Queering Atrocity Prevention: Europe in focus

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Published in May 2024 by Protection Approaches,
Edinburgh House, 170 Kennington Ln, London SE11 5DP.

Registered charity 1171433.

Further information can be found at protectionapproaches.org and this report will also be available at https://protectionapproaches.org/reports

We are grateful to Dean Cooper-Cunningham and Detmer Kremer for providing their expertise in this discussion paper. As external authors, the views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of Protection Approaches.

With thanks to Corrie Hulse for copy editing this paper and to Jess Gifkins for her continued guidence.

Cover photo: 03 June, 2023 Utrecht, Netherlands, Drag queens lead Utrecht Pride boat parade protesting against anti-LBTQIA+ violence.

About the authors

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Preface

Protection Approaches exists to transform how we understand identity-based violence and so transform how we prevent it. We address structural and physical violence against groups marginalised as 'other' locally and internationally and believe prevention requires consistent, inclusive strategies implemented through horizontal, intersectional collaboration. We look to the commonalities of violence directed towards people because of how perpetrators – whether individuals, groups or structures – conceive their victims' identities. This pathology of violence manifests in different ways and requires different strategies of prevention and response. However, it is our belief that more effective prevention requires us to first better understand the realities of how identity-based violence emerges and is perpetrated.

In mid-2020, Jess Gifkins came to Protection Approaches with the question of how to integrate LGBTQI+ persecution into an atrocity prevention framework. Jess recognised a disconnect between communities and organisations working on atrocity prevention, particularly under the banner of the 'responsibility to protect' (or R2P), and the growing backlash against LGBTQI+ people in the UK and elsewhere. Jess became Protection Approaches' Queering Atrocity Prevention Research Fellow in November 2021; and in 2022, following a collaboration between Jess, Dean Cooper-Cunningham, and Protection Approaches, we published our Queering Atrocity Prevention ideas report. This shorter discussion paper, which focuses on the region in which our organisation is based, seeks to follow on from that report, written by two of its authors. Recognising the positionality of its authors as members of the European LGBTQI+ community and of Protection Approaches as a North-based organisation working on the prevention of identity-based violence broadly, this paper seeks to apply the lens of identity-based violence prevention to highlight the presence and prevalence in Europe of structural and acute violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and provide evidence of the intersectional harm perpetuated by cis-heteronormative systems in our own country and region.

Queer people's experience of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes is not new yet this experience is not well known. In fact, queer people's experiences are often ignored in policy and research on identity-based violence and mass atrocity. From the Holocaust to the more recent and ongoing anti-gay purges in Chechnya – both examples of European experience – LGBTQI+ communities have been deliberately targeted by widespread, systematic campaigns that can be described as atrocity crimes. These global threats are increasing, with coordinated ultraconservative movements advocating a return to valorising the heterosexual, cis-gendered family unit over more diverse ways of living. These movements portray LGBTQI+ people as a threat to the social order, the 'traditional family', and children. The (re)imposition or intensification of heteronormative, patriarchal power structures through legislation and culture nearly always comes ahead of widespread human rights violations against LGBTQI+ people and other groups. And yet, the specific vulnerabilities faced by LGBTQI+ communities in atrocity contexts, and the intersections of sexual and gender rights with the perpetration of atrocity crimes, are largely absent from the fields of atrocity prevention research, policy and practice. So too are the histories and experiences of queer cultures and resistance.

Despite Europe's long history of mass atrocities and genocide, few people believe that the region requires what is often called 'atrocity prevention' – or efforts to prevent the widespread or systematic targeting of communities based on how perpetrating structures view their identity. This is still the case two years into Russia's second invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, it is far more commonly accepted that Europe is experiencing a surge of online and offline hate speech, divisive propaganda, the rise of conspiracy theories, and a decrease in public trust in institutions; all common crises that increase vulnerability and can foreshadow increased levels of violence against specific groups identified and pathologised as threatening, dangerous, or in some way undermining the right and correct way to live.

European states and regional institutions such as the EU have a duty to protect its populations from identity-based violence. This responsibility to prevent and to protect is as much the case within and at Europe's own borders and in its contributions abroad. More specifically, this responsibility to prevent and protect includes all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity and must explicitly include all LGBTQI+ communities – whether within Europe or outside.

But Europe, like much of the world, is facing a prevention crisis. The rise in nationalist and exclusionary politics across the continent continues, driving discrimination, marginalisation, and persecution of all groups who have been historically made vulnerable or minoritised – and who now face new guises of hatred. Central to nationalist and exclusionary politics is a cis-heteronormative and patriarchal view of the world, the nation, and the family.

This paper demonstrates evidence of and articulates the need to first recognise rising risks against LGBTQI+ communities in Europe and raise the alarm, and then acknowledge that the current trajectory indicates wider, longer-term, and potentially more systematic or widespread risks of identity-based violence in Europe against LGBTQI+ people and other communities too commonly excluded, made vulnerable or minoritised. When the rights of some are eroded, none of us are made more safe. The history of Europe tells us this too clearly. This paper is a warning to Europe but also a call to action to those of us who believe in the prevention of a more equitable and safer world to open our understanding of where violence, democratic backsliding and insecurity come from.

Introduction

Identity-based violence perpetrated against LGBTQI+ people is on the rise across Europe, seen in the negative mobilisation of LGBTQI+ identities in political campaigns, the rise in homophobia and transphobia in political rhetoric, and in the documented increase in hate crimes against LGBTQI+ people.[1] At the same time, we have seen an increase in the incidence of mass atrocities – genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes – across the world both in conflict and non-conflict settings.

A significant portion of modern atrocities have their roots in a particular pathology of violence motivated by, or legitimised through, a politics of identity-based grievance, discrimination and/or human rights deficits.[2] The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect argues that "[s]ystematic or widespread human rights violations and abuses often serve as one of the key early warning signs of possible atrocity crimes", so "[u]nderstanding the intrinsic link between human rights violations and abuses and atrocity crimes helps clarify the root causes and drivers behind such crimes".[3] Protection Approaches' Queering Atrocity Prevention report showed that anti-queer discourse and action by states and non-state actors has led to violence against actual or perceived LGBTQI+ people and communities, but has also shaped wider strategies of violence and conduct in conflict.[4] For example, LGBTQI+ people have been targeted as part of Russia's state-directed violence internationally in Ukraine and domestically in Russia.[5]

The Queering Atrocity Prevention report underscores that despite current trends of anti-queer persecution and the intersections of LGBTQI+ people's vulnerabilities in the history of atrocity crimes, the atrocity prevention fields of practice, policy, and research have too often failed to look at, learn from, reach for, or at times even acknowledge queer experiences of atrocity crimes.[6] This has resulted in gaps in violence prevention policies across the world. Current prevention policies do not register the flashing warning signs of violence escalation that are – or should be – set off by rising identity-based violence against LGBTQI+ people.[7]

From the Holocaust to the more recent and ongoing anti-gay purges in Chechnya – both examples of European experience – LGBTQI+ communities have been deliberately targeted by widespread, systematic campaigns that can be described as atrocity crimes. Yet, despite Europe's history of mass atrocities and genocide, few people consider that the region requires what is often called atrocity prevention – that is, efforts to prevent widespread or systematic violence.[8]

This paper argues that the rising violence experienced by LGBTQI+ people across Europe indicates patterns of discrimination and internal grievances that foreign and domestic policies must confront.[9] European states and institutions such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe, and the European Union have a duty to protect their populations from identity-based violence and mass atrocities.[10] Taking seriously the argument that prevention must start at home, we will demonstrate in this paper why it is critical for atrocity prevention policies to focus on structures of cis-heteronormativity in which the persistent and rising homophobia and transphobia in Europe are rooted. Cis-heteronormativity refers to the idea that being heterosexual and cisgender are the default, so-called natural or normal positions. The term captures how people are forced to adhere to these positions in direct and indirect ways, which we outline in this paper.

The aim of this paper is not to provide specific recommendations or detailed policy advice, but rather to encourage discussion of the state of LGBTQI+ protections as well as homophobic and homophilic politics in Europe and what that means for understanding and preventing identity-based violence and mass atrocities in the region. Protection Approaches focuses on transforming how identity-based violence is understood, and in so doing, contributing to the transformation of its prevention. This paper is part of this endeavour.

The intersection of identity-based violence and atrocity risks

There are a number of factors or conditions that contribute to creating an environment conducive to identity-based violence that, when left unchecked, can become widespread or systematic, including atrocity crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. These conditions include weakened state structures, economic instability, and discriminatory actions.[11] Mass atrocity crimes can take place in or alongside situations of armed conflict and in so-called peace time. This type of violence has the potential to emerge in all societies and all states, with the following common drivers: political inequity, human rights deficits, and identity-based grievances. This means that atrocity prevention is something that must continually be practised and reflected upon by all societies, states, and regions with consistency.

Identity-based violence is any act of violence motivated by the perpetrator's conceptualisation of their victim's identity. For example, their race, gender, sexuality, religion, or political affiliation.[12] Politicised homophobia and transphobia, that is the explicit targeting of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people for correction and/or extermination for political purposes, is a form of identity-based violence that often precipitates and lays the groundwork for mass atrocity crimes, conflict, and imperial expansionism. In a time where specifically LGBTQI+ inclusive education is targeted in states such as Hungary and the United States, we must recall another poignant, historical example: the Nazi's burning of the library of the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, which was dedicated to gender non-conforming expertise.[13] This destruction was followed by the coordinated closing down of civic space and intensification of the persecution of those whose perceived gender and/or sexuality did not align with dominant norms at the time, as well as their allies.[14] The Nazi assault of those perceived to be outside of the cis-heteronormative ideal was a fundamental component of Nazi ideology, political strategy, and its violent implementation. Despite forming an inextricable thread in the political ecosystem the Nazis constructed to enable, facilitate, and justify the widespread targeting of minorities during the Holocaust, this remains a largely untold and often dismissed story.[15]

This paper does not argue that the persecution of LGBTQI+ individuals precedes all mass atrocity crimes or that anti-LGBTQI+ violence is a pre-requisite for the determination of mass atrocities. However, such violence has often preceded violence intensification and a more rapid and severe erosion of democratic principles, including as an enabling or radicalising process on the path towards mass atrocity violence.

Acute and systemic threats against LGBTQI+ people in Europe

In Europe, there are both acute and systemic threats that are contributing to an environment conducive to the targeting of LGBTQI+ people and other marginalised communities.

In this context, and building on Johan Galtung's typology of violence, we define acute violence as personal or immediate violence committed with the intent to harm individuals based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.[16] This includes killing, physical attacks, and verbal harassment – which may be classified as hate speech or hate crimes, depending on location. In general parlance, this is what most would identify as homophobic or transphobic violence. Systemic threats are forms of violence that are intrinsic to a particular system, often going unnoticed by those who are not impacted by them. Heteronormativity is a form of such violence that affects LGBTQI+ people. Heteronormativity is an ingrained norm shaping social and institutional fabrics in ways that exclude or discriminate against non-heterosexual individuals. It creates systemic threats by denying LGBTQI+ individuals the same opportunities and rights as their non-queer counterparts, often without a single identifiable perpetrator. In extreme forms, it includes the implementation, by relevant actors such as governments, of forced adherence to cis-heteronormativity. For example, through policy and legislation. Both acute and systemic violence are often legitimised and sustained through cultural means such as religion, ideology, language, art, science, and so on.[17] In the context of homophobia, transphobia and cis-heteronormativity, cultural violence manifests in the societal norms, religious doctrines, media portrayals, and educational materials that perpetuate and enforce cis-heterosexuality as the default, natural, normal position for all people everywhere. These are not necessarily distinct forms of violence, but are interlinked parts of a continuum of violence.

Increasing homophobia and transphobia in politics and rhetoric

The recent elevation of far-right, authoritarian, and populist politicians to power across the continent of Europe – many of whom have run on homophobic and transphobic platforms that are branded as challenges to what are deemed woke agendas, cancel culture and political correctness – is deeply concerning. The result has been a creeping (re)normalisation of homophobic and transphobic discourse in mainstream politics. We have seen this, for example, in what the UK Conservative Party calls their war on woke, in former Home Secretary Suella Braverman's attacks on so-called gender ideology and various British Conservative governments' failure to legislate against conversion therapy. We have also seen it in Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's discourse about what she calls an LGBT lobby – in what is viewed as being pro-traditional family – and her government's ban on registering same-sex parenthood, as well as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's emphasis on the so-called traditional family and a ban on LGBTI+ propaganda that is not dissimilar to Russia's.[18]

Queering Atrocity Prevention, the agenda-setting paper that precedes this text, outlined how anti-queer discourse and actions by state and pseudo- or non-state actors not only leads to violence against LGBTQI+ communities but also shapes wider strategies of identity-based violence, including campaigns of mass atrocity crimes. Despite legal and cultural shifts in more queer-friendly directions in some countries, largely intact systems of cis-heteronormativity are being reinvigorated, expanded, and instrumentalised across Europe. While there have been marked improvements in European states', the Council of Europe's, the European Court of Human Rights', and the EU's policies, guidance, and language around LGBTQI+ issues, the increasingly vocal homophobic and transphobic minority that are resistant to rights and protections for LGBTQI+ people are gaining ground.[1]

Case study - United Kingdom

From 2021 to 2022, there was a 26 percent increase in hate crimes in England and Wales according to the Home Office.[20] In England and Wales, all hate crime rose but the biggest increase, by 56 percent, was in relation to transphobic hate crime. This is the largest annual increase since this category of aggravation was included in hate crime reporting. The Home Office analysis puts this down to a combination of improved reporting mechanisms and the impacts of the polarising debate about trans issues in the media, including social media, over the preceding 12 months. Mainstream media outlets in particular have driven vehement and occasionally violence-inciting anti-trans and non-binary rhetoric. Young LGBTQI+ people are twice as likely as their cis-hetero peers to experience online hate speech.[22] Sexual orientation related hate crimes rose by 41 percent, again the largest annual increase since this category of aggravation was included in hate crime data in 2012.

In Scotland, while the overall number of hate crimes has decreased, hate crime connected with sexual orientation and transgender identity increased, in line with a trend since 2010 when sexual orientation and transgender identity was added to the list of aggravations. That increase was 10 percent for sexual orientation-based hate crimes and 87 percent for transgender identity between 2021 to 2022.[23] The Scottish data also showed that 77 percent of those charged with a hate crime were men. Of this 77 percent of cases, 83 percent involved an element of sexual orientation aggravated hate crime. Any prevention approaches to tackling cis-heteronormativity must be able to confront the crisis of masculinity that continues to enable individual and state-level perpetrators to exact violence against LGBTQI+ communities.[24]

It is worth highlighting that in contrast to all other hate crime data, statistics for transphobic hate crime show perpetrators are frequently younger: 29 percent were reported as under 20 compared to other averages where only 13 percent were under 20. This data is not broken down by gender of the perpetrator.

Systemic violence: intersex surgeries

Intersex surgeries are one of many examples of state-endorsed, daily violence committed against queer bodies, enforced through systems that create an environment in which violence becomes omnipresent and normalised. These procedures are most commonly performed on babies, are referred to by academics and activists as intersex genital mutilation, and are non-consensual surgical interventions that impose a rigid gender binary by surgically operating on intersex bodies until they comply to what is assumed to be the normal cisgender male or female body.[25] It is estimated that 30,000 to 80,000 intersex children are born in Europe annually.[26] Almost all will experience surgery that leaves them sterilised, mutilated, and/or with loss of sexual function and sensation.[27] Furthermore, intersex people experience severe mental health issues, stigmatisation, and suicide rates twice as high compared to non-intersex people.[28] Medical violence against intersex people by medical professionals is such a systemic practice that it is relatively unacknowledged and near invisible within the societies these surgeries are practiced; the medical act appears small but is a key part of sustaining the violent structures of cis-heteronormativity by correcting what are deemed to be deviant bodies.[29] We do not minimise the scale of violence by using the concept small, rather we are flagging the deep normalisation of anti-intersex violence that enforces binary gender and conformity. We hold that the systematic dehumanisation of intersex people is integral to, not separate from, understanding the conditions that enable further identity-based violence.

In 2015, the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe, Silvan Agius, called for a ban on the intersex surgeries which are routinely practised across Europe.[30] Yet, despite persistent organising by intersex people and their allies, robust precedent from international and regional multilateral institutions on intersex surgeries meeting the threshold of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, as well as legislative protections for intersex children in Malta, Portugal, Albania and Greece, these surgeries remain common in most European states and are increasing in frequency in the United Kingdom.[31]

Anti-gender funding and its impact on sexual and gender rights

The rise in homophobic and transphobic politics is linked to a more generalised backlash against so-called gender ideology that has taken hold in far-right circles and targets reproductive rights, women's rights, and LGBTQI+ rights.[32] The term anti-gender refers to a social and political position that opposes "women's sexual agency, gender as a social construct...sexual and gender diversity", bodily autonomy, and the de-stigmatisation of non-heteronormative sexual practices and non-cisgender identities and expressions.[33] The anti-gender movement deploys terms such as gender and gender ideology as pejoratives to undermine and discredit the discourse around gender fluidity and equality.[34] The term anti-gender is meant to capture the variety of actors – including conservative, traditionalist, and religious groups – operating transnationally that are committed to upholding cis-heteropatriarchal sex and gender hierarchies across "all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life".[35] The movement is underpinned by specific ideological foundations that often intersect with nationalist sentiments, positing that shifts in gender norms threaten the fabric of society. Between 2008 and 2017, anti-gender funding in the United States was around US$6.2 billion, with approximately US$1 billion distributed worldwide.[36] Anti-gender politics have created conditions for rampant transphobia in many parts of the world, including and specifically Europe. Transphobia and transphobic discourse have become a dynamic and variegated political project that builds on and extends the homophobia we have seen successfully mobilised throughout history to underpin fascist and ultra conservative right-wing political projects.[37]

Case study - Hungary

In Hungary, which the EU now considers an electoral autocracy, Victor Orbán's government has increasingly targeted LGBTQI+ people and so-called gender ideology for correction and/or erasure.[38] Since 2020, anti-LGBTQI+ positions have been a central pillar of Orbán and his government's discourse. Pursuing an anti-LGBTQI+ agenda, the government (ab)used COVID-19 executive emergency powers and Parliament altered the constitution to end legal gender recognition, legislated to define marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman, legislated to prevent same-sex couples from adopting children, banned the "positive promotion of non-traditional sexual behaviour or gender expression" in schools and TV shows for people under the age of 18, and has put in place legislation that stigmatises and prevents anyone experiencing gender dysphoria from receiving treatment, particularly children, on grounds of traditional Christian values.[39]

The erosion of LGBTQI+ rights in Hungary is entwined with Orbán's role in the far-right around the world, with Hungary "increasingly seen as Russian President Vladimir Putin's Trojan horse" and Orbán giving a keynote at the Conservative Political Action Conference.[40] Orbán encouraged Christian nationalists in Europe and the US to unite forces to fend off the threat to western civilisations and the family posed by progressives.[41] Hungarian LGBTQI+ people and allies continue to resist where possible, as demonstrated in the record turnout at Budapest Pride 2023.[42]

Homophilia in Europe: the strategic adoption of LGBTQI+ positive positions for political gain

Politicised homophilia is the strategic mobilisation of support for the rights and protections of some LGBTQI+ people and certain divergences from cis-heteronormativity.[43] Homophilia is when a positive position on LGBTQI+ issues is used to justify or obfuscate identity-based violence. Focusing on homophilia exposes how people, institutions, and states instrumentalise gender and sexuality for other causes.

Case study - Serbia

In 2022, Belgrade hosted EuroPride, the annual pan-European international LGBTQI+ event hosted by a different European city each year. This was a first for Southeast Europe and the event was hailed as a signal of progress around LGBTQI+ rights across eastern Europe, particularly in what are sometimes referred to as the EU's New and Prospective Member States.[44] However, Belgrade EuroPride was marked by contestation and violence. Just prior to the event starting, Serbia's right-wing, populist president, Aleksandar Vučić, cancelled EuroPride and created other obstructions to appease a loud chorus of domestic right-wing actors, his own political party, and international partners such as Vladimir Putin and Milorad Dodik. This is part of a familiar trend of far-right movements using sexuality as a political pawn when courting or clinging to power.[45]

Despite attempts by the Serbian government to cancel the EuroPride march, it took place after persistent resistance by organisers and activists. However, the march was limited to a walk of less than half a kilometre through a public park with none of the flamboyance many have come to associate with Pride.[46] Since the EuroPride march went ahead, albeit in limited form and after significant concessions to right-wing opponents, Serbia can claim having hosted the event and appease the European Union to which it seeks membership.[47] Domestically, on the other hand, Vučić has been able to portray Pride as a private event imposed by foreign actors and separate from the Serbian state; and one he strongly stood up to.[48] Vučić publicly communicated that his reasons for the cancellation were rooted in wider security concerns, not explicit homophobia, and showed his support for right-wing lesbian prime minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, as proof of his tolerance.[49] This is an example of how homophobia and homophilia get instrumentalised politically. Despite lending no meaningful state support nor providing protections to LGBTQI+ people throughout the event, Serbia successfully used LGBTQI+ people as a political pawn to signal to the EU and its partners its apparent progress on human rights while letting domestic and international anti-LGBTQI+ factions know Serbia stood up against what is known as Gayropa in Russia's illiberal geopolitical project.[50]

Homophilic, anti-trans feminism

Across Europe, there has been a growing movement towards a style of feminism based in essentialist ideas about sex-based rights that define womanhood through reproductive capability, and discourses about the supposed dangers trans women pose to those who they see as real or authentic women (i.e., cis women who were assigned female at birth) in single-sex spaces.[51] This shift has legitimised and normalised trans-antagonistic and trans-suspicious social and political values.[52] We have seen this in British MP Joanna Cherry's claim that trans-inclusive language is an "erasure" of women, lesbians, and woman-as-"sex class", and in Spain's far-right Vox party bringing challenges to self-ID laws to the country's highest court.[53]

These sex-based-rights and biological essentialist feminists have branded themselves as defenders and allies of lesbians – and sometimes of what is stylised as the wider LGB community, dropping the letters deemed dangerous (e.g., T), as for example the LGB Alliance does – which has given them a shield against accusations of anti-queer politics generally.[54] By including lesbians in their activism and constituting them as needing specific protections from transwomen, this marginal yet loud movement has successfully mobilised homophilia and manufactured a rift in queer activism between those that support trans people and those that do not.[55]

Homophilia used to cover violence against other marginalised communities

Politicised homophilia intersects with other forms of identity-based violence when LGBTQI+ protections are utilised to justify violence against other marginalised communities. This has been a feature of debates on migration in countries in western and northern Europe where national and European identities are constructed and presented as inherently LGBTQI+ inclusive by governments, movements, and political parties vying for power.[56] In particular, voters are told by right-wing parties in states like Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden that LGBTQI+ citizens are under threat from homophobic and transphobic Others, often racialised as Muslims and from the South West Asian and North African region.[57] In the run-up to the 2017 elections long-standing leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders, said that "the freedom queer people have - to kiss, to get married, and to have children - is exactly what Islam fights against".[58] Wilders, who has also called LGBTQI+ education in schools "a woke dictatorship", won the 2023 elections in a landslide victory.[59] Gianmaria Colpani and Adriano José Habed call this a "sexual fortress under siege" narrative.[60] Ironically, these centre and far-right movements often seek to further erode LGBTQI+ protections within the states they operate.[61]

Case study - Italy

In September 2022, Italy elected a new government led by far-right politician Giorgia Meloni. Meloni and her party, Brothers of Italy, pose a significant human rights challenge not just to LGBTQI+ people but to asylum seekers, women, and other marginalised groups.[62] Brothers of Italy have a history of actively blocking queer positive policies on grounds that so-called gender ideology poses a threat to Italian society. This includes a bill proposed in 2021 that would have made violence against LGBTQI+ people a hate crime. Through her party, Meloni also has closely aligned herself with the transnational anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI+ organisation World Congress of Families (WCF) – a central institution for the far-right – which was a joint project between Russian and US evangelicals who constituted themselves as defending what they claim to be traditional family values. It has been classified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an anti-LGBT hate group.[63]

Meloni has aligned herself very closely with Orbán. She recently declared her opposition to queerness in a speech to the far-right Vox party in Spain: “Yes to the natural family, no to the LGBT lobby, yes to sexual identity, no to gender ideology…”[64] Meloni’s discourse is rooted in a similar form of cis-heteronormativity to Putin’s heteronormative internationalist geopolitical project and revolves around the constitution of the so-called natural family as existentially threatened by non-heterosexual and non-binary and trans individuals.[65]

As we saw from Meloni’s election campaign, which not only ran with a pledge to defend the traditional family but on an anti-immigrant, anti-asylum, anti-reproductive rights platform, political homophobia and transphobia do not usually occur in isolation but at the intersection of other oppressive political positions that connect race, ethnicity, gender, religion, class, and other identities as targets.

LGBTQI+ rights and atrocity prevention: insights on the current political landscape

In a marked shift, more civil society organisations that focus on atrocity prevention and wider peace and security concerns are explicitly considering LGBTQI+ populations in their work. They are also collaborating with the LGBTQI+ communities and organisations that have long-since been leading this work, regardless of whether they have used the language of atrocity prevention or not.[66] This can be seen in those that have been able to publicly commit to centring these populations in their work.[67] Recently there have been some positive changes towards wider recognition that queer perspectives are critical to understanding, resolving, mitigating the effects of, and preventing armed conflict, mass atrocity crimes, and humanitarian crises.[68] Yet, this shift still predominately holds its focus outside of Europe.

In the multilateral, intergovernmental space there are further indications of a positive shift, including the report to the General Assembly by the United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.[69] In March 2023, the United Nations Security Council convened an Arria-Formula meeting focused on the integration of LGBTQI+ people's perspectives into its work.[70] The US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, stated that LGBTQI+ people have "unique perspectives, challenges, and vulnerabilities in situations of armed conflict and post-conflict situations" that the council must better understand in order to "take action on these issues".[71] The UK Representative reiterated the importance of the Arria meeting, stating that "we need to enhance the inclusion and visibility of LGBTQI+ persons" in crisis response planning and that the international community "must focus on atrocity prevention" to quell "the rise of violence against LGBTQI+ persons in all regions inside and outside of conflict settings".[72] While Arria-Formula meetings do not have binding outcomes, they provide important opportunities to bring together UN Security Council members around important topics that often may be too controversial to productively raise within the formal council meetings.

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a widely adopted policy framework that recognises the unique role gender – with a focus on the experiences and expertise of women and girls – plays in achieving sustainable international peace and security. Over half of UN member states have WPS National Action Plans (NAPs), which guide state level implementation of these commitments. Alongside participation, protection and relief, prevention is one of the four core pillars of WPS and therefore provides a crucial entry point to further the intersection of gender and prevention as many states, including the United Kingdom, have well-developed domestic WPS policy architectures. Internationally, 16 states currently reference the risks LGBTQI+ people face during conflict to various extents.[74] This inclusion often focuses on the participation and relief pillars, meaning there is a clear need for LGBTQI+ inclusion under WPS prevention obligations.[75] Only Ireland's commits to a queer-inclusive WPS domestically "on the island of Ireland".[76] The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy notes that "[m]ost NAPs, including the EU Strategic Approach to WPS, do not refer to people with diverse SOGIESC [Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics], and overlook intersectional discriminations".[77]

Additionally, the United States' most recent Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities includes a brief reference to LGBTQI+ people's persecution, USAID has published an LGBTQI+ Inclusive Development Policy, the Council of Europe has noted how anti-queer social values and politics can fuel broad-scale conflict, and the UK International Development Committee indicated that sexual orientation must be included in atrocity prevention frameworks.[78] The UK government fund that contributes to Protection Approaches' Queering Atrocity Prevention Programme supports LGBTQI+ inclusive approaches to WPS, conflict, and atrocity prevention.

These significant and, to many members of the community, long overdue shifts are opening up new opportunities where these organisations, perspectives, sectors, and experts can come together to listen to the expertise of LGBTQI+ communities and movements and work collaboratively – whether in policy structures, civil society, or donor communities – towards more integrated, inclusive, and intersectional understandings of identity-based violence and its prevention.

Conclusion

Building upon the Queering Atrocity Prevention report, this paper demonstrates evidence of and articulates the need to recognise rising risks against LGBTQI+ communities in Europe. In doing so it also raises the alarm. It argues that current trajectories indicate wider, longer-term, and potentially more systematic or widespread risks of identity-based violence in Europe against LGBTQI+ people and others. Using the existing Queering Atrocity Prevention report's findings as a point of departure, we make the case that there is a need for increased work on LGBTQI+ rights in Europe to address the rise of identity-based violence against LGBTQI+ communities and others.

Anti-LGBTQI+ politics are indicative of processes of democratic backsliding, shifts towards authoritarian politics, human rights deficits, and can signal increased risks of physical and structural identity-based violence on a widespread or systematic scale – often aimed directly at LGBTQI+ communities, but as this paper argues, also posing significant risks for many other, often marginalised communities. This report argues that cis-heteronormativity, as an embedded system and pervasive ideology, entrenches the dehumanization of LGBTQI+ people, legitimises repression, and ultimately shapes violence enacted against LGBTQI+ people and other marginalised communities. It also argues that the rising violence experienced by LGBTQI+ people across Europe indicate patterns of discrimination and internal grievances that foreign and domestic policies must confront. Left unchecked, these trends evolve, posing risks to LGBTQI+ people, to others who are minoritised or excluded, and ultimately the general population.

As noted elsewhere in Protection Approaches' work, Europe – like much of the world – is facing a prevention crisis.[79] The recent rise in nationalist and exclusionary politics across the continent is not outside of the region's historical experience but is more starkly in contrast with the projected European leadership on the world stage for rights, equality, and freedoms. This paper has not uncovered new harms but rather sought to spotlight embedded structures and cultures of binary and exclusionary visions of gender, family, sexual orientation, and expression that continue to evolve, driving discrimination, marginalisation, and persecution of LGBTQI+ people and who now face new guises of hatred. At the core of European nationalist and exclusionary politics is a cis-heteronormative and patriarchal view of the world, the nation, and the family that must be understood, confronted, and dismantled if Europe is indeed to become a region where people are able to thrive because of rather than despite who they are.

Endnotes

1. While we acknowledge the recent turn in policymaking circles to the term SOGIE, we have opted to use the terms queer and LGBTQI+ to refer to those whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity falls outside cis-hetero norms. We acknowledge that no acronym (e.g., LGBTQI+) can account for the diversity of sexual desire and gender identity or expression, but use the identity-based LGBTQI+ acronym because it is often, on account of being read as L/G/B/T/Q/I/+, that individuals are subject to violence and even atrocity crimes. This paper is about violence and atrocity crimes motivated by (presumed) identity, and while we acknowledge that sexual desire ought not be elevated to an identity in its own right, all kinds of so-called deviant sexualities often function as an identity category that perpetrators assign to those targeted. Hence, in this case, LGBTQI+ seems most appropriate when referring to specific groups.; On hate crime statistics, see: ILGA-Europe, "Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe and Central Asia," 2023

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