after the initial crisis relief plan was announced,** mediation of the international organizations**, made it possible for Georgian LGBT+ activists to have a dialogue with the government.** As a result, a few dozen boxes of food and personal hygiene kits, were provided to the organizations and distributed to the community, however this was assessed as ’’an act of one-off humanitarian assistance’’ which certainly cannot be qualified as ’’an adequate response to either the general or the currently critical needs of the LGBTQI community.’’[[7]](#footnote-7)

Aside from the exclusion of LGBT+ people from the groups eligible for state support under these critical circumstances, additional challenges emerged in relation to **the selective implementation of the imposed restrictions**. In Georgia[[8]](#footnote-8). and Moldova[[9]](#footnote-9), despite severe restrictions on public assembly, the representatives of the Orthodox Christian churches were allowed to hold large scale Easter services in clear violation of the mandatory social distancing regulations. The fact that this exemption was reserved only to the members of the dominant religious institutions **further exacerbates the power dynamics and hierarchies between the religious and political elites and all the marginalized communities,** especially considering that the former regularly contest freedom of assembly and manifestation of the latter.

**Another challenge related to the increased power of the state in times of pandemic is connected to potential deterioration of democratic governance and increased disregard or even crackdown on human rights defenders, free media and minority groups.** There are reports of Azerbaijani government using Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to crack down on the opposition[[10]](#footnote-10), while Russia continues detaining participants of legally allowed single-person pickets[[11]](#footnote-11) and uses homophobia to shift the public attention away from its poor handling of the crisis and instead rally for the proposed comprehensive Constitutional amendments[[12]](#footnote-12) under the pretext of ’’preserving traditional family’’. Last but not least, Georgian Parliament passed a law increasing the government’s power to impose restrictions on public assembly in light of public health crisis without having to declare state of emergency[[13]](#footnote-13). This move was met with criticism and suspicion in in light of the upcoming Parliamentary elections. These are few, but alarming examples and long-term political effects of the pandemic in the region remain to be seen.

1. **Socio-economic needs of LGBT+ communities in the light of pandemic and how civil society organizations were able to respond[[14]](#footnote-14)**

The consequences of the current pandemic for the (already unstable) economies across the region are dire and **members of the LGBT+ community who are employed in the trade and service fields or hold blue collar jobs (often with daily or weekly wages) are facing unemployment, poverty and homelessness.** These challenges also **disproportionately affect members of the trans community**, which, due to lack of swift, transparent and accessible legal gender recognition procedures across the region, are often hired without proper documentation and thus lack protection on the labor market. **Trans and gay sex workers, while exposed to both health and economic risks**, **remain under a higher risk of increased harassment and violence** on the part of the law enforcement agencies (already biased against these groups), that might become overzealous in raiding cruising areas, under the pretext of enforcing curfews and other limitations on public assembly. **LGBT+ community members that are already homeless found themselves in an especially precarious position**, because while their chances of finding even the short term employment and temporary housing solutions decreased drastically, **the states do not have efficient social housing and shelter programs that are also safe for stigmatized communities**.

**The community based organizations contributing to this report point to a significantly increased demand on different services in the last 2 months.** For example, requests on the regular services such as psychological and legal assistance doubled for Genderdoc-M (Moldova) and increased 1.5 times for WISG (Georgia), while the Russian LGBT Network reports that request for psychological help increased by 96% compared to the beginning of 2020 and by 174% compared to May 2019. Inisght (Ukraine) is also confirming increased demand on their regular services, while for Pink (Armenia) the numbers seem to hold steady. The organizations feel that this tendency can be explained by elevated stress levels both due to socio-economic instability, inability to leave abusive environments, as well as aggravation of anxiety and other pre-existing conditions related to the mental and emotional well-being caused by the current isolation from one’s support systems.

It must be noted, that shifting the services online did not prove unproblematic and t**he organizations were faced with the fact, that there are several obstacles preventing them from reaching everyone who needs their help.** Namely, those who live with the families of origin (especially teenagers) often lack privacy to seek help - sometimes due to the actual lack of physical space and sometimes due to intrusiveness or abuse and pressure by family members. The issue of connectivity (internet and air time) and technology (phones, computers, headphones) needed for proper access to online services and staying connected with the community is also an important problem, tied both to the financial situation of LGBT+ people as well as their geographical area of residence (for instance, lack of internet connection in rural areas).

**Alongside with increased demand on regular services, the organizations saw an overwhelming surge in requests for humanitarian assistance (food, shelter, medicine and hormone replacement treatment).** Despite the fact that the organizations contributing to this report do not typically work with humanitarian aid and may lack relevant funding, as well as policies and infrastructure, they were able to quickly mobilize and provide initial emergency support to the community members:

* Pink (Armenia) was able to provide humanitarian aid to 70 out of 102 applicants. Of this support 61.6% was allocated to provision of housing, 27.7% to food and other basic necessities, and 10.7% to covering the medical expenses of 20 applicants.
* Insight (Ukraine) provided 36 food packages, 11 packages with groceries and medicine, 9 medicine packages and 54 hormones packages to the community members.
* WISG (Georgia) received requests for humanitarian help from up to 50 lesbian and bisexual women and up to 30 trans people, as well as 5 lesbian couples specifically asking for means to cover housing costs. It is noteworthy, that 25% of these beneficiaries has either a child or a (sick or elderly) parent/family member depending on them for care, which makes the current situation particularly burdensome. Alongside with efforts from community-based organizations, an initiative involving trans activists and allies raised funds that helped provide food, rent and medicine for more than 50 trans people.
* Genderdoc-M (Moldova) was able to assist approximately 100 community members from different parts of Moldova with food and basic hygiene products.
* The Russian LGBT Network, was able to put together an emergency grant program and by the beginning of June, supported 7 regional organizations and initiative groups out of 11 applications.

Aside from a limited number of donors (international and local) that provided direct support, and ad-hoc crowdfunding initiatives, the organizations had to rely on flexibility of some of their current donors to gather resources for emergency humanitarian help to the community members, in absence of any state funding.

1. **Violence, discrimination and backlash against LGBT communities in times of Covid-19**

One of the legitimate fears voiced by the LGBT+ movements in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was that focus and resources would entirely shift to provision of humanitarian aid and enforcement of social distancing restrictions, leaving survivors of gender based violence and hate crimes more vulnerable than usual. Thankfully, **the organizations have not reported any unusual obstacles in relation to access to justice**, however, because of the general decision to deprioritize non-essential processes, everyone admits to have experienced a slowdown in investigation and prosecution of cases. The usual lack of political will to deal with hate crimes also remains in place. For instance Russian police keeps refusing to register cases of violence against LGBT people, while in Ukraine, the authorities are refusing to investigate the claims of Patriarch Filaret blaming LGBT people for Covid-19 pandemic[[15]](#footnote-15).

**The organizations are also beginning to see an increase in reported cases of domestic violence especially in relation to teenagers.** Psychologists working with the Russian LGBT Network state that increased number of their beneficiaries bring up the recent or ongoing cases of domestic abuse. In Moldova, Genderdoc-M managed to intervene and help 5 adolescents (two of them identifying as trans) who suffered domestic abuse and were left without any means of survival. In the last 3 months, Pink (Armenia) documented eight cases of human rights violations against LGBT people, most of them related to domestic abuse. In some cases LGBT minors reported domestic violence to the Armenian authorities, but were forced to stay with their abusive families and in some other cases LGBT people faced extortion from their family members and had to provide them with financial support in order to stop the abuse. WISG (Georgia) has not witnessed a particular increase in reported domestic violence cases, which is explained by the fact that many of the organization’s beneficiaries from urban areas live separately from their families of origin.

**It is concerning, that harassment and disinformation campaigns deriving from the anti-gender movements and representatives of religious institutions in the region have not stopped during the pandemic**:

* Heads and high officials of the Ukrainian[[16]](#footnote-16) and Georgian[[17]](#footnote-17) Orthodox churches and a highly popular Moldovan priest [[18]](#footnote-18) made statements claiming that Covid-19 is the God’s punishment for the spread of homosexuality and same-sex marriages.
* Members of the far-right groups in Georgia, spread degrading jokes while sharing the video of a trans sex worker, who tried to set herself on fire in an attempt to bring the government’s attention to the dire conditions of trans people during the pandemic[[19]](#footnote-19).
* In Ukraine, the far-rights groups and conservative movements increased their presence in the Parliament, through the Inter Parliamentary group “Values, dignity, family” created in January [[20]](#footnote-20). In April, leaders of this group, whose members have ties with World Congress of Families[[21]](#footnote-21) (as well as Council of Churches of Ukraine, pro-family movement “Vsi razom” and some of the far-rights groups) rallied against the bill 3316[[22]](#footnote-22) ’’regarding responsibility for crimes committed with the motives of intolerance", which aims at introducing the concept of hate crime into the Ukrainian legislation and expanding the list of protected grounds to include sexual orientation and gender identity. Also in April, the same MP’s registered another bill proposing to ban ’’propaganda’’ of any relations that are not aimed at procreation and reproduction of the image of the so called traditional family. [[23]](#footnote-23)

1. **Good practices[[24]](#footnote-24)**

While no good practices can be reported when it comes to State interventions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on LGBT+ communities across the region, there is plenty to say about the civil society mobilization. As was described above, the community-based organizations did most of the heavy lifting and shouldered an almost impossible task of a) swiftly assessing the emerging needs of the communities b) shifting all the necessary services and activities online c) raising funds for humanitarian support; and all this while d) trying to understand how to re-shape the current programs that were impacted by travel and other restrictions. Once again **the flexibility and resilience of these organizations, activist groups and community members is the ultimate good practice**. In some cases tangible tools, such as Social Support Guide elaborated by Pink (Armenia) and various needs assessment tools resulted from this crisis, creating opportunities for learning and experience exchange.

**The flexibility exhibited by some donor organizations in both allowing these groups to reallocate existing funding or, in some cases, making new emergency grants available is undoubtedly a good and commendable practice**, which needs to be taken up by a wider group of donors and development cooperation practitioners.

**Mobilization of individual allies who donated their time and money, as well as solidarity of other human rights groups expressed through action and tangible support, is another good practice that was witnessed across the region.** One clear example of this is the cooperation of Genderdoc-M (Moldova) with "Initiativa Impreuna Improtriva Covid-19" (Initiative Together Against Covid-19), in Chisinau and a youth-friendly health organization from Balti (the second largest city in Moldova), making it possible to physically distribute food, hygiene and medicine supplies.

1. **Long-term impact of the pandemic and recommendations**

Covid-19 pandemic and the measures taken by different governments to slow down the spread of the virus, have impacted the most vulnerable populations in the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia, including LGBT+ people, and this impact is bound to be long-term. Alongside with socio-economic and political challenges described above, the LGBT+ people in the region faced a cancellation or indefinite postponement of most of the Prides and IDAHOT demonstrations and festivals, that serve as a momentum for campaigning as well as sharing joy and celebration of community in the repressive environments. Many LGBT+ organizations and activists also lost the hard won access to international lobbying and advocacy platforms, which in the long run may lead to further exclusion, especially considering the growing presence of anti-gender movements in such spaces coupled with the attitudes of some state actors. **The activists are afraid that LGBT+ issues will be increasingly categorized as non-essential both in national and international platforms, further deepening the already existing inequalities.**

It is also feared that due to overrepresentation of LGBT+ people in the sectors most affected by the pandemic, poverty and unemployment will become even more extensive in our communities. The problem of affordability of housing may drive LGBT+ people into homelessness (alone or with their families) or back into the abusive environments, which will have longer lasting effects on their survival and well-being. Unfortunately, while this analysis is made available by the community-based organizations, the states do not express any political will to listen.

The challenges we have discussed in this document have existed before, but now more than ever it is clear that healing and recovering will require comprehensive, intersectional efforts, of which we believe the most important ones are the following:

* Community-based organizations need to be included in every stage of planning and implementation of short and long term crisis mitigation programs. Political stakeholders need to show openness for intersectional analysis of the societies affected by the crisis, in order to more efficiently cater to the needs of the most vulnerable groups;
* While providing emergency financial support to our countries, the major donor states and international development cooperation organizations need to emphasize the importance of inclusive dialogue between the state and civil society on how to most efficiently make use of this funding and not leave anyone behind;
* State services need to be developed in a way, that survivors of hate crimes and domestic abuse – including minors, are not re-victimized and have the possibility to receive meaningful support even in times of state-wide lock down. Protecting vulnerable communities from violence and discrimination should be deprioritized even during the public health crisis;
* States need to introduce stronger legal protections for all workers, alongside with anti-discrimination provisions inclusive of SOGI and swift, transparent and accessible legal gender recognition procedures for transgender people. This would help make the employment more secure for LGBT+ people in the region;
* International organizations as well as states with strong human rights portfolio need to take a decisive stance against exclusion of LGBT+ people from international advocacy spaces, under any pretext, including challenges connected to the online format of the meetings;
* Donor organizations and development cooperation practitioners need to embrace the fact that as we are dealing with the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, more flexibility will be required when it comes to earmarking funding, in order to meaningfully answer the emerging needs of the affected communities.

1. <https://www.facebook.com/LGBTEasternCoalition/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SexualOrientationGender/Pages/CFI_COVID-19_and_LGBT_Persons.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This section looks at answering questions 1 through 3 in the list of key questions in the call for submissions [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/03/16/coronavirus-in-the-eastern-partnership-states/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/11/russia-to-end-national-covid-19-lockdown-as-cases-hit-record-high> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://oc-media.org/coronavirus-live-updates-19-june/> ; <https://www.rferl.org/a/covid-19-wrapup-armenia-june-12/30667066.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://women.ge/en/news/newsfeed/284/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-nightmare-before-easter> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/20/moldova-struggles-to-secure-church-respect-for-coronavirus-restrictions/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-cracks-down-on-opposition-amid-coronavirus-outbreak> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/29/russia-journalists-held-over-peaceful-pickets> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/06/02/actor-starring-in-homophobic-political-ad-for-upcoming-russian-plebiscite-opposes-constitutional-amendments> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://oc-media.org/new-law-allows-georgian-government-to-restrict-rights-without-declaring-state-of-emergency/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This and next section aim at answering question 4 from the list of key questions in the call for submissions, because the information provided here is available to all the relevant stakeholders, including states, although the latter have not showed any interest in receiving it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/04/14/ukraine-patriarch-filaret-orthodox-church-kiev-patriarchate-homophobia-insight-lawsuit-coronavirus/> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/styler/filaret-ozvuchil-prichinu-poyavleniya-koronavirusa-1584876708.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30515743.html?nocache=1&fbclid=IwAR1rNcW8Fcixdx5V1mOmRRCJFpeDk4vDKEfmdER_u07yrcdYCj44hQhwPKM> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As reported by GENDERDOC-M, Pavel Borșevschi, the parish priest of the most visited church (St. Dumitru's church) in Chisinau during the liturgy, understood that some 200 people present (despite the ban) know where COVID-19 comes from, doing an allusion to those who legislate LGBT marriages "The church knows why this terrible disease (Coronavirus) is coming upon us. Because of those who have legislated for same sex marriages " [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://oc-media.org/transgender-woman-sets-herself-on-fire-in-tbilisi/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://ukraina.ru/exclusive/20200121/1026401060.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3102096156490091&set=a.397542046945529&type=3&theater> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://www.facebook.com/sviatoslav.yurash/posts/4194331520607186> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. <https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/deputat-opzzh-zaregistriroval-zakonoproekt-protiv-chayldfri-i-razvrata-novosti-ukrainy-50084976.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This section looks at answering question 5 from the list of key questions in the call for submissions [↑](#footnote-ref-24)