

Meet Lilly from Bilitis in Sofia, co-host of ILGA-Europe's Annual Conference

[Blog](#), [Bulgaria](#), [ILGA-Europe Annual Conference](#)

Lilly Dragoeva is the Executive Director of [Bilitis](#), one of the three Bulgarian LGBTI organisations co-hosting the ILGA-Europe Annual Conference in Sofia this month. Here Lilly talks about what it means to have the largest European LGBTI activism conference in her country.

We are almost ready for our Annual Conference, which will place later this month in Sofia. The conference is a very much needed moment of connection and empowerment for the LGBTI movement in Europe and Central Asia, as we have not been able to get together in person since 2019. We can only do this thanks to the support of the three Bulgarian organisations who will be hosting us all, Bilitis, Deystvie and Glas Foundation.

In this blog, Lilly Dragoeva from Bilitis, tells us about what it means to co-host ILGA-Europe's conference, what the key developments have been for Bulgarian LGBTI communities and organisations in recent years, and what they expect from the government elected this month, on October 3.

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Lilly Dragoeva

Hi Lily, can you tell us what it means for your organisation, Bilitis, to co-host ILGA-Europe's Annual Conference in Sofia?

Bilitis is proud to be one of the co-hosts of the conference and we are excited to welcome activists from all across Europe and Central Asia! Bilitis is the oldest active LGBTI organisation in Bulgaria but we weren't part of the hosting team of the first ILGA-Europe conference in Sofia, back in 2006. So, we see this as a great opportunity to shed a light on the situation in Bulgaria and our work, especially in the last few years when we see an organised effort to attack and scapegoat the LGBTI community in the country.

At the same time, hosting the biggest European political LGBTI event of the year in Bulgaria's capital inevitably puts pressure on the local politicians and institutions to finally take a step in advancing LGBTI equality – something that is much needed and long overdue. It is also a wonderful occasion to reconnect with friends and colleagues from all over and remind ourselves how energising it is to be physically together, exchanging ideas, sharing struggles, laughing, crying, dreaming.

And last but not least, we hope that this event will inspire and empower the Bulgarian LGBTI community to be relentless in demanding justice and equality for all.

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Lilly Dragoeva

Originally, the decision to celebrate the Annual Conference in Sofia was made in 2019, but it was postponed it for well-known reasons. What key changes or events have taken place for the LGBTI movement and communities in Bulgaria since then?

There have been quite some changes over the last three years. The visibility of our work and the visibility of the LGBTI community has significantly increased as a result of the ongoing efforts of the LGBTI organisations, non-formal groups, activists and artists, and our partners. On the one hand, this has led to a greater number of allies and supporters to the cause – from other civil society actors, and through businesses, to more and more Bulgarian citizens. This can be seen in the number of projects and initiatives that are taking place all year around and most evidently at Sofia Pride, which gathered a record number of over 12,000 participants in June this year. We can definitely see and feel that the levels of societal acceptance are increasing.

At the same time, with visibility comes a greater level of negative reactions. The phrase “do whatever you want, just don’t show it publicly” is still widespread. It’s no surprise that the increased visibility of the topic also led to an increase in threats and attacks on the community.

In 2021 we witnessed an unprecedented organised attack on the LGBTI events and spaces around Sofia Pride, which was taking parallel to the second parliamentary elections campaign. Far-right actors attempted to capitalise on the situation. Vandalising spaces, provoking participants, using hate speech and intimidating LGBTI people was an everyday event in May and June 2021.

The situation de-escalated to an extent in the autumn, but on October 30 our community centre, Rainbow Hub was attacked and destroyed, and my colleague Gloriya was physically assaulted. This put us into an entirely new situation of threat and fear for the physical safety of activists and community members. At the same time, there was a really strong wave of solidarity coming from many groups in the society, including politicians, which showed that Bulgarians still refuse to tolerate acts of brutal aggression, regardless of who the victims are.

The GERB party won the parliamentary elections this month and reports say they will form a coalition. How do you expect this will affect LGBTI people’s rights and communities and organisations?

First of all, I’m not sure they will form a coalition because the situation in the parliament is pretty uncertain and almost all political parties have declared that they will not join a government led by GERB. If this is the case, then they will not have a majority, and even if they form a minority government, it will be very unstable. In that scenario there will be another round of elections, the fifth in less than two years, which will be catastrophic not only for LGBTI people but for the country as a whole.

However, should GERB come to power, I expect nothing good for the LGBTI community. They have been in power for more than 12 years and we saw that there were no advancements regarding LGBTI rights whatsoever, regardless of the ongoing efforts from the civil society and despite of the numerous recommendations from international and intergovernmental organisations. So, should GERB come to power, I expect a continuation of their “don’t ask – don’t tell” policy, which means LGBTI organisations and activists will continue to be left without a seat at the table.

This is extremely harmful as it creates a notion that LGBTI people don’t deserve to participate in public life in Bulgaria, or that LGBTI people are just a small group of noisy people demanding special rights and privileges. Let’s not forget that it was GERB who refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention in 2018. GERB allowed their far-right coalition partner VMRO and other actors to spread disinformation about the so called “gender ideology” and to scapegoat the LGBTI community for political gains.

The ILGA-Europe Annual Conference takes place in Sofia, Bulgaria from October 19-22. To learn more about Bilits, [visit their website here](#).