



Armenia



Contradictory messages emerged from Armenia in 2015. On the one hand, the marriage rights of LGBTI people were limited in a sweeping package of constitutional changes and LGBTI activists were harassed on the street and online. On the other hand, political figures reacted defensively when questioned on the issue. Statements from the president's office continue to insist that adequate provisions are in place to protect against discrimination. Amidst this atmosphere of intolerance, there were positive signs of solidarity. The national LGBTI community mobilised in greater numbers than in previous years. Human rights activists spoke out in support of LGBTI people targeted after the first ever Rainbow Forum, the PACE called for greater action by Armenian authorities, and an infamous newspaper was fined for publishing homophobic content.

Bias-motivated speech

- In February, the *LGBTnews* website featured a series of interviews with political figures on LGBTI rights. Karine Achemyan MP (Republican Party of Armenia, RPA; right-wing) commented that she was not sent to parliament to protect the rights of LGBT people. When asked about violations of the rights of LGBTI people, Tevan Poghosyan MP (Heritage faction) replied “I don’t now see it as an issue, you even have a web site, in many other countries you would all have been burnt or killed while you exist in Armenia ...”.
- The Court of General Jurisdiction of Kentron and Nork-Marash Administrative Districts of Yerevan ruled against the *Iravunk* newspaper for publishing homophobic content. In July 2014, *Iravunk* had published personal information of all three plaintiffs in an article entitled “Another three of Conchita’s witnesses joined the persecution of free speech”. On 14 May, Judge Arayik Melkumyan ordered the paper to publish a refutation and pay each of the plaintiffs AMD 250,000 (approx. EUR 480).
- During parliamentary hearings on proposed constitutional reforms in September, Hrayer Tovmasyan, a member of the Specialised Commission on Constitutional Reforms, said “we have tried to put it clearly that same-sex marriages are alien to our value system.”
- In October, the mayor of Vanadzor reacted to the announcement that an LGBT forum would be held in the Lori region by saying “Shame on them, that they are organising such kind of events...”. LGBTI NGO Pink Armenia complained to the Commission on Ethics of High-Ranking Officials but had not received a response by the end of the year.
- One of the ‘Rainbow Forum’ participants (see **Freedom of assembly**) was threatened after taking part in the event. On 21 October, she was followed from a bus by a man who then grabbed her and shouted “viruses like you should be burned... we’ll find you all and destroy all of you one by one”.
- On 6 November, the leader of the Armenian Socialist Movement Robert Aharonyan burnt a rainbow flag at a protest in front of the EU Delegation office (see also **Respect for private and family life**).

Bias-motivated violence

- On 23 August, two trans sex workers were assaulted by five men at a park in Yerevan. The incident was reported to the police, no individual was detained and the prosecutor’s office was processing the case at the end of 2015.

Data collection

- In January, the NGO Public Information and Need of Knowledge and another NGO Socioscope (Societal Research and Consultancy Center) published ‘The impact of LGBT emigration on economic indicators of Armenia’. The report details the economic impact of LGBTI emigration during 2011-2013. An estimated 5,891 LGBTI people emigrated during this time period. The report’s authors estimate that budget revenues could have been increased by USD 20 million had the LGBT individuals, who left due to discrimination, remained in the country.

Equality and non-discrimination

- On 25 January, Petra de Sutter (Belgian delegate at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)) issued a call to the Armenian authorities to condemn hate speech and to implement the CoE Council of Ministers’ recommendation on combatting discrimination. The call cited articles from *Iravunk* newspaper as an example. Her announcement was signed by 22 fellow delegates. In March, the president of *Iravunk*’s editorial board Hayk Babukhanyan demanded an apology from the PACE delegates.
- Following Armenia’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) hearing on 22 January, the government stated its commitment to providing effective protection against discrimination to LGBTI people, combatting hate speech and training law enforcement officials in how to deal with bias-motivated crimes against LGBTI people.
- On 17 May, LGBTI NGO Pink Armenia submitted a letter containing questions on LGBTI issues to President Serzh Sargsyan, MPs and several ministries. Reacting to a question about protection for LGBTI people in the country, the president’s office said that “...necessary prerequisites exist in legislation to exclude any act of discrimination”.

Family

- A package of constitutional changes proposed by President Sargsyan's government was approved by the National Assembly on 5 October. As part of the package, an amendment to the marriage definition was suggested. The term 'one another' was added to the existing clause on marriage; effectively limiting the union to different-sex couples only. The changes to marriage were passed by referendum (along with changes to the country's system of government, electoral system and judicial powers) on 6 December. Voter turnout was 51% and 66.2% of those who voted supported the referendum. On 8 December, a PACE delegation stated that the referendum was "driven by political interests instead of the needs of the Armenian public". Opposition parties, including the Armenia National Congress (ANC, centre-right) and the Heritage Party (centre/centre-right), claimed that the referendum results were fraudulent.

Freedom of assembly

- The first Armenian LGBT 'Rainbow Forum' took place from 17-18 October in the province of Lori. The Forum attracted 40 participants.

Human rights defenders

- Following the threats made against Rainbow Forum participants, both in person (see **Bias-motivated speech**) and on social media, Human Rights House Network released a joint statement in support of human rights activists. It called on the relevant authorities to immediately investigate all cases of threats, take appropriate steps to protect human rights defenders and ensure attacks are denounced by political leaders.

Respect for private and family life

- Robert Aharonyan, who has a history of making homophobic speeches and campaigning against LGBTI activists, was outed for using gay dating websites on 18 November. NGO Pink Armenia issued a statement calling for an end to hate attacks against Aharonyan.