

The real life consequences of the EU's equality u-turn

[Blog](#), [Inclusion and Equality](#), [Anti-discrimination](#), [Equality](#), [Europe](#), [European Commission](#), [European Union](#)

Seventeen years ago, the EU promised to protect people from discrimination in everyday life, not just at work. Now, that promise is being rolled back. The European Commission is preparing to drop a major equality law that would have tackled unfair treatment in schools, hospitals, housing, and more. Here's what that means, why it matters to you, and what you can do to help stop this happening.

In 2008, the European Commission proposed a directive that would extend protection from discrimination beyond employment. It aimed to cover essential areas of life such as education, healthcare, housing and access to services. The proposal included grounds that remain under-protected across the EU: age, disability, religion or belief and sexual orientation. 17 years later, the directive has still not been adopted, and this February the Commission quietly announced plans to drop it altogether.

The three member states blocking it

Despite broad and consistent support from the European Parliament and civil society, the directive has remained blocked at the Council level since its introduction. Just three member states, Czechia, Germany and Italy were blocking it before the Commission ultimately announced it would withdraw the proposal. Among the reasons they gave were large costs of implementation and political resistance to including anti-discrimination sectors like education and social protection.

Over the years, EU Presidencies have tried to broker compromises. In 2024, the Belgian Presidency proposed a significantly weakened version to try and win over opponents. Key protections around disability, age-based treatment and access to health services were watered down. Even so, no agreement was reached.

Early in 2025, hopes were briefly reignited under the Polish Presidency. But continued opposition from just a handful of governments led the European Commission to announce its intention to withdraw the proposal, stating that consensus was unlikely.

When equality isn't for everyone

This is not just a legislative failure. It is a failure of political leadership and of moral responsibility. The EU has allowed a small number of governments to block progress on equal protection for millions of people. It has upheld a legal system that recognises some forms of discrimination but not others, creating a hierarchy of protection that contradicts the EU's own values.

For LGBTI people, people with disabilities, older and younger people, religious minorities and those who live at the intersections of these identities, this means ongoing vulnerability and invisibility in law. You can still be denied an apartment, refused access to healthcare, blocked from seeing your partner in hospital or forced out of school because of who you are. And you may find no EU-level protection to turn to.

Here are just a few examples of what that looks like in real life:

- In [Italy](#), a gay couple was denied a rental flat because the landlord preferred a “traditional family”.
- In [Hungary](#), a community centre refused to rent a space to a lesbian group for a film screening.
- In the [Netherlands](#), several LGBTI people reported harassment by Uber and Bolt drivers during Pride.

The hidden ways this will affect everyone in the EU

The absence of equal protection across the EU is not just a human rights issue. It affects social cohesion, freedom of movement and economic participation. People who are not protected are less likely to relocate, to report abuse, to engage in society. Businesses lose out on talent and consumer trust. Governments struggle to ensure rights are respected, even where national laws exist, due to underreporting, lack of data and inconsistent implementation.

Only strong EU-level legislation can provide a foundation for consistent and equal protection. Just as the Victims' Rights Directive helped strengthen national systems, this directive could have been the legal backbone of a fairer Europe.

Why the EU must stand firm in its message to the world

Legislation tells a story about the kind of society we want to live in. By failing to adopt this directive, and now preparing to withdraw it, the EU is sending a message that some people's rights do not matter. That being denied services, harassed, bullied, or excluded from public life is not worth addressing. That equality is not for everyone.

Withdrawing the proposed directive tells LGBTI people, people with disabilities, religious minorities and many others that they are less worthy of respect. That their dignity and safety are not priorities. It gives a licence to those who discriminate against minorities to further do so without consequence.

At a time of rising hate, the EU must stand firm and send a message about who belongs. We see increasing anti-LGBTI rhetoric, racism, sexism and xenophobia. Hate speech and violence have spiked in the aftermath of divisive political campaigns. This is a critical moment. And yet the Commission is proposing to retreat. Law and policy are often the last line of defence for marginalised communities. If the EU abandons this directive now, it will be turning its back on the very principle of equal rights for all.

Have your say

Don't let the EU turn its back on equality. [Sign the petition now!](#)