



Dear friends from every corner of Europe,

we are very happy to welcome you to Riga – the European Capital of Culture 2014!

You will come to a city and a country full of contrasts – beautiful art nouveau architecture and worn down wooden buildings, trendy international boutiques and soviet time cafes, lush parks and concrete bridges, hipster quarters and beggars, open and friendly people as well as homophobic church leaders, so called „family movement” and politicians.

Latvia has undergone tremendous change in the last 25 years – from being one of the smallest Soviet republics to joining the EU and NATO in 2004. Change brings challenging tasks, and does not always influence all layers of society at the same pace. It is easier to replace your old Lada with a BMW than to accept that democracy and a state based on human rights is a 7 course dinner, not a Swedish *smörgåsbord* where you can pick only the dishes that you like.

Much has changed to the better, much still remains to be done. This includes, of course, the rights of LGBT people. The first prides in 2005-2006 were met with open hostility and homophobia took over the public space. It was acceptable to bash gay people in the media, in Parliament and in private life. In the last couple of years, however, we have seen change coming to our region, slowly but surely.

Still there is a long way to go to reach full equality and recognition of LGBT rights, however, the tides have shifted. It is no longer acceptable to openly use hate speech, or bluntly question the right to equal treatment of LGBT people. Baltic pride, which took place for the second time in Riga the summer 2012 and in Vilnius 2013 was a great success compared to all previous Riga pride events in 2005-2009. Next year, in June 2015 Riga will host EuroPride – an exciting task which already has stirred heated debate in our media and society.

What is still missing, however, is an outspoken political will to introduce such positive rights as recognition of partnership, adoption of partner’s child etc. For most politicians LGBT rights is not an issue worth a political battle, nor it is on top of their list of priorities.

We truly hope that the ILGA Europe conference will contribute to bringing LGBT issues to the top of political agenda. It is events such as this that can engage politicians, opinion leaders and other key persons in a debate and open their minds to the urgency and necessity to catch up with the more progressive parts in Europe when it comes to the protection and enhancement of human rights, including LGBT rights.

You can also expect some great fun during the conference – our organising team is already making plans how to offer you a wonderful time and great experience during your stay in Riga. October may not be the best time of the year to enjoy a drink in one of our wonderful parks or beer gardens, however, we are confident that you will go home with a feeling that this is a place worth to revisit – for exemple, for EuroPride from 15th to 21st of June, 2015!

Kristine Garina, Chairperson Mozaika
Linda Freimane, Chair of the Conference organizing team